A Guide to the Dhammatalaka Peace Pagoda

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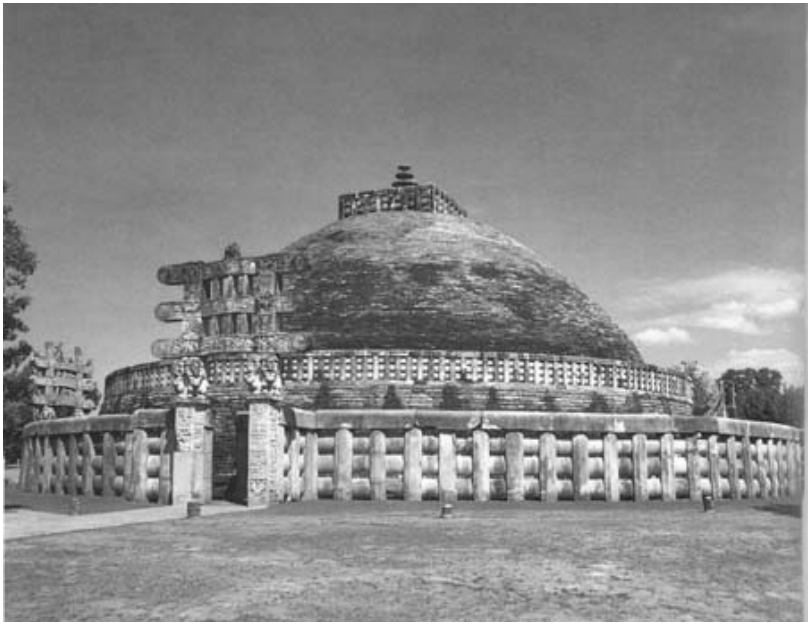
1. *The Origin of the Buddhist Pagoda*

The word 'pagoda' came into English via the Portuguese. They had encountered it in Sri Lanka as a deformed version of the Pali *bhagavata* (the blessed one), a title of the Buddha. In Sri Lanka it was associated with structures housing his relics, of which one of the most famous is the so-called Temple of the Tooth, the Ratanamali Chetiya in Jaffa. An acceptable translation of pagoda might thus be "reliquary building".

Another word for such structures now gaining currency is *stupa*, a Sanskrit word whose Pali form is *thupa* and from which our technical word 'tope' ultimately derives. The root meaning of these words is 'heap' and they are thus allied with Latin *tumulus* and English 'tump' and 'tomb'. We are reminded of the custom of our Indo-European ancestors of raising a burial mound over the remains of any noteworthy person. But it was not limited to them, of course, for the Egyptian pyramid is another such stylised burial heap. And eventually Buddhist stupas developed, like the pyramids of Central America, into grandiose temples with cosmological significance.

The Buddha was once asked who merited such elaborate funerary structures and named various types of enlightened beings, their realised disciples and holy emperors. On his own death, his ashes were divided into eight parts and given a stupa each, with others for the ashes of the cremation pyre and the bowl used to divide the relics. In later years, some stupas were reopened and the subdivided ashes

similarly housed. Later still, memorial stupas were raised at sites associated with events in the Buddha's life – at his birthplace in Lumbini, for example, and at Sarnath, where his first sermon was delivered. Eventually a wide range of simple votive structures was built in all the lands to which Buddhism spread.



Some idea of what stupas used to look like can be gained from the one at Sanchi in India. Originally built by the Emperor Asoka, and then encased in a new brick structure dating from the second century BCE, it consists of a great dome on a square support and is surmounted by a parasol. It is from this last symbolic feature that there developed Shwedagon's soaring spire in Yangon (Rangoon) and the elaborate series of overhanging roofs on Chinese and Japanese pagodas. There is also a traditional story that explains how the form came about. Asked what a stupa should look like, the Buddha folded the thick monastic outer robe and laid it on the ground, put his upturned begging bowl on top and leaned his staff against it. Maintaining silence, he pointed at this structure, no doubt with that famous half smile on his lips. Keep it simple, he probably meant, at the same time realising the futility of actually saying so!

2. *The Dhammatalaka Pagoda*

The base of Birmingham's pagoda is octagonal. Leading up to its traditionally carved teak doors is a flight of steps under a canopy. There are two other doors round the sides of the building, one of which permits wheelchair access. Raised on plinths at either side of the main entrance are two stylised white lions, their gaping mouths red, their crests and manes gold. They are Myanmar equivalents of the spirit guardians generally found outside most Buddhist pagodas, warding off negative influences. The dome above the building's base is most plainly seen from inside. Outside it presents itself as a stepped structure rising to a spire, surmounted by the parasol and terminated by a crystal finial. The spire itself is painted gold while the reliquary area is coated with gold leaf.

England hosts three peace pagodas at present. Those at Milton Keynes and in London's Battersea Park were built under Japanese patronage and opened in 1980 and 1985 respectively. Birmingham's Dhammatalaka Pagoda, opened in 1998, is the first in the Myanmar (Burmese) style anywhere in the West. Its name means Reservoir of the Teaching and refers to its situation just behind Edgbaston Reservoir. Its form relates to the Shwedagon Pagoda, where some hairs of the Buddha are preserved.

The relics enshrined in the Dhammatalaka Pagoda are ashes that once belonged among the treasures of the Myanmar royal family. Thibaw, the last king of Myanmar, was exiled by the British to India in 1886. At the beginning of the twentieth century two Myanmar monks visited him where he lived at Ratanagiri and were entrusted with a portion of the royal relics. One of those monks, U Kitti, passed them on to U

Arsaya, another Myanmar monk resident in India. Shortly before his death, U Arsaya passed them on in his turn to Ven. Dr. Rewata Dhamma. This was in 1964, when the latter was studying at the Sanskrit University of Varanasi.

In 1975, Dr. Rewata Dhamma was invited to set up a Buddhist Centre in Birmingham and left the relics in the shrine room of U Nu, a former prime minister of Myanmar then in Indian exile. After U Nu's eventual return to Myanmar, the relics remained in the keeping of his daughter, Daw Than Than Nu. Meanwhile, Dr. Rewata Dhamma had settled in Birmingham and was planning a fitting resting place for them after their century of wandering. Negotiating a site and then building there took all of twelve years in the end.

The main portion of the relics is enclosed in a swelling of the spire, immediately below the parasol feature which signifies the Buddha's royal birth. A smaller portion of the ashes is enclosed in a crystal casket on the shrine inside. Together with the ashes above are other traditional offerings and also a novel feature, a fragment of the infamous Berlin Wall, picked up by Dr. Rewata Dhamma when the wall was being demolished in 1989. Thus the Dhammatalaka Pagoda partners the other two in England devoted to peace. We are reminded not only of the Buddha's practice of loving-kindness and conflict resolution but of Dr. Rewata Dhamma's own activities in this field.

Birmingham City Council was approached in the late 1980s for a suitable place to build and eventually suggested Osler Street. The site of a demolished row of houses on the edge of Ladywood, it was offered at a fraction of its actual value. A service of consecration, in which a number of different schools of Buddhism participated, was held in 1990 and building began four years later. It was quickly found that, due to the site's history, far deeper foundations were needed than originally envisaged and other

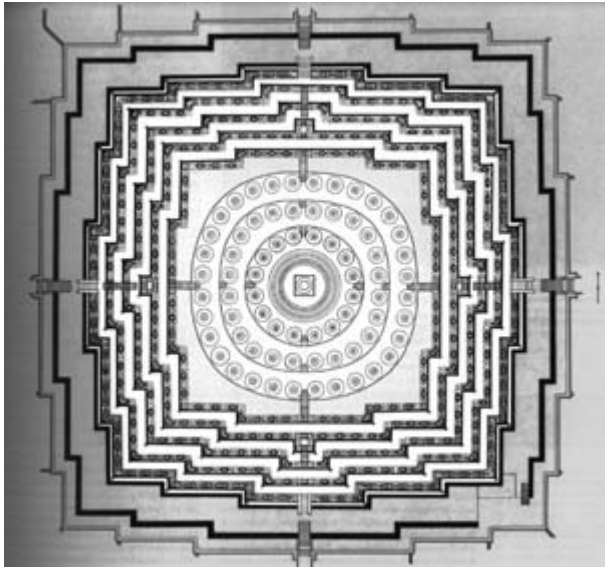
complications cropped up as building proceeded. This necessitated making fresh appeals to the Buddhist community for funds and the pagoda was not completed until 1998, although the shell was being used for large ceremonies over a year before.

Birmingham has gained from the building in a number of ways. It is now a holy city since the pagoda is officially a place of pilgrimage. Commenting on such structures, the Buddha once declared that there "people will make offerings…or will pay homage, or will feel reverence in their minds. To such people benefit and happiness will accrue for a long time." Nor are visitors confined to Buddhists alone. A number of people from all parts visit the pagoda every day. It is a rare example of Eastern architecture in the city and takes its place beside the beautiful Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, the Sikh Gurdwara on Soho Hill, and the ornate Ghamkol Sharif Mosque in Small Heath. The beauty of the building outside and in, and the state of serenity it engenders, attract many from all walks of life, those who follow other ways and those whose quest is personal to them.

3. *The Pagoda's Purpose and Interior*

One can, if one wishes, read cosmological significance into a pagoda's structure, symbolising the approach to enlightenment, the end of all Buddhist practice. From this point of view, the base and walls of the building correspond to the realm of desire that we now inhabit and from whose hold on us we seek to be purified. The gradations below the bell of the spire represent the lower heavenly realms of gratified desire which are not much regarded. Beyond that are fine material realms associated with the results of meditative trance and these take us to the downwards-and-upwards facing

lotuses. Here start the formless realms associated with purified conduct and the finer aspects of wisdom. The highest of these is represented by the bud in which the Buddha relics are encased. The parasol that shades it stands for the realisation of Nirvana in this life, while the crystal surmounting that is the ultimate liberation from rebirth.



One reading of a pagoda, then, is as a representation of the 'Buddha mind', the perfect balance of love and wisdom manifested in an ordinary human being. Not an impossible ideal but an attainable state. And from this assurance arises a second reading: it is the inspiration of Buddhas to be. Seen from above you would get a design that looks very much like a mandala, one equally readable as a diagram of the spiritual journey. Opposite, for instance, is the plan of the even more elaborate Indonesian temple complex at Borobudur. Far removed though it is in space and time of construction, its kinship to ours in Birmingham is immediately obvious.

A prime function of the Pagoda is as a teaching device. This was once of great importance when the majority of devotees were illiterate. Indeed, the Buddha was so himself. In his era writing had only recently been reinvented in India and was the monopoly of royal scribes. Everything about a Buddhist building and what was done inside it therefore had a symbolical function to be borne in mind by devotees.

It is inside the building that the beginning of the practice takes place and there one discovers other reminders of and aids on the Buddhist path. The building is spacious and uncluttered. On a shrine is situated a statue of the Buddha in meditation posture. This is seated on a canopied teak throne overlaid with fine gold leaf. It is known as the lion throne, in reference to the Buddha's royal birth, and has a lotus flower support, symbolising the purification of the mind by meditation. Royalty and meditation also come together in the umbrellas on either side, in that, though reserved for kings in the East, in the Buddhist context umbrellas also symbolise the tree under which the Buddha was enlightened. This is especially true of the white umbrellas, from which hang golden leaves shaped like those of the Bodhi Tree. On the other hand, the gold umbrellas in front of them are unashamedly royal. When opened, you can see inside a decorative web of interwoven coloured threads

Various offerings are made at the shrine and all of these have their special meanings. Lighting a candle, for instance, is a reminder that the Buddha's title means 'The Awakened (or Enlightened) One' and that we follow his teaching in order to attain his qualities. When offering incense one reflects on the influence of one's actions (karma). The offering of flowers is a reminder of death (since they will not last long) and that we should be diligent in doing good since life is uncertain. The glass of water also found on the shrine symbolises the heart purified of selfishness. Each offering reminds those that make them that they are disciples under training. The most effective offering is therefore of oneself to the practice. This is why people bow before the Buddha. It looks like an act of worship but is in fact an Indian form of respect to a teacher. Finally you will see various types of food and drink on the shrine and even, on occasion, a monastic robe. This is because monks are totally dependent for food, shelter and clothing on lay people. Often, when they are bringing supplies for the monks, devotees will leave a token sample before the Buddha – again as a sign of respect to the founder of the monastic order.

Along a rear wall near the shrine are the three divisions of the Buddhist scriptures contained in forty volumes (so far only in Pali, and written in Myanmar script), as well as fifty-two volumes of commentaries and twenty-six of sub-commentaries. There are also examples of old palm-leaf scriptures from both Myanmar and Sri Lanka and a very handsome and decorative copy of the monastic ordination ceremony on lacquer strips, written in a very ancient ornate script.

Display cabinets near the side doors hold statues of the Buddha from many lands as well as a variety of other objects. There are traditional rosaries, used as a meditation aid, made up of 108 beads. There is also a bunch of leaves from the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya, the scene of the Buddha's enlightenment. On the right of the shrine is an elaborate 'teaching seat' painted gold, only to be used by the most senior of teacher monks. It is, of course, a place of honour, but monastic rules also state that one should be seated higher than the audience when teaching doctrine

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4. *Buddhas and their symbolism*

uddha is merely a title meaning 'one who is enlightened'. Born some 26 centuries ago in the north of India, our Buddha was named Siddatha Gotama and belonged to the royal Sakya clan. Round the pagoda are paintings of various events in his life, especially the moment of his enlightenment at the age of 35, and of his passing away 45 years later. However, statues differ not only in national style but in feature as well

since it is customary to give the Buddha the look of his devotees. This is to emphasise that he is not some remote and exotic prince but someone with whom we can identify. We too are called to seek enlightenment. Although the pagoda does not yet have a Buddha with English features, there are statues from China, Japan, Vietnam, Tibet, Nepal, Thailand and, of course, Myanmar.

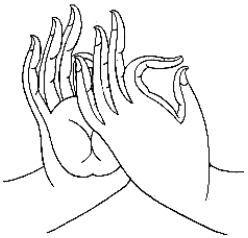
The way the Buddha's hands are placed also has a meaning. There are some 180 different postures, each of which tells a story, but the four most frequent are these:

The earth-witnessing gesture in which the left hand is positioned palm-up on the lap and the right hangs over the knee, with palm inward and extended fingers touching the ground. This refers to the occasion immediately after the enlightenment when the demonic Mara challenged the Buddha to say by what right he laid claim to the title of Enlightened One. He silently indicated that the earth, on which he had been reborn so many times, was witness of his development of the required Perfections. Its meaning, therefore, is the assertion of attainment.

The meditation or lotus posture in which the feet are tucked onto the opposite thighs while the right hand rests on top of the left in the lap, thumbs lightly touching.

The gesture of fearlessness in which the right hand is held at shoulder height with palm facing outwards. The Buddha is said to have made this at the moment of his enlightenment as a sign that his times of stress and striving were over. But it is also a mark of reassurance to his devotees that they too can succeed in this endeavour and follow where he led.

The turning of the wheel, which refers to the Buddha's first sermon and is made by placing both hands in front of the chest. The left palm faces inward and overlaps the right hand; the right hand is facing outward. The index finger and the thumb on each hand are touching and form a circle.



Of the other figures, two more are worth looking at. One is a golden standing figure that points upwards with the right hand and downwards with the left. This is the infant Gotama announcing the future attainment that will make him greater than any on earth or in heaven. There is a larger version of this in the garden outside. Then there is a dark standing figure with hand raised in the gesture of fearlessness and a flame rising from his head. This is Maitreya (the loving one), the Buddha who will succeed Gotama after his teaching has been forgotten. The Buddha's final words to his disciples were that everything must pass away. This includes his teaching, the truth of which must then be rediscovered.

Round the rim of the interior dome are painted reliefs of 28 such enlightened ones who have already taught. They include Gotama, the Buddha of our own era, who is the twenty-eighth. The Buddhist belief is that time is without beginning, with infinite universes coming into being and passing away. Buddhas too are therefore infinite, but these 28 are the teaching line with which former births of our own Buddha have been associated. He first made the vow to seek buddhahood under Dipankara, the fourth in this succession. He also did some service for each of the 23 others who followed and his future status was confirmed by them. History repeats itself but with significant differences in this cyclic set of universes. Each Buddha is born of different parents, of different social status and in different cities, but all in India. The time they take to reach enlightenment varies and they teach for differing

lengths of time, but that enlightenment always comes at the full moon of May. They are always seated beneath a tree, but it is generally (though not always) of a different species on each occasion.

In every school of Buddhism great stress is laid on the unbroken line by which the teaching reaches us. The lineage of the 28 Buddhas therefore extends this backwards in time.

5. *The grounds*

The grounds have been laid out as a 'meditation garden' with benches where, on fine days at least, you can sit and appreciate the scene. Traditional Buddhists consider it a good thing to walk round the outside of the building three times. This is done clockwise, always keeping the right shoulder to the building as a gesture of reverence.

At the back of the pagoda, directly behind the shrine area, is a fish pond which incorporates a bit of Myanmar folklore. Kyansittha, the eleventh century king of Pagan, was unable to see the spire of the Shwesigon Pagoda that he had sponsored; it was so high that tilting up his head would cause his crown to fall off. In order to solve the royal dilemma, an enterprising workman dug a hole some distance away and filled it with water. By casting his eyes down, the king was at last satisfied by seeing the spire's reflection there. Most pagodas in Myanmar now have a body of water in the close vicinity. We are fortunate in having the Edgbaston Reservoir immediately behind the grounds. In fact an overflow leat from the dam defines our boundary at this point.

A happy historical coincidence also makes this particular spot special since the area where both the reservoir and the pagoda are found used long ago to be part of Rotton Park, the deer sanctuary belonging to the manor of Birmingham. Now it was at the deer park at Sarnath (a suburb of the Indian city of Varanasi) that the Buddha preached his first sermon. A commemorative pagoda there has long marked the spot. For millennia Varanasi (or Benares, as the British used to call it) has been regarded as the holy city of India by Buddhists and Hindus alike. A visiting monk once remarked to us that because of its associations Birmingham must now be regarded as the Benares of Britain!

Also behind the pagoda are a number of features belonging to other branches of Buddhism. Tibetan prayer flags sometimes flutter in the wind, which always picks up speed over the adjoining lake just here. Near them are a couple of handsome prayer wheels. These are inscribed with the Sanskrit mantra OM MANI PADME HUM in both Newar and Tibetan characters. The former is an old form of writing used for religious texts in Nepal. Opposite them, in an enclosure against the wall of the pagoda, is the Chinese embodiment of the quality of compassion, which takes a female form there and is known as Kuan Yin (pronounced closer to Gwan Yum in the south). This was commissioned from the same sculptor in Myanmar who carved our Buddha statue, which accounts for the similarity in style. In China

this figure (also known as the Holy Mother) is particularly associated with the granting of wishes. Traditionally one takes her hand in one's own when making a request at one's personal shrine. In the pagoda there is a small china statue from Taiwan which has a detachable hand for this purpose.

6. *Linking with the Pagoda*

Outside of its main religious function, the pagoda was set up with several other essential purposes in mind. First of all, it acts as a contact point for the Myanmar community in Britain and abroad. Indeed, the money for building it came largely from the expatriate Myanmar community across three continents. In recognition of this, the Myanmar State Buddhist Council has been given a limited custodial role over it. While there are other Myanmar monasteries in Britain, ours has been longest established and is the only one that has had an interface with Western devotees from its beginning.

Equally important is that the pagoda has acted as a focus for Buddhists of all nationalities and schools across the West Midlands region. Since Dr Rewata Dhamma arrived in Birmingham in 1975, there has been a shared history with the Birmingham Soto Zen group and with the Tibetan Karma Kagyu school. Indeed, when the West Midlands Buddhist Centre was first set up in 1978, the premises were shared between Theravadin and Tibetan devotees and also used by the Zen group for retreats. Senior representatives of the three schools were consulted in the early planning

stages of the pagoda and were present at the consecration of the grounds in 1990. For several years too the Soto Zen group has met regularly on our premises.

One way we have marked our unity of purpose almost from the beginning have been joint celebrations at which devotees, lay disciples and monks chant scriptures in their various religious languages. In later years these moved to Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in the city centre, with their magnificent two-metre high Sultanganj Buddha as focus. The many other Buddhist groups present in Birmingham participated there in celebrating the Buddha's birth near the full moon of each May. These occasions were planned through the West Midlands Buddhist Council, of which Birmingham Buddhist Vihara is a member. We are also a member of the Network of Buddhist Organisations, which covers all of Britain.

Another of our aims has been to encourage inter-faith dialogue. From early on Dr Rewata Dhamma had a close relationship with the vicar of the local Church of St John's and St Peter's, a five minute walk away. With them we planned several joint initiatives over the years, including the Buddhist-Christian Contemplation Group and the Ladywood Education Project (which also involves the Progressive Jewish Synagogue and a local mosque). Equally near us is the temple of the Birmingham Confucian Society in Ledsam Street, with whom we made contact more recently and whose members have performed a Kuan Yin offering on our premises in the past. Some of our members also represent Buddhism on the committee of Birmingham Council of Faiths, while Dr Uttaranyana serves on the Birmingham Faith Leaders Group

Finally we have had a longstanding educational function and welcome parties from schools, colleges, universities and study-groups from across the country and even abroad. Monks and devotees are also prepared to visit educational establishments and make presentations there. Buddhist courses have been

held at the Vihara in the past; and now that the teaching hall named after Dr Rewata Dhamma has been completed on our site, educational activities continue there. It has also become the focus of the Buddhist Academy, where Dr Uttaranyana teaches an international degree course in Buddhist Studies.

Nor have our educational activities been confined to the city. Dr Uttaranyana has continued the work of Dr Rewata Dhamma in leading meditation retreats across several continents. In addition he pays an annual visit to the Thamangone schools complex in Myanmar, whose work is supported by donations from the Vihara. Annual months-long visits to Bangladesh are also made by Ven. Dr Nagasena, whose innovative Lotus Children's Trust runs a schools project in the Chittagong Hill Tracts with Vihara support.

7. *The History of Birmingham Buddhist Vihara*

Dr Rewata Dhamma was the first Buddhist monk to take up residence in Birmingham, but there had been a lay Buddhist presence in the city since the 1960s. One group, predominantly Tibetan in orientation but welcoming those following other schools, met in the north of Birmingham. Another, exclusively practising Theravada meditation, met in the south. The idea of setting up a Buddhist centre headed by a monk arose from the visit in 1973 of Sis. Palmo, an English-born Tibetan nun and disciple of H. H. the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa. The following year the Karmapa himself visited the city, partly as a response to the IRA bombings, in order to conduct a ceremony of great

compassion. He too backed the plan for a centre and between them he and Sis. Palmo decided on Dr Rewata Dhamma as a suitable person to direct it.

The reason for the choice was that Dr Rewata Dhamma, a monk of Burmese origin, held a degree in Mahayana philosophy and would be sympathetic to the two schools that would principally use the centre - Theravadins and followers of the Karma Kagyu school. At that time, Dr Rewata Dhamma was working in the Sanskrit university of Varanasi in India and at first declined the invitation because of his commitments there. Later he was persuaded to leave his academic niche and take up this challenge in a new country. He arrived in 1975 but it was not until 1977 that anything like permanent quarters were arranged in a converted terrace house at 41 Carlyle Road, a few streets away from the present pagoda site. It operated then under the name of the West Midlands Buddhist Centre.

The activities of the centre in those days were mainly Theravada but Dr Rewata Dhamma gave teachings on Mahayana Buddhism, encouraged Kagyu practice and invited Tibetan lamas to give teachings. In 1979 he asked two Tibetan lamas to take up residence in the centre. Living there also was a Theravada monk and nun from Nepal, so there was a serious overcrowding problem and it was very difficult when visiting teachers and their retinues arrived. If it was a Tibetan, the Theravadin monks had to move out; when it was a Theravadin, the Tibetan monks had to stay elsewhere.

This was the situation when His Eminence the Tai Situpa came and he expressed the view that the time had come to split up the centre's activities. We therefore purchased 47 Carlyle Road for the Birmingham Buddhist Vihara and established a separate charity. The Tibetan centre at number 41 was renamed Karma Ling. The two centres now developed separately but in proximity and in friendship.

Even after the pagoda was opened in 1998, the vihara remained in Carlyle Road for another four years. Meanwhile two monks living in a mobile home on the site remained there as caretakers. Building began on the new monastery in 2001 and it was officially opened in 2002. At this two Westerners took temporary ordination as monks, along with a Myanmar devotee and his grandson. The next year the Pagoda hosted the visit of the United Nations Buddha Relics to the UK and four more devotees took temporary ordination as nuns – two Westerners, a Chinese and a Burmese. Temporary ordination is a practice sanctioned by the Theravadin tradition and particularly encouraged by Birmingham Buddhist Vihara. Over the years there have been many, of very varied races and ages, who have done so.

In May 2004, Dr Rewata Dhamma died unexpectedly. His work is now being carried forward by Ven. Dr. Uttaranyana. In 2007 the new teaching hall was built next door to the vihara and was named the Rewata Dhamma Hall in his memory.

Yann Lovelock, alternatively known as Upasaka Nyanaloka, is a senior member at Birmingham Buddhist Vihara. Born in the city in 1939 but raised outside it, he has been associated with Buddhism there since his return in the 1960s and has spent short periods as a Theravadin monk. His article here is partly based on the one he wrote on "The Origin and Symbolism of a Buddhist Pagoda" for **Meeting Buddhists** *(Ed. Elizabeth Harris & Ramona Kauth, Leicester, 2004). After spending much of his life as part of the Vihara's educational outreach team and representing Buddhism in various interfaith and multi-faith organisations, he is currently one of the Senior Advisors of the Network of Buddhist Organisations. In 2012 he was awarded the BEM for his work in the West Midlands.*