

10-1-1998

# Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples

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## Repository Citation

Chapple, Christopher Key, "Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples" (1998). *Theological Studies Faculty Works*. 91.  
[http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac/91](http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/91)

## Recommended Citation

Chapple, Christopher Key, reviewer. "Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 1998: 166. Print.

*Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples.* By Paul David Numrich. The University of Tennessee Press, 1996. 181 pages. \$25.00 cloth.

The Religion in Urban America Program at the University of Illinois in Chicago has sponsored a number of research projects around the country to investigate immigrant religious communities that have been established since the 1965 liberalization of American immigration law. *Old Wisdom in the New World* provides insight into two such Theravada Buddhist organizations: the Wat Dhammaram, a Thai temple and community center in Chicago, and Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara, a Sinhalese temple in Los Angeles. The former was established in 1976, the latter in 1980. Both evolved from earlier institutions, and Numrich explains in rather painstaking detail the various organizational peregrinations that resulted in the current institutions. He also provides a description of primary activities held at each center and profiles the people who attend.

This study elucidates several important distinctions. First, these organizations do not fit the standard profile of NRMs but grow out of an ancient religious tradition. Occasionally a difficult relationship develops between lay leadership and the monks who conduct the daily activities at each center. An interesting anomaly characterized as “parallel congregations” is also evident in both centers. On one hand, the centers were designed to provide Thai and Sri Lankan forms of Buddhism for immigrants from those respective countries. On the other hand, they have also attracted non-Asian converts with a deep interest in Buddhist practice. In general, the Asian members tend to emphasize ritual while the non-Asians seem attracted to meditation; nonetheless, “we will find some Asians who think a lot like American converts and some Americans

who sometimes behave like Asian Buddhists (ritually speaking, that is)” (p. 64). To illustrate this diversification among adherents, Numrich provides useful biographies of the head monks, leading Asian members, and select non-Asian converts (some of whom take special lay ordination). The attempt to educate the children of Asian immigrants in Buddhism and Asian cultures sometimes backfires; young Asian-Americans have commented that “Thai kids are boring . . . They seem more dependent on their parents . . . They all stay home until they’re married” (p. 104). Such comments indicate the cultural and generational stresses encountered in the process of Americanization.

In general, Numrich’s study is more descriptive than analytical. It would have been useful to include more discussion of how each center adheres to or diverges from the practical realities of Buddhism in its home country. Also, while he suggests that Americanized Buddhism will evolve into a distinct form, Numrich does not speculate on its content or appearance. Nonetheless, this book contains valuable material and merits inclusion in libraries with collections on American and Asian-American religion.

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