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List of Contributors

**Bhikkhu Anālayo** specializes in early Buddhist studies. He teaches at the Center for Buddhist Studies, University of Hamburg, and at the Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy, Kandy, and carries out research at Dharma Drum Buddhist College, Taiwan.

**Amanda Anderson** has a Postgraduate Diploma in Buddhist Studies from the University of Sunderland. She is currently studying for an MA in Mindfulness Based Core Process Psychotherapy at the Karuna Institute. She works as a freelance editor and is based in Oxford. amandaand30@hotmail.com

**Geoffrey Bamford** is one of the Trustees of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies. He gained a first class degree in Sanskrit and Pali from Oxford University in 1970, then did four years' postgraduate work, both in Oxford and in Sri Lanka (on a Commonwealth Scholarship). From 1974 he had a business career, during which he ran an independent consultancy specialising in cross-cultural communication issues. Geoff founded the Society for the Wider understanding of Buddhism (So-Wide) and has worked closely with the OCBS. geoffrey.bamford@gmail.com

**D. Mitra Barua** teaches South Asian Religions at the Department of Religion and Culture, University of Saskatchewan, Canada. He is currently working on two projects: 1) the moral formation of young Buddhists in contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhism and 2) Buddhism in Bengal from a perspective of minority religion within modern transnational networks. In August 2014 he is to join the Asian Studies Department at Cornell University as ACLS/Ho family postdoctoral fellow in Buddhist studies. dmitra777@gmail.com

**Yi-hsun Huang** is an associate professor of the Department of Buddhist Studies at Fo Guang University, Taiwan. She earned her Ph. D. in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. She is currently doing research on Chan texts in the Song Dynasty. yihsun.huang@gmail.com

**Mark Leonard** studied Zoology and became a fisherman. He gained a Masters in Fisheries Biology and had a short career in fisheries politics at national level. Later, he became interested in applying Buddhist thinking to achieve change in society;
he worked for SoWide, the OCBS and the nascent Oxford Mindfulness Centre (OMC), where he championed the OMC “Mindfulness in the workplace” project. His role then migrated to the Oxford Department of Psychiatry. He has set up The Mindfulness Exchange as a spin off from the OMC and is now developing this business with co-founder Marina Grazier. geramos@yahoo.co.uk

Louella Matsunaga is senior lecturer in the anthropology of Japan at Oxford Brookes University. Her research has included work on the spread of both established Japanese religions and Japanese new religious movements outside Japan, with particular reference to Western Europe. She is now working on the globalisation of Jodo Shinshu, comparing some of the transformations in Shin Buddhism in Europe, the United States and Japan since the late nineteenth century, in the context of shifting global discourses of Buddhism. lmatsunaga@brookes.ac.uk

Shì Huìfēng is Assistant Professor at Fo Guang University, Taiwan, and teaches at the Department of Buddhist Studies. His areas of academic focus include Indian Buddhism, in particular early Mahāyāna sūtra and śāstra, translation and hermeneutics, and practices of contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism. shihuifeng@gmail.com

Brett Shults is an independent researcher. He lives in Hong Kong. He published an article in JOCBS vol.4. brett.shults@gmail.com

Jan Westerhoff is University Lecturer in Religious Ethics at the University of Oxford, a Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall, and a Research Associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His publications include Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka (OUP 2009) and The Dispeller of Disputes: Nāgārjuna’s Vighrahavyāvartani (OUP 2010). jan.westerhoff@theology.ox.ac.uk

Yu-Shuang Yao took her Ph.D in the Sociology of Religion at King’s College, London in 2001. She has published extensively in both Chinese and English. Her book Taiwan’s Tzu Chi was published by Brill/Global Oriental in 2013. She is an associate professor at Fo Guang University. YSYao@gmail.com
Editorial

Richard Gombrich

“Taiwan has the highest number of Buddhist nuns in the world and also a
greater proportion relative to monks, a situation in monastic Buddhism unlike
any other on earth.”¹ “[I]t is estimated that there are around 15,000 nuns active in
Taiwan at present.”²

Yet, a hundred years ago there was not a single ordained Buddhist nun in
Taiwan. How did the nuns’ movement there begin?

Let me briefly show the wide historical significance of this question. The
largest body of nuns in Taiwan for the past half century has been at Fo Guang
Shan in southern Taiwan, a huge monastery for both sexes founded by the Master
Xingyun in the 1950s. Voramai Kabilsingh, the first Thai woman to receive full
ordination, was ordained there in 1970. Her daughter, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh,
was later ordained in Sri Lanka in 2003 as Bhikkhunī Dhammânanda, and has
been a foremost proponent of religious rights for Buddhist women.

In 1988 Xingyun founded Xilai Monastery, “the largest Buddhist temple in
the Western world”, in a suburb of Los Angeles, and “decided to offer the Chinese
ordination rite to Theravada as well as Tibetan nuns so that they might eventually
establish Fo Guang Shan ordination lineages in their own countries”.³ In 1998 he
held a huge ordination ceremony for both monks and nuns from all the major
Buddhist traditions in Bodh Gaya.⁴

To learn about the antecedents to these developments, read our article by Yu-
Shuang Yao. It turns out that during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan a Rinzai

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² *Ibid*.
Zen monk called Gisei Higashiumi had learnt Hokkien, the local form of Chinese, and in 1919 held a ceremony in southern Taiwan at which he ordained 84 monks and 79 nuns. He repeated these ordinations for over 20 years, and arranged for the nuns, in total perhaps several hundred, to be educated in Japan. An intriguing detail is that in 1917 the Chinese monk Tai Xu had held an ordination ceremony in the very same temple. He was later to become internationally famous as the founder of “Humanistic Buddhism”. In the 1917 ceremony he ordained only men; but it is intriguing to speculate that he may have influenced the large scale female ordination held only two years later.

I would also like to draw attention to the “supplement” to the Journal: “The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts” by the Ven Sujato and the Ven Brahmali. The authors asked my advice about where to publish it. As it is clearly too long for an article, but probably too short for a book, I asked their permission to publish it hors de série as a special supplement to our Journal. It is now on our main web site and is accessible without a subscription. I regard this as a very important contribution to Buddhist studies. In my view, anyone who reads it will hardly be able to sustain the scepticism about our knowledge of what the Buddha taught which has become so fashionable in academia. It deserves to command wide attention.

I deplored this scepticism in my editorial for vol. 5, in the context of the next IABS conference, which will be held in Vienna this August, and I remarked on the absence of the words “Pāli” and “Theravāda” from the published schedule. Now that the detailed programme has been published, there is something else which I find odd. 35 panels and 25 sections are to meet, and the participants (speakers) at these meetings are listed as numbering 458 in all. That’s an average of between 7 and 8 participants per meeting; and that in turn means that very many meetings will involve fewer people than 7! What can be deduced from this fragmentation? I used to think, perhaps naïvely, that a conference was a meeting at which people conferred. The OED gives as meanings for “confer” “converse” and “consult”; Webster’s Dictionary hits the nail on the head with “compare and exchange ideas”. How much reaction can a speaker expect to their ideas from so small an audience?