

Buddhist Libraries in the UK

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Libraries in Buddhist temples, monasteries, and meditation centres play a major role in preserving, promoting, and disseminating Buddhist teachings and practices. In the UK, Buddhist libraries have developed exponentially after the end of the Second World War, a period almost concomitant with the existence of ABTAPL. Buddhist libraries function as repositories of sacred books, scholarly treatises, and practical works. Such texts can enhance the knowledge and support the practice of monastics, practitioners, scholars, and devotees. For spiritual seekers, Buddhist sympathisers, and the public, Buddhist libraries provide resources on Buddhism as a religion, philosophy, or way of life. Buddhist libraries symbolize the lineage and tradition of their parent institution. Alongside publishing, websites, social media, and newsletters, Buddhist libraries represent a central effort to collect and disseminate Buddhist thought and experience, an important element in the visibility of Buddhism in the British religious

landscape and a key phenomenon in the transplantation, adaptation, transmission, and development of Buddhism in the UK.

This chapter surveys the presence of libraries across all Buddhist denominations in the UK. It focuses on their creation and collections as well as on their role within their parent organization. By tackling libraries in Buddhist settings, rather than in research, specialist, or higher education academic environments, this chapter offers a contrast to other essays in this volume. Although all Buddhist libraries provide access to resources, only a few aspire to develop information literacy, support research and study, enhance academic performance, or foster a learning community.

The term *theological library* might not adequately apply to the cases explored here. These libraries vary greatly in size, collecting efforts, professional support, and intended uses. Moreover, it is debated whether traditional theistic theology aligns with Buddhism – a religion (for some a philosophy or spiritual practice) often described as non-theistic. However, *theology* and *theological* aptly apply to these cases in at least two senses. First, Carisse Mickey Berryhill's (2020) definition of theological libraries appropriately applies to these types of libraries. They collect texts each tradition views as valued, sacred, or symbolically central. They serve a particular community of practitioners, followers, and religious specialists in their own practice and goals by providing resources and tools for religious education and edification. And they appeal to the wider community and potentially to researchers. Second, it can be said that when scholars and practitioners critically and constructively reflect on the Buddhist tradition and the nature and purpose of practice, that constitutes Buddhist theology (Jackson and Makransky 2000). Hence, not only the thinking about these libraries, but also the reflection and research facilitated by these collections constitutes Buddhist theology in that they aim to have an impact on the life of practitioners and on society at large.

This chapter argues that Buddhist libraries represent a key phenomenon in the transmission, adoption, and adaptation of Buddhism in the UK. It suggests that Buddhist libraries in the UK reflect diverse views on librarianship and knowledge transmission and organisation. It also shows how Buddhist libraries are formed in response to Buddhist and European attitudes towards books, reading, and learning within religious practice. This chapter introduces librarians and historians to an important phenomenon for a small, yet growing number of people where book collections are not just information resources but also sites of religious practice and performance. For scholars and practitioners,

it is hoped that descriptions of these libraries will contribute to the knowledge of Buddhism in the UK. And for Buddhist libraries and librarians, it is hoped this chapter will offer an opportunity to reflect on the role of libraries in Buddhist life in the UK and an invitation for Buddhist libraries to collaborate and learn together.

As Alan Jesson has noted, “there has been a growth of non-Christian theological libraries” in recent times (2006, 480). This growth has not been duly accounted for and documented. This chapter diversifies our knowledge of theological and religious libraries. A revised version of my previous survey (Garcia-Jane 2015), complemented by ideas on the reading practices of contemporary Buddhists (Garcia-Jane 2021), this original contribution constitutes the only study dedicated to this phenomenon (Ćurić 2020, 75; Milošević 2023, 13–14). Concerned with the phenomenon of transplantation and adaptation of Buddhism to the West, scholarship on Buddhism in the UK has focused on the practices of convert-dominated groups and lineages, whilst largely, but not totally, neglecting those of the majority of Buddhists in the UK. Although accounting for a phenomenon found largely in convert-dominated Buddhist settings, this chapter acknowledges the great tradition and immense value of Buddhist libraries found all around Asia.

Buddhist Practitioners in the UK

Buddhism is a growing tradition in the UK. Based on census data, the estimated number of self-identified Buddhists in the UK by 2021/2022 was under 300,000 people – about 0.4% of the total UK population – comprising both Asian communities and Western converts. Most Buddhist practitioners are Asian/Chinese, with over 30% of total practitioners being White or White Other, and just over 10% being mixed, Black, or from other backgrounds. By total population, most Buddhists reside in England, then Scotland, and followed by Wales, with the least being in Northern Ireland (Office for National Statistics 2022; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2023; Scotland’s Census 2022).

A distinction can be made here between Buddhism as practised by converts (not necessarily White, British, or Western, but the majority in this group are) and as practised by diasporic – also variously referred to as ethnic – communities (Starkey and Tomalin 2016). Diasporic communities (Sri Lankan, Chinese, Vietnamese, Burmese, and Korean, amongst others) practise a Buddhism comprising, but not limited to, devotional chanting, ancestor worship, or cultural festivals, and the

use of local languages, which converted, or “Westernised,” Buddhists might not engage in as much. Although the use of monasteries and centres is not absolute, in practice many Buddhist centres cater for either of the broad divisions of Western and convert practitioners or diasporic communities. Their practices and needs influence how they collect library materials or even how they mediate with these resources for their communal or individual practices. It is felt that more research on the textual practices of both sets of practitioners would enrich the scholarly account of Buddhist practice in the UK.

Additionally, Buddhist practitioners, as well as practitioners of Buddhism broadly understood, might not have identified as Buddhist in the census but remain what has been referred to as Buddhist sympathisers, nightstand Buddhists, or simply as spiritual seekers (Tweed 2002). Belonging to other faiths or none, these individuals might have adopted some Buddhist practices. Some might not consider Buddhism a religion, but a philosophy or way of life. Moreover, these individuals might not access libraries to meet their needs. What is significant however is the large number of Buddhist libraries and the ubiquitous presence of Buddhist-related resources available in relation to the relatively small number of self-identified Buddhists. This reflects the symbolic value placed on library collections as well as their function in promoting Buddhist thought and practice.

Although libraries are present in all contexts, there is a stronger drive to collect library material in Western Buddhist-dominated contexts, in ecumenical groups, in traditions focused on practising a Buddhism suitable for current times and to enact societal change, and in groups geared towards convert Buddhists. However, there is also evidence that diasporic communities collect library material in their own language, one example being the collection at London Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Temple comprising about 3,000 volumes, periodicals, and other material mainly in Chinese (London Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Temple 2024). Distinguishing between Western and diasporic Buddhism also proves helpful to understand the use and ownership of buildings and the presence of libraries. With some exceptions, whereas Western, convert communities purchase and repurpose buildings in city centres or country houses and listed buildings for their meditation centres and monasteries, diasporic communities, with less economic opportunity, often purchase semi-detached houses in suburban neighbourhoods with the primary aim to attract members of their own communities (Starkey and Tomalin 2016). Since these houses often accommodate monastics, there is less space for libraries.

Reading in Buddhist Practice

Buddhist libraries are found in places of practice and instruction. Reading for information, edification, and enjoyment, but also religious reading – performed to learn a certain account of reality (Griffiths 1999, 40) – are central to their ethos. Reading is mainly considered a companion to practice, on occasion the actual practice. Buddhist attitudes towards reading and access to reading material varies from the widely diverse, to the narrowly restrictive and focused, to the closely monitored and controlled. These attitudes are formed by a combination of Buddhist views on learning and practice as well as by Western and contemporary perspectives on religious practice and study.

Reading is attested at all stages and levels of practice in contemporary Buddhism. A convert's first experience of Buddhism might have been through reading Buddhist-related literature. For some, this might have been their introduction to Buddhist practice, even their main form of contact with the religion. For most, reading remains an important element in their practice and identity as Buddhists. For ordinands and monastics, or for anyone with a committed practice, religious reading might be both a means to learn a particular worldview and a prompt for reflection and inspiration.

Having developed unique forms of textual engagement and reading practices, Buddhism has depended on texts for its expansion and revival throughout its history. The creation, development, scope, and mission of libraries in Buddhist settings is a product of historical trends as well as views for the future. In the UK, the reading habits of contemporary Buddhists can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when significant historical and social changes occurred. At that time, due to the contact with Christian missionaries and Western authors researching and popularising Buddhism, some Buddhist publications emerged which emulated their Christian counterparts. Found in places like Sri Lanka or Japan, these publications were also animated by revivalist and reformist Buddhist movements characterised by scripturalism, rationalism, individualism, and universalism – traits consonant with what would become the Westernising influences of Buddhist modernism. Important for this study is the fact that since then, a greater emphasis was placed on reading as a preferred method for the transmission of knowledge and for engaging with authoritative texts. Moreover, it also meant that Buddhism was principally introduced and transmitted to the West initially as a textual tradition – not

so much as a meditative or devotional tradition – so that texts had to be arranged into libraries, one of the greatest symbols of learning, knowledge, and the Enlightenment. Aimed at captivating Western audiences, the tenor of these texts betrayed European, particularly Protestant, themes and preoccupations, such as the need for rational, scientific explanations. Buddhist scholars refer to this phenomenon as Protestant Buddhism – a hybrid tradition drawing from European Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Transcendentalism, amongst other movements and historical trends (Mellor 1991). These processes and texts also had an impact in Asia. The Buddhism of these texts makes little reference to myth, ritual, or devotion, and instead contains psychological terminology. This process continued later in the twentieth century with the alignment of Buddhism in the West with several psychologies and therapies which emphasised science, individualism, and self-development.

Besides other media, modern Buddhists favour written texts and solitary, silent reading. Perhaps due to Western, democratic forms of access to education, Western dharma practitioners and Buddhist sympathisers feel freer to select their own readings. These individuals are generally defined as self-conscious, well off, well educated, middle class, liberal and respectful of diversity, less committed to organised religions, and more inclined to exploring spirituality through meditation and reading. Given these forms of commodified religion, there is a sense in which the visibility of Buddhism in the British religious landscape is dominated by Western Buddhists.

A phenomenon parallel to the development of libraries in Buddhist settings and key for understanding contemporary Buddhist reading habits is the expansion of the reading public in the twentieth century with the increase in literacy rates, the availability of cheaper books, the inclusion of Buddhist-related topics in publishing houses' catalogues, and the establishment of publishing houses run by Buddhist organisations. For instance, Windhorse Publications is a Buddhist charitable publishing company established in the 1970s to publish works by Sangharakshita and books and other media by Triratna (Windhorse Publications, n.d.). Likewise, Tharpa Publications publishes works by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and by members of the New Kadampa Tradition (Tharpa 2025). Other publishing companies include Parallax Press for content related to Thich Nhat Hanh, his students, and the Community of Mindful Living (Parallax Press, n.d.) or Buddha's Light Publishing connected to Fo Guang Shan (Buddha's Light Publications 2025).

Buddhist Librarianship and Sources

Scholars have studied book collecting and libraries in Buddhist settings in Asia and elsewhere, from early Buddhism to contemporary times. However, as Steven Collins (1990, 104) notices, more must be done to study this phenomenon, particularly in Asia, but also in those places where Buddhism is found. Technical literature often overlooks libraries in Buddhist settings. Guides to places of worship contain references to book collections and libraries amongst the activities of Buddhist groups (Weller 2007), some noticing over sixty such centres (Corner and Marchant 2007). One authoritative source lists one hundred and eighty-nine Buddhist buildings in England alone (Historic England 2017), all of which with a potential for housing a book collection. Only one Buddhist library is currently listed in the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries (ABTAPL) directory. ABTAPL, however, has always been an ecumenical and interfaith organisation with an interest in Buddhist libraries (ABTAPL, n.d.).

There are perhaps more than a hundred Buddhist libraries in the UK. This number is likely higher, considering that the UK's largest groups by number of centres (New Kadampa Tradition and Triratna) have collections in practically all their centres. This number is arrived at by direct knowledge and by mentions found in primary sources (histories of lineages, biographies, newsletters, websites, directories) and secondary literature (historical, sociological, and ethnographical studies).

Regarding their organization and management, a few publications have addressed the peculiarities of Buddhist libraries. Perhaps based on the tradition of church libraries in the United States and given the availability and demand for books on Buddhism, the Buddhist Churches of America published a library manual written by Roy H. Fry in 1961 (Arai 1980, 1), followed by Tomoe M. Arai's manual (1980), both largely aimed at paraprofessionals. Classifying Buddhist material has also been the topic of recent publications (Ranasinghe 1991; Library of Luminary Buddhist Institute 2011).

History of Buddhist Libraries

In the UK, collections of Buddhist-related material developed alongside research into the history, archaeology, religion, and literature of Asia, from the late eighteenth century and particularly in the nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries. With the growth of academic interest in Buddhism, Western orientalist scholars made accessible Buddhist texts and ideas. These eventually became the libraries of learned societies and university libraries. Around the First World War, now with an impetus for religious practice and personal development, such collections as the Buddhist Lodge of the Theosophical Society, later The Buddhist Society, started forming alongside incipient efforts to establish monastic communities, like the Sri Lankan London Buddhist Vihara in the 1920s. Up to that moment, the intellectual interest was on Pāli texts and the Theravāda tradition. Seminal to this was the creation of the Pali Text Society in 1881 by T.W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922) “to foster and promote the study of Pali texts” (Pali Text Society 2023).

Although other groups formed in the first half of the twentieth century due to the presence in the UK of Asian and Western teachers, the creation of Buddhist establishments, and therefore libraries, grew exponentially after the Second World War. The annexation of Tibet by the People’s Republic of China, the subsequent diaspora of the Tibetan people, and immigration from former British colonies and other diaspora communities brought in new Buddhist traditions to the British religious landscape – Zen, Pure Land, and Tibetan Buddhism. Animated by new religious movements and alternative spiritualities in the 1970s and 1980s, alongside the creation of sections and departments on Buddhist Studies and south, southeast, east Asian area studies in many UK universities, many Buddhist library collections were formed and developed then, and have continued to do so since.

Geography of Buddhist Libraries

Found across all Buddhist denominations present in the UK, there is a higher concentration of Buddhist libraries in urban centres and in locations with monastic presence and regular, permanent congregations, as well as in lineages and groups running publishing houses and study programmes, thus reflecting their ethos around reading and study but also around outreach and conversion.

Libraries, of course, are housed in buildings. Although Buddhist groups have been established in new buildings, one of the salient characteristics of Buddhism in the UK has been the adaptation of existing structures for the purposes of Buddhist practice. Buddhist libraries partly occupy buildings which once were courthouses, schools, libraries, seminaries, mansions, churches, or fire stations. There are also

some Asian-style buildings across the spectrum. Building projects are supported by volunteer donations and fundraising efforts, both locally and from overseas (Historic England 2017).

Characteristics of Buddhist Libraries

Buddhist libraries collect and make available Buddhist-related books, periodicals, audiovisual material, archival material, and artworks. Alongside physical collections, many institutional websites or libraries' webpages contain collections of digital resources comprising e-books, audiobooks, audio and video recordings, newsletters, reading lists, and similar material. These are supplemented by material available for sale or for free distribution. Their main users are practitioners and visitors, with a few collections also serving scholars and researchers.

Buddhist libraries are symbols and embodiments of their lineages and traditions. As Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche (b. 1951) put it, "A Buddhist library for dharma texts is the precious treasury of wisdom, and that's an invaluable treasure; it's more valuable than any kind of material treasure" (Gomde UK, n.d.). Libraries act as curators, custodians, museums, and repositories symbolically narrating and iconically embodying the histories of the lineages and individuals they represent. These functions reflect traditional textual practices, which are part of Buddhist monastic and lay devotional life: memorising, copying, collecting, reciting, and sharing Buddhist texts. These highly meritorious activities are essential not only to the practice of Buddhism, but also to its transmission and preservation.

Manifested nowadays in the sponsoring of translation and publishing projects or in supporting Buddhist libraries, Buddhist textual practices are grounded in Buddhist ideas of *dāna* or giving and in the merit accrued by generous acts. The Buddhist teaching or *dharma*, manifested in books, is one of the three jewels of Buddhism – Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; teacher, teaching, and students. Giving in general but the dharma in particular is considered a most meritorious devotional act: the gift of *dharma* is the highest gift. Or as the beloved and revered *Dhammapada* has it, "The gift of the dharma conquers all gifts" (Roebuck 2010, 69). The value placed on books intrinsically reflects the role reading might play in the practice of Buddhism.

Physical and digital resources represent the tangible efforts to collect, promote, and disseminate the intellectual, doctrinal, and pastoral output of each tradition. Besides practice, Buddhist groups also

value an intellectual understanding of the religion and believe that reading and studying might impact the life of Buddhist practitioners and sympathisers.

The symbolic and iconic value placed on books reflects how these libraries define the scope of their collections. Whereas many groups emphasise the teaching of their tradition, lineage, and founder via their libraries, websites, and publishing houses, they also tend to offer a comprehensive, on a few occasions exhaustive, account of Buddhist history, practice, and doctrine, including canonical and scriptural texts, commentaries, scholarly literature, general introductions, and even popular titles by well-known figures such as the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, or Pema Chödrön, amongst others. Philosophy, psychology, and ethics are popular topics, with meditation manuals being frequently consulted. Besides these, material on psychotherapy, art, cookery, gardening, or poetry are often found in these collections. Although some libraries do not classify their material at all, most libraries classify by subject, often using some decimal classification system. As a reflection on their collecting efforts, Buddhist libraries and the institutions to which they belong imagine practitioners' needs ranging from the general and eclectic to the researcher and academic to the sectarian and exclusionary.

Collecting bias can become restrictive and exclusivist in scope, even leading to collections being dismantled. For instance, the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) purged the collections of the Manjushri Institute, subsequently presumably in all centres, of all books except for titles by their founder Ven Geshe Kelsang Gyatso Rinpoche (1931–2022) and for their in-house publications. Their main collection, once comprising over 3,000 volumes, has now become a collection of just over a hundred volumes. This purge was accompanied by an institutional decision to remove all iconography not directly related to NKT teachings from their centres and to only allow teachers from within the NKT to teach at their centres (Kay 2004, 76). That core collection, and a selection of related works, is available in the shrine rooms and bookshops of every NKT centre worldwide (Manuel Rivero-De'Martine, personal communication, March 18, 2025). This symbolic potency of books and the iconic valence they contain is made evident in the case of books by Geshe Kelsang and how they are made to stand for the presence of the now absent teacher. As Geshe Kelsang expressed it, “Dharma books are the eyes through which sentient beings can see the spiritual paths to liberation and enlightenment, the light by which they can dispel the

darkness of ignorance, and the Spiritual Guide from whom they can receive reliable advice" (Tharpa 2025).

In contrast, whereas the Zen tradition places great emphasis on direct experience and displays distrust on the mediation of books for actual experience, some Zen settings, such as Shobo-an and Throssel Hole (Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, n.d.) have libraries. These and similar libraries cater primarily for monastics and regular practitioners and place their needs to the forefront. Nonetheless, some Zen lineage websites feature articles, e-books, and reading lists, often quite extensive, and akin to a contemporary canon of Zen literature (Crook 2004).

Library collections often appear alongside or shortly after the foundation of Buddhist groups. Resulting from the efforts of monastics or laypeople, their development is due to the donation or the purchase of individual items or the addition of whole collections. Usually managed by volunteer paraprofessionals, both lay and monastic, virtually all Buddhists, a few libraries are led by qualified librarians, although retired librarians and academics are often drawn to these roles.

According to size, collections range from the virtually insignificant (under two hundred books) to the substantial (between 2,000 and 10,000), to the remarkable (about 20,000–25,000 items). Libraries with a larger collection have dedicated library spaces and services. Some of these significant collections are described below. Growth is due to donations and purchases, managed very diversely across the spectrum. Some libraries also contribute to the development of digital collections. Collections are mostly housed in a single room, with larger collections spanning over several spaces. Most libraries also have special collections considered rare and valuable.

The predominant language in most collections is English. However, most libraries include material in Buddhist canonical languages (Pāli, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese) as well as in modern languages according to their needs, mainly European and Asian languages.

Some libraries do not catalogue their collections, but increasingly most do. Cataloguing is often a priority for organising a collection in developing libraries. Many libraries have made their catalogue available online, particularly those with larger collections. For those cataloguing their collections, many just create basic records in a spreadsheet or similar format, sometimes shared online, like the Triratna collection at Adhisthana (Adhisthana, n.d.) A few, however, use MARC21, AACR, or RDA or similar standards and formats. Electronic catalogues are the exception, but increasingly more common. Amongst the libraries mentioned in the case studies, many catalogues often use cost-effective,

easy-to-use software, like the 3,000-volume Paramita Library (2025) at Jamyang Buddhist Centre London (2024), the Samatha Trust Library (n.d.), or Centre for Applied Buddhism (2025) of the Soka Gakkai-UK (SGI-UK). A few libraries use open source, free software, such as Koha, like the Christmas Humphreys Memorial Library at Amaravati (Garcia-Jane 2015) and Gomde UK (2024). Popular elsewhere, a few groups in the UK opt for having their collection in social cataloguing web applications such as Librarything, like the almost 3,000-volume library at Golden Buddha Centre, Totnes (n.d.). The catalogue can also appear embedded in their websites, like at The Buddhist Society (2025a).

Canonical collections are highly esteemed and symbolically potent in all traditions and lineages. Containing the words of the Buddha, canonical works symbolise and embody the Buddha's speech or teaching – the Dharma. Amongst other textual categorisations, Buddhist canons are typically defined as the Pāli Canon (the Tipiṭaka or the Three Baskets) of the Theravāda tradition of South and Southeast Asia, the Chinese Canon (or the Great Storage of Scriptures) of the Mahāyāna traditions of East Asia, and the Tibetan Canon found across Tibetan cultural areas. The two latter canons include texts translated from Sanskrit and other Indian and Central Asian languages as well as Chinese or Tibetan originals. In addition, other canons of importance are the Mongolian Canon, in Classical Mongolian translated from the Tibetan, and the Nepalese Canon in Sanskrit.

Buddhist scholarship distinguishes between a closed canon (Pāli Canon) and an open, evolving canon to which new works may be added (associated with Mahāyāna traditions). Canonical collections, although partially or in full found in a section in many Buddhist libraries, are frequently found in other areas of a Buddhist temple or monastery as well, often in lecture rooms and around altars. Canonical collections therefore are reserved for ritual and performative practices. In the Theravāda context, scholarship refers to those sources used for edification and instruction as a practical canon. This practical canon is found in most library collections, with the “closed” Pāli canon often found in separate cabinets, on occasion still in their original wrapping, unused. In other contexts, such as the Tibetan, it is customary to arrange relevant sūtras and tantras, in larger temples also the commentaries, surrounding altars, also unused except for special occasions.

One such performative, ritual occasion is during the Tibetan festival of Saga Dawa (Tib. Sa ga zla ba) or Vesak – the month celebrating the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha. In preparation for this celebration, communal reading of the Kangyur section of the Tibetan

canon is organized. All volumes are taken from the shelves around the altar, the wrappings covering the volumes of texts are washed and ironed, and the texts are communally read. In this festival, the library constitutes the site of religious performance, and the books are the ritual objects, with reading and reciting representing key elements in the ritual.

Another ritual and performative function of books must also be noted. In Tibetan lineages, for instance, teaching transmission requires the presence of the teacher, the disciple, the oral transmission, and a copy of the text being transmitted for the transmission to be effective. Without the texts, these lineages would be discontinued. Hence, collecting and safeguarding these texts is of the utmost importance. Amongst these, West London-based Lelung Rinpoche (b. 1970) strives to collect original Tibetan manuscripts key to the transmission of the lineages he heads (Lelung Tulku 2013). Samye Ling founder Akong Rinpoche (1939–2013) had endeavoured to collect Tibetan Buddhist and medical manuscripts from India, Nepal, China, and Mongolia for study and safekeeping (Thubten and Trinley 2020). Likewise, Chime Rinpoche (b. 1941) is also reported to have collected valuable items. To varying extents, books and library collections have iconic and performative functions in all Buddhist traditions.

Anecdotally, there seems to be a certain affinity between librarianship and monasticism as some monastics take on the role of librarians or had been librarians before ordination, whilst those acting as librarians and volunteering in libraries certainly see themselves as practising dharma. For instance, ordained individuals within their lineages, such as Rev. Alexander (Throssel Hole Library) or Danasamudra (Adhishthana) had been librarians and served as such. The Burmese monk and Abhidharma scholar U Thittila had been a librarian at The Buddhist Society, as was Myokyo-Ni (Irmgard Schoegl), founder of the Zen Centre, London. Ani (Jetsunma) Tenzi Palmo (Diane Perry) catalogued the library collection of the London Buddhist Vihara in the early 1960s before her ordination – together with Russell Webb, once editor of the *British Mahabodhi Society Journal* and of the *Buddhist Studies Review*, who also worked at the School of Oriental and African Studies library. Chime Rinpoche was curator of Tibetan material at The British Library for sixteen years. Helen, a Mitra member at the Manchester Buddhist Centre, is a retired librarian. Lastly, Rev. Aloka, former monastic at Amaravati, had been a librarian in South Africa before ordination, and worked again as a librarian after disrobing.

Case Studies: Libraries and Individuals

To exemplify the diversity and peculiarities of libraries in Buddhist settings, the following libraries have been selected as case studies. Their description relies on secondary literature, websites, library catalogues, observations, existing survey data, and conversations with representatives from some of these traditions. They are located in England, Scotland, and Wales. Buddhist libraries in Northern Ireland, although in existence, are in developing stages. For instance, Jampa Ling Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Centre (Jampa Ling Northern Ireland; 2018), located in County Cavan, Republic of Ireland, caters for practitioners and visitors across the border and has a library.

The Buddhist Society Library

Founded as the Buddhist Lodge of the Theosophical Society in 1924 by Christmas Humphreys, the Buddhist Society became an independent body in 1926, thus becoming one of the first and oldest Buddhist organizations outside of Asia. It moved to its current location near Victoria Station, London, in 1956. Truly ecumenical in approach, the Buddhist Society (2025b) offers lectures, classes, and courses in Theravāda, Pure Land, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism.

Their first library accession records date from 1926. Aiming to support practice, the library holds 5,000 items on all aspects and traditions of Buddhist history, thought, and practice. Members can borrow library material; non-members can use the library for reference. Comprising books, periodicals, and audiovisual material, the catalogue is available online. A separate digital library is also maintained (Buddhist Society 2025c).

Christmas Humphreys (1901–1983) is a seminal figure in the development of Buddhism in the UK and of its libraries. Prominent for his work as a judge and for being the best-known Buddhist convert to Buddhism of his time, Humphreys corresponded with key twentieth-century spiritual authorities, such as Ananda Metteya, Annie Besant, D. T. Suzuki, or Alan Watts, amongst others. A prolific author of books on Buddhism, Humphreys was instrumental in the popularisation of Buddhism in the UK. A substantial library collection developed under his presidency at The Buddhist Society until his death. In 1984, Humphreys' home in St John's Wood, North West London, developed into the Shobo-an Zen Centre (2025), a Rinzai group originally led by

Ven. Myokyo-ni (1921–2007), whom Humphreys had met in the 1950s and who subsequently worked temporarily in the library of The Buddhist Society. The library at Shobo-an, restricted to residents and practitioners, comprises over 2,000 items and a few hundred electronic resources mainly in English and in a few European languages, Chinese, and Japanese. The collection at Amaravati, moreover, was first formed by a donation of books belonging to Humphreys.

London Buddhist Vihara Library

Founded by Anagarika Dharmapala in 1926, the London Buddhist Vihara (2025) became the first Sri Lankan monastery established outside Asia. Managed by the Colombo-based Anagarika Dharmapala Trust, the vihara moved several times until it found its current location on a Grade II listed building in Chiswick, West London, in 1994. It houses several monastics from Sri Lanka.

The library occupies the lecture hall. It comprises sets of the canon in English and Asian languages, some ola-leaf manuscripts, periodicals, and monographs on Buddhism and related topics in English and Sinhala. The library is open to monastics, students, and friends of the vihara. The growth of the collection is well documented. There was a library already in 1928 (Oliver 1979, 67); the library had 1,000 volumes by 1972 (Candamitto 1972), an “impressive” 2,000 by 1979 (Oliver 1979, 72–73), and 2,500 by 1994. It currently holds about 2,600 volumes. Until the advent of university departments on Asian religions and history in the 1970s, the Buddhist Vihara library was thought to be the most representative library on Buddhist topics in the UK (Webb 2004, 159–160).

Christmas Humphreys Memorial Library – Amaravati Buddhist Monastery

Amaravati (2025a) is a Theravāda Buddhist monastery in the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah (1918–1992) established in 1984 by the English Sangha Trust in Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire. Monastics and postulants, together with support staff, form the resident community. The Christmas Humphreys Memorial Library (Amaravati 2025b), named after its original donor, founder in 1924 of the Buddhist Lodge, later The Buddhist Society, was created in 1985 by the then abbot

Ajahn Sumedho (b. 1934), with Barbara Jackson as librarian. There is also a private library for monks and another for nuns. It is currently run by Juan Serrano and Julian Wall, both volunteer paraprofessionals with long involvement in Buddhist librarianship. Wall had also been involved with the cataloguing of the London Buddhist Vihara. Additionally, a qualified librarian also supports the development of the archival collections.

Library services include lending, including postal service, and reference to residents and visitors. Besides library collections, it hosts archival and special collections. Of particular interest are the handwritten manuscripts, diaries, and rare volumes belonging to members of the early English sangha from the 1950s and 1960s, as well as a large photographic collection, currently being digitised and catalogued.

The collection has grown by donations. It currently houses about 25,000 items, including over 200 periodicals, the archives of Ven. Narada Thera and the collection of Buddhist scholars and Indologists such as that of Karel Verner (1925–2019), amongst others. Half of the collection is dedicated to Buddhist topics, a quarter to other religions, with an emphasis on Asian traditions, and the remaining to other psychology, psychotherapy, and new age content. It contains sections on gender identity and sexuality, neurodiversity, fiction, poetry, and a children's collection. Books are mainly in English, with many in other European and Asian languages.

Running costs are minimal. The library seeks to be as efficient and ecological as possible. One of its priorities is the cataloguing of its archives whilst living memory of the individuals represented in them is still available. It also seeks to raise its profile amongst researchers and to network with other libraries and resources. As an example of this collaboration, the library donates material to other libraries, such as that of the Oxford Buddhist Vihara, which organises shipment of books to Burma/Myanmar and other libraries abroad (Julian Wall, interview with the author, March 21, 2025).

Samatha Trust Libraries

Founded in 1973, the Samatha Trust (2025) focuses on the teaching and practice of meditation in the Samatha-Vipassanā tradition as first taught in the UK by Thai Cambodian monk Nai Boonman (b. 1932). Comprising three centres, all featuring libraries of diverse size, value,

and history, their two main libraries are situated in Greenstreete, Llangollo, Wales, and in Manchester, England.

Created in 1996, The Greenstreete Library – the Samatha Trust’s national centre – provides reference material to mediators whilst on retreat. It holds the Pāli Canon in English and Pāli languages and in Sinhalese and Thai scripts, and in other Indian scripts. The focus is on Abhidhamma and Theravāda Buddhism, with an emphasis on esoteric practice. It also has material on Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. It contains over 3,000 volumes and over 300 journal issues, all reference use only.



Image 1: The Greenstreete Library of the Samatha Trust. © The Samatha Trust, used with permission.

Founded in 1977, The Manchester Centre for Buddhist Meditation in Chorlton-cum-Hardy, South Manchester, covers different Buddhist and other spiritual traditions. To this original collection comprising about 1,000 items, a new library in honour of renowned Abhidhamma scholar and founding member of the Samatha Trust L. S. Cousins (1942–2015) is developing with the donation of religious books from Cousin’s personal collection following his death in 2015 (Shaw 2019, 354). It also houses most of the collection of Prof. Ian Harris (1952–2014), Buddhist scholar and co-founder, together with Prof. Peter Harvey, of the UK Association for Buddhist Studies in 1996.

Lecturer in Comparative Religion at Manchester University since the 1970s, Cousins was keen that the Manchester Centre should have a library (Samatha Trust Library, n.d.). Intended for scholar-practitioners and with an emphasis on meditation practice widely understood, the library aims at supporting members and other researchers

in their meditation practice and scholarly study. Although study is not a requirement for all practitioners, meditators within the tradition are expected first to have an established meditation practice before they engage in scholarly research. Likewise, the library welcomes researchers who are not meditators.

Samatha's library custodian is Keith Munnings, dharma teacher and Buddhist chaplain, who has been involved with these libraries since 1976. Library services are run by volunteer paraprofessionals, some of whom are academics, such as Harvey, who catalogued the initial Manchester collection. For Munnings, central to the library are the roles of research and networking. For instance, they have established a relationship with the John Rylands Research Institute and Library, which houses manuscript material of interest to members of the Samatha Trust, and where digitization projects such as that of the Pāli language scholar T. W. Rhys Davis collection are underway (Charles Shaw's interview March 18, 2025; Keith Munnings's interview March 21, 2025).

The focus of the collections is the Pāli canon and meditation instruction and study. It comprises 3,000 circulation items, 2,600 reference items, and about 1,000 journal issues. The cataloguing is ongoing. The joint catalogue, available online, uses Libib, a cloud cataloguing system ideal for a library their size and needs (Samatha Trust, n.d.).

Samye Ling Library for World Religions – Samye Ling

Kagyu Samye Ling Tibetan Buddhist Monastery and Centre for World Peace and Health (2017) is recognized as being the first Tibetan centre established in the West. Founded in 1967 by Akong Rinpoche (1939–2013) and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939–1987) and located in Eskdalemuir, Scotland, Samye Ling is a monastery, retreat, and cultural centre working for the preservation of Tibetan cultural and spiritual traditions in the Karma Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. It currently houses a community of about forty monastics and lay volunteers.

Samye Ling aspires to become a monastic university. The library – a place of study, reflection, and contemplation – is integral to the whole vision of Samye Ling (Thubten and Trinley 2020, 109). Open to everyone regardless of faith or religious practice, interfaith is a key component of life at Samye Ling (Jones, n.d.)



Image 2: Samye Ling Library for World Religions / Kagyu Samye Ling Tibetan Buddhist Monastery and Centre for World Peace and Health. © Kagyu Samye Ling, used with permission.

Wide in scope and with material in many languages, there are three aspects to the library: a Tibetan collection, a general collection, and a main collection on Buddhist topics. The library collects all material to support all topics taught at Samye Ling including all forms of Buddhism, religions, psychology, philosophy, art and architecture, Tibetan and herbal medicine, therapy, Tibetan language learning, and yoga and tai chi, amongst other subjects. Akong Rinpoche's books and manuscripts are kept separately. Considered a treasure, these are currently not available to the public. Comprising over 15,000 items collected over a forty-year period, the collection is almost fully catalogued, although the catalogue is not yet available online.

The library welcomes and encourages donations and the involvement of volunteers. The library has been impacted by recent factors. Visitors' figures post-Covid-19 pandemic are slowly recovering. Brexit has also affected the number of volunteers able to stay in the monastery as many come from EU countries, hence progress in the library has slowed down. Having been kept by professional librarians in the past, the library is now run by volunteer paraprofessionals. A need for professionalisation of the library has been identified (Ani Lhamo's interview, March 24, 2025).

Centre for Applied Buddhism Library – Soka Gakkai UK

Based on the teachings of thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist priest Nichiren, Soka Gakkai is a lay organisation engaged in disseminating Buddhist practice and philosophy to achieve a peaceful world. SGI-UK opened its headquarters at Taplow Court in 1990 under the auspices of SGI president Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023). It has about 14,500 members in the UK. The library belongs to the European Branch of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy and supports the work of the Centre for Applied Buddhism (n.d.-a) a centre for research, activism, and dialogue on the intersection of Buddhism and contemporary social and political issues, including climate change, conflict resolution, and human rights, amongst others (SGI-UK, n.d.).



Image 3: The library of the Centre for Applied Buddhism / SGI-UK. © Centre for Applied Buddhism – SGI-UK, used with permission.

The collection contains 25,000 books, around a hundred journals, and several subscriptions (Harte 2024). It comprises sections on all Buddhist traditions and lineages as well as philosophy, art, sociology, and anthropology. Other philosophies and religions are also represented. The collections emphasize practical Buddhism for contemporary times. Besides the Pāli canon and many sections of the Tibetan canon,

there is a complete canon in Chinese (Taishō Tripitaka) and many commentarial works. It also has a newspaper clipping collection on Buddhism in the UK since 1990. The lending library is by subscription (Centre for Applied Buddhism, n.d.-b).

The Sangharakshita Library and Exhibition Centre – Adhishthana

The Triratna Buddhist Community, formerly the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), is an international organisation founded by Sangharakshita (1925–2018) in the UK in 1967. Ecumenical in approach, Triratna aims to practice a Buddhism rooted in tradition but applicable to the contemporary world (Buddhist Centre, n.d.).

One of the largest groups in the UK, Triratna has about thirty urban centres as well as retreat centres, arts centres, ethical business, and a publishing house. They have a substantial number of ordained and ordinary members. Based at Adhishthana, in Coddington Court, Ledbury, Herefordshire, its headquarters comprise a training centre, exhibition space, and a library. A library for Triratna has been available and in development at several locations since the 1970s. As the order's library it was housed at Padmaloka Retreat Centre, Norfolk, and then moved to Vajraloka Retreat Centre, North Wales. Purchased in 2013 and opened in 2015, Adhishthana and its library now house over 11,000 books, only a portion of which are currently in their online catalogue. Managed so far by volunteers, some of them with library experience, Adhishthana was organised with input by Dayaka, a conservator at The British Library. Currently led by Dharmalila, the library promotes membership to the Friends of the Sangharakshita Library and encourages volunteers' involvement in running all aspects of the library.

The Sangharakshita Library, named in honour of the founder of Triratna, encapsulates Sangharakshita's vision of a library which would preserve his legacy as writer, teacher, and founder and which would contain the books he had written, bought, and collected over the years, particularly those he had collected during his formative and training years in India. Well connected and influential, Sangharakshita corresponded with leading figures in the arts and religion, such as Alan Ginsberg or Lama Govinda, and many of the books in the collection carry notes and inscriptions by notable individuals, making provenance and ownership research a special feature of this collection. This library contains Sangharakshita's books, papers, letters, and archives. The library also contains the former Dharmavastu Library – a growing



Image 4: Bookshelf at The Sangharakshita Library and Exhibition Centre at Adhisthana / Triratna Community. © Adhisthana / Triratna, used with permission.

collection of books, periodicals, and an extensive electronic library – the core of the lending library (Adhisthana, n.d.).

Gomde UK Library – Rangjung Yeshe Gomde UK Tibetan Buddhist Centre

Gomde UK (n.d.-a) is a Buddhist retreat and meditation centre set in Lindholme Hall, Doncaster, Yorkshire. Led by Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche (b. 1951) and established in 2009, Gomde UK offers Buddhist teachings in the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. With a focus on study and scholarship and led by the community, the library has been an integral part of Gomde UK since its inception. Passionate about libraries and scholarship, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche envisions the library as a space for learning and reflection for residents, visitors, researchers, and the local community. This is paralleled by the number of monastic and research institutes he leads worldwide (Shedrub 2022).



Image 5: Visualization of the projected new space for the Gomde UK Library at The Rangjung Yeshe Gomde UK Tibetan Centre. © The Rangjung Yeshe Gomde UK Tibetan Centre, used with permission.

Gomde UK Library currently occupies a temporary space awaiting completion of the building. It is expected that the library will have a capacity to house about 50,000 items. For the last ten years, trustees and volunteers have been collecting library material in several rooms. The library is currently run by several volunteers and led by academic librarian Rory Caddis, who has been involved in the project since 2022, with the help of a systems librarian helping with metadata description and systems integration. The catalogue, currently at 5,000 items and a few hundred digital texts, uses library management system Koha, MARC21 and RDA framework for bibliographic records, and Library of Congress classification, but call numbers are local (Gomde UK, n.d.-b).

The library seeks to encourage research and collaboration with other libraries and academic institutions worldwide. The catalogue is integrated with the Buddhist Digital Archives at the Buddhist Digital Resource Centre (n.d.) a site making accessible Buddhist scripture in original languages and in translation. The library collaborates with other Buddhist libraries, notably those at Amaravati, currently one of the largest in the UK.

The collection focuses on Vajrayana Buddhism and the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. It holds a restricted collection containing texts requiring conditions for handling or reading, such as empowerments. It also has sections on all Buddhist traditions and lineages as well as on language resources, philosophy, religion, and

psychology, and a children's section. Besides primary and secondary literature, the library houses recently donated complete canons in Tibetan and in Chinese as well as the collections of books and papers of several retired academics, some of which will be added to the archives and special collections, and a substantial donation from The British Library. Notably, the library has a comprehensive collection development policy and a clear mission.

For the future, Gomde UK Library intends to grow their collection, develop their online presence and catalogue capabilities, and build relationships with other Buddhist libraries and research institutions, amongst other projects and commitments. To achieve this, Gomde UK Library acknowledges the need to be run professionally, ideally by CILIP-recognised librarians. Professionalisation of library services and collection development are key in fulfilling Gomde UK's mission of becoming a monastic university (Rory Caddis, interview with the author, March 20, 2025).

Some Other Libraries

To complete this overview, it is worth mentioning a few other Buddhist libraries with substantial collections of between 1,000 and 3,000 items: Birmingham Buddhist Vihara (n.d.), Gaia House (2019) in Devon, Jamyang Buddhist Centre Leeds (2025), Lam Rim Bristol Buddhist Centre (n.d.), London Buddhist Centre (n.d.), and Oxford Buddhist Vihara (2020).

Conclusion

The development of Buddhist libraries constitutes a central phenomenon in the adoption and adaptation of Buddhism in the UK and a key element of its visibility within the British religious landscape and within society. The presence – and absence – of libraries in Buddhist settings mirrors the diversity of Buddhist schools, traditions, and lineages currently practised in the UK. Besides economic and practical considerations, Buddhist library collections reflect a variety of Buddhist experiences and expressions; their views on reading as religious practice and on books as carrying and symbolising knowledge and authority express a diversity of aims, hopes, and worldviews. Reading and book collecting in UK Buddhist contexts are a product of both Western and Buddhist

attitudes towards reading, learning, and religious practice. Ultimately, these attitudes are deeply rooted in ideas of power and authority and how these influence the adaptation and development of Buddhist traditions to new places and times. Buddhist libraries are testimony to the freedom, faithfulness, and zeal with which each tradition expresses and reflects a particular worldview or account of reality. The spectrum of adaptation of Buddhism in the UK is also manifested in the diverse nature of libraries in Buddhist contexts. As this chapter has shown, Buddhist libraries function not only as gateways to knowledge by providing access to resources but also as potent symbols and tangible embodiments of their parent institutions, their lineages, and of the Dharma. Finally, the spirit of information sharing and collaboration embodied by ABTAPL could inspire Buddhist libraries to connect, support one another, and exchange advice.

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