DEFINING A TRUE BUDDHIST: MEDITATION AND KNOWLEDGE FORMATION IN BURMA

Ingrid Jordt
University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

This article considers Fredrik Barth’s call to reconceptualize how anthropologists approach the study of complex societies through a study of how knowledge is differentially embodied by individuals within a population and how these bodies of knowledge are produced and sustained. Burma’s lay meditation movement serves as a case study for how knowledge communities emerge. The focus is on how people who acquire meditation-derived knowledge, as contrasted with cosmological and traditional forms of Buddhist knowledge, practice, and identity, comprise a community of knowers. This membership is based on individual experiences in meditation and does not conform to membership in prior social and religious categories. The case provides an example of how knowledge is constituted, justified, and shared, within an emergent community. (Anthropology of knowledge, Burma, Buddhism, meditation)

In publications dating to the early 1990s, Fredrik Barth (e.g., 1993, 2002) has been urging the discipline of anthropology, to which he has made many seminal contributions, to reconceptualize how it approaches complex societies. The anthropological stock-in-trade concepts of culture and social structure, he says, are too generalizing and seamless. Instead, a componential approach that will account both for internal variations in collective characteristics (as might be observed, for instance, between neighboring villages) and the differences between individuals in positioning and experience is needed.

Reflecting on his fieldwork in North Bali, Barth (1993:4) says, “[L]ocal variation in a traditional civilization is not a surface disturbance, to be covered over by generalization or tidied away by a typology. It is a ubiquitous feature of great civilizations,” and regarding disparities of individual experience Barth (1993:104) adds:

[T]he fact that certain features of formal village constitutions have endured does not mean that these features need have any singular significance in underpinning the meanings, the interpreted reality, of people’s lives. We should not assume ipso facto, as have most anthropologists in their construction of social structure, that formal groups and statuses, because they endure, comprise the most salient components of persons in the sense of being the most important identities they conceive and embrace. . . .

The suggestion of putting in motion “the most important identities [individuals] conceive and embrace” relative to existing formal groupings seems a particularly apt way to begin to analyze the flux of what Schober (2006) calls
the “many faces” of modern Buddhism in Burma. “Some Buddhist communities focus on ritual, others on meditation, and still others venerate a particular individual they believe to embody Moral Perfection (nibbana). Some take on familiar neotraditional traits, and others advocate a more radical break with the religious authorities of the past” (Schober 2006:74–5). An emergent Buddhist identity that I studied has become a significant individual and social force in Burma. The “mass lay meditation movement” (Jordt 2005, 2007) is a form of “conceiving and embracing” an identity that is wrapped in a new way of knowing, and of verifying that the knowledge won through that method conforms to existing cosmological truths.¹

Barth considers “knowledge” and “knowledge communities” as valuable components of culture or social structure in the pursuit of generative models of anthropological analysis. “We can greatly advance our anthropological agenda by developing a comparative ethnographic analysis of how bodies of knowledge are produced in persons and populations in the context of the social relations that they sustain” (Barth 2002:1). Knowledge is a necessary component of analysis because “[it] is distributed in a population, while culture makes us think in terms of diffuse sharing. Our scrutiny is directed to the distributions of knowledge—its presence or absence in particular persons—and the processes affecting these distributions can become the objects of study” (Barth 2002:1).

This article intends to show how a division of Burmese Buddhist identity has come to be based upon a distinctive and recent codified form of knowing in vipassana (insight) meditation. It considers the kind of knowledge community that developed out of the meditation movement, and how its particular epistemic outlook is verified at individual and social levels. This requires a consideration of how the knowledge community creates consensus for its particular form of knowledge (i.e., insight knowledge and its consequences) that can be known only through internal verification procedures of “knowing agents” (Goldman 1999) in combination with more traditional repositories of religious knowledge.

The distinction between new meditation-derived knowledge and so-called traditional Buddhist cosmological principles refers to native distinctions in Burma, such as born/true Buddhists and inside/outside the sasana (Buddhist teachings and dispensation). It also marks several complementary religious categories: the mundane (lokiya),² the supramundane (lokuttara), scriptural learning (pariyatti), meditation practice (patipatti), and even the distinction between percept and concept as the basis for evaluating reality and truth. These new emphases have emerged in a relational continuum with old categories. (See the explanation of spiritual categories of Buddhist mentality below.) The result is a community that exists for the production of individual goals that cannot be validated by external verification methods. Nonetheless, social and institutional
processes support and hold in place the possibility for such potential knowing agents\textsuperscript{3} by nurturing consensus over legitimate belief-forming techniques and processes, as well as determining what counts as legitimate veritistic procedures (in philosophical jargon) warranting belief formation in the individual.

Barth's grievance against how anthropologists tend to objectify norms in "great civilizations" has special relevance here, particularly as the Burmese have cultivated a discipline, which might be likened to Western psychology or cognitive science, that is directed toward understanding how action and thought grasp empirical reality. This ethnographic case draws on some of these intellectual understandings to show how Burmese meditators identify for themselves the boundaries of a knowledge community within Buddhist practice. Meditation is elaborately studied and theorized for how it cultivates belief and mental transformations in its practitioners.

**THE FIELDWORKER'S INTRODUCTION**

In the past, ethnographers often reported that the people among whom they conducted research incorporated them into their kinship system. Their fictive kin positioning was a form of socialization into the community and a way for the local community to fix the outsider's position. The process could also be a window into the local classificatory scheme, kin-based or otherwise, and it relates to my experience as an outsider/insider when, in 1996, I began doing fieldwork in a lay meditation center in Yangon, Burma, where I had previously been a meditator and resident. This is meant to introduce a provisional notion of boundary to this knowledge community in the way it first occurred to me.

Ten years prior to my role as anthropologist, I had been a Buddhist nun practicing meditation at the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha (the Center, hereafter). It is the foremost meditation-oriented monastery in Burma for its historical significance to the mass meditation movement and for the number of its adherents. Over a million people are reported to have meditated at the Center or one of its branches. My return there as an anthropologist benefitted from my previous relationship, and I was referred to as a yogi haun (an old yogi).

A yogi haun is someone with in-group status at the Center. Its meaning is indefinite, perhaps intentionally so. It can refer to someone who has been affiliated for ten years, or less if the person is closely associated with the administrative activities of the Center. More generally, the term refers to someone who had had deep meditation experiences. In Burmese Buddhist orthodoxy, meditation is the most significant of the three practices or virtues (paramis): dana (charity), sila (moral conduct), and bhavana (meditation). Because of the difficulties in determining whether someone has achieved depth
in meditation, being a yogi of long standing does not assure that one has achieved deep meditation, nor does having deep meditation imply having been a yogi for many years. Thus there is an ambiguity or tension between a socially observable identity that can be empirically confirmed (i.e., long association with the Center), and a status that can ultimately only be corroborated internally.

At the start of field research, Daw Thwin (all names appearing here are pseudonyms), the head of the Women’s Welfare Committee at the Center and one of my chief sponsors, strategically affixed the label yogi haun to me. Whenever I was introduced to someone, she would immediately indicate that I was a yogi haun, adding “she has practiced already.” Not knowing what specifically my yogi haun status meant in terms of meditational development, my new acquaintances would often defer to me and my knowledge of meditation practice.

Being a successful (or dedicated) meditator also implies a certain karmic tendency in an individual’s multiple lives. People might refer to a meditator as paramis shi day, which means the person accumulated Buddhist virtues in a prior life, which earned the privilege of being a good meditator in a later one. Elder members of the administrative committee frequently mused about whether I had been a member of the women’s committee in the 1950s and had been reborn in the United States only to return to Burma and the Center. These iterations of prior belonging, told in the idiom of reincarnation, spread outside the Center. On several occasions, complete strangers encountered in the marketplace, referring abstractedly to our prior karmic relatedness, would grasp my arm gently as though we were old friends reunited. They might seek to solidify the renewed bonds of emotional good feeling by plying me with sasana-related gifts (Buddha images, amulets, etc.). Similarly, ten years earlier, while I was preparing to take precepts required before a meditation course, the head preceptor monk at the Center remarked how he recalled meeting me previously. Thinking he had mistaken me for some other foreigner, I protested that this was my first visit to Burma. He smiled, and gesturing with a quick upward nod over his shoulder, explained that he meant in my past life. The effect on the Burmese women in the room who overheard this was palpable. Unlike the vague assertions of past-life associations lay people might avow, a monk’s claim is deemed to come from direct knowledge through meditation practice.

The reincarnation idiom evokes affective associations by emphasizing that mentality causes individuals to be drawn together. People draw together in penultimate causal terms because of shared habits of mind (seit) cultivated through meditation and the Buddhist practices of charity and moral conduct. Because penultimate reality truths are played out on a karmic scale, one’s engagement in meditation from the start prepares one for “true Buddhist” discourses.
DEFINING A TRUE BUDDHIST 197

These examples would suggest that a strong narrative of identity, and therefore also of belonging, is intimated in these encounters. Indeed, this is so. However, the identity being expounded is not associated with belonging to sociological categories such as class, gender, ethnicity, or nationality. Instead, the logic of belonging follows a path that cross-cuts such groupings. The new identity category validates in-group status in accordance with achievements made toward the realization of penultimate realities (paramatta) in one’s practice as a Buddhist.

This procedure is evident in my own paradoxical case as outsider and insider. The most puzzling (and revealing) reaction I received in response to knowing that I had been a nun and Mahasi meditator came from non-meditators. They would say, “You are more Burmese than I.” The response was not simply to humor a foreigner, as it was often followed with an inculpating self-assessment, as if in apology for the lack of progress in their own moral development. This would be expressed in the idiom of paramis, the virtues accumulated toward enlightenment. For these persons, their lack of interest, ability, or opportunity to practice meditation represented an undeveloped competence in the preliminary practices of charity and moral conduct that would lead to undertaking meditation practice (bhavana). Comparisons with my participation in meditation practice as a Westener who came to Burma confirmed that my Burmese traits were rooted in prior life experiences, when I would have cultivated the advantages that brought me to Burma. My presence there was taken as proof of these causal forces, and my yogi haun attribution was understood in terms of my vipassana meditational insight and its related cosmological planes, and not ethnic, national, or even religious identity. Such an identity I call a knowledge community.

MASS LAY MEDITATION MOVEMENT IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The present association between meditation practice, Burmese Buddhism, and religio-national identity gelled during the nation-building era of Burma’s first prime minister, U Nu (1948–1962), but has roots traceable to the period of British colonialism in the nineteenth century (Houtman 1990a, 1999; Schober 2006; Mendelson 1975; Thant Myint 2001). U Nu put state support behind the lay meditation movement in an effort to define national identity through Buddhist revitalization, doing so particularly by increasing the laity’s understanding. Buddhist teachings were made available to people from all walks of life (and also throughout the world) so that everyone might have the opportunity of realizing the teachings of the Buddha. These popularizing efforts helped make the practice of lay meditation as pervasive as it is today (Jordt 2007).
The spread of vipassana was systematized by U Nu’s chosen monk, Mahasi Sayadaw (the eponymous founder of the Center). Based on his observations of thousands of yogi practitioners, Mahasi Sayadaw determined that two months was the average length of time required for individuals, whose virtues are “ripe,” to achieve nyanzin (vipassana insight), the precursor to the first stage of enlightenment (sottapanna). He focused on a line in the Dhammadāyāda Sutta (from the Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha) that he interpreted as a guarantee given by the Buddha, which is that exerting unbroken moment-to-moment mindfulness for a consecutive seven days can result in enlightenment. The penultimate practices of meditation affirmed, on an individual experiential level, the truth of the Buddha’s teachings and the identity of the practitioner as a Burmese and member of sasana society. Following a classical tradition in which the monarch’s role includes a moral revitalization to purify the conditions for sasana, U Nu hoped to create a transformed and ethically invigorated citizenry.

MEDITATION KNOWLEDGE

In Buddhist practice, vipassana meditation is intended to retrain the individual’s relationship to the senses (hearing, seeing, touching, etc.) in order to produce a stance toward the world in which self-identity is understood to be substance-less, as is common to all Buddhist philosophy. In the 1990s, the Center claimed that over a million people (monks, nuns, but mostly laity) had practiced dhamma striving (Burmese, deya auto) and experienced truth through brief, intensive meditation courses. What they had experienced as truth was described as the insights leading to enlightenment or to enlightenment itself.

When yogis from the Center speak of their meditation, certain tropes typically organize their accounts. The most predominant narrative is that they had experienced anicca (impermanence), dukkha (suffering), and anatta (soullessness or non-self). This conformed to an ideological account of paramount truth drawn from the canonical texts reiterated regularly in the doctrinal discourses of the monks. No direct experience of meditation was necessary to declaim these truths. It was a matter of common rhetoric to describe the self-evident state of the world as suffering, ephemeral, or empty of essential identity. In response to a description of personal hardship, a speaker or listener might sum up the discussion by exclaiming, “Dukkha!” (Suffering!). These exhortations remind one of how life is experienced. Such expressions are key cultural terms, in this case religious terms, that draw listener and speaker to a common transcendental perch upon which to commiserate with personal and general suffering. In the case of anicca (impermanence) and anatta (soullessness), the speaker or listener might
emphasize either that circumstances would change, or that the events were not happening to an essential self and so should be recognized as empty experiences.

Such invocations are analytical conventions of thinking involving religious symbolism (Geertz 1973), both descriptive and prescriptive. They assert a belief about the world while also encouraging a particular kind of action or mental disposition with which to steel oneself against life’s misfortunes. This is far from the fatalistic ennui and hopelessness Westerners attribute to Buddhist philosophy. It is more fruitful to regard what occurs as an “ethical discipline” (Hirschkind 2001) that trains for an affective engagement with the world. Specifically in Burmese Buddhist thinking, it trains the moral and emotive sensibility of equanimity (upekkha) toward all psycho-physical experiences.

The gap between language conventions and the texture of meditative experience relates to debates in anthropology regarding how to distinguish between belief and ideology, or how and to what extent language represents religious experience (Keane 1997). One cannot get inside the head of the meditator. Observing the behavior of people sitting in meditative contemplation provides no clues about how to infer the meaning of their cognitive processes. Even narrative accounts seem to enlarge the distance between experience and its representations. This fundamental problem of empiricism is not limited to Western science. The attempt to discern how words and action represent a person’s belief is also a preoccupation for Burmese practitioners in their efforts to describe true knowledge, how to attain it, and how to define the knowledge community in which such knowledge is individually embodied. It is this latter criterion that is of concern here.

Reflecting upon the assertions of some yogis at the Center that they had experienced anicca, dukkha, and anatta, a long-time meditator opined:

Vipassana practitioners who have gained insight knowledge see things as they really are. Their understanding is not based on conventional knowledge. You could say they are true Buddhists . . . not like so many here [in Burma], who are Buddhists in name only—born Buddhists.

This depiction reveals several points. First, the speaker is reflecting upon meditation within the broader context of practices in Burma. He also is distinguishing between those who have had true experiences and those who only have conceptual knowledge. The speaker contrasts born and true Buddhists. Born Buddhists are to be discounted because their belief is objectified and realized only through practices into which they were enculturated and not through a realization of what they had won through efforts to gain insight knowledge. While born Buddhists may espouse the same beliefs as the vipassana practitioner,
their understanding is merely conceptual, handed down from parents and their parents before them.

Framing this as an issue of two kinds of Buddhist practice brings into relief how verified knowledge is true belief. The teachings of the law or truth that orders the universe, and their embodiment via mental purification (i.e., through vipassana meditation) are held to be integrated. That is, belief as true knowledge includes the sense that a person realizes through practice the conditions that verify truth. This is the meaning of “seeing things as they are” (ashi ataing myin gyin), a ubiquitous expression among those who have experienced deep meditation. The meditator undertakes systematic techniques that lead to cognitive belief-forming processes.

The born/true distinction mirrors the opposition of worldly and transcendental knowledge (lokiya vs. lokuttara). Seeing things as they really are triggers an epistemic reconstruction in the meditator, and affects a transformation in being. The goal is to irrevocably remove “wrong views” (meica-ditti), which are the cause for endless rebirth and suffering. While the goals of the so-called born Buddhist may not be distinguishable in discourse from those of the meditator, it is through practice that the goals may be differentiated. Born Buddhists are believers who have not practiced meditation and therefore have not attained truth directly. They are said to be more susceptible to wrong views since their belief lacks embodied understanding and a coherent moral dispositional stance toward action, speech, and thought. True Buddhists attribute the prevalence among them of superstitious belief and engaging in spirit-propitiating rites to the lack of embodied knowledge of truth. Born Buddhists are also said to be susceptible to breaking moral precepts such as not to kill, steal, lie, commit adultery, or take intoxicants. Finally, because they lack the insight achieved by meditators, they are liable to become skeptical of Buddhist teachings. In future lives, these moral deficiencies lead to rebirth into states of woe.

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITY

Distinguishing kinds of knowledge is one way that the cognitive results of meditation come to be constructed as fact. Monks distinguish between meditators who have seen things as they are, and traditional Buddhists, sometimes framing this as between “simple” rural folk and educated laity in the urban centers. One monk explained:

Rural people want to hear about the deva [celestial] realms and jataka stories [tales of the lives of the Buddha] . . . about how they will become rich if they donate or how they will be reborn in the deva realms if they keep their precepts and make offerings. They want these discourses to be long, to go deep into the night . . . and they even fall asleep during the discourse. Alternatively,
urban people want short discourses, 45 minutes long and they want it on the *Abhidhamma* [the most abstruse of the texts dealing with the description of consciousness and mental states and practices of meditation].

The community of knowers does not, however, reproduce a simple rural/urban divide or a dichotomy between educated middle-class persons and peasants. Factors such as education, class, status, or foreigner are not considered to be defining features of meditators. Nor are these social categories discernible at the Yangon Center or its branches. Indeed, their demographic make-up is diverse. Who counts as a traditionalist or as a practitioner with true knowledge or insight of the teachings does not coincide with any social category. There is at least discursive conformity over the idea that a person from any walk of life might become a meditator and attain insight. At the Center, a voluntary committee supports poor yogis to come and practice. During the low periods in the agricultural cycle, farmers arrive at the Center by the busload to practice for two months, and branch organizations (some 350 in the Mahasi system alone) can be found all over Burma.

Not only are rural/urban, educated/uneducated, and similar distinctions at best weakly predictive of belonging to the knowledge community, the divisions made at an organizational level today reflect not region or sect, as in the past (Mendelson 1975), but experiential and conceptual knowledge—the dimensions of the knowledge community. The new relevant categories of religious division are *pariyatti* vs. *patipatti*. Pariyatti is scholarly, text-based knowledge of the Buddha’s teachings, and patipatti is knowledge based on practical experience and won through vipassana practice. The pariyatti/patipatti dichotomy, which refers to types of monks and monasteries, is used by the government’s Department of Home and Religious Affairs to demarcate the activities of scholarly monks and meditation monks (Jordt 2007).

U Zawana, a recently ordained monk in his early sixties, reveals this distinction in action. U Zawana retired from the civil service with a small pension, which he turned over to his wife who visits him occasionally to pay her respects and to make offerings. Despite his age, U Zawana has seniority only according to the number of years he has spent in the robes (only one). His explanation of how he views the distinction points to the value of experiential rather than scholarly forms of learning, and to the greater importance of the former.

In the *Sangha* [community of monks], *wasa* [number of years in the robes] is most important in every ceremony. In every meeting we must sit according to the wasa. Those traditional monks, they ordain at the age of 20, they just abide the *viniya* [ethical rules of conduct for monks]. But as for me, I count more on the spiritual development. That’s meditation. We praise this spiritual
development [in a person] even if he may be a layman. I know [from] the behavior of a person . . . the way he moves. We can judge by that. These ordinary monks, especially pariyatti monks, they only have learning. Anybody can learn. You watch how they move, they don’t have any mindfulness. They are just like ordinary men, only they are wearing the robes. Wearing the robes means nothing. Just an ordinary man wearing the robes.

U Zawana is drawing here on a different context for a discourse that describes “men in yellow robes” as monks who do not uphold the viniya, the ethical standards of the order. He subtly likens monks who engage in the “mere” learning of the teachings to ordinary men, not spiritual men who have perfected their ethical condition through meditation. Houtman (1990b) writes similarly.

There are two types of truth: conventional truth (tha-mok-ti’) is conditional on our senses and time and place, whereas ultimate truth (pa-ra-mat-hta’) transcends these. The former encompasses worldly knowledge such as culture and science, while the latter encompasses the knowledge of the Buddha’s teachings as experienced through meditation. For example, there is a tendency among some yaw’gi, when talking in a confidential mood, to admit that many monks were more concerned with scriptural learning and arguing about “conventional” truths than “ultimate” truths. By referring to yaw’gi as members of the ultimate Order, it is established that meditation is what really matters in being a member of the Order, not robes, initiation, and knowledge of conventional truths (Houtman 1990b:136).

U Zawana went on the say that a Mahasi monk knows through interviewing which lay persons are advanced spiritually, and pays respect to that person at that time. But that is temporary and only at the time of meditation, when the layman, the ordinary person, attains the fhana stage (meditative absorption state). It does not continue after meditation. An arahant (a fully enlightened one), on the other hand, is forever in that state. Like Houtman (1990b) quoted above, U Zawana concluded that spiritual development is most important because spiritual development is necessary for someone to escape from samsara [the round of rebirths].

As U Zawana suggests, monks may show deference to lay individuals who have vipassana accomplishments during the course of their meditation. But these same individuals become “ordinary people” when their meditation ends and they return to worldly life. Because there is uncertainty as to whether a yogi has achieved nyanzin (temporary insight) or enlightenment (a permanent epistemic and phenomenological shift), no one but the meditator (or a Buddha) can know for sure. It is generally assumed that when the meditation ends, so does the acute and penetrating concentrated insight. Only an arahant is exempt from this doubt, and then too, the hierarchy of seniority among monks is maintained.

The monk’s comments underscore how uncertain is verification of inner states. Potential knowing agents make up the knowledge community that is prima facie reproduced to perpetuate the technique of practice leading to radical belief.
transformation, and not for the construction of new social identities. As Barth (2002:2) observes, "The knowledge component of our being is conceptually separable from our relationships and group memberships, the social dimensions of our lives." The community of potential knowers may tend over time to become a social community, but the analytical separation of this process underscores the importance knowledge plays in social transformation as well as reproduction.

The Center's statistics on the number of persons who have experienced insights are not used to define a community as such. They serve instead to verify for members and potential members of the meditation community the validity of the technique and its teaching as realized by a large number of persons. The numbers are intended to objectify the subjective experiences of an anonymous community of knowers to a potentially enlightened citizenry. That is, the goal of the meditation knowledge community is to produce enlightened persons in the transcendent sense, not in a social sense. Enlightened beings, with the notable exception of fully enlightened arahants (who are inevitably monks), are not given titles or status markers that might identify them. Even the category of "old yogi" is left intentionally vague, although linked to more conventional Buddhist categories and to the institution of the Center.

Nevertheless, membership among the cognoscenti is communicated by such terms as yogi haun, as well as through oblique signaling among meditators regarding the quality and depth of one's experience. While monks are not permitted by the rules of the order to make any claims of accomplishments in meditation practice, ordinary lay people are not so constrained, although it might give cause for others to criticize them as immodest or boastful and therefore possibly not authentic. A shorthand has developed to make claims in ways that normalize the practice rather than ratify it. Yogis will casually inquire whether you have "passed the course" or gotten "the insurance policy." The "course" refers to the stages of insight culminating in enlightenment (magga-\textit{phalla}), while the "insurance policy" refers to the confidence that, with attainment of the first stage of enlightenment, one will not be reborn again in states of woe.

Spiro (1970) pointed out that loss, heartbreak, sorrow, illness, or even a rude temper are some of the reasons that a person may renounce the world to become a monk. The same is true for lay meditators. Just as commonly, however, someone may wish to become a yogi for reasons that are not directly motivated by personal strife. Many come to the Center in the final third of their life, in keeping with the tradition that this is the time to prepare for good conditions in the next life. Others describe how they were inspired by the discourses of a monk, or because a friend encouraged them to take up a meditation course. Friends often join together to practice. Young unmarried women come together in pairs and larger groups. Many are encouraged to go by their parents, who see
it as a way of inculcating ethical discipline and mental training, and parents send
their children for a month when school is out.

Ma Su, in her early 20s, and a group of about fifteen women decided to prac-
tice together at the Center during the summer, but could afford to undertake only
a 10-day meditation course, as the Center charges nominally for meals and
utilities. The 20-hour daily meditation schedule was arduous, and the supervising
monk was strict in insisting that Ma Su apply herself strenuously and not let her
mind wander.

My other friends managed to stay the whole time. I couldn’t do it. It was too difficult for me and
after four days I went home. But my mind had become calm and still, and my family said that I
had cooled my temper and had become very mindful and considerate of other people. But that
only lasted for about a month and then I was talking very fast again and not very mindfully. I
think it is a good thing to meditate.

Clearly, as is generally reported, vipassana meditation is not for the faint-
hearted. How difficult the regime is appears in an anecdote the monks related to
me. After amnesty was offered to communist guerillas in the 1980s, a man who
had lived in the jungle for more than two decades took the government’s offer to
return to Yangon and give up the resistance. He came to the Center with the aim
of moral purification, for he had spent many years engaged in violent activities,
but it was exceedingly difficult for him to progress in his practice. He described
to the monks how, as he sat, he could physically feel the blows of a boot to his
head and torso, just as he had kicked his enemies. He was determined to succeed
no matter how difficult because he was hardened by jungle warfare and felt he
could endure the obstacles he encountered. After some weeks of striving with no
progress to show for his effort, he abandoned his meditation, saying that it was
more difficult than living in the jungle. The monks explained that the reason for
his difficulty was that he had insufficient preparation in the preliminary practices
of charity and moral conduct.

CONCLUSION

In the past, membership in the Sangha (the community of monks) was via the
canonical category of sasana membership through Buddhist learning, irrespec-
tive of individual achievements.7 The shift in criteria for belonging is instructive
for considering how knowledge communities are distinguished and the kind of
knowledge being distinguished. Institutionally grounded understandings and
practices determining who was within or outside the sasana depended more
upon prescribed identities. Communities of knowers were distinguished by their
religious occupation.
With the rise of the mass meditation movement, there was a shift from a
singular identification with role identities, such as monk and lay donor, toward
the universalizing of sasana knowledge across social and religious divides. The
novelty of the meditation knowledge community was revealed by the frequency
with which it was referred to as a paradox in that dhamma knowledge could be
realized and embodied in lay people who were not part of the established Sangha
order.

The meditation knowledge community does not require enlightened people,
but only potential knowing agents, those who cultivate superior ethics and
morality. As a community of practice, the emphasis is on creating opportunities
for moral development through preliminary and advanced techniques. Knowledge
sharing in this context institutionalizes social forms of knowledge production that
support inner moral discipline and practice, while maintaining an agnosticism
over how one might definitively identify enlightened persons. In other words,
the goal of the meditation knowledge community is to produce enlightened
persons in the transcendent sense but not explicitly in the social sense.

It may be that the hegemony of a way of knowing happens through the
successful institutionalization of that way of knowing—courts, social institutions,
education, social discourse, or even resistance movements—so that its authorities
are manifest. In Burma, the vipassana way of knowing is simultaneously tradi-
tional and revolutionary. As many have noted (Jordt 2003, Houtman 1999,
Schober 1997, 2005), the military regime in power in Burma since 1962 has had
to reconcile its goals for complete power with the mass of New Laity, whose way
of conceiving reality contains within it the criteria for legitimacy of rule.

The knowing in this case is linked more closely to experiential than to textual
knowledge. This matters both in relation to existing debates in Theravada
Buddhist studies between doctrine and belief, ideology and action (see Sharf
1995 for a bibliography of this debate), and in support of Barth’s proposal of
knowledge and knowledge communities as a useful variable in ethnographic
analysis. However epigrammatically these points have been dealt with here, it
is nonetheless clear that shifting the focus away from culture and toward an
investigation of knowledge provides a different set of causal processes. Such a
view treats culture not as a repository of beliefs that produce action, but seeks
the ways in which knowledge is constituted, shared, justified, and distributed
within an emergent community. This approach is closer to experience and
enables a more nuanced account of the systems of knowledge that individuals
pursue toward the goals of understanding and ethical training.
1. This way of knowing also has significant implications for current political realities. Gustaaf Houtman describes "a wide array of practices usually identified as 'meditation' and 'contemplation' in the internal cultural debates surrounding the politics of the military regimes [in Burma] since 1962, and in particular since 1988" (Houtman 1999:9).
2. Pali terminology is used here for terms typically employed by monks and lay scholars in discussing these distinctions.
3. "Potential knowing agents" is an expression used by Goldman (1999), whose work on social epistemology focuses on the social paths by which information or misinformation spreads through a group.
4. The claim of vast numbers of people who had practiced at the Center was often treated with disdain. One critic quipped that the Center must be "manufacturing enlightened beings 100-a-month!" Such comments were meant not to doubt the efficacy of the techniques, but as a reproach for the impropriety of boasting about success, and an implicit accusation that the Center inflated the numbers to attract more devotees to the Mahasi method and Center. That literally millions of lay people had practiced vipassana and experienced the teachings was beyond doubt.
6. This is an arbitrary division since scholarly monks may also be meditation monks.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

_____ 2006. Buddhism in Burma: Engagement with Modernity. Buddhism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives, ed. S. C. Berkwitz, pp. 73–100. ABC-CLIO.