

## Reflections on Boonman and Samatha Trust

An excerpt from *SD 60.1b Samatha, Vipassanā, Kammatṭhāna*, © Piya Tan 3<sup>rd</sup> rev 2023.

### 6.4.1 The ideal lay teacher

**6.4.1.1 Ajahn Boonman Poonyathiro** [6.1] is clearly a remarkable individual, whose life, personality and spirituality launched one of the most wholesome and successful lay Buddhist organizations in Europe, even the world. His early life is an edifying testimony to serendipity (in the darkness of his life, he always sees a path of light) and synchrony (good things happen just at the right time for him). Above all, it is a warm story of personal transformation through Buddhist living. At the height of his childhood delinquency, he heeded a warning voice from his uncle. He turned to the traditional temple life, working his way up from being a humble temple boy to an admirable young monk educated both monastically and academically.

His karmic connections with the UK compelled him to disrobe so that he was able to work his way across South Asia, with a travelling companion, to reach his destination. Along the way, he met just the right people (such as Anandabodhi) who introduced him into the mainstream British Buddhist circle. The UK Buddhists he met saw in him desirable Buddhist qualities of a teacher. When charismatic monks like Sangharakshita and Anandabodhi failed the English Sangha Trust, Boonman, even as a layman, illuminated British Buddhism.

**6.4.1.2** Given this opportunity, he swam in it like fish in water, and, with panache, started a remarkable school for local Buddhists. What he taught them was closer in spirit to the Buddha's teaching than most of the institutions and teachers of his time. His personal charisma and teaching skills attracted and held together a loyal community of practitioners and followers in ancient Dharma. His instructions and example rallied and raised them into a world-class community of meditators and teachers who taught from their own experience of Dharma.

With all these amazing opportunities, he could have easily become a Guru parasiting pleasurably on the devotion or naiveté of his admirers and the wealth of nations—like the devious Sangharakshita (1926-2018),<sup>1</sup> who preyed on youths who came in faith, or the pretentious Yantra Amaro (b 1951),<sup>2</sup> who succumbed to the bodies of female admirers. Neither did Boonman build some monumental status-conscious prosperity Church,<sup>3</sup> nor spin tantalizing webs of a dark Guru cult selling salvation.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Like Sangharakshita's (Friends of the) Western Buddhist Order, rebranded as the Triratna Buddhist Community: SD 34.5 (1.2.2); SD 7.9 (4.3.6; 4.4.3.4-4.4.3.6; 4.5.1).

<sup>2</sup> Piyasīlo, *Charisma in Buddhism*, 1992h:113-137.  
<http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Charisma-in-Buddhism-piyasilo.pdf>. [https://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/charisma6.pdf](https://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/charisma6.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Like the Soka Gakkai International centred on Daisaku Ikeda: SD 34.5 (1.2.3).

<sup>4</sup> Like Bhagwan ("Lord") Shree Rajneesh, later Osho (1931-90) who made a joke of all that is good and true, or the Maharishi ("great seer") Mahesh Yogi (1918-2008) of TM fame.

**6.4.1.3** Instead of keeping a cult harem, he fell in love and married. It failed, but he married again, and happily this time, now with 3 daughters. Before returning to Thailand, he instructed 2 experienced teachers [6.1.5.1] he had trained to run the meditation classes themselves. In Thailand, he raised his own family, supporting himself with honest work. Two decades passed, and the Samatha Trust he left behind grew handsomely.

When ST started their National Centre, he was invited to return to Britain, and he did. His work was done, but he kept in touch with the British Buddhists because they loved and needed him. They had grown accustomed to his teachings, and many mastered them and taught many more. They did not abandon him, and he kept in touch with them—old friends in the evening of the 1<sup>st</sup> generation of teachers. He has lived a full life, and brightened up the lives of so many others, all in the name of the 3 jewels. I cannot think of any parallel or better example here.

#### **6.4.2 Samatha Trust as ideal lay Buddhist community**

**6.4.2.1** The Samatha Trust started because Boonman Poonyathiro met the right people—Lance Cousins and Paul Dennison—but none of them became cult figures. Unlike the Forest Sangha, there is little emphasis on the life and teaching of contemporary figures. Boonman gave them a Buddhist launching pad, and did not build any pedestal for himself. He is highly respected among the ST teachers as the person who first taught Samatha meditation to them.

An issue of the *Samatha Newsletter* detailed his current activities in Thailand and his summer visits to Greenstreete. His autobiographical essay, *From One to Nine* (Boonman, 2004) he recounts his own struggles and life-journey. However, he is seen as neither the founder nor the leader of the Samatha Trust, and most members were initially not even aware of his role.

The only remaining founder member, Paul Dennison—Lance Cousins, the other founder member, having passed on in 2015—is a respected senior teacher, who was quoted from time to time, but they are not revered as religious leaders.<sup>5</sup> They instead deeply revere their common teacher, on whose account they gather, that is, **Gotama Buddha**, whose narratives are studied for their implications for practice, rather than from a hallowed mystique of hagiography.

It is indeed significant that **the main Buddha image**, named the Phra Buddha Dhammacakra,<sup>6</sup> in the Greenstreete Shrine Hall is sculpted in the Dharmacakra mudra, the teaching gesture, reminding us of the Buddha's first discourse, and that he is still teaching, rather than a meditating Buddha, as we might have expected from a Samatha tradition.<sup>7</sup> That is what every member does, in keeping with the teaching.

R845 Inspiration 495

Piya Tan ©2024

---

<sup>5</sup> Veronica Voiels, interviewed by Bluck, Manchester Samatha Centre, 2003. (Bluck 2006:53).

<sup>6</sup> The name is Thai; hence, the blend of Pali (dhamma) + Skt (cakra), pronounced as “phra’ phutthathammachak” in Thai: [http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/buddhadhammacakra.pdf](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/buddhadhammacakra.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Dennison 2001:49; Bluck 2006:57.