

FOR LIVING BUDDHISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

DHARMA WORLD

JULY-SEPT. 2011 Vol. 38



Buddhism in North America

Dharma World is published in cooperation with the lay Buddhist association Rissho Kosei-kai. Rissho Kosei-kai welcomes access from readers of *Dharma World* to its English-language Web site, which provides up-to-date information about current events and activities of the organization. Anyone interested can browse it by accessing the URL:

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The Power of Forbearance

by Nichiko Niwano

When Shakyamuni was in the Jetavana monastery, a young Brahman suddenly verbally attacked Shakyamuni by rebuking and reproaching him.

Shakyamuni quietly listened to the slanderous complaints, and then inquired, "When your family has prepared a banquet, and no one eats the food that is served, what happens to it?"

"Then it becomes mine," the young man replied. Shakyamuni then calmly said, "You have just tried to shame and criticize me, but I have not accepted your comments. So to whom do your abusive statements and anger belong?"

Our daily life closely parallels this anecdote from the sutras.

You may have had the experience of being the target of someone's rage, or on the contrary becoming angry because things did not turn out as you expected or feeling righteous indignation over some injustice. These days, everyday life can be very stressful, so generally speaking people seem more likely to be moved by feelings of anger and at the same time are required to persevere and endure hardship on many occasions.

At such times the short exchange between Shakyamuni and the young man holds an invaluable lesson for us.

Above all Shakyamuni did not blame the angry young man. And even when he was confronted by explosive anger, he deflected it and did not respond with similar anger.

Someone once said that anger, in a manner of speaking, is a paroxysm of defilements, really nothing more than a natural phenomenon. More

so than the momentary anger itself, what is truly wrong is returning anger directed at us with anger and letting resentment and hostility build up along with wrathful emotions. Shakyamuni's calm response to the intensely emotional young man clearly shows us what it is to be patient.

Shakyamuni next said, "Do not return anger with anger; instead, control your emotions. That is what is meant by diligence."

Recognizing the Truth

Anger becomes the cause, even if there may be a just reason for it, that at its worst leads to wars and is the power behind destruction. On the individual level, anger alienates one from friends and family, leading one to experience the suffering of solitude. This illustrates the mental state of the hells in the ten realms of existence as taught in Buddhism.

The important challenge put to us, therefore, is controlling our anger every day, just as Shakyamuni did.

The Sutra of Innumerable Meanings contains the phrase "makes an angry one give rise to the mind of forbearance"; that is, through forbearance we are taught to control our anger and bitterness, and the first step toward forbearance is being calm and silent. Then, when our emotions have at last settled down, we often are able to see that we became upset over something quite trivial.

Furthermore, when we express gratitude toward people who caused anger

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in us and treat them gently, our anger can be soothed. In other words, forbearance is more than merely enduring someone's anger; it is taking a positive approach to it and accepting it for what it is, which allows even one's sense of endurance to dissipate naturally.

What matters most at such a time is that we recognize the truth.

When we realize that the roots of all lives are one and the same and we are caused to live in this world of dependent origination, we are compelled to reflect upon ourselves as being not entirely without faults, and then we can free ourselves from the lonely isolation of anger and move toward being in harmony with others.

As is written in the Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, "You must sit correctly, and meditate on the ultimate reality of all things. All sins are just as frost and dew, so wisdom's sun can melt them away." When we know the truth and open our wisdom-eye, angry thoughts evaporate.

The power of forbearance is generated by wisdom. It thus removes ignorance, nurtures a compassionate heart considerate of others, and builds a world of harmonious living. □

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Dharma World presents Buddhism as a practical living religion and promotes interreligious dialogue for world peace. It espouses views that emphasize the dignity of life, seeks to rediscover our inner nature and bring our lives more in accord with it, and investigates causes of human suffering. It tries to show how religious principles help solve problems in daily life and how the least application of such principles has wholesome effects on the world around us. It seeks to demonstrate truths that are fundamental to all religions, truths on which all people can act.

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Layout and Design: Abinitio Design

*Cover photo by Don Farber with
Photoshop work by Abinitio Design.*

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Photo: Don Farber

Sharing the Dharma in America

by Shoko Mizutani

The purpose of sharing the Dharma is not to make all people become Buddhists. . . . Christians can become buddhas as Christians, and Jews can become buddhas as Jews.

"Of those who hear the Dharma / Not one fails to become a buddha."

This is a phrase in the Lotus Sutra. Founder Nikkyo Niwano liked this phrase. With his big smile, he would explain to all gathered in the Great Sacred Hall, "Each and every one of you has the wonderful, boundless capacity of becoming even a buddha. So, grasping this Buddha's message firmly, please continue to walk the Way of the Buddha. You will all attain the happiest life." He also taught us the importance of sharing the Dharma with others, so that they can become buddhas too. His words always touched and inspired me very much.

In May 1978, I joined Rissho Kosei-kai in Sapporo. For thirty-some years since then, through studies and practices, I have been gradually deepening my understanding of the Dharma. I find that all the teachings I have been learning are closely connected and actually originate from the one Dharma. And in the Dharma, I feel the warm and embracing life force of the Buddha. I have witnessed the Dharma truly working in my life and in the lives of many others. Having been able to make the Dharma a light in life is such a blessing. I did not expect to receive this inestimable jewel when I walked into Rissho Kosei-kai in Sapporo that first time.

In December 2007, after serving as minister of Rissho Kosei-kai of Los Angeles for seven years, I was assigned as director of a newly established center, Rissho Kosei-kai International of

North America (RKINA). RKINA was established under Rissho Kosei-kai's International Dharma Mission Plan, which aims to promote the Dharma mission among people born in North America. I am very grateful to have been here in the United States for the last ten years and to share the Dharma with people in this country.

I have some observations on our Dharma mission in the United States. First, there are no fundamental differences between Americans and Japanese. We equally possess the buddha-nature, and we all suffer from illusions. The Buddha Dharma works for everyone.

Second, as shown in the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, bodhisattvas always emerge in each land in order to take the responsibility of teaching the Dharma to people in that land. My English is terrible. So let the Americans share the Dharma with Americans.

Third, I have witnessed a good number of American bodhisattvas springing up in various parts of the United States. They have experienced and acknowledged the profundity of the Dharma and they are joyfully sharing the teachings with fellow Americans.

One American leader returned to a city where her elderly parents live. With strong determination, the aspiring leader opened the Rissho Kosei-kai Dharma Center with her husband, from scratch. Her mother is a devoted Catholic. Wondering what her Buddhist daughter was doing, she decided to come

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and sit in a corner of the Dharma center and observe *hoza*, or the Dharma circle, every Sunday. One Sunday morning, her mother was listening to the conversation of people in *hoza*, who were reflecting on the daily application of the Dharma. Some of the teachings and reflections must have touched her heart and mind. She said to herself, "That makes sense," shedding tears down her cheeks. As we also may do, her mother often sees the cause of her anger in someone or something outside of her. Naturally, it was difficult for her to let go of negative emotion. But she is gradually beginning to realize that the cause of her anger may reside within her. Through this realization, the mother changed into a more patient woman. The leader was very delighted to have her mother's recognition of what she does. At the same time, she was very much impressed with her mother's miraculous change. "Wow, the Dharma really works," she said.

The purpose of sharing the Dharma is not to make all people become Buddhists. As the teaching of the One Vehicle shows, Christians can become buddhas as Christians, and Jews can become buddhas as Jews. What we would like to do is to share the Buddha's wisdom with everyone, so that we all are able to recognize, respect, and reveal the values of all beings as we all live in peace, harmony, and fulfillment.

Let us share the Dharma and let us all become buddhas!

Gassho.



Dramatic Growth of American Buddhism: An Overview

by Kenneth K. Tanaka

If we add up all three groups (Buddhists, nightstand Buddhists, and those strongly influenced by Buddhism), they amount to about thirty million people in America.

According to Professor Diana Eck, a specialist in contemporary American religions at Harvard University, "Buddhism is now an American religion."¹ That Buddhism is seen as an *American* religion reflects the status of Buddhism in the United States today.

Buddhists currently make up 1 percent of the American population, or about three million, making it the third-largest religion in the United States and constituting a fifteenfold increase from the 1960s. Of course, the largest by far is Christianity, with about 79 percent of the population being Christian, followed by Judaism, with 2 percent who are Jewish. Other faiths such as Islam and Hinduism are less than 1 percent.²

Beyond the three million Buddhists, there are also those who do not claim to "be Buddhists" but are keenly interested in Buddhism, especially its meditation. These people are called sympathizers or, somewhat humorously, nightstand Buddhists.³ They may not be members of any temples or centers but practice Buddhism in the privacy of their home by meditating and reading Buddhist books. While reading them, they often keep the books on their bedroom nightstand, hence the name. While there is no reliable data on the number of nightstand Buddhists, it is estimated to be a couple of million people.

Moreover, in a recent survey, 12 percent of the people replied that Buddhism has had "an important influence on their thinking about religion or spirituality."⁴ This amounts to about twenty-five million people. So, if we add up all three groups (Buddhists, nightstand Buddhists, and those strongly influenced by Buddhism), they amount to about thirty million people in America.

A barber gives a haircut in the courtyard of the Vietnamese Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles, built in 1976 by Thich Thien An, a scholar and Zen master from Vietnam, in response to the needs of Vietnamese refugees in the United States.

Kaleidoscope of Buddhists

Focusing now on the *kinds* of Buddhists, which city in the world do you think has the largest number of Buddhist schools? You might think Bangkok, Taipei, or Kyoto, but the answer is Los Angeles, where there are at least eighty different schools of Buddhism present. In other words, virtually all the main schools of Buddhism in Asia are now represented in Los Angeles.

In Asia, Buddhists from different countries have rarely known each other, let alone lived in the same community. However, in Los Angeles, a Thai, a Korean, and a Japanese temple are located in the same neighborhood. The same thing can be said of other major metropolitan areas such as Honolulu, the San Francisco Bay Area, Seattle-Tacoma, Chicago, and New York.

In order to better understand all the various kinds of Buddhist schools, I have categorized them into four groups:

1. Old-line Asian-American Buddhists (approximately 250,000): They started their temples in the mid- to late 1800s and are mostly of Chinese and Japanese origin. Today, because they are third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation Americans, their temple activities are virtually all held in English.
2. New Asian-American Buddhists (approximately 1,350,000): They arrived in the United States primarily from the mid-1960s and onward, and are mostly of Cambodian, Laotian,

Photo: Don Farber

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Myanmar, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, Thai, and Vietnamese origin. With the large percentage of first-generation members, the temple activities and services are often held in the respective native language. As time passes, however, English is being used with increasing frequency.

3. Convert Buddhists whose main practice is meditation (approximately 1,300,000): Unlike the first two groups, they were not born into Buddhist families but converted to Buddhism. They are predominately Euro-Americans and belong to one of the three traditions, Zen, Vipassana, or Tibetan, whose main practice is sitting meditation.

4. Convert Buddhists whose main practice is chanting (approximately 100,000): Like the third group, they also converted to Buddhism, but in their case they all belong to one school, Soka Gakkai International-USA. They are racially the most diverse group, for they include not only Asian-Americans and Euro-Americans but also a good percentage of African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans. Their main practice is the repeated chanting of the name of the Lotus Sutra, or the *daimoku* (pronounced “Namu-myōhō-rence-kyō”).

Among these four groups, what draws the most attention of the

media and the scholars are the convert Buddhists, especially the famous ones such as the actor Richard Gere, actor Richard Segal, singer Tina Turner, golf player Tiger Woods, and rap singer Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys. Phil Jackson, a well-known NBA basketball coach, definitely qualifies as a nightstand Buddhist.

There are plenty more convert Buddhists, which is why a 1997 issue of *Time* magazine featured on its cover actor Brad Pitt, who starred in the popular movie *Seven Years in Tibet*, with the heading “The American Fascination with Buddhism.” The article dedicated ten pages to how and why many Americans are attracted to Buddhism.

Lay Buddhists meditate at the Rinzaï-ji Zen Center in Los Angeles. This urban meditation center, which opened in 1968, offers daily Zen practice.

Representatives of many Buddhist traditions participate in the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in September 1893, presenting Buddhism as a modern religion.

Well, it has been said that there is a Chinese restaurant in virtually every city in America, but perhaps the same is now becoming true of Buddhist temples and meditation centers.

Three Periods in History

Let me now paint a quick picture of Buddhist development in the United States, which can be divided into three periods.

First period. The first period began in 1844 when a chapter from the Lotus Sutra was translated from French into English, and in the same year Professor Edward Salisbury of Yale University delivered the first comprehensive paper on Buddhism at the annual conference of the American Oriental Society. In the world of American literature, such eminent figures as Ralph Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Henry Thoreau were attracted to and made positive references to Asian religions and Buddhism.

Soon more Americans became interested in Buddhism, such as Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) and Paul Carus (1852–1919). Both of them devoted their lives to propagating Buddhism. Carus produced numerous publications through his Open Court publishing house, while Olcott, a Theosophist, traveled to Sri

Lanka and became a Buddhist in 1880. He later contributed to the revival of Buddhism in that country.

An epoch-making event was the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. It was an eye-opening encounter for many Americans, who for the first time came face-to-face with the living representatives of Buddhist and other Asian religions, which they had largely imagined to be relics of the past. Instead, Sōen Shaku from Japan, Anāgārika Dharmapāla of Sri Lanka, and others were not only impressive figures but presented Buddhism as a modern religion more in keeping with science than Christianity. After the parliament Dharmapāla made more trips to the United States over the years to lecture on Buddhism, and Shaku sent his disciple D. T. Suzuki to reside in the United States, who went on to make enormous contributions to the understanding of Buddhism, Zen in particular.

Second period. Though it overlaps in time with the first period to some extent, the second period refers to Buddhism brought over by Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the second half of the nineteenth century. They established numerous temples, mostly on the West Coast, serving as important centers of their religious and community life. The Chinese built the first Buddhist temple

in 1853 in San Francisco, and more were built throughout the western United States wherever large Chinese communities existed.

By the closing years of the nineteenth century, Chinese Buddhist temples began to dwindle in numbers. This was due to the decline in the Chinese population stemming from discriminatory laws that prevented further Chinese immigration, particularly of women. Also, there were very few priests associated with these temples to provide the professional leadership necessary to endure and prosper in the new environment.

The group that resuscitated Asian Buddhism was the Japanese, who began to establish temples in large numbers, first in Hawaii and the West Coast states. The Japanese differed from the Chinese in that the headquarters of the various Buddhist denominations sent professional priests as missionaries to the new land. Further, more Japanese women were able to accompany the men, enabling them to start families, which soon led to the need for religious institutions for their American-born children.

These sets of dynamics allowed the Japanese Buddhists to grow in numbers through the first half of the twentieth century and even into the war years. Ironically, the hostile environment of

the larger society contributed to making the temples even more of an important emotional and social center for the immigrants and their children. In fact, the Japanese Buddhists were the only group that managed to prosper and actively keep the torch of Dharma lit throughout the first half of the century in the face of the decline in the number of Chinese Buddhists (for reasons previously mentioned) and Caucasian Buddhists, whose interest in Buddhism waned because it came to be perceived as being too pessimistic and not socially active enough for the American mentality.

Third period. The third period began soon after the Second World War and continues to the present and is characterized most prominently by its dramatic growth. This period encompasses two movements, that of the converts and that of the new Asian-American Buddhists. And it was in this period, especially among the converts, that the earlier perception of Buddhism as pessimistic and inactive was dramatically changed to one of optimism and activism. It is thought that this was, in large part, the outcome of greater emphasis on practice, such as meditation, which spiritually empowered the practitioners to a greater degree than the mere intellectual understanding of Buddhism that was dominant in the first period.

The convert Buddhists are those associated with the so-called Beat Buddhism of the 1950s, represented by such famous poets as Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. They paved the way for the more full-fledged groups of the 1960s and 1970s. These groups include Tibetan institutions such as the Nyingma Institute, founded by Thartang Tulku; Shambhala International, founded by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche; the San Francisco Zen Center, founded by Shunryū Suzuki Roshi; and the Insight Meditation Society, founded by Americans Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, and Jacqueline Schwartz. These institutions

refer to the “convert Buddhists whose main practice is meditation” mentioned earlier.

This convert group also includes Soka Gakkai International–USA, which makes up the “convert Buddhists whose main practice is chanting” discussed above. With its beginnings in 1960, this group was often criticized in the early stages for its aggressive proselytizing style and its exclusivistic attitude of not associating with other Buddhist groups. But with these features now attenuated, Soka Gakkai has succeeded in creating an organization that probably claims the largest number of members for a single organization and is ethnically the most diverse among the four Buddhist groups.

The other dimension of the third period is the enormous growth of the second of the four Buddhist groups, the “new Asian-American Buddhists.” Their numbers surged with the change in the immigration law in 1965 that allowed much larger Asian immigration from Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the other Southeast Asian countries.

Characteristics of American Buddhism

Buddhism in America has produced characteristics, especially in the convert groups, that are not prominently seen in traditional Asian Buddhist countries.

Democratization. There are definitely more women leaders than in Asian Buddhist countries. Women make up half of the teachers in some of the convert groups, such as the Insight Meditation Society. And women have held top leadership positions at the San Francisco Zen Center and elsewhere. Second, monks and nuns are the norm in the Buddhist world in Asia, but American Buddhists have largely rejected the monastic lifestyle. Most priests are married with families. These democratic developments differ from the more traditional hierarchical relationships, where the

monks and nuns are considered superior to the laypeople, and men superior to women.

Rationalization. Psychology (which includes psychotherapy) has become one of the main frameworks for Americans to understand Buddhism, since they both focus on the mind and seek to alleviate suffering. Consequently many counselors and therapists have converted to Buddhism or adopted Buddhist elements such as meditation into their professional practices. Another reason for the popularity of Buddhism is that it does not conflict with natural science. This view has contributed to the popularity of Fritjof Capra’s landmark book *The Tao of Physics*. The Dalai Lama, too, has been at the forefront of dialogue between Buddhists and scientists and has gone so far as to announce that in the domain of the natural realm, Buddhists should adjust any traditional Buddhist understanding if it is refuted by science. Thus, the Buddhist interaction with psychology and the natural sciences represents an attempt to enhance the rational element of Buddhism to interact with the modern world.

Engagement. Many Americans believe that Buddhist teachings must help to alleviate the problems of the world, such as global warming, domestic violence, poverty, discrimination, and crime. They say that Buddhism should not only be concerned with one’s own happiness but should also care about others, especially those people who are suffering. While social engagement is, of course, not absent in Asia, it is perhaps emphasized to a greater degree in America. This “engaged Buddhism” has no doubt been strengthened by the Judeo-Christian tradition of social justice, by which many of the converts had been influenced.

Privatization. Buddhism in America is in keeping with a sociological trend toward religion becoming more privatized or individualized. Rather than attending temples and meditation

Participants in
Change Your Mind
Day, hosted in
May 1994 by the
Buddhist magazine
Tricycle, meditate
in Central Park in
New York City.

Photo: Don Farber

centers, more people practice Buddhism, particularly meditation and chanting, in the privacy of their homes. This feature is especially prominent among the so-called nightstand Buddhists, who are motivated primarily by a desire for mental and spiritual freedom and not by social and cultural needs, family obligation, or ancestral veneration.

Present life. In Asia, the traditional teachings regard our existence as lying within the cycle of birth and death (*samsāra*), from which the Buddhists seek liberation (*nirvana*). Hence, the present life is seen to be inherently unsatisfactory and not worthy of attachment, but American Buddhists actively seek liberation in this present life and even in this very body. The teaching of impermanence (*anitya*) is not taken as the reason for not getting attached but as an encouragement to live fully in the moment, which is reflected in a popular saying quoted by Buddhists, “Yesterday

is history and tomorrow is a mystery. However, this moment is a gift, which is why we call it the present!”

Humor. The American love of religious humor has led to the creation of a robust Buddhist humor, which some American Buddhists see as a way of fostering levity and spontaneity and not getting attached to self-centered things and ideas. Perhaps the most well-known Buddhist joke is one that has been aired even on regular radio programs: “Why couldn’t the Buddha vacuum the very narrow space under his sofa?” Well, the answer is . . . “because he had no attachments!”

Factors for Growth

The growth of American Buddhism can be attributed to four factors.

The importance of religion. America values religion to a much higher degree than most other developed countries.

Ordinary people generally respect religious professionals, who also play vital leadership roles in the community. And parents make a concerted effort to provide religious education for their children, for religion is seen to be “a good thing,” providing a spiritual and ethical foundation. If religion were not important, far fewer people would take an interest in Buddhism, an Asian religion at that.

Societal openness. The second reason for the growth of American Buddhism lies in the fundamental societal shift that took place in the 1960s, with greater openness toward religions other than Protestantism. For example, John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, was elected president, and the Catholic Church itself underwent the liberalization process of the Second Vatican Council. A new immigration law also helped to foster greater diversity with the arrival of more people from non-Western countries.

Within this greater openness, Buddhism was no longer seen as an exotic religion of the Orient. In fact, many people interested in spiritual matters regarded Asia to be superior to the materialistic West. Consequently, the appeal of Buddhism lay in the fact that it was one of the superior Asian religions that could more effectively respond to the spiritual decadence of the industrialized West.

Spirituality. The third factor in this growth has to do with the change in the very nature of American religiosity, wherein people are more attracted to spirituality than to organizational religion. More people are heard saying, “I am not religious, but I am spiritual.” A noted scholar of religion defined spirituality as “personal experience tailored to the individual’s own quests,” and he went on to define spirituality in five key terms, *connectedness*, *unity*, *peace*, *harmony*, and *centeredness*. This differs from the five terms that characterize traditional religion, which are God, sin, faith, repentance, and morals.⁵

Members of the Los Angeles Sangha Council attend a ceremony on April 3, 1994, celebrating the Buddha's birthday in Little Tokyo in Los Angeles.

Buddhism, as presented in America, is characterized more by the former set of terms than the latter, which makes it more in accord with the changing trend. As part of this attraction to spirituality that stresses personal experience, Buddhism has been particularly effective in the following three areas.

The first is the healthy attitude of Buddhism when dealing with the suffering in life, such as old age, death, and "losing." Buddhism sees suffering as a natural part of life that needs to be understood, accepted, and turned into a springboard for living a more full and meaningful life.

Second, Buddhism gives much value to the personal understanding of the individual, for the teaching cannot make sense if it fails to speak directly to the experience of the unique individual. This is the reason why many American Buddhists are particularly fond of these famous words of the Buddha: "Do not accept a statement on the grounds that

it is found in our books . . . or because the teacher said so."

The third area of spirituality lies in people's attraction to meditation. This is probably the number one reason for the growth of American Buddhism. Many find Buddhist meditation easy to do, mentally therapeutic, and spiritually empowering and liberating. Sitting meditation, in particular, is the main practice in Zen, Theravada, and Tibetan schools, which have attracted the largest number of converts.

The Dalai Lama's influence. The fourth reason for the growth lies in the positive image of one single individual, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. He is well known as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and an exiled leader of Tibet, but his impact in the West has been enormous. He is highly loved and esteemed by the thousands who flock to hear his talks during his numerous American visits. The popularity of the Dalai Lama lies in the fact that he is

regarded as a spiritual leader who is peaceful, tolerant, and accessible, thus helping to foster a new and refreshing form of American religiosity. □

Notes

1. *Becoming the Buddha in L.A.* (Boston: WGBH Educational Foundation, 1993) video.
2. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2007), <http://religions.pewforum.org/maps>. A more recent 2009 Pew survey found the Muslim population to be 0.8 percent, which is less than the Buddhist population. The details on the population numbers are found in my recent book in Japanese, *Amerika Bukkyo* (Tokyo: Musashino University Press, 2010).
3. This term was coined by Professor Thomas A. Tweed.
4. Robert Wuthnow and Wendy Cage, "Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States: The Scope of Influence," *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 3 (September 2004): 371.
5. Wade Clark Roof, "Religious Kaleidoscope," *Temenos* 32 (1996): 183–93.

American Buddhist Practice

by Charles S. Prebish

In North American Buddhist practice we are now beginning to see a fruitful cross-fertilization between Buddhist communities of different sects.

Buddhism's growth to more than twenty-five hundred communities on the North American continent doesn't begin to reflect the complexity of the development of this expanding religious tradition. Now there are North American Buddhist books on virtually every topic imaginable, establishing this literature as its own cottage industry. Conferences that aim to bring together scholars and practitioners alike are popping up regularly, like Naropa's recent conference sponsored by the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, which highlighted a brilliant keynote address by Jan Willis entitled "Dharma Diversity: The Many Forms and Faces of Buddhism in America." But perhaps the most telling sign of Buddhism's acceptance, and complexity, on the North American scene is the dozens of university courses devoted to North American Buddhism. All of the above move beyond the simplistic image of "Hollywood Buddhists" or "celebrity Buddhists" and point in the direction of a genuine Buddhist literacy developing in the United States. At least one author has even suggested that we consider English as the newest canonical language, and another scholar—Stephen Berkwitz—has cleverly and perhaps properly suggested that rather than having our students begin their studies of North American Buddhism with the

fine academic textbooks that are now available, they instead should read the "primary" sources of North American Buddhism: books by the Asian Buddhist masters who appeared on the American scene, interpreting the Buddhist tradition for willing North Americans.

A North American Buddhist Typology

So is there anything out there that makes sense of this complex tradition? Is there anything that tells us how we might best approach our studies of North American Buddhism in this new subdiscipline of the larger field of Buddhist studies? I think there is! When Kenneth Tanaka and I edited *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, we settled on five major thematic issues to consider: ethnicity, practice, democratization, engagement, and adaptation. I expanded a consideration of these topics in my 1999 book *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America*, and framed the discussion between the two "bookends" of "Who is a Buddhist?" and "Ecumenicism." Why do I think this typology continues to offer the most promising paradigm for understanding North American Buddhism and Buddhist America? No matter where one goes, the discussion always focuses

on these issues. Virtually every one of the twenty-four papers presented at the "Buddhism without Borders" conference at the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley, California, in March 2010 dealt with these issues. It's the same at panels on North American Buddhism at the American Academy of Religion annual meetings or the International Association of Buddhist Studies. The insightful and well-prepared new scholars of North American Buddhism are now publishing lots of exciting articles on the development of North American Buddhism, yet they are still trapped in what Louis Nordstrom called the "scenery" of American Buddhism in 1977 and have not offered any creative new ways of understanding the "path," or the whole development of Buddhism on our continent. To move beyond this limitation, we can now begin to explore creatively the ways in which each of these five issues has impacted North American Buddhism in new and developmental ways. What better way to launch these new investigations than to consider the issue of American Buddhist practice.

American Buddhist Practice

Many researchers, me included, have walked into North American Buddhist centers and begun their investigative inquiry with the question "What's your practice?" The first time I asked that question was in a Buddhist Churches of America temple. The faithful and respectful Jōdo Shinshū practitioner

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looked at me as if I were crazy. She never did answer, but as I watched her over the next several days, I learned that her identity as a Buddhist and her identity as a person were inseparable. In the nearly forty years since that initial observation, my experience with Asian immigrant Buddhists has been almost identical to that initial meeting. On the other hand, when I visit North American convert sanghas, I almost always get an immediate, and different, response: “meditation.” Indeed, the specific form of meditation, such as Zen or Vipassana, varies, but the focus on meditation remains immediate. If I then push back a little, and ask some specific questions about what other aspects of Buddhist practice they might do, there’s usually very little response, almost as if Buddhism for them were a monolithic “Meditation-Yāna” tradition.

There’s little doubt that the above reinforces some of the problems in understanding the distinctions that exist between Asian immigrant and American convert communities. And it’s understandable, too. In his introductory chapter in Don Morreale’s first catalog of American Buddhist centers, Jack Kornfield, one of the superstars on the North American Buddhist scene, indicated that a wonderful process was happening in North American Buddhism. He said, “American laypeople are not content to go and hear a sermon once a week or to make merit by leaving gifts at a meditation center. We, too, want to *live* the realizations of the Buddha and bring them into our hearts, our lives,

and our times.” A decade later, when interviewed by *Time* magazine, Kornfield was far more direct: “American people don’t want to be monks or nuns. . . . They want practices that transform the heart.” Kornfield went on to explain that is why so many convert Buddhists attend Vipassana retreats or Zen sesshins, and in so doing, he essentially dismissed the efficacy of all nonmeditative traditions. We should bear in mind, too, that it was not only the ethnic Buddhist traditions that Kornfield omitted in what he called “the real practice of the Buddha.” He also eliminated the Soka Gakkai tradition, and that may indeed be the single largest Buddhist tradition, in terms of membership, on North American soil.

Kornfield was certainly correct when he defined North American Buddhism

as an essentially lay Buddhist tradition. North America has never had a monastic culture, but to focus exclusively on the lay Buddhist tradition overlooks the immensely critical role Buddhist monastics have played throughout Buddhism’s history in Asia. Moreover, in its globalization, the monastics—along with the scholar-practitioners—remain the culture bearers of the tradition. It’s no accident that two decades after Kornfield wrote his remarks, more and more monastic centers are growing throughout North America, and an increasing number of American Buddhists—men and women—are choosing the monastic vocation as a means of making Buddhist practice the focal point of their lives. While this is no insignificant issue, it is not free from dilemmas, for the monastic codes for monks and nuns, known as the *vinaya*,

Seated meditation at the Mount Baldy Zen Center near Los Angeles. Angeles.

were largely written for a religious environment that is two millennia old . . . and no longer entirely applicable to our modern, and sometimes urban, lifestyle. As a result, the codes themselves, and the degree to which they are enforced, become problematic. Many Western Buddhist monastic centers have had to incorporate many exceptions into the detailed rules, and my suspicion is that it will not be too much longer before the commentarial tradition, which died out nearly fifteen hundred years ago, will be reawakened. Additionally, as early as 1970, Shunryū Suzuki Roshi commented on the problem of the choice between a lay or monastic life in America, noting

that “American students are not priests, yet not completely laymen.” He went on: “I think you are special people and want some special practice that is not exactly priest’s practice and not exactly a layman’s practice.” Lama Surya Das has called the alternative experiments an “in-between sangha.”

Moving beyond the lay-versus-monastic dichotomy, it does seem that academic studies and popular books alike focus almost exclusively on the various meditative traditions. And in typical North American fashion, success is often measured quantitatively rather than qualitatively. The more hours in meditation practice, the better, irrespective of any

measurable improvement in one’s religious or secular life. If one wants to know just how dominant the meditative tradition is in North American Buddhism, all that’s necessary is to peruse the pages of the front and back sections of *Tricycle* or *Shambhala Sun* or *Buddhadharma*. One can even find places where the Buddhist tradition has blossomed into part of the wellness movement, thanks in part to the spectacular efforts of individuals like Jon Kabat-Zinn, who founded the Stress Reduction Clinic at the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

The choices available are far different and more comprehensive now than during the Dharma-hopping explosion of the 1970s and 1980s. Nonetheless, if Lama Surya Das was correct when he identified the Three Treasures of North American Buddhism to be “me, myself, and I,” then perhaps the motive hasn’t changed all that much. Instant enlightenment still sounds pretty good. By no means does this rule out the serious, well-intentioned students who value Buddhist ideals and mental training, but it also recognizes that many North Americans still collect teachings and immediate gratification the way they collect baseball cards and songs on their iPods. More is better. I am again reminded that my early students at Naropa Institute were far more impressed to learn that I did four hours per day of sitting meditation, and all-day sits on Sundays, than they were with my academic credentials. Nobody ever asked me if I *really* did *satipaṭṭhāna* or simply engaged in silly fantasies during those long hours. And it was no different more than thirty years later when the Cache Valley Sangha members in Utah were very impressed to learn of my many hours on the cushion and my month-long retreats early in my training, but they were turned off immediately when I explained that my major practice no longer involved daily formal meditation.

Photo: Don Farber

Monastics attend the sixteenth conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists and a full ordination ceremony held during the grand opening of Hsi Lai Temple, America’s largest Buddhist temple, in Hacienda Heights, California, in 1988.

I've always enjoyed my time spent at Buddhist centers where the meditative tradition is properly integrated into an overall Buddhist lifestyle, but it was no accident that for my very first invitation to speak at a Zen Mountain Monastery retreat, Daido Roshi asked me to plan a weekend's lectures on precepts. There's no need to rehearse my staunch support for the precepts-as-practice approach, offered by Stephen Batchelor and others. Yet I think it is important to understand that Buddhist communities—composed of mostly Asian immigrant Buddhists—value and utilize ritual practices, chanting, and faith-based observances in quite the same way convert communities emphasize sitting meditation. The mental focus and concentration required to carry out ritual practice in the proper fashion is every inch as demanding as *śamatha* meditation. But additionally, I think that the precepts-as-practice approach can help bridge the gap between the Asian immigrant and American convert communities because, irrespective of the specific practice dictated by the individual sanghas, all Buddhists are obliged to follow the five vows of the lay practitioner. Those five vows are something we are all encouraged to do all the time. One cannot overestimate the importance of ethical concerns for the entire Buddhist community globally. In the more than twenty-five hundred years since the Buddha's ministry, the ethical concerns and challenges we face as global and American Buddhists have changed drastically, and we are indeed fortunate that scholars like Damien Keown have helped us better understand the contextual circumstances for issues never considered during the Buddha's lifetime, like abortion, euthanasia, bioethics, sexual ethics, and the like. All of these issues fall under the category called practice, and they will continue to become more complicated as we move through this new century.

What is rarely mentioned in discussing Buddhist practice is the issue of Buddhist family life. To the best of my knowledge, the only Buddhist publication that devotes a regular column to Buddhist family life and parenting is *Turning Wheel*, published by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Fortunately, we now have books like Sandy Eastoak's volume called *Dharma Family Treasures: Sharing Buddhism with Children* and Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn's book called *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting*. The issue of Buddhist parenting and family life cannot be overlooked, because many of the young North American Buddhist converts, and many of the latest generation of Asian immigrant Buddhists, now find themselves having given birth to yet another generation of American Buddhists. One of these "Dharma brats" is Sumi Loundon Kim, born into a small Soto Zen community in New Hampshire in 1975. Her interest in Buddhist family life prompted her to publish an edited book in 2001 called *Blue Jean Buddha: Voices of Young Buddhists*, with about thirty short sections written by young Buddhists. Five years later she followed up with *The Buddha's Apprentices: More Voices of Young Buddhists*. At the end of her second book, in a section called "Looking Ahead," she tells her own story, addressing the issue of how to infuse Buddhist practice into the lives of our children. She wastes no time in raising the critical issue of practice: "How are we, the greater Buddhist community in America, going to receive these beginners and young people?" She postulates three things that might secure a sane Buddhist environment, and practice, for our future generations. First, she hopes the overall Buddhist community will continue to create a welcoming atmosphere in individual Buddhist communities. Second, Buddhist communities need to create participatory roles designed to energize young people. Finally, and most important, Buddhist

communities need to address the psychological needs of youngsters.

Is Sumi Loundon Kim's approach working? One of the contributors to her first book was Noah Levine, now noted for his work with Dharma Punx, one of the most visible Buddhist organizations today despite its unusual focus. Another was Jimmy Yu, now a Buddhist studies professor in Florida. Still another was Venerable Yifa, a Fo Guang Shan ordained nun since 1979. And perhaps most notable is Jeff Wilson, who is possibly the brightest new voice in the study of North American Buddhism.

Truly, in North American Buddhist practice we are now beginning to see a fruitful cross-fertilization between Buddhist communities of different sects that has been identified as hybridity. Scholars are now more clearly understanding the linkage and association between adaptation and hybridity in the various forms of Buddhism that are emerging and cooperating in North America. As Buddhism continues to globalize, the advances in technology have enabled North American Buddhist groups to communicate not only across regional boundaries in their own continent but across continental boundaries as well. This is additionally important because the practices, teaching lineages, and communities of important ancient and modern Buddhist teachers have become worldwide enterprises. Global Buddhist dialogue with respect to Buddhist practice enables modern American Buddhism to truly be involved in productive boundary crossing. North American Buddhists traveling abroad can now use their computers to instantly find a community with which to practice in virtually any country on the globe. Better still, because of global Buddhist dialogue, they'll know what to expect—within the limits of cultural and regional differences—in terms of that practice, and when traveling, they needn't be a proverbial "sangha of one" any longer. □

Innovative Trends in Euro-American Buddhism

by Richard Hughes Seager

Since the 1970s there have been major developments promoting interreligious dialogue, gender equity, and social engagement.

Over the past fifty years, Buddhism has grown into a dynamic and diverse American religion divided into two broad demographic communities. One consists of a range of Buddhist sects and traditions flourishing within immigrant communities from nations across Asia. The other is composed primarily of Euro-Americans who discovered Buddhism as a spiritual alternative or adjunct to Judaism and Christianity. There is relatively little contact between these two Buddhist groups even though both began to grow rapidly in the 1960s—the first due to changes in American immigration law in 1965, the second as a result of a broad turn to the religions of the East in the course of spiritual revolution.

The term *American Buddhism* is usually understood to refer to the forms and practices taking shape among Euro-Americans. With the exception of a few prominent Asian leaders such as the Dalai Lama and a handful of Asian Dharma teachers, the public voice of Buddhism in the United States is overwhelmingly Euro-American. With origins in the social turmoil of the 1960s, Euro-American Buddhism has a markedly progressive orientation that many have hailed as giving rise to a unique and innovative expression of the ancient traditions of Buddhist Asia. The practice of choice among these Buddhists is

seated meditation as drawn from Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, and the Theravada traditions. The tenor of its philosophy is informed by contemporary science, modern psychology, and liberal secular humanism. While elements of Asian monastic tradition and practice persist, Euro-American Buddhism is essentially a lay phenomenon. Its leading institutional forms such as Dharma and retreat centers are designed to cater to the needs and lifestyles of middle-class Americans, many of whom understand Buddhism to be not a religion but a philosophy, spirituality, way of life, or even healing therapy.

The spirit of Euro-American Buddhism is largely pragmatic, this-worldly, and future-orientated, characteristics originally grounded in liberal Protestantism. Its pragmatism gains expression in assertions about the empirical foundation of Buddhism, such as the verifiability of meditation as an effective tool with which to enhance life. Its this-worldliness is expressed in a social orientation that is environmentally sensitive, proscience, proboddy, and holistic. Future orientation is implicit in its programmatic vision of social amelioration made possible through Buddhist spiritual practice, but this is crosscut by a focus on being present in the “now” that is fostered by meditation.

A number of innovative trends are identified with Euro-American Buddhism, among them interreligious dialogue, gender equity, and social engagement. In the 1970s all three had a trail-blazing character as Euro-American Buddhists first began to define themselves in public. Highly publicized gatherings occurred that broke new ground for interreligious dialogue, such as meetings between the Dalai Lama and the emerging cadre of Western teachers. Sex and alcohol scandals, mostly perpetrated by men, put a spotlight on the role played by women in the community. Bold visions of how meditation might contribute to social change challenged many who had come to Buddhism seeing practice as a personal quest for enlightenment. Such developments suggested something new and important was under way in American Buddhism and contributed to the excitement of the time. Today, most of these developments have become widely accepted and are part of the normative lay of the land in Euro-American Buddhism.

Interreligious dialogue gained expression in two distinctly different ways, the first mixed or shared practice within Euro-American Buddhism, the second the adaptation of Buddhist ideas and practices to other religions.

The origins of mixed practice can be traced to the influence, in almost equal parts, of Zen, Theravada, and Tibetan traditions within the sixties-era counterculture. Around that time, Asian monastics from the three traditions

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began to teach their sectarian philosophies and meditation techniques to Euro-Americans in a highly fluid social situation. Young seekers often migrated from teacher to teacher, and fledgling Dharma centers were commonly composed of practitioners exposed to variants within all three forms of Buddhism. Although most centers tended to take on a distinct sectarian style, a mixed-practice pattern had been established. Thirty years ago, a group such as Friends of the Western Buddhist Order could self-consciously devote itself to the creation of a mixed-practice style thought to be best suited for the transmission of the Dharma to the West.

Today mixed practice is both ad hoc and taken for granted as part of the Euro-American community, although not

without some controversy. For instance, Vipassana practitioners may emphasize the importance of Buddhist practice as taught in the Theravada *suttas* (sutras) but dismiss Mahayana texts as only secondary sources of inspiration. But the idea that Euro-American Buddhists can and should draw upon a range of traditions to create a new Western Dharma has a great deal of currency. This has been systematically expressed by Joseph Goldstein, a highly regarded teacher in the Vipassana-inspired tradition of the Insight Meditation Society. Published in 2002, Goldstein's *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism* is representative of the state of mixed practice today. One of his goals in writing it was to negotiate the doctrinal pitfalls of Zen-Theravada-Tibetan mixed practice

in an effort to forge ecumenism among Western Buddhist meditators.

Christians and Jews continue to adapt Buddhist ideas and practice to suit their traditions, despite reactionary responses from conservatives. By and large, they view meditation as a set of spiritual techniques that enhance traditions of prayer and contemplation long in use among Western theists. A current position on Buddhist-Christian dialogue is suggested by Paul F. Knitter, a longtime ecumenist and Zen practitioner, who recently published *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*. In this personal reflection grounded in decades of theological work, Knitter explores how he, a baptized Catholic who loves Christ and the church, can also be a Buddhist who has taken triple refuge. He approaches the question by taking up fundamental theological questions: Can the Christian God be reconciled to Buddhist nontheism? Can Jesus coexist in the heart and mind of the faithful with Gautama Buddha? How can Christians understand heaven and prayer in light of nirvana and meditation? As Knitter works through these questions, he comes to a realization that Buddhism enhances, even in some sense restores, his faith in Christ and church. He hopes that Christians will embrace a faith grounded in scripture, tradition, and personal experience inclusive enough to cultivate insights from other religions.

Like interreligious dialogue, gender equity has long been a characteristic concern of Euro-American Buddhism, and its

Asian Buddhist leaders who have disseminated Buddhism in North America. From left, Ven. Ratnasara (Sri Lanka), Master Thich Man Giac (Vietnam), the Dalai Lama (Tibet), Master Hsing Yun (Taiwan), and Taizan Maezumi Roshi (Japan).

origins can be traced to the sixties-style, progressive orientation of the community. A first wave of publications about gender equity in Buddhism appeared in the 1980s and was informed by secular feminism. These books began to chart women's deep involvement in creating new Buddhist communities and to argue for the unique quality of their contributions. As a self-consciously Buddhist ideal, gender equity was given a significant boost in the 1980s when a series of scandals rocked the Euro-American community. In their wake, longtime female practitioners like Blanche Hartman, who in 1996 became coabbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, began to take up high-profile leadership positions. The number of women among rank-and-file practitioners, as well as among teachers and leaders, has increased substantially since then, and the central role of women in Euro-American Buddhism is now taken for granted.

Also in the early 1980s, gay men and women began to found gay-oriented Dharma centers and to agitate for explicit inclusion in the Euro-American community. Some leaders expressed disappointment to discover that even a prominent leader like the Dalai Lama cannot simply overturn traditional sexual mores ensconced in the canon law of Asian Buddhist institutions. His Holiness suggested, however, that Euro-American Buddhists had the right to build a new consensus about how gender-related values could be expressed to reflect the ideals of Dharma communities in the West.

Like gender equity for women, equity for gays and lesbians seems to be taken for granted throughout the Euro-American community. At the same time, some Asian traditions linked to questions of gender are being refashioned to address the needs of Western Buddhists. For instance, in Japan the bodhisattva Jizo is regarded as guide and protector during death and rebirth. More recently, he has been evoked to mediate emotions that accompany abortion.

Some Euro-American Buddhists are now promoting Jizo rituals as a means to aid women and their families to negotiate the grief, loss, and guilt frequently evoked by both abortion and miscarriage. In the absence of American rituals to address such traumas, there is evidence that Jizo has begun to move beyond Buddhism into the broader community. Such gender-related developments suggest the tenor of the Buddhism emergent among Euro-Americans. But they also indirectly underscore the importance of mixed practice insofar as gender equity is fostered across the Euro-American community at large, irrespective of traditional attitudes toward gender in Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan institutions in Asia.

Gender equity is also playing an important role in the ongoing, worldwide discussion about full monastic ordination for women. In this context, gender equity ideals shared by progressive Buddhists in both the East and the West are being brought into direct conflict with more traditionalist views embedded in Asian-based monastic institutions. Over the long term, Euro-American Buddhists may play an important role in resolving this debate insofar as they are able to speak with strong voices about the salutary influence of gender equity in their own communities.

Social engagement is a third prominent ideal in Euro-American Buddhism today. Like mixed practice and gender equity, it is now so taken for granted that it is difficult to recall it was once a source of controversy. Thirty years ago, organizations like the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and Thich Nhat Hanh's Communities of Mindful Living first began to give concrete shape to socially engaged Buddhism in the United States. Gun control, peace work, prison ministry, and ecologically sensitive teachings grounded in the Buddhist worldview were then hailed as new developments. These are now commonplace in most Euro-American Dharma communities.

Today's socially engaged Buddhists operate in a lower key than in the past but have a more pragmatic vision of how to implement the Dharma in American society. A good deal of socially engaged energy is now channeled through major American institutions, a testimony to how far the community has moved from its countercultural roots. For example, socially engaged Buddhism finds expression today in the field of pastoral education. Both seasoned practitioners and younger Buddhists are pursuing professional careers as Dharma teachers in institutions such as universities, hospitals, and hospices. Some pastoral education programs are sponsored by grassroots Dharma centers such as the Upaya Zen Center of Santa Fe, New Mexico, while others are taking shape in leading divinity schools such as those at Harvard and Yale.

Another major development in socially engaged Buddhism is the promotion of mindfulness meditation as a means to foster well-being in society at large. Observers once referred to this development as "stealth Buddhism" to suggest how Buddhist practices could be promulgated in a secular form acceptable to major American institutions. Jon Kabat-Zinn was a pioneer in this movement. In the late 1970s, he promoted the use of meditation in a medical setting at his Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Today he promotes an eight-week program that has aided some twenty thousand clients to cope with stress, pain, and anxiety. Kabat-Zinn's program is now part of a much broader effort to establish secular and nonsectarian initiatives aimed at fostering contemplation. The Mind and Life Institute and the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC) retain fairly direct links to Buddhism but promote secular meditation in professions such as education, law, and nursing and in a range of life situations from parenting to recovery and death and dying. Many such

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen master from Vietnam, leads a peace march in Los Angeles in 2006.

organizations, whether Buddhist or Buddhist inspired, participate in the mindfulness movement today. All can be said to be engaged in bringing meditation out of monastic settings and into the American mainstream.

The mainstreaming of mindfulness meditation is intimately related to another, somewhat different, form of engagement in which Buddhism is joining forces with science. Speculative arguments about the relationship between Buddhism and science have been a familiar part of modern Buddhist rhetoric for well over a century. Over the past decade, however, a particular interest has been expressed in mindfulness meditation among researchers in the field of neurobiology. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), researchers are finding that mindfulness meditation has a measurable effect on the structure and function of those areas of the brain thought to foster empathy, self-reflection, and positive states of mind that counter depression. These findings seem to give a scientific sanction to reports by practitioners that mindfulness practice can improve one's outlook on life by transforming self-understanding. The neuroscience of mindfulness remains

in its infancy, and responsible observers remain cautious about drawing speculative conclusions. But there is a palpable sense of excitement in American Buddhism about the possible discovery of an empirical basis for the efficacy of mindfulness meditation.

Euro-American Buddhism is a dynamic movement based upon deeply internalized Buddhist concepts and practices that have been intelligently recast to address the needs of a particular group. In many respects, it is of a piece with new Buddhist movements in Europe and Australia, and it is sometimes praised as a model for other national and regional expressions of Buddhism.

As one contemplates its virtues, however, it is important to recognize a few of its limitations. Euro-American Buddhism is the expression of a subset of a particular class in the United States—middle- to upper-middle-class people, mostly white and college educated, and of a conventionally left-liberal political and social persuasion. Both its ideals and the accommodations it has made to American culture reflect aspirations forged in the ideals and excesses of the countercultural era. It gives voice, albeit with important Buddhist twists, to a highly evolved

individualism that, for both good and ill, is considered a too typical expression of the American mainstream. Some Buddhists express concern, moreover, that the mindfulness movement and the approach of the neurosciences, both of which emphasize the individual while devaluing traditional symbol, ethics, and community, may erode the coherence and integrity of the Dharma.

It must also be recognized that Euro-American meditators form only one part, perhaps not the largest part, of Buddhism in the United States today. Despite its size and progressive orientation, Soka Gakkai is composed of Buddhists who chant and thus tends to be excluded from discussions about the nature of "American Buddhism." Asian-Americans within rapidly growing immigrant communities, where precepts, tradition, and community continue to play vital roles, are also seriously underrepresented in public conversation. These groups are likely to play an increasingly important role in defining America's national Buddhism in the coming decades. But for now and the foreseeable future, Euro-Americans who meditate are likely to continue to define the public voice of an American Buddhist mainstream. □

Some African-Americans Are Buddhists, Too!

by Jan Willis

Because of the Buddha's teachings and his own life example, many African-American children of the civil rights movement have been finding their way to Buddhism.

More than twenty-five hundred years ago, at the end of his life, the Buddha declared, "In all these years I have taught only two things: suffering and its cessation." What a marvelous statement! In forty-five years of teaching, he had concentrated on imparting to his listeners an explanation of the causes and conditions of suffering and the ways they could themselves seek to overcome those causes and conditions and thus realize the end of suffering. Who, having heard and reflected upon such teachings, would not wish to undertake and practice them? As His Holiness the Dalai Lama often says today, "All beings wish to have happiness and to avoid suffering. In this regard, we are all *exactly* alike, *exactly* the same." It should come as no surprise then—at this historic time in Buddhist history when almost all of the world's various traditions of Buddhism are found together in one geographic space, the United States—that African-Americans, too, would find Buddhist teachings attractive.

There is much that is universally appealing about Buddhist Dharma. As Dhammapada, verse 183, summarizes it, "To do no harm; to practice virtue, to purify the mind. This is the Buddha's teaching." Again, in Dhammapada, 5, the Buddha says, "Hatred is never appeased by hatred; Hatred is only appeased by

Love. This is an eternal Law [Dharma]." Many African-Americans of my generation who later inclined toward Buddhism had already heard similar teachings in the words and sermons of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Striving to move the United States closer to a more just society, Dr. King and others had built the civil rights movement around the strong principles of love, forgiveness, interdependence, and nonviolent resistance. Hearing again these same principles and practices extolled in Buddhist teachings was like coming home.

When the details of the Buddha's life were reviewed, he became even more of an inspiration. For he was a man who, in actual practice, rejected the systemic oppression of his country's people by denouncing the caste, or *varna*, system of the Aryans (which had originally been founded on color discrimination) and by allowing women to enter into his community of practitioners. Both actions were extremely radical, even revolutionary, for his time. He was a man who left his youthful life of luxury to commune with diverse people of whatever caste or gender so long as they, too, sought a disciplined path to liberation. Because of the Buddha's teachings and his own life example, many African-American children of the civil rights movement have been finding their way

to Buddhism. Yet—as has so often been the case before—we are doing this without much fanfare or even recognition, once again being made—almost!—invisible. Why is this the case? And, why is it important? I want to explore these issues here.

According to some reports, percentage-wise, Buddhism is now "the fastest growing religion in the United States."¹ In terms of adherents, it is said to rank either fourth or fifth—behind Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and/or the "nonreligious"—and to have grown by 170 percent between 1990 and 2000.² The 2008 Pew Forum's Religious Landscape Survey reported that people who claim to be Buddhist account for 0.7 percent of the total U.S. population, which translates into around two million followers; but another study shows that at least 12 percent of the U.S. population—or some twenty-five million people—have "been impacted or influenced in their spirituality by Buddhism or Buddhist ideas."³

I think we can all agree that Buddhism's cultural impact has far outdistanced its demographics. Still, it would be nice to have more accurate demographics. Charles Prebish and others have estimated that the number of Buddhists in the United States today is roughly between 1.5 million and 4 million;⁴ whereas in 1997 Martin Baumann suggested that there were between 3 million and 4 million Buddhists in America (with around 800,000 of these being "Euro-Americans").⁵ Of course, getting a more accurate count would require settling

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the very thorny issue of *who counts as a Buddhist*.⁶ In 2002 Thomas Tweed coined the terms *nightstand Buddhists* and *sympathizers* for those “influenced in one way or another by Buddhist ideals or practice”⁷ and suggested, along with Prebish, that “a Buddhist is/should be anyone who calls herself a Buddhist.”⁸ We will not be able to settle this issue here but should note that it is very important and pertinent to acknowledge that the *vast majority* (perhaps 80 to 85 percent) of Buddhists in America are immigrant Asian Buddhists, *not* so-called home-grown or convert Buddhists.⁹

A brief historical overview may prove helpful here. Buddhism, in various forms, began arriving on North American shores roughly 150 years ago. Though the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago is often cited as the marker for Buddhism's introduction to the United States, clearly there were Buddhists in the country before that time. In fact, Buddhist history in the United States can be seen as occurring in three distinct periods, each with distinctive groups of Buddhist immigrants. The first groups of Buddhists were the Chinese who came to the West Coast as menial laborers in the gold mines and on the railroads. In 1860 the California census shows that one of every ten Californians was Chinese. Also around this time, the Japanese came to Hawaii and other West Coast states, bringing with them their specific forms of Buddhism. Contemporaneously, on the East Coast in the mid-nineteenth century, a famed group of spiritualists,

the Transcendentalists, were discovering the spiritual texts of the “ancient Orient,” some (not most) of which were Buddhist.

The second wave of enthusiasm for Buddhism occurred in the 1950s with the appearance of the Beat movement of art, aesthetics, and “crazy wisdom.” Such interests carried through until the sixties and seventies, when countercultural Americans ventured East and later returned to the United States, bringing with them their newfound Buddhist gurus, establishing Buddhist centers, and paving the way for the group of followers that has come to be known as convert Buddhists.

Third, contemporaneous with America's pullback from the Vietnam War, the passing of the Immigration Act of 1965 allowed for a new wave of mainly Southeast Asian Buddhists to immigrate to the United States in large numbers. These three streams of Buddhist followers still exist in the United States, though, typically, all such immigrants are subsumed under the singular rubric of “Asian” or “ethnic” Buddhists. Clearly, there is a type of ignorance here that leans toward pernicious racism, in at least two respects: (1) lumping all the distinct Asian immigrants under one heading—whether “Asian” or “ethnic” or “immigrant”—fails to show an understanding or appreciation for the great variety of distinctive cultures subsumed under the singular term, and (2) doing so ignores the historical dimensions and circumstances of those specific immigrations, most of which were fraught

with a kind of racial disdain and disparagement. As Paul Numrich has noted, “America's encounter with Buddhism began with a mixture of fascination and hostility.”¹⁰

A divide is recognized between “ethnic” or “immigrant” Buddhists on the one hand—though irrespective of whether such immigrants derive from East, South, or Southeast Asia—and the so-called convert Buddhists on the other hand, who are generally characterized as being either “Euro-American,” “elite,” or “white” Buddhists.¹¹ Indeed, Kenneth Tanaka has called this “American Buddhism's Racial Divide.”¹² Yet, as an African-American Buddhist, I do not see myself reflected here. It would appear that there is a further “divide” or “gap” *within* the American Buddhist convert community. For while it is certainly true that a majority of convert Buddhists in this country are white, middle to upper-middle class, well-educated, and generally liberal, there are some African-Americans (as well as Hispanics and other people of color) who are Buddhists, too!

It is *not* the case that all African-American Buddhists are members of Soka Gakkai International-USA (SGI-USA), though a popular movie (about singer Tina Turner) and some written works might suggest this.¹³ It is true that of all Buddhist groups and organizations in the United States, this one alone has the most ethnically diverse group of followers—and, interestingly, the most African-Americans in leadership positions. But Soka Gakkai is

rarely, if ever, mentioned or counted as being a Buddhist group; it is not listed at all in the well-known catalog by Don Morreale, *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America*. We must ask ourselves why only this particular group is excluded.

As I have written elsewhere, for almost all African-Americans in this country it is the trauma and legacy of slavery that haunts us in the deepest recesses of our souls and psyches. For most of us, dealing with and healing this deep suffering is our chief aim. If Buddhist teachings and meditative techniques can help us with this, what more could we wish for? But the legacy of slavery is not just ours; the historical trauma of slavery affects blacks and whites alike. Therefore, dealing with it together, perhaps as a new meditative hook or a new koan, has the potential to help liberate us all.

I do not personally know any African-Americans who are members of Soka Gakkai. I do, however, know quite a number of African-Americans who practice in and with a wide variety of other Buddhist traditions and sanghas in America. We have come to Buddhism—like other hyphenated Americans—because of books and education, because of movies, because (in some cases) of psychedelics, because of travel, because of military service, or because of martial arts. We have come seeking spiritual wisdom, healing, and liberation from suffering. Some of us follow Tibetan traditions; some

of us are Zen roshis. Some of us are Tibetan lamas; some Vipassana teachers. Some of us wear robes and are actually ordained. Some of us are called *acharya*. Some of us teach at universities, others offer workshops at prisons; some record music or head dojos. Some have founded separate, black-only meditation groups; some work for peace organizations or at AIDS hospices. We are, in many ways, as diverse as the different traditions of Buddhism that have made their way to the United States in the past 150 years.

As of yet, there are no studies that focus exclusively on African-American Buddhists. No sociologist of religion has looked at the issue. There are, however, individual African-American Buddhists who are writing about and speaking about their own journeys to the path of Dharma. In my own memoir, for example, called *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist*, I write about my personal story—from being raised in the Jim Crow South to marching with Dr. King during the Birmingham civil rights campaign to discovering Buddhism in college and meeting Tibetan Buddhists in India and Nepal. It is a book about searching for relief from suffering, about crossing boundaries, both spiritual and geographical, about finding methods that work, and about returning home as a “Baptist-Buddhist.” Other African-Americans—like Charles Johnson, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Angel Kyodo Williams, Faith Adiele, Bhante Suhita Dharma, Lewis

An African-American youth pours sweet hydrangea tea over a statue of the infant Buddha, celebrating the Buddha's birthday. The ceremony was organized by the Los Angeles Buddhist Church Federation at the Japanese American Culture and Community Center in Los Angeles.

Woods, Jules Harris, George Mumford, Lori Pierce, Lama Thupten Gyalsten Dorje, Joseph Jarman, Gaylon Ferguson, and Earthlyn Manuel—have written or talked about their lives and about Buddhism and its teachings. Alice Walker, in a piece entitled “This Was Not an Area of Large Plantations,” has given us a profound Buddhist meditation on forgiveness in the context of the legacy of slavery.¹⁴ At least two incarcerated African-American men, Jarvis Masters and Calvin Malone, have written, powerfully, about finding Buddhist Dharma while in prison.¹⁵ And there are a growing number of essays addressing the specific challenges presented by trying to practice Buddhism within the present structures of mostly white convert Buddhist centers in the United States—where money and leisure time are two essential requisites for practice. Some of the questions and issues that arise from such writings are worth noting.

Since Buddhist practice offers us the chance to “sit” with our sufferings and look deeply, we must begin with the recognition that here we “sit” in a country and within a society that is now racially diverse but was founded by whites who received and thrived on power that was built upon and supported by a system of brutal slave labor. Recognizing this as fact, how do we who were harmed forgive and go forward? How do we who were privileged by such circumstances recognize this fact and go forward? We need to find ways to allow our meditations to help us with these deep existential sufferings.

Moreover, given the history of this country, we need to find ways to nurture more racially integrated sanghas. A first step toward achieving

this, ironically, may initially be to hold separate retreats. Indeed, since the year 2000, a number of Buddhist retreats have been held that have been specifically limited to people of color. In 2002 I was invited to serve as a teacher at the African-American Buddhist Retreat held at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Woodacre, California. On the first day of the retreat, seated on the raised dais in front of seventy-five African-American students, fourteen African-American men and women Buddhist teachers were introduced. Just as the introductions concluded, Rachel Bagley, who was also a teacher, stood in a far corner of the meditation hall and began singing, soulfully, the moving strains of "Amazing Grace." It was a stirring welcoming—of Buddhism to America and to African-Americans.

The best way to make African-Americans, and people of color generally, less anomalous in convert Buddhist centers throughout America is clearly to have more African-Americans and people of color present and visible, and the best way to do this is to have African-American teachers present. Ralph Steele, a psychologist in New Mexico and a Vipassana teacher, has been saying this for a while.¹⁶ Lama Rangdrol, founder of Rainbow Dharma, would no doubt agree. In 2001 bell hooks remarked, "I think that people are disturbed, not by a black presence, but by a black presence that seeks to revolutionize." She noted, "I have been fascinated in general that white folks have shown themselves willing to follow men of color from Tibet and other places . . . but I don't think that white people in America have shown themselves willing to follow any black guru."¹⁷ And Carol Cooper wrote, "Traditionally, teachers are expected to anoint their successors—in other words to tell students when they're ready to teach. Thus far no high-profile white lama, guru, or *sen-sei* (with established financial resources and pedagogic influence) has chosen a black dharma heir."¹⁸

The issue that I personally worry about is accessibility. Having found the Buddhist teachings to be so helpful for me, and seeing their amazing potential to help suffering beings everywhere—of whatever color—I want to see accessibility routes improved. If offering free weekend urban retreats just for people of color is helpful, there ought to be funding for them. The Buddha offered teachings to everyone, equally. I'd like to see equal-access Dharma become a reality in the United States. □

Notes

1. See the 2008 Pew Forum's U.S.

Religious Landscape Survey, <http://pewforum.org/US-Religious-Landscape-Survey-Resources.aspx>.

2. Ibid.

3. See R. Wuthnow and W. Cadge, "Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States: The Scope of Influence," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 3 (2004): 363–80.

4. In *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (1999), vii, as well as in "Diversity and Divisions in American Buddhism," *Buddhadharma*, (Winter 2006): 48, Charles Prebish writes that there are "several million" Buddhist practitioners residing in the United States. This seems to imply more than two million. Richard Seager, in *Buddhism in America* (2000), prefers the lower estimate.

5. See Martin Baumann's figures for the United States in "The Dharma Has Come West: A Survey of Recent Studies and Sources," in the online *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2010/04/baum2.pdf>.

6. The question "Who is a Buddhist?" has been tackled by a number of scholars and writers; for example, see works by Jan Nattier, Charles Prebish, Rick Fields, and Thomas Tweed.

7. Thomas Tweed's "Who Is a Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures," in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia* (2002), is fast becoming a modern classic.

8. Charles Prebish had suggested this definition as early as 1979 in his *American Buddhism*, 188.

9. This estimate is my own. Charles

Prebish, in "Diversity and Divisions," 48, writes that "in all likelihood, the number of Buddhists in North America with Asian ancestry represents about 75 to 80 percent of the total number of Buddhists on the continent."

10. See Gurinder Singh Mann, Paul Numrich, and Raymond Williams, *Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs in America: A Short History* (2002), 15.

11. The so-called gap or divide between ethnic Buddhists and convert Buddhists in America has been discussed by a number of scholars. See, for example, Jan Nattier's "Who Is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America" and Rick Fields's "Divided Dharma: White Buddhists, Ethnic Buddhists, and Racism"—both in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka (1998). Tanaka addresses the divide early in his epilogue to this work. See also Prebish, "Diversity and Divisions," 48–57.

12. See Kenneth Tanaka's "American Buddhism's Racial Divide" online at www.belief.net.

13. See Nattier, "Who Is a Buddhist?" for sustained studies of Soka Gakkai; David Chappell's "Racial Diversity in the Soka Gakkai" in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher Queen (2000), 184–217; Jane Hurst's "Nichiren Shoshu and Soka Gakkai in America: The Pioneer Spirit" in Prebish and Tanaka, *Faces of Buddhism*, 79–97; and Richard Seager's *Encountering the Dharma* (2006).

14. This wonderful story-meditation appears in three places: a special edition of *Turning Wheel* entitled "Black Dharma" (Summer 2003); the 2004 anthology *Dharma, Color, and Culture: New Voices in Western Buddhism*, ed. Hilda Baldoquin; and Alice Walker's own 2006 collection, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*.

15. See Jarvis Jay Masters's *Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row* (1997) and Calvin Malone's *Razor-Wire Dharma* (2008).

16. See Lawrence Pintak, "Something Has to Change," *Shambhala Sun* (September 2001), where Ralph Steele, Joseph Jarman, and I are interviewed about blacks in American Buddhism.

17. See Carol Cooper's "Guess Who's Coming to Dharma: Black Women Embrace Western Buddhism" in *Village Voice*, July 3, 2001.

18. Ibid.

Leadership Issues in American Buddhism

by Paul David Numrich

Three important issues emerged: (1) the tension between the monastic and householder leadership models, (2) the content of leadership training, and (3) new gender expectations.

At a 2010 forum hosted by the Won Institute of Graduate Studies in suburban Philadelphia, presenters addressed adaptations occurring in the leadership of four Buddhist traditions in the United States, while ensuing discussions touched on adaptations across American Buddhism. Three important issues emerged: (1) the tension between the monastic and householder leadership models, (2) the content of leadership training, and (3) new gender expectations.

I will discuss each of these leadership issues in turn, drawing upon the forum presentations¹ and other sources. I will conclude with a comparative analysis of the Buddhist and Christian contexts and advocate the benefits of sharing insights about leadership across religious traditions.

Tension between Monastic and Householder Leadership Models

The Buddha privileged the monastic path to enlightenment. “There are two kinds of happiness, O monks,” he says in the *Anguttara Nikaya*. “The happiness of the home life and the happiness of monkhood. But the happiness of monkhood is

the higher of the two.”² The Buddha established monastic orders that renounced the householder path in order to pursue a holy or sacred life (*brahmacariya*) under a disciplinary code (*vinaya*) with celibacy as its primary rule.

This monastic model of religious leadership has maintained a powerful hold on Buddhists even when alternative models arose. In Japan, for instance, the great majority of Buddhist clergy have been married since the Meiji period (1868–1912). As Richard Jaffe explains in *Neither Monk nor Layman* (whose title evokes the tension between the monastic and householder models), “The departure of Japanese Buddhism from the monastic and ascetic emphasis of most other forms of Buddhism is striking.”³ Jaffe reports that Japanese lay Buddhists generally prefer married clergy, whereas clergy opinion is mixed—the disconnect between the practice of clergy marriage and the monastic ideal “has continued to trouble many clerics until the present day.”⁴ One Nichiren Shū minister, himself married, expresses his dismay: “Monks do not get married in Taiwan, China, Tibet, and so forth. It is only in Japan that Buddhist priests get married. . . . Thus, from the beginning, Japanese priests are looked down upon. This is a big problem, and Japanese Buddhism will be ruined in the near future.”⁵

The founder of Nichiren Buddhism in Japan, Nichiren Daishōnin (1222–82), considered monastic precepts impractical for most people in the present era, emphasizing instead adherence to the Lotus Sutra. Yet not only did Nichiren himself follow a monastic lifestyle, he advocated that “though one may have had a wife and family when one was a follower of the provisional schools, in a time of great trouble such as the present, he should cast all these aside and devote himself to the propagation of the correct teaching.”⁶

Even so, like most Japanese Buddhist clergy today, Nichiren Shū ministers are typically married. Ryuei Michael McCormick, an American minister and one of the presenters at the 2010 forum in Philadelphia, was not required to cast aside his family or leave his secular job when he was ordained as what he calls a “householder-clergy.” He believes that this model is “very compatible with the needs of North Americans who . . . do not wish to renounce family life or career” in order to pursue a ministerial vocation.⁷ The key is to maintain a “priestly spirit” while living in society, as this excerpt from the Nichiren Shū ordination materials explains: “Those priests with priestly spirit, who will never become contaminated by the worldly evils while associating with the secular world and who will walk with confidence on the way of saving the society, are disciples of the Eternal True Buddha.”⁸

Brought to the United States by Chōgyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939–87), Shambhala Buddhism considers the

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Tibetan models of householder yogi and married lama well suited to Western society and thus trains nonmonastic meditation teachers and ministers as its primary leaders.

Yet Trungpa established Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia as a monastic complement to lay practice. Trungpa's son and the current leader of Shambhala, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, emphasized the importance of a symbiotic relationship to a group of monastics: "Lay people could develop a better understanding of and appreciation for monasticism. At the same time, the monastics need not hold themselves completely separate from the community at large. What you do can be inspirational for other people, and it can all bounce back and forth. . . . I feel that having practice centers and having people who are there dedicating themselves completely to dharma practice is kind of a cosmic support for other people within the community."⁹ Gampo Abbey residents live under monastic vows whether they intend to do so permanently or merely until resuming lay life.

Won Buddhism's founder, Soŭ'aesan (1891–1943), recognized the advantages of monastic life but criticized institutional monasticism in Korea for being disconnected from the experiences of lay Buddhists. He envisioned the ordained devotee (in Korean, *cheonmuchulsin*) as a leader who connects religious practice and daily life, thereby providing a powerful role model for laypeople in how to practice the Dharma.

But the adaptation of the Korean model of the ordained devotee to the

American context has become a topic of discussion. Currently, ordained devotees cannot take an outside job. This can place an economic strain on the family of a married ordained devotee and can also weigh heavily on his wife, since she is responsible for maintaining the household finances. (Female ordained devotees cannot marry; see below.) Moreover, it is not uncommon for married ordained devotees to neglect their familial duties in their wholehearted commitment to their clergy calling. The Won Institute's Bokin Kim contends that "in Won Buddhism in the U.S.A., it seems more realistic to encourage ordained clergy who wish to marry to have special skills or knowledge that will allow them to earn a living. In addition, they need to be trained in how to balance those two responsibilities [clergy and family]."¹⁰

A symbiotic relationship between the monastic Sangha and householders has been a hallmark of traditional Theravada Buddhism. The number of Theravada monks in the United States has increased steadily in recent decades, with more than one thousand now residing in approximately 360 temples, including about two dozen non-Asian monks. In addition, as many as twenty-five Theravada nuns now reside in at least 10 temples in the United States and Canada, a significant development given that the Theravada *bhikkhuni* order was only reestablished in 1996.¹¹

But the traditional monastic leadership model has been rejected or modified by some Theravada and Theravada-inspired groups in the United States.

For instance, the Vipassana or Insight Meditation movement prefers lay meditation teachers, some of whom studied under monks and/or took monastic vows for a time. A few temples, such as Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara in Los Angeles, have developed innovative religious statuses for laypeople, partly to accommodate individuals who wish to exceed the expectations of ordinary lay practice. Some of these statuses require celibacy.

Content of Leadership Training

Buddhist groups must determine the kind of training that will prepare effective leaders in the United States. Often this requires adapting or supplementing traditional protocols.

In my experience, most foreign-born monks in U.S. Theravada temples are well trained in Buddhist studies but have only a rudimentary understanding of American society and struggle to communicate with American-born Buddhists. In an attempt to address such shortcomings, Thai monks undergo a three-month training period before leaving for the United States, which includes topics in English language, American culture and law, and clergy ethics. This last is particularly important in light of the leadership scandals in a number of American Buddhist groups.¹² We are beginning to see cases of clergy misconduct in American Theravada temples, and it remains to be seen whether the ethical checks provided by the monastic

disciplinary code (*vinaya*) will suffice to stem this development. Other Buddhist groups have implemented ethical safeguards for their leadership, including the Vipassana movement and Shambhala.

Clergy roles and expectations in the United States can differ greatly from Buddhist home countries, thus calling for applied training here. Rev. McCormick, an American Nichiren Shū minister, explains that Buddhists in Japan tend not to look to their ministers for spiritual counseling. But it is different here. “In my own ministry in San Francisco over the last nine years,” he reports, “I have found that people will come to me looking for spiritual answers or advice in regard to infidelity on the part of spouses or children with mental health issues or drug addiction.” This leads Rev. McCormick to advocate continuing clergy education and perhaps certification: “Buddhist ministers in North America should be trained in how to deal with these issues, and depending on state laws they might need to enter additional programs to get certification in things like marriage counseling. So the Japanese Buddhist clerical model is indeed compatible with North American lifestyles but still in need of adaptation and transformation if it is to meet the needs of North American people in the twenty-first century.”¹³

Won Buddhism has faced the challenge of striking the proper balance between what Bokin Kim calls the “experiential wisdom” of Buddhism on the one hand, and the emphasis on the “academic learning and critical awareness” characteristic of secular education on the other.¹⁴ Kim describes the difficulties at Wonkwang University and Youngsan Seminary in South Korea, as well as the faculty debates at the Won Institute in the United States that resulted in a decision to balance its curriculum with three components: (1) Won Buddhism, particularly the eleven basic subjects of *The Principal Book of Won Buddhism*;

(2) practice, which focuses on sitting, walking, and mindfulness meditation; and (3) Western learning/methodology, including studies in comparative religion. Commenting on the third component, Kim writes, “Without comprehensive study of other religious traditions and secular thinking in this pluralistic society it seems impossible to be a spiritual leader.”¹⁵

New Gender Expectations

New expectations for women and men in the American context affect leadership in different ways across Buddhist groups. In some cases, women’s involvement and status have been enhanced, as in the Vipassana movement, where half of the meditation teachers are female.¹⁶ In other cases, women leaders have encountered obstacles or ambivalence, as in mainstream Theravada, where the reestablishment of the *bhikkhuni* order remains controversial and so-called lay nuns occupy a marginal status vis-à-vis the (male) institutional Sangha.¹⁷

Expectations about celibacy can differ for female and male Buddhist leaders. Whereas most male clergy in Japan are married, virtually all female clergy are not.¹⁸ As Won Buddhism evolved in Korea, a policy of celibacy for female ordained devotees was formulated even

though Won’s founder allowed both men and women to choose either celibacy or marriage.¹⁹ Bokin Kim of the Won Institute praises the celibate clergywomen for the spiritual and financial benefits they have provided to the Won order for almost a century, but now it is time to “recover the founder’s vision by allowing a choice.” She finds “no rationale to support the argument for unequal rights and treatment between male and female *cheonmuchulsin* [ordained devotees],” and thus “Won Buddhism’s current regulation which requires celibacy of the female *cheonmuchulsin* is wrong. The order should not interfere in the individual’s decision.” In Kim’s mind, the benefits of a policy change are clear: “Female *cheonmuchulsin*, if married, just like male *cheonmuchulsin*, would function as a role model to female laity.”²⁰ Of course, like their male counterparts, female *cheonmuchulsin* would then need to learn how to balance the demands of being both clergy and householder.

Conclusion

I was trained in the comparative study of religion, which investigates the similarities and differences among religions. All three leadership issues in American Buddhism are also found in American Christianity, with variations specific to each religious context.

New gender expectations have affected both religions. The involvement and status of female leadership vary across Christian groups just as across Buddhist groups, at times enhanced, at other times opposed or treated with ambivalence. Bokin Kim’s appeal for equal rights and treatment for female leaders finds echoes in many Christian circles. A key difference between the two religions is the discrepancy regarding celibacy in those Buddhist contexts where women (but not men) are expected to be celibate, which is not the case in Christianity.

Photo: Don Farber

Meditation at the Zen Center of Los Angeles.

In some respects, leadership training in American Buddhism lags behind its Christian counterpart, due in part to the longer history and larger constituency of American Christianity. The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada has more than two hundred member institutions, whereas only a few Buddhist graduate schools have been established to date. Yet similar questions arise in both contexts: What is the proper balance between experiential and academic education? What kind of practical training is necessary to produce effective and ethically upright leaders in the American context? How does one represent a religious tradition with integrity in an increasingly diverse world?

The tension between the celibate and married leadership models also appears in Christian circles, even though the monastic ideal is not as pervasive in Christianity as it is in Buddhism. While Protestant pastors often find it difficult to balance the competing demands of ministry and family, celibate Catholic priests avoid that dilemma but then may be criticized for being disconnected from the experiences of lay families. Like some Buddhist leaders, Christian leaders may struggle to make a decent living in their religious vocation and sometimes take secular jobs to supplement their income, thus creating strains in their individual and family lives. The intention to maintain a "priestly spirit" while living in society is often expressed as "being in the world but not of the world" by Christians, a difficult ideal for anyone.

Educators of leaders across religious traditions in the United States would benefit by holding regular summits to explore common issues and share best practices. Such gatherings could nurture better leaders who could then better serve the spiritual and moral needs of their constituents and influence society in positive ways. "It has never been more evident," we read in

the Carnegie Foundation's study of clergy education, "that public as well as private life in America is powerfully shaped by traditions of faith commitments and religious observance."²¹ Buddhist, Christian, and other religious leaders play a significant role in this shaping process. □

Notes

1. The presentations made at the 2010 forum hosted by the Won Institute of Graduate Studies in Philadelphia are "So'at'san's Vision for Won Buddhism" by Bokin Kim, the Won Institute's academic dean at the time, now its acting president; "From Itinerant Mendicants to Married Ministers" by Ryuei Michael McCormick, an ordained minister of Nichiren Shū (not to be confused with Nichiren Shōshū); "Passing the Banner of Dharma: Training Teachers in Shambhala Buddhism" by Elaine Yuen, a Shambhala senior teacher and Upadhyaya (Buddhist minister of religion); and "Religious Specialists in North American Theravada Buddhism: Present Situation and Future Prospects" by Paul David Numrich, from my perspective as a scholar of Buddhism.

2. Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. and eds., *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: An Anthology of Suttas from the Anguttara Nikaya* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1999), 44. For more on Buddhist monasticism, see my "The Problem with Sex according to Buddhism," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 48, no. 1 (Spring/March 2009): 62–73.

3. Richard M. Jaffe, *Neither Monk nor Layman: Clerical Marriage in Modern Japanese Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 2.

4. *Ibid.*, 8.

5. Quoted in Gen-ichi Oikawa, "Thus I Heard . . .," *Nichiren Shu News* 118 (June 1, 2000): 3.

6. "Letter Sent with the Prayer Sutra," *Writings of ND II*, 460, <http://wnd2.sgilibrary.org/wnd2/wnd2-229-p0460.html> (retrieved January 2, 2011).

7. See Ryuei Michael McCormick in note 1.

8. Kyotsu Hori, trans., *Nichiren Shu Center for the Training of Faith and Practice: Reader* (Tokyo: Nichiren Shu Administrative Headquarters, 1998), 12–13.

9. Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, "Establishing Shambhala Monasticism," <http://www.gampoabbey.org/home/sakyong-view.htm> (retrieved December 31, 2010).

10. See Bokin Kim in note 1.

11. Documents expressing various views of Theravada *bhikkhuni* ordination are available on the Web site of the Alliance for Bhikkhunis, <http://www.bhikkhuni.net>, and Bhikkhu Bodhi's supportive piece, *The Revival of Bhikkhuni Ordination in the Theravāda Tradition* (Penang, Malaysia: Inward Path, 2009), can be viewed at <http://www.bhikkhuni.net/library/venbodhi-revival-bhikkhuni-ordination.pdf> (retrieved January 20, 2011).

12. See Stephanie Kaza, "Finding Safe Harbor: Buddhist Sexual Ethics in America," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 24 (2004): 23–35.

13. See Ryuei Michael McCormick in note 1.

14. Bokin Kim, "Training vs. Education in Forming Won Buddhist Kyomus in the USA," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 9, no. 2 (2006): 112.

15. *Ibid.*, 113.

16. Gil Fronsdal, "Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 178.

17. See Sandy Boucher, *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism*, updated and expanded edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), for an overview of women leaders in American Buddhism.

18. Jaffe, *Neither Monk nor Layman*, 238.

19. "The Master said, 'Under the system of devotees in this order, one can pursue the religious practice and public service either as a married person or as a celibate person, male or female, with special aspirations and vows discarding worldly desires.'" Bongkil Chung, *The Scriptures of Won Buddhism: A Translation of the Wŏnbulgyo Kyōjon with Introduction* (Honolulu: Kuroda Institute, 2003), 322.

20. See Bokin Kim in note 1.

21. Charles R. Foster, et al., *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 1.

Zen and Tibetan Buddhism in North America: East Meets East

by Akemi Iwamoto

This kind of mutual enrichment of two Buddhist traditions was undoubtedly one of the greatest fruits produced by the encounter between the two in North America.

Born in India sometime between the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, Buddhism spread across the Asian region and developed in distinctive ways in each place. More recently a variety of Buddhist traditions have been carried into North America, where they have entered a new phase of evolution in the culture of the West. One of the new developments has occurred as a result of the confluence of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism (Tantra). In what follows I introduce this mixing and discuss the resulting birth of Buddhism for Westerners.

Tibetan Appreciation of Zen Arts

The Teacup and the Skullcup: Chögyam Trungpa on Zen and Tantra (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Vajradhatu Publications, 2007) contains the record of two seminars titled “Zen and Tantra” conducted over seven days in January and February 1974. Among the chapter headings are the following: “Precision and Vastness,” “Artists and Unemployed Samurai,” “Beauty and Absurdity,” “Dynamic Stillness and Cosmic Absorption.”

Each of these paired terms contrasts features of Zen with features of Tantra. As these headings illustrate, the lecturer at the seminars was adept at

discussing Buddhism in language that reverberates within the hearts of modern Westerners. He was one of the first Tibetan lamas to become fully assimilated into Western culture.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939–87) was a meditation master and the eleventh lama in the teaching

lineage known as the Trungpa Tulkus. He fled Tibet to India in 1959, began studies at Oxford University in 1963, and moved to North America in 1970. He considered his lifework to be planting the Dharma in the West. While his life was short, he successfully laid a broad foundation for Tibetan Buddhism in the Western world, establishing more than one hundred meditation centers in the process.

Trungpa was interested in Zen and the Zen arts. It was while studying at Oxford that he encountered Zen in the works of Alan Watts, but it was in the United States that he developed a close relationship with a number of Zen masters. The first one he met was Shunryu Suzuki (1904–71), founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. Around that time, what Trungpa identified as “spiritual materialism” was rampant, and the students of Suzuki Roshi were the only ones who were, in his view, practicing Zen correctly. Suzuki and Trungpa held feelings like those of father and son toward each other, and they shared ideas on disseminating Buddhism in the United States. It was not long after the two got together, however, that Suzuki developed cancer and passed away quite suddenly.

Following Suzuki’s death, the next Zen master Trungpa developed a close relationship with was Kobun Chino

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, founder of the San Francisco Zen Center.

Photo: San Francisco Zen Center

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Otogawa (1938–2002). The two of them are said to have been like brothers to each other. Through his exchange with Suzuki, Trungpa had become familiar with *zazen* (seated meditation), which is not practiced in Tibetan Buddhism, and he recognized its merits. He then learned Japanese calligraphy and the Zen practice of *oryoki* (liturgical eating) from Kobun. There is also calligraphy in Tibet, but it does not use ink brushes and has a much more limited degree of freedom. Trungpa developed a liking for Japanese calligraphy. He left behind many works of calligraphy penned with ink brush in elegant style, including some placing the Sino-Japanese character for *kami* (god) alongside Tibetan letters.

Trungpa engaged in exchange with various Zen masters of the Soto sect, including Suzuki and Kobun, and he also got together with Eido Shimano Roshi and other Zen masters of the Rinzai sect. In addition, through an introduction by Kobun, he became a family friend of Kanjuro Shibata, a *kyudo* (Japanese archery) master and twentieth in the line of bow makers to the throne of Japan.

Trungpa sometimes dressed in kimono and Zen *kesa* robes. He also practiced Japanese calligraphy and ikebana (the art of flower arrangement), but this was not merely because he was fond of them. Holder of an instructor's license in the Sogetsu school of ikebana, he recalls that when he first came across this art form, he was astonished:

“The Sogetsu School in Japan does not only pay attention to flower arranging, but also it pays attention to sculpture and to creating an environment out of a variety of things. My meeting with my teacher in England (Stella Coe of the Sogetsu School) provided me with a tremendous shock and surprise that such a new dimension of working with reality could be presented in terms of ikebana. The first time I saw a flower arrangement I was quite amazed that dignity and reality could be expressed

by means of that particular arrangement. There is beauty and there is cruelty. Maybe there is invitation, there is seduction, and in fact the whole thing is like the Buddhist teaching. So, it is not just purely a work of art. It is a manifestation of reality which can be presented in a simple but very spacious fashion. Ikebana practice teaches how to go about your life. It requires a great deal of paying attention, nonaggression and not being speedy.”¹

Flower arrangements are, Trungpa said, not merely works of art but “a manifestation of reality.” Probably he is not the only person to have characterized ikebana as a representation of reality, but surely he is the first to have declared that “the whole thing” of ikebana is akin to Buddhist teaching and that the practice of ikebana “teaches how to go about your life.” This proposition is based on the following insight, which informed Trungpa's specific way of presentation of traditional Tibetan Buddhist thinking.

“If you understand the ultimate aspect of the dharma, this is the ultimate aspect of the world. And if you should cultivate the ultimate aspect of the world, this should be in harmony with the dharma. I am alone in presenting the tradition of thinking this way.”²

It would appear that Trungpa viewed ikebana to be an excellent method for cultivating “the ultimate aspect of the world.” Shibata, whom he invited to teach *kyudo* in his Shambhala sangha, offers this recollection:

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the eleventh lama in the teaching lineage known as the Trungpa Tulkus.

Photo: Shambhala Archives

“Trungpa Rinpoche was attracted to Kyudo because it was not a sport. Rinpoche thought that for Americans just sitting was too tiresome a way to always do their meditation. Whereas in Kyudo there is change and movement, so he thought it might be a good method of meditation practice.”³

Trungpa included ikebana and calligraphy along with *kyudo* in the training menu of the Shambhala sangha. As he saw it, ikebana and calligraphy were also suitable ways for Americans to practice meditation.

In Japan as well, calligraphy is seen as one of the fields in which Zen masters train. But it is only in twentieth-century North America that calligraphy and other Zen arts were actively incorporated into the Buddhist training system as methods of meditation practice.

Tibetan Influence on American Zen

Practitioners of Zen picked up much more than that from Trungpa. One person who has said as much is Bernie Glassman (b. 1939), one of the leading American Zen masters. He writes:

“Even more important to my thinking was seeing how Trungpa Rinpoche adapted the basic Tibetan Buddhist tradition to teaching dharma in America. Zen, as it came to this country, was very hierarchical and aimed purely at producing teachers. The temple system of Japanese Zen didn’t come over, except among ethnic Japanese living here, and at that time there was almost no contact between them and non-Japanese Americans interested in Zen. The primary purpose of Zen Center of Los Angeles was to produce American Zen teachers. But Trungpa Rinpoche was talking about building a sane society.

“That was of great interest to me. I wanted to bring what I was learning into the community. Here also I adapted

Rinpoche’s approach. Rather than focusing on building a sane society within the growing sangha of Western Buddhist practitioners, I wanted to work with the whole society. I stayed in a Buddhist venue, as a Zen priest and teacher, but in my work I moved out into the general community.”⁴

Glassman Roshi is a Dharma heir of Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi (1931–95), founder of the Zen Center of Los Angeles. He became a student of Maezumi Roshi in 1967 and a sensei (teacher) in 1976, moving to New York in 1979, where he set up the Zen Community of New York. To raise funds for the Zen community, he opened the Greyston Bakery in Yonkers in 1982. Eventually he expanded the goals of the bakery to include employment and job training for the homeless and others. The bakery is part of the Greyston Mandala, a network of organizations dedicated to developing Zen as a force for social change.

Glassman retired from the Greyston Mandala in 1996 and moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he organized the Zen Peacemaker Order (now known as the Zen Peacemakers). He is a leader in the peace movement, and in autumn 2007 he taught a graduate course at Harvard Divinity School titled “Buddhist Arts of Ministry in the Zen Peacemakers Order.” He is also known for conducting “bearing witness retreats,” which are primarily “Street Retreats” and “Auschwitz Retreats.” Taking part in a Street Retreat involves living on city streets for five days with no money. This is a unique method devised by Glassman for realizing an enlightened society with Zen as the driving force, and it has won high praise.

Glassman is one of the leaders of today’s socially engaged Buddhism. While the term *engaged Buddhism* was coined by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen master from Vietnam, Glassman selected Trungpa rather than Thich Nhat Hanh to be his role model, as he himself has stated. Inspired by Trungpa, he has been

applying what he learned from him in the general community.

John Daido Looi (1931–2009) was another of Maezumi’s outstanding Dharma heirs, and he also looked up to Trungpa.⁵ Daido Roshi established the Mountain and Rivers Order of Zen Buddhism (MRO) in 1980 and became abbot of the Zen Mountain Monastery (ZMM), the core facility of the order, in 1989. Unusual for the United States, ZMM is an extremely strict and highly organized Zen monastery.⁶ Training is based on the Eight Gates of Zen training matrix. The eight gates are (1) *zazen*, (2) study with a teacher, (3) academic study, (4) liturgy, (5) right action, (6) art practice, (7) body practice, and (8) work practice.

Evidence of Trungpa’s influence is to be seen in the eight gates. Daido remarked of Trungpa, “He incorporated into his training matrix some of the elements integral to Zen—the liturgical meal of *oryoki*, the Zen arts of flower arranging, calligraphy, and archery.”⁷ Daido integrated these elements into three of the eight gates: liturgy, art practice, and body practice.

Daido also relied heavily on Trungpa in the realm of doctrine, as can be understood from the MRO’s recommended reading list for gate 3, academic study. The list contains thirty-four reference works by seventeen writers, and more of the works are by Trungpa than by any other author except Daido himself.⁸

Trungpa’s influence also extends into the MRO’s interpretation of the Buddhist precepts. Pema Chödrön, one of the central figures along with Trungpa in the 1984 foundation of Gampo Abbey, a monastery of the Kagyü lineage of Tibetan Buddhism in Nova Scotia, Canada, offers this comment on Trungpa’s view of the precepts practiced in Gampo Abbey:

“At the same time that we have been trying to keep the vows purely, we also are working very hard on keeping an

open, flexible mind. Trungpa Rinpoche emphasized again and again that we should not use the monastic rules as a way to close ourselves off from the world—the whole point was to see them as a way to further open our hearts and minds toward the whole world.”⁹

This is a revolutionary approach to the vows or monastic rules. Traditionally, the more rigorously one practiced the precepts, the further one withdrew from the world. The MRO’s reformist stance on the precepts, which are studied and practiced in gate 5, right action, is the same as Trungpa’s, which is emphasized in Gampo Abbey. The following passage provides an indication of that.

“In essence, the Precepts are a definition of the life of a Buddha, of how a Buddha functions in the world. They are how enlightened beings live their lives, relate to other human beings and this planet, and make moral and ethical decisions while manifesting wisdom and compassion in everyday life.”¹⁰

Further evidence of Trungpa’s influence can be seen in the heavy emphasis on motivation common to Zen Mountain Monastery and Gampo Abbey. According to Chödrön, Trungpa advised her to keep a close watch on the motivation of those wishing to become monks or nuns.¹¹ In the MRO, similarly, one wishing to become a formal student must meet with the Guardian Council, a group of senior MRO students, and articulate one’s reasons for practicing Zen and wanting to become a formal student of the MRO.¹²

Evolution of Buddhism in North America

The foregoing has confirmed how Glassman and Daido, while learning from Trungpa, each formed a unique Zen sangha representing North America.

Zen was the first form of Buddhism to gain a popular following in North America, a development that Trungpa

appreciated. He wrote, “In the United States, Zen has been the vanguard of buddhadharma.”¹³ The American boom of Zen Buddhism began in the second half of the 1950s, fueled by the writings of D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966) and lectures he delivered at Columbia University (1951–57).

Starting around that time, Shunryu Suzuki, Maezumi, Shimano, and several other Zen masters arrived in the United States from Japan. In short, it became possible for students to receive instruction in *zazen* under Zen masters while in the United States. But as noted above, the temple system of Japanese Zen didn’t come over. Zen communities for Westerners needed to be established.

Here it is intriguing that the role model for community creation was filled by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a master in the separate tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, who moved to North America in 1970. Having received special education in both doctrine and meditation from an early age as a *tulku*, Trungpa had developed extraordinary abilities. In the efforts of Zen practitioners to establish Zen communities, the perspective and approach Trungpa had taken to planting the Dharma in the Western world was also highly useful.

At the same time, Trungpa incorporated the Zen arts into his own training matrix. This kind of mutual enrichment of two Buddhist traditions was undoubtedly one of the greatest fruits produced by the encounter between the two in North America.

The chapter headings in *The Teacup and the Skullcup* I cited at the start of this article draw contrasts between Zen and Tantra in the way they interrelate with reality. But why is it that Trungpa associates Zen with artists and Tantra with unemployed samurai? No doubt we can gain a deeper appreciation of the fruits of American Buddhism through close study of the record of the “Zen and Tantra” seminars. □

Notes

1. Chögyam Trungpa, “Perception and the Appreciation of Reality,” in *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*, vol. 7, ed. Carolyn Gimian (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2004), 684.

2. Quoted by Carolyn Gimian, introduction to *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*, vol. 1, by Chögyam Trungpa, ed. Carolyn Gimian (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003), xxxvi.

3. Kanjuro Shibata, “Teaching Kyudo,” in *Recalling Chögyam Trungpa*, comp. and ed. Fabrice Midal (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005), 465.

4. Bernie Glassman, “New Upayas,” in *Recalling Chögyam Trungpa*, 463.

5. The back cover of Trungpa’s *The Teacup and the Skullcup* bears this message: “For years Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche dazzled us with his diamond wisdom at various venues from coast to coast. We delighted in his insights into the arts of Zen and its relationship to the tantric teachings. A whole generation of Buddhists was thus nourished. Now, *The Teacup and the Skullcup: Chögyam Trungpa on Zen and Tantra* skillfully makes available the heart of this extraordinary master to a new generation of practitioners. It should be on the bookshelf of every serious student of Buddhism—John Daido Looi.”

6. For more information on ZMM see Akemi Iwamoto, “Amerika zen no tanjo—Rori Daido roshi no maun-ten zen’in” (An American Zen: The Zen Mountain Monastery of John Daido Looi), *Journal of East Asian Cultural Interaction Studies*, Supplement 6 (2010):11–31.

7. John Daido Looi, “The Body of Reality,” in *Recalling Chögyam Trungpa*, 410.

8. <http://mro.org/zmm/training/readinglist.php>.

9. Pema Chödrön, “The Establishment of a Pure Monastic Tradition in the West,” in *Recalling Chögyam Trungpa*, 251–52.

10. <http://www.mro.org/zmm/training/jukai.php>.

11. Pema Chödrön, “Establishment of a Pure Monastic Tradition,” 252.

12. <http://www.mro.org/zmm/training/becomingstudent.php>.

13. Quoted in John Daido Looi, “Body of Reality,” 410.

Lessons from the Internment of Japanese-Americans

by Duncan Ryuken Williams

Stories of Japanese-American Buddhists reveal the complex relationship that existed between ethnic, national, and religious identities at the same time as a new form of Buddhism, which simultaneously drew on and transcended Japanese and American traditions, was forged in the crucible of war.

It had been three weeks since ten-year old Masumi Kimura had first heard about the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Like everyone else in her small Japanese-American farming community in California's Central Valley, she felt uneasy about what was happening around her. She could see that her *issei* (first-generation) Buddhist immigrant parents, from Wakayama Prefecture in Japan, who had settled in Madeira, California, were unusually tense and afraid. Perhaps it was not too surprising. The family's dear friend and president of the Madeira Buddhist Temple, Mr. Nikaidō, had recently been taken away by the FBI. Local Caucasian boys had taken their shotguns to the nearby Fresno Buddhist Temple and used the front door of the building for target practice. The fear was that because of the Japanese-American community's ethnicity and Buddhist religion, the American government and the public at large would vent their resentment against it, even though the community had nothing to do with the attack on Pearl Harbor.

It was midafternoon when the FBI came to Masumi Kimura's farmhouse to question her father, a leader in the

local Buddhist temple. It didn't help matters that he had a shotgun in his hands when he opened the door (he had been about to "take care" of the rabbits out in the vegetable garden). The FBI agents barged in and wrestled him to the floor. Minutes later, Masumi returned from the local public school only to find her father pinned on the ground and an agent holding a gun to her mother's head. Since Masumi's English was the best in the family, she explained to the agents that her father wasn't trying to shoot them. Things settled down once Masumi turned to her parents to translate into Japanese what the FBI agents were saying. After some further questioning, the agents decided they were done for that day, though in the subsequent weeks they would return to the Kimura home to conduct further interrogations.

Masumi's father was one of the lucky ones. Unlike the hundreds of Buddhist priests who were incarcerated for the duration of the war, he was not taken during the initial sweep of December 1941. Many prominent men in the community—leaders in Japanese religious, political, and cultural organizations—were taken away without any trial or evidence

of anti-American activity. During the first month after Pearl Harbor, rumors swirled around the community about what happened to the several thousand detained and why the American government seemed to be targeting those with links to Japan's traditions.

In response to this climate of war hysteria, Masumi's father decided additional steps to prove loyalty to America were necessary. He instructed his daughter to start a fire in the furnace next to their Japanese-style bathtub. Since it was already Masumi's daily chore to start up the wood-fired stove for the bath, she didn't think much of the request—that is, until her father entered the room carrying every single article in the house that had Japanese language or "Made in Japan" written on it. Tears rolled down Masumi's cheeks as her father brought out her precious Hinamatsuri (Girls Festival) dolls, a special Japanese set given to her on the festival day, to throw into the fire with all the other Japanese artifacts. Her father explained that anything that could link them to Japan had to be destroyed. It was the only way to prove their loyalty to America.

However, her father hesitated with a few items. Masumi remembers that her father set aside minutes from board meetings and other temple documents from the Madeira Buddhist Temple, the family's bound edition of the Buddhist scriptures, and also some farm-use dynamite, all of which he thought could be suspicious to the FBI. Her father asked his wife to find several tin boxes and some Japanese kimono cloth. Once she

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was able to locate several old rice-cracker boxes and some cloth, he went outside and got the backhoe to dig a hole behind their garage. Wrapping the Buddhist scriptures and the temple records in the kimono cloth and placing them in the tin boxes, Masumi's father carefully lowered them into the hole and covered them with dirt. It was safer to bury these items than to keep them.

A few months later, in April 1942, after depositing a single suitcase of their most valued items at the Fresno Buddhist Temple for storage and safekeeping, they sold their farm to their neighbors for less than one-twentieth of its market value. The family then reported to the Fresno Assembly Center. On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt had issued Executive Order No. 9066, which led to the designation of restricted military zones on the West Coast of the United States; it was ordered that all persons of Japanese ancestry were to be removed from these areas. Unlike the treatment of persons of German and Italian ancestry, whose potential threat to the United States was reviewed case by case, virtually everyone with even a trace of Japanese blood was forcibly removed from the West Coast. This included the rounding up of Japanese-American babies in orphanages, who in normal times could hardly be considered a national security threat.

Japanese-Americans in the restricted zones were given between a week and ten days to sell or store their property; they were allowed to take to the camps only that which they could carry by hand.

Without any due process of law, nearly 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry would be incarcerated at one of fourteen Assembly Centers, such as the one in Fresno to which Masumi and her parents reported. These temporary camps, set up in converted fairgrounds such as the one in Fresno or racetracks like Tanforan, in California, housed thousands of families who had no idea as to their ultimate fate. Masumi's family was quartered at Fresno in a smelly horse stable numbered Barrack E-17-2.

After spending the spring and summer of 1942 in these Assembly Centers, most Japanese were transferred to one of ten so-called permanent relocation centers. A handful of families, like the Kimuras, were fortunate enough to avoid further incarceration by being approved for work programs east of the military zone, where they were used as cheap farm labor. However, the overwhelming majority of West Coast persons of Japanese ancestry would be forced to endure the long train journey to the detention centers, all the while guarded by soldiers with machine guns. The barbed-wire fences and armed guard posts of these camps, run by the War Relocation Authority (WRA), constituted the perimeter of their new "homes" for the next several years.

After the war, the Kimura family traveled back to Madeira, only to find that the new owner of their family farm was unwilling to sell it back unless they paid more than ten times as much as they had sold it for. Unable to come up with that kind of money, the Kimuras

decided to seek shelter with relatives in Los Angeles, but not before trying to recover the tin boxes buried with their family, temple, and community treasures. Especially after finding out that their suitcase held for safekeeping at the Fresno Buddhist Temple had been ransacked by vandals during the war, they had hoped to at least find the valuable Buddhist documents buried on their farm. But the new owners had torn down the garage that had been the main reference point to locate the tin boxes, and so their search was a failure; the treasures were lost.

Though the Kimura family lost sacred Buddhist texts and temple records to the soil of California, the spirit of Buddhism lived on in the hearts of this Japanese-American Buddhist family both during the war and beyond. However much they were willing to let go of their Japanese-ness by burning objects symbolically linked to Japan, the one thing they couldn't erase was their Buddhist faith. Tens of thousands of these Buddhist families, who constituted the vast majority of the Japanese-American religious community in the Americas, found strength in their faith and, by extension, faith in America, the land of religious freedom. In their minds, being Buddhist was just going to have to become a part of becoming American.

There are a multitude of stories like that of the Kimuras that have been buried underground not only in physical sites but also in the memories of people who have at times been too modest or too hurt to recount their experiences. These

stories of Japanese-American Buddhists reveal the complex relationship that existed between ethnic, national, and religious identities at the same time as a new form of Buddhism, which simultaneously drew on and transcended Japanese and American traditions, was forged in the crucible of war.

The buried treasures, whether artifacts or stories, represent what was most valued by a small but increasingly significant religion in the American religious landscape: Buddhism. The history of American Buddhism is, in large part, a history of Asian-Americans trying to find a place for their religious heritage and Buddhist converts of a variety of backgrounds claiming their right to freely practice their adopted religion in a country where some have held that Catholics, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists do not fit into a conception of a God-ordained Protestant Christian nation. The tension between the notion of America as a Christian nation and America as a nation of religious freedom is often heightened in times when national security is thought to be at risk—such as with Buddhists during World War II or Muslims in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

American Buddhism: A History of Dislocations and Relocations

Despite the view that Buddhism was un-American, which was held by some members of the U.S. government, the broader American public, and even a number of Japanese-American Christians, Buddhists quickly turned to their faith for sustenance during the trying time of the war years. They had to be ingenious to re-create Buddhist life within their new environment. A passage from Rev. Bunyū Fujimura's recollections about his days in the Bismarck, North Dakota, camp reveals the internees' resourceful nature when the Buddha's birthday, the first major Buddhist holiday since

internment began, was celebrated in April 1942.

"April 8th is the day on which the Buddha was born. In the U.S., we call this day Hanamatsuri, Flower Festival. The other Buddhist ministers and I decided to make the most of our circumstances and to celebrate this sacred day for us Buddhists. . . . Arthur Yamabe 'borrowed' a carrot from the kitchen and carved a splendid image of the Buddha. Others made imitation flowers and all the other things used in our Hanamatsuri service, from the tissue used to wrap oranges and other fruit, and anything else they could get their hands on. With the carrot image of the Buddha in the center, we conducted the most impressive and moving Hanamatsuri service that I have ever participated in. The intense cold and the anxiety of being a prisoner of war was temporarily forgotten, and our minds and hearts were set at ease by a ritual that transcended time and space."

The Bismarck "carrot Buddha" had counterparts in other camps: home-made Buddha statues crafted from desert wood, family Buddhist altars (*butsudan*) made from spare crate wood, and rosaries (*o-juzu*) strung together from dried peach pits that a Soto Zen priest collected over several months. It was here within these camps, surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards, that Buddhist priests did their best to bring order to chaos, to create meaning in a seemingly senseless situation, and "to make the most of our circumstance," as Rev. Fujimura suggested.

The Japanese-American Buddhist experience is thus characterized by two major dislocations—first as sojourners and immigrants to a new land and second as a people forcibly removed from their adopted homelands. Their Buddhism had been a part of the American religious landscape since the 1860s, and during the first decades of the twentieth century in places like Hawaii, Buddhists even outnumbered Christians. Despite

this seventy-year history of Buddhism as the faith affiliation of the majority of the Japanese-American community, on a national level this religion was a small, minority tradition in America as of 1941. Asian Buddhist immigrants concentrated in Hawaii and the West Coast and Buddhist converts and sympathizers concentrated in New England and the East Coast simply did not make up a large enough community to significantly alter mainstream views of Buddhism as a "heathen religion." As the Kimura family found out that year, many members of the public at large and government agencies would conflate religious, racial, and national identity in such a way that Japanese-American Buddhists would be suspect on multiple levels in contrast to German- and Italian-Americans, who would escape any mass incarceration because their race and religion were deemed more acceptable to the dominant culture despite the war in Europe against Germany and Italy.

American Buddhism is also a part of a long history of Buddhism as it migrated from one cultural context to another. During the roughly twenty-five-hundred-year history of the religion, the spread of Buddhism from its origins in India to the Himalayan kingdoms and South and East Asia, or subsequent flows into new lands beyond Asia, has always been marked by cultural exchange and innovation through interactions with pre-existing religious traditions and that society's mainstream values.

The formation of "American Buddhism" has been an ongoing process of the transmission of ideology, artifacts, and people from Asia—Buddhism, Buddhist art and material culture, and Buddhists—and its encounter and transformations with various social, cultural, and religious orientations in America. As one Buddhist priest noted in the 1934 *Hawaiian Buddhist Annual*, that, just as when Buddhism adapted to the local religious and cultural milieu when it moved from India to China and again

This is the Buddhist temple at the Manzanar War Relocation Center, at the foot of the Sierra Nevada in California. The Manzanar center was one of ten internment camps for Japanese-American citizens during World War II. Photographed in the winter of 1943.

from China to Japan, “Americans should establish a new American Buddhism, in harmony with the history of the founding of the United States and in accord with the growth of its national spirit, with its climate and customs.”

In addition to these types of adaptations of Buddhism, this process has also been marked by the adoption of this religion by Americans for whom Buddhism was not a part of their family heritage. Whether through the construction of Buddhist temples that would inscribe Buddhism on America’s physical landscape or the dissemination of Buddhist ideas through books and magazines that placed Buddhism in the world of ideas in early-twentieth-century America, as a universal religion with local manifestations, the American acculturation process makes for a fascinating contrast with the process in the making of other forms of regional and national Buddhism throughout history. And while American Buddhism in the post-1960s period has much to offer in thinking through this acculturation process, the prewar and wartime history of the Buddhism of Japanese-Americans and their converts and sympathetic friends symbolizes the first critical test of whether Buddhism

could become a significant part of the American religious landscape.

The story of American Buddhism is thus made up of many forms of Asian Buddhism that arrived on American shores from areas outside of Japan (such as Tibet, South and Southeast Asia, Korea, and China) as well as a diversity of Buddhist schools and lineages from Japan. Just as a history of American Christianity, Judaism, and Islam would be incomplete without attention to different historical moments, regional variations (the American South, the Midwest, New England, the West Coast, for example), and the plethora of sectarian traditions and institutional denominations, this study of Japanese-American Buddhism includes all the major schools of Japanese Buddhism (Zen, the Jōdo and Jōdo Shin Pure Land schools, Nichiren and Shingon schools) that had an American presence by World War II. Sectarian diversity is also accompanied by regional variations of Buddhism in Hawaii, California, the Pacific Northwest, Canada, and Central and South America and, during the war, the variations that accompanied locations of Japanese-American camps, as well as Buddhism in the so-called free

zones east of the Rockies in Denver, Chicago, and New York.

While the internal diversity of Buddhism in America is noteworthy, we should not forget that Buddhists of any era, in any place, and of any sectarian denomination held certain key elements as central to their lives as Buddhists. The Buddha taught that his teachings were to assist in the alleviation of suffering, both physical and mental, that accompanied human life. Thus the Buddhists whose histories are described in this book often found that their religion provided a response to existential questions of suffering, inherent in life, but particularly apparent in migration and incarceration.

Buddhists also affirm a common faith in three elements of their religion: often referred to as the Three Refuges or the Three Treasures, namely, the Buddha (the historical founder as well as the more general notions of someone awakened or enlightened to reality and thus free), the Dharma (the Buddha’s teachings often assembled in Buddhist sacred texts), and the Sangha (the Buddhist community, which typically includes monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen). Just as the Kimura family in their time of distress put aside their family’s treasured copy of Buddhist scriptures and their temple’s records chronicling the sangha’s history in California, Buddhists throughout history have taken refuge in and revered these three treasures of their faith. Having been forced to abandon most of their possessions and all they had worked for as middle-aged and older immigrants and an American-born younger generation, Buddhists re-created the Three Treasures behind barbed wire by carving Buddha statues from carrots found in a mess hall or from desert wood available in their bleak environment, by preaching the Dharma on topics ranging from impermanence to hope, and by the forming of Buddhist communities to strengthen familial and communal bonds at a time when the

Photo: Granger / PPS

very fabric of the Japanese-American community was torn apart. World War II and the Japanese-American incarceration experience—a moment when the relationship between a minority faith and national identity comes into particularly sharp relief—thus reveals the enduring question of how a religion acculturates to a new cultural context.

Reorienting American Religious History

Buddhists in Japan had long employed the idea of *bukkyō tōzen*, literally “the eastward transmission of Buddhism,” to denote the geographic advance of their religion from its roots in India, across the Asian continent, and finally to Japan. In the opposite direction, American Christians have contributed to a long history of manifest destiny, in which European Christianity and civilization would be brought westward across the mainland United States and farther west toward Hawaii and beyond.

The U.S. government targeted the Japanese-American Buddhist leadership in the initial sweep right after Pearl Harbor, believing that Buddhists were more likely to be a threat to national security than Japanese-American Christians (though eventually race trumped religion, and all Japanese-Americans on the West Coast became subject to incarceration). One of these Buddhist priests was Rev. Daishō Tana, who had been serving a temple in Lompoc, California, when he was picked up by the authorities. Tana spent his war years in two high-security internment camps in New Mexico (Lordsburg and Santa Fe) operated by the Department of Justice. He was a meticulous diarist, and his entry a few months after being incarcerated discusses the concept of *bukkyō tōzen*: “It brings tears to my eyes to think of the profound words ‘the eastward transmission of Buddhism’ as I reflect on the fact that Buddhists on the Pacific

coast have carried the Buddha all the way here to a place where we can see the Rocky Mountains as we celebrate the birth of the Buddha. While it may be true that the Buddhist organizations on the Pacific Coast have been decimated, the Buddha seeds that have now flown on the winds of this war will eventually move eastward and take root themselves before flowering into authentic Dharma flowers.”

In the traditional formulation of *bukkyō tōzen*, Japan was conceived of as the end point in the progression of Buddhism, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Buddhist “missionaries” to the Americas (Brazil, Peru, Hawaii, the U.S. mainland, and Canada) advocated a new eastward movement of Buddhism: this time, from Japan to the Americas across the Pacific Ocean. The establishment of a Buddhist presence in lands farther east from its origins was accomplished by the pioneering *issei* (first-generation) priests and the devout Japanese Buddhist laypeople they served through the constructions of temples, the transmission of Buddhist teachings and practices, and to a lesser extent, the conversion of non-Buddhists in the Americas.

In the diary entry above, Rev. Tana extends this notion even further as he views his own incarceration as a small sacrifice in the inevitable progression of the Buddhist religion. He is confident that “Buddha seeds” will blossom in the Rocky Mountains region now that Japanese Buddhists have been transferred farther eastward from California to a New Mexico internment camp. While Tana’s understanding of his circumstance could be viewed as a simplistic way of reconciling himself to a situation forced on him, the fact that he points to the power of the Buddhist faith to sustain him during a moment of “dislocation” is not surprising given the long history of Japanese-American immigrant identities that combined ethnic and religious formations.

The view of America as a land where the frontiers lie to one’s east is, of course, in contrast with the more common, mainstream notion of America as a land of manifest destiny where civilization and religion are thought to move westward, initially from Europe to the New World and from there, westward toward the American West and farther in its colonial manifestations, toward Hawaii, the Philippines, and, with Commodore Perry’s black ships “opening” the land of the samurai, Japan. The notion of manifest destiny was articulated in the religious field repeatedly. For instance, the Christian organizers of the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions (an auxiliary event alongside the World’s Fair in Chicago) had invited a Japanese Buddhist delegation to present their perspectives, but with the presumption that “the movement of civilization” followed “the movement of the sun,” in other words, westward. The connotation of the term *assimilation* as proposed by the organizer was that it was a vehicle to reunite non-Christian religions that had “[achieved] partial revelations and are children of a lesser light” to the one authentic and universal “Christian truth.” One of the Japanese delegates, Banryū Yatsubayashi, countered this argument by using a similar rhetoric of inevitability in which Buddhism, rather than Christianity, represented a higher truth and civilization while being more appropriate to a scientific world, suggesting Christianity “failed to comprehend modernity because of its failure to understand the evolutionary character of the world.”

The notion of the American West and its opening by pioneers presumes that America faces Europe and is centered in a certain kind of New England Anglo-Protestantism to which every other immigrant group and religious tradition ought to assimilate. Numerous religious historians have argued that in America, all religious traditions conform to a certain Protestantism.

American Buddhism similarly adopted a congregationalist model and other impulses toward “Protestantization,” but the history of American Buddhism must also be understood in the context of a more global development of a “modernist” Buddhism, in the context of Buddhism in diaspora and colony (as Japanese Buddhists similarly innovated in other regions of the Asia-Pacific in emigrant communities and as colonists in an expanding Japanese empire), and also in contrast to all the ways in which Japanese-American Buddhists resisted simplistic forms of assimilation and “Protestantization” as they claimed their place in twentieth-century religious America.

Indeed, instead of the American West, especially for the first Japanese sojourners and settlers, the frontiers of the Americas could be viewed as the Pacific East. Thus, neither the simplistic frameworks of a Japan-centered diaspora that ignores local conditions and community formations nor an America-centered assimilationist model that reduces religious change to “Americanization” is adequate for understanding the place of religion in the lives of Japanese-American Buddhists. The study of Japanese-American Buddhism thus opens up the possibility for retelling American religious history by reorienting our gaze, which has taken Europe and Euro-American religious forms as central. By decentering America, we “re-Orient” in another sense, that is, viewing America from the perspective of those for whom the Orient is homeland.

The notion of *bukkyō tōzen* at the very least provides a counternarrative to an American religious history of manifest destiny in which civilization simply moves from Europe westward. This is not to say that the history of Japanese-American Buddhism ought to be thought of as the dominant narrative of the American story; the point of this exercise is not to replace one

overarching narrative with another. But what the study of Japanese, or more broadly, Asian-American Buddhism, suggests is that the picture of American religions is not complete without a critical examination of multidirectional migrations of ethnicities and religions, including the growing importance of Central and South American Catholicism’s movement northward. Just as the notion of American Buddhism destabilizes Orientalist conceptions of Asia as Buddhist (in more recent post-1965 Asian immigration to the Americas, Christianity is a major “Asian” religion) and Buddhism as Asian (with its century-old history in the Americas), it also disturbs the image of America as a Christian nation.

Indeed, the history of religion in America is often characterized by a pendulum swinging at times toward a celebration of religious diversity and an open acceptance of new religious traditions and at other times toward a closing of that door with the assertion of an American religious identity as essentially unitary and exclusivist. Religious pluralism often came hand in hand with the opening of national borders to new immigrants with faiths other than Anglo-Protestantism, while a nativist retrenchment often accompanied major migrations of Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. Over the decades of the pendulum swinging to broaden what constitutes American religion, the rhetoric has shifted from America as constituted of certain strains of Protestantism to assertions of America as a Christian nation, to notions of a unity between the so-called Abrahamic traditions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. It is only in very recent times that an American president could pronounce that “whatever we once were, we are no longer just a Christian nation; we are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation, a Buddhist nation, and a Hindu nation, and a nation of nonbelievers.”

Today, a growing number of North Americans view Buddhism as a fount of wisdom and compassion rather than a national security threat. Buddhists can be found in the judiciary and police departments, and politicians such as Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii) or Hank Johnson (D-Georgia), both members of Japanese-derived Buddhist traditions, have been elected to the U.S. Congress. Buddhist meditation can be found promoted by psychologists, medical doctors, and sports trainers; and young fifth- and sixth-generation Japanese-Americans attend Dharma school at their local Buddhist temple, proud of their religious heritage.

Religion helps orient a person in living in this world by referent to an ultimate, absolute, and sacred world. Japanese-American Buddhists drew on their faith during a period of severe dislocation and disorientation. While the American camps were not death camps like the German Nazi concentration camps, Japanese-American Buddhists also struggled with their faith in Buddhism and in America, just as Jews in the same period drew on but also struggled with their faith. The Holocaust challenged some fundamental assumptions regarding the nature of evil, the suffering of the innocent, and the redemptive nature of suffering brought on the Jewish people for no reason other than a twisted conflation of race and religion that excluded Jews from a secure place in European society. Just being Japanese-American and Buddhist brought a less severe, but similar, exclusion by race and religion from the American mainstream, and the wartime experience prompted an intense questioning about whether it was possible to be Buddhist and American at the same time.

These are the stories of Japanese-American Buddhists who, like the Kimura family, burned away their Japanese-ness but refused to shed their faith in Buddhism and, ultimately, in America. □

The Popularity of Selected Elements of Buddhism in North America

by Jeff Wilson

The popularity of selected elements of Buddhism in America, Canada, and Mexico may actually hinder Buddhism's ability to liberate people fully from samsara if they never go further to discover the deeper nature of Buddhism.

One of the interesting things about Buddhism is that it has always coexisted alongside other belief systems and worldviews, and has often done so in ways that blended Buddhism with non-Buddhist religions. In fact, this may be one of the keys to how Buddhism was able to spread so successfully from its origins in northern India throughout Asia, including places as far apart as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Siberia, and Japan. As Buddhism encountered other religions, a process of negotiation took place, typically over hundreds, even thousands, of years, as both systems influenced each other. Often Buddhism was successful in integrating into a new culture when it managed to provide its new devotees with something that they wanted—different cultures adapted Buddhism to meet their specific needs and situations. For example, Daoists in China had long sought supernatural powers and immortality through breath and energy manipulation, so the Chinese sought new techniques for self-cultivation through Buddhist meditation and yogic exercises. The Bon religion in Tibet was used to protect people from dangerous spirits of the mountains and sky, so when Buddhism arrived, it was used to tame the fierce nature deities and

make them Dharma protectors. This sort of pattern has now been repeated in North America, where Buddhism has encountered a new set of competing belief systems and principles and thus is being adapted to meet the desires of Western culture.

The most obvious examples of beliefs competing with Buddhism are other religions. The dominant religion of the United States, Canada, and Mexico is Christianity, of course. Christianity comes in a wildly diverse number of forms, but in general it places more emphasis on belief than practice, says that the essence of religion is the individual's relationship with God, and holds the Bible up as the source of spiritual truth. All of these contrast sharply with Buddhism, so we might assume that Buddhism and Christianity would have very little to say to each other. But in fact, Christian-Buddhist dialogue and even Christian-Buddhist practice are popular in North America, particularly among liberal Christians. Beyond the specifics of its doctrines, Christianity is about personal spirituality, and Buddhism offers many ways to enhance one's spiritual life. Borrowing from the Buddhists, there are Christians who meditate in order to still their minds and thus connect with God, while other Christians

explore the ethics of the Buddha in order to gain new insights into the nuances of Jesus's teachings. Some of this comes from individual Christians exploring Buddhism, but awareness of Buddhism's potential benefits for Christians has also been raised because internationally respected Buddhist monks such as the fourteenth Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh have written respectfully and insightfully about the relationship between the two religions.

Although smaller in numbers, Judaism is another historic faith in North America, and if anything, the impact of Buddhism on Judaism has been even larger than on Christianity. Although we don't have exact data, the number of Jews involved with Buddhism is very significant, and many lamas, roshis, monks, and meditation instructors in America and Canada were brought up in Jewish households. The very first person to convert to Buddhism in America was a Jew, near the end of the nineteenth century. Like Christians, Jews have sought spiritual renewal through contact with Buddhism; in fact, a major movement in North American Judaism is called Jewish Renewal and draws noticeably from Buddhist practices to provide a fresh perspective on Judaism. For example, at this year's summer institute in Colorado, Jews will be able to take a course called "How the Hindu and Buddhist Traditions Can Clarify Our Understanding of Jewish Practice." The movement's spiritual leader, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, is a former professor at Naropa University,

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a Buddhist school, and has been highly active in the Buddhist-Jewish interfaith encounter.

A third religious community in North America is neo-paganism. Pagans are interested in reviving ancient polytheistic belief systems from before the advent of Christianity. Because they have to reconstruct religions that have passed away, they frequently draw inspiration from non-Christian religions that include multiple deities and objects of devotion. Native American and African religions, Hinduism, and other sources are easily assimilated by modern pagans, and Buddhism, too, has had a measurable impact on this movement. Pagans enjoy adding various buddhas and bodhisattvas to their developing pantheons, especially ones associated with the earth, such as Jizo, or ones that can be depicted as female, such as Kannon and Tara, since modern pagans are especially concerned with the feminine side of religion. It is common to find statues of Kannon Bodhisattva on pagan altars alongside gods and goddesses taken from many religions. Modern pagans are also influenced by Buddhist teachings on reincarnation and karma. As with Christians and Jews, pagans take from Buddhism what they find most useful and appealing based on their particular religious interests and needs. In each case, the Western religion is changed by its encounter with Buddhism and grows in new directions.

However, religions are not the only types of belief systems operating in North America. There are many other forms

A woman meditates in Central Park in New York City.

of belief and elements of culture that Buddhism has made an impact on. One good example is the environmentalism movement. Environmentalism is not a full-blown religion, but it does contain beliefs such as seeing the planet as sacred, practices such as recycling, and values such as respecting other living things and even the soil, water, and air. For many environmentalists, Buddhism offers a sophisticated vision of interdependence that mirrors the way all things interact with one another in natural systems. For example, there is the famous Kego concept of Indra's Net. This is a vast web of shining jewels that stretches across the sky; in each jewel one can see the reflection of all the other jewels, as well as the reflections of all those reflections, and so on. This serves as a metaphor for how everything in the universe is connected to everything else, and whatever affects one person will surely affect all others in some manner.

When environmentalists learn about Indra's Net, they are reminded of how all human actions have consequences on the environment, and they feel a sense of union with nature by imagining themselves as part of the web of all things, living and nonliving.

One of the most interesting developments in American spirituality at the present is the application of mindfulness meditation to all sorts of activities other than Buddhist practice. America and Canada have strong self-help industries, and mindfulness has been taken up by self-help gurus to promote their pet concerns. For example, many people advocate mindful eating, which means to eat your food slowly, paying close attention to each bite and the sensations as you chew, taste, and swallow. According to mindful eaters, this attention gives you greater control over your urges, and thus you can avoid overeating, poor eating, and obesity. Given the North American obsession with slimness, beauty, and body image, this is a movement with great potential to go mainstream. Other people believe in mindful recovery, meaning the application of mindfulness techniques to combat addiction. Paying attention to the grasping that accompanies the desire to have anything that we are addicted to—alcohol, drugs, food, sex, gambling, even shopping or the Internet—gives us the ability to resist these urges and can point us to the deeper feelings of anxiety, stress, trauma, or low self-respect that lead to addiction in the first place.

Photo: Don Farber

Self-help doesn't just refer to getting over negative situations, though. Others are applying mindfulness to their time at work so that they can be happier and more efficient. Many books have been written on mindful parenting, telling people how to use awareness practices while interacting with their children so that they become a better listener and more patient and respond more naturally to their child's needs. It seems that there is an almost endless list of ways that mindfulness is being applied by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike in North America: we even have mindful divorce lawyers, mindful soldiers, mindful sex, and other surprising combinations.

One of the most pervasive influences in North American culture is psychotherapy. Since at least the mid-twentieth century, some psychologists and psychiatrists have taken an interest in aspects of Zen Buddhism. More recently, mindfulness meditation has penetrated this profession, so now psychologists are trained to employ meditation practices in helping their clients deal with stress and problems. In the medical world, mindfulness-based stress relief is a big movement now, as doctors prescribe meditation as a way to augment or replace pain medication, deal with stress, and lower blood pressure. Some studies suggest that Buddhist meditation can even change the shape of the brain and how it functions.

Buddhism has always been connected to the process of dying, and now Buddhist practices are being promoted in some hospice situations. Besides mindfulness, patients may be taught visualizations like *metta* and *tonglen*. *Metta* means "loving-kindness" and is a technique that involves sending loving thoughts to others. First you picture someone close to you, such as a family member. Then you keep expanding the circle of kindness until it encompasses all people, including those you don't like. This encourages feelings of

love and happiness, which ease the process of dying. *Tonglen* is a Tibetan Buddhist practice carried out by imagining that you are breathing in someone's pain and illness in the form of a black cloud, transforming it into a mist of white healing and loving energy, and sending it back to the person. This can be done by a patient to develop a feeling of empathy for others beyond his or her own painful situation, or done by a hospice worker to help patients feel healed and cared for. One of the hardest parts of dying is the feeling that one is all alone in such a difficult transition, so Buddhist practices that support a sense of connection with others can be very helpful.

There are many other examples of Buddhism's being selectively adapted to meet the preexisting desires and preferences of North Americans. We can see Buddhist influence in the arts, such as painting, sculpture, music, and especially writing, such as poetry and literature. Bioethicists use examples from Buddhism to debate issues like organ transplantation, abortion, and stem cell research. The entertainment industry uses Buddhism as a source of exoticism, putting monks in Hollywood movies and television programs. And of course capitalism and marketing are enormous forces in America, Canada, and Mexico. Merchants promote their products by sticking words like *Zen* on them to imply that they will somehow make you calmer, more patient, or even enlightened by eating their breakfast cereal, sleeping on their pillows, or using their cell phones.

All of this is similar to how Buddhism has been used in the past. People in Asia use Buddhism to improve their luck, seek healing, protect themselves from accidents, and win the lottery, among other activities. This doesn't mean that the pattern is exactly the same in North America, of course. For one thing, different cultures have different needs, so they use different tools from the Buddhist

toolbox or apply them to different purposes. For another thing, Buddhism in Asia typically exists as a complete, traditional religious system: believers may consult a monk for lotto numbers, but they also know that the Dharma is there to teach them when they are ready for it. Buddhism has been growing for more than a century in North America, but it is still not well represented in most places. Before people have a chance to learn about the fullness of Buddhist thought and practice, they may mistakenly come to think of it as simply a way to deal with mundane problems or to improve their health and therefore never investigate it further. The popularity of selected elements of Buddhism in America, Canada, and Mexico may actually hinder Buddhism's ability to liberate people fully from samsara if they never go further to discover the deeper nature of Buddhism. And there is the risk that even dedicated Buddhists will come to see their practice as mainly a form of self-help or spiritual therapy and dilute the Dharma from inside.

But perhaps all of this is normal for the first few centuries of contact between Buddhism and a new cultural area. Since modern-day Buddhists are connected with Buddhists in all parts of the world, it is easy to receive helpful correction if one area begins to exploit Buddhism too much for worldly ends rather than Dharmic ones. And it can be argued that there are real advantages to this appropriation of Buddhism for non-Buddhist uses. On the one hand, it enables many non-Buddhists to at least practice part of the Dharma and thus gain some higher level of peace in their lives. And it has given Buddhism a very positive image in the North American mind. Buddhism is associated with helpful techniques like meditation, rather than with superstition or fanaticism as some other religions are. That's a very good position to be in, and may bode well for Buddhism's future in the West. □

Rissho Kosei-kai's Progress in America

by Masako Watanabe

In the communities where Rissho Kosei-kai's dissemination among Americans is advancing, it has adopted an approach that suits American traits and is exploring methods that are appropriate to the locality.

The seeds for Rissho Kosei-kai in America were sown by Japanese women who had joined Rissho Kosei-kai in Japan and, later, after the Second World War, moved to the United States as the brides of American servicemen. Rissho Kosei-kai served the function of an “ethnic church” for these Japanese in a strange land. To this day, native Japanese and persons of Japanese descent make up the core of most Rissho Kosei-kai Dharma centers and chapters.

Recently, however, local Americans have come to be central in certain strong footholds, namely Oklahoma City and San Antonio, Texas. In these cities, the membership is more than 80 percent non-Japanese Americans. I surveyed the Rissho Kosei-kai membership in areas in and around both Oklahoma City and San Antonio in September 2008, where Rissho Kosei-kai has its Dharma centers. I wanted to find out from this survey how it became possible to disseminate to local Americans in these areas. What dissemination approaches were being used to make it suitable for Americans? Also, what sorts of changes do the people in the congregations, who have accepted the Rissho Kosei-kai faith, see in themselves? I wanted to hear the voices in these locales.

The primary reason there are strong Rissho Kosei-kai footholds in Oklahoma City and San Antonio is that there are military bases in both places. The women who had married American servicemen began disseminating when they moved to their husbands' new postings. But it was not easy for Rissho Kosei-kai to shed the image of being an “ethnic church.” Also, the core congregations of Japanese gradually became aged, and their faith was not passed on smoothly to the next generation.

However, in 1997 Rissho Kosei-kai put together a nationwide American dissemination caravan, traveling to the Rissho Kosei-kai locations and disseminating in English. It was a plus that neither Oklahoma City nor San Antonio is a place with a strong Japanese-American community. Yet, fortunately, there are Japanese members residing there who have a high proficiency in English and therefore can act as bridges between American and Japanese cultures. American members are today far more numerous than Japanese members, and the congregations are segregated, meeting on different days: the Japanese meet on the monthly memorial days, and the Americans meet for Sunday services. On the memorial days, the Japanese members offer the sutra readings and

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take part in *hoza*, a group counseling session based on the Buddhist teachings; after that they eat Japanese food they have brought from home and enjoy conversing in Japanese. It seems that their needs for an “ethnic church” go beyond the religious aspect. I got the sense that the American members, on the other hand, were generally seeking an intellectual understanding of Buddhism and were fascinated by the study of the Lotus Sutra.

America is an ethnically diverse country, and so there is no such thing as a monolithic “American.” Even the people of Oklahoma City and San Antonio differ from each other. Most of the members of the Dharma Center of Oklahoma are Caucasians, many of whom are in their fifties and sixties. In San Antonio, members are from diverse ethnic backgrounds—Hispanic, Caucasian, African-American, and Asian—and are of diverse age groups as well. Comparing the two groups, the Oklahoma Dharma center

has more people seeking an intellectual understanding of Buddhism, but in San Antonio the *hoza* sessions are of greater interest, whose topics have a more practical application. Although ancestral appreciation, one of the pillars of the practice of Rissho Kosei-kai teaching, is not well understood by Americans generally, it is better accepted in the Dharma center in San Antonio—where there are many Hispanics and which is an historically Catholic city (Catholics celebrate a Day of the Dead)—than in the Oklahoma Dharma center.

In both cities, the people who have become involved with Rissho Kosei-kai are interested in spirituality, even though they are uncomfortable with organized religion. For instance, one member said she had felt that there was an atmosphere of compulsion in organized religion. According to the American members, the Dharma centers have a “comfortable family feeling”

that is open and exhibits an ambience of acceptance of all people. In addition to their Sunday services, both locations offered study sessions for the basic teachings of Buddhism and for the Lotus Sutra, as well as meditation.

In 2008 the sangha in Oklahoma City was elevated from a chapter to a Dharma center, and in 2009 Rev. Kris Ladusau became the first person born in America to be made a Rissho Kosei-kai minister. The person who has worked with Rev. Ladusau to carry out dissemination among local Americans is Rev. Yasuko Hildebrand, a Japanese woman who in 2001 became the first chapter leader of the Dharma center when it was built in Oklahoma City, and later its first minister. Rev. Hildebrand studied in America as a young woman and has since lived there for more than forty years. She joined Rissho Kosei-kai in America. She prefers jazz to *enka* (traditional Japanese popular music), and is

an open, forward-looking person who is always considering new ways of thinking and new approaches to adopt. She had the idea that because there are limits to how much a Japanese person could disseminate among Americans, it would be best to have an American, speaking the same language and sharing the same culture, disseminate among Americans. Rev. Hildebrand is very proficient in English and understands both Japanese and American culture. Rev. Ladusau has studied martial arts in Japan, has an understanding of Japanese feeling, and ingenuity in making an Eastern concept into a Western one. Together they came up with a new experiment in the spirit of giving it a try, and if it didn't work out, reapproaching it.

Rev. Hildebrand says that while there are three points that cannot be changed—that the Eternal Buddha Shakyamuni is the object of our worship, that the Lotus Sutra must be the scripture, that

its interpretations must be based on those of Founder Nikkyo Niwano and President Nichiko Niwano—everything else can be adapted to how things are done in America. Japan is a vertical society, whereas America is a horizontal one. Rev. Hildebrand says that the type of instruction from the top, “do this, do that,” that is given in Japan is not suitable for Americans.

Rev. Ladusau and Rev. Hildebrand set about figuring out an approach that would suit the American mind. The Americans who come to Rissho Kosei-kai are people who have left the Christian community and are seeking something spiritual and who also have an interest in Buddhism. They are attracted to the fact that they will be able to study the Lotus Sutra and practice Buddhism.

The Dharma Center of Oklahoma engenders an open attitude, an ambience that is welcoming to all, and a positive and comfortable atmosphere.

Members say that the Dharma center is a very safe place and full of good, positive energy.

After people join Rissho Kosei-kai in Japan, they install a home altar. It is difficult, however, for Americans to understand ancestral appreciation. As it is not intuitive to them, any practice of it should start from an understanding of its meaning. Furthermore, Rev. Ladusau and Rev. Hildebrand have added meditation, which Americans like. Because many people are interested in spirituality, at the suggestion of the members there is a weekly “movie night,” when a spiritual film is shown, followed by a discussion. When it is time for services, the roles of chanting leader, assistant chanting leaders, and the like are not assigned as a duty, but, instead, the people who want to do them voluntarily sign up for them under an honor system. The members also treasure the opportunity to coteach. It is in

this regard that members who anticipate receiving an image of the Eternal Buddha Shakyamuni give a lecture on basic Buddhism.

In Rissho Kosei-kai we say that *hoza* is thought to be at the core of members’ practice. In Japan one listens in silence to what the *hoza* leader has to say. Americans tend to offer advice from their own personal experiences. So it is crucial that the *hoza* is summed up with the leader’s advice, firmly based on the teachings, after suggestions have been exchanged among the participants. Also, a Japanese can accept the reasoning that individuals are responsible for their own trouble, but that is not easy for Americans to accept. Instead of putting something negatively, Americans want to make it positive, framing it so as to say that changing oneself is following the teaching of the Lotus Sutra and is in keeping with respecting the buddha-nature in others.

So then, after putting into practice the teachings of Rissho Kosei-kai, how do the American members perceive their self-reform? Mr. A says, "I used to be more anxious. I was more irritable" and "As a result of the teaching that 'suffering happens, changes happen,' I'm able to accept things more easily." Ms. B says, "In Buddhism it is taught that everything changes, nothing remains the same. Knowing this, I no longer get upset when something happens." About self-reform, another says, "I've become calm. I've become more able to take things in stride. I have a considerate heart now, and I can help others. Since joining Rissho Kosei-kai, I have learned how to dig in and confront the problems that face me and to figure out what the cause of a problem is and what to do about it," and the members say unanimously, "Since joining Rissho Kosei-kai, I've become compassionate toward people. I've stopped judging people. Where I had been short-tempered, I've become much more patient. After hearing the Buddhist teaching that everything changes, nothing remains the same (all things are impermanent), I no longer get upset when unfavorable things happen."

The American members of Rissho Kosei-kai are people who feel uncomfortable in the extremely competitive society that is part of America, and they have looked hard at themselves. I sensed that many of them were looking for an intellectual understanding of Buddhism, but I

also felt that there were some who, if you looked into their hearts, had experienced problems in the family when they were children or had suffered some mental or emotional trauma. For those people, Rissho Kosei-kai offers a warm atmosphere and a friendly, safe space.

The reason dissemination by Americans is making progress at the Dharma center in Oklahoma City is that there is a flexible sense that a type of dissemination with a local feel is unfolding, based on American traits but still abiding by the points of Rissho Kosei-kai that must be observed. Rather than insisting on the Japanese style of instruction that is derived from Japan's vertical society, the Dharma center leaders have adopted a manner that is comfortable for Americans, and moreover they have promoted hands-on dissemination, that is, helping each member to realize what is happening to him or her in the light of the teachings and thus leading all of them to self-reform. Among those who are involved with Rissho Kosei-kai are many people who had been involved previously with other Buddhist organizations. As a particular feature of Rissho Kosei-kai, I make special mention that it isn't enough simply for you to understand the teachings intellectually; you need to know how to carry yourself and put the teachings into practice in your daily life.

In that way Rissho Kosei-kai started to get a sense of how to carry out

dissemination work among people born in North America. Here, Rissho Kosei-kai is attractive to people who distrust organized religion yet are interested in spirituality. In the communities where Rissho Kosei-kai's dissemination among Americans is advancing, it has adopted an approach that suits American traits and is exploring methods that are appropriate to the locality. In the early stages of dissemination, its development depends on what sort of people the Buddhist organization can attract, and at the present stage it appears that the Dharma centers have developed to the extent all members are well acquainted and the needs of each member are readily and carefully met. For that reason American members are becoming established, and one can appreciate the fact that they are contributing in their own way to the Dharma centers as well. Furthermore, Americans tend to move around the country comparatively easily, and while that can be a blow for the Dharma center to which they belonged, it is also an opportunity for Rissho Kosei-kai to gain a new foothold elsewhere. As for Rissho Kosei-kai's future expansion, it can be expected that a larger number of people over more regions—diverse in age and social backgrounds—will become members, but undoubtedly there will be new problems that must be surmounted with each stage. However, that will certainly be a touchstone for the universalization of the faith of Rissho Kosei-kai in the world. □

The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

Chapter 18

The Merits of Joyful Acceptance

This is the 105th installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra by the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.

This chapter preaches in further detail the merits of initial rejoicing over the sutra. The reason such merits are repeatedly preached is that joyfully accepting the Buddha's teachings, spiritual exultation over the sutra, and feeling deep gratitude for the teachings are indispensable and basic for faith.

Although we may have read all the sutras and committed to memory the Buddhist doctrines, unless we have accepted the sutra with heartfelt joy, it means merely that we are knowledgeable about Buddhism, not that we truly believe in the Buddha. To have joyfully accepted the sutra is to have true faith. Therefore the merits of joyful acceptance are repeated throughout this chapter.

Faith is often compared to multiplication. The object of faith multiplied by the mind of faith equals the results of faith. Let us look more closely at this formula.

Even if the object of faith is the most perfect in the world, if our mind does not believe ardently and our faith is of low degree, then it cannot yield a great result.

Let us assume that the Buddha's teachings are equivalent to the figure 100. If a person's mind of faith is a mere one-half, then the result will be 50. If we consider an extreme case, in which despite the existence of the Buddha's teachings

in this world today, a person does not believe in the teachings at all, then the result would be zero; 100 multiplied by zero equals zero.

At the same time, however vigorous a person's religious feelings might be, the result will be nil if the object of his faith is empty, because zero multiplied by a 100 equals zero. No matter how earnest one may be in devotion, if the object is empty the result will still be nil.

If a person has faith in a wrong teaching, then it stands to reason that this will lead to an evil or at least unhappy result. If the teaching itself is the equivalent of a minus one, and we take a person's religious mind to be the equivalent of 100, then we have a large negative result, for minus one multiplied by 100 equals minus 100. It is easy to understand how disastrous belief in an unsound religion can be.

The teachings of the Lotus Sutra can be compared to an infinite positive number, but let us suppose that they are equivalent to the figure 100. If one deeply believes in the sutra with so much as a single thought and is grateful for it, and if that single thought is assumed to be equivalent to the figure 1, the result will be a highly positive 100.

The initial rejoicing over the sutra is this important. As the merits of a person's religious feelings grow to values of

2, 5, 10, and 100, the results gradually increase, and before long they become immeasurable.

Let us now turn to the text.

TEXT At that time Maitreya Bodhisattva-Mahasattva spoke to the Buddha, saying: “World-honored One! If there be a good son or good daughter who, hearing this Dharma Flower Sutra, accepts it with joy, how much happiness will he obtain?”

And he spoke [it again] in verse:

“After the extinction of the World-honored One, / If anyone, hearing this sutra, / Is able to accept it with joy, / How much happiness will he obtain?”

COMMENTARY Needless to say, Maitreya Bodhisattva already understands how much happiness a person obtains from accepting the Lotus Sutra with joy. But as might be expected of one who is the idealization of the Buddha’s compassion, he asks this question intending to make all sentient beings deepen their faith still further. He requests that the Buddha preach the merits of joyful acceptance in further detail for those whose understanding is still elementary.

TEXT Then the Buddha addressed Maitreya Bodhisattva-Mahasattva: “Ajita! If, after the extinction of the Tathagata, any bhikshu, bhikshuni, upasaka, upasika, or other wise person, whether old or young, on hearing this sutra has accepted it with joy, and coming out of the assembly goes elsewhere to dwell either in a monastery or solitary place, or in a city, street, hamlet, or village, to expound [what] he has heard, according to his ability, to his father, mother, kindred, good friends, and acquaintances;

COMMENTARY *The assembly.* In our day we are apt to think of this as a formal gathering for Buddhist rites, but the

true assembly is a gathering where believers deepen their faith by preaching and listening to the teachings.

• *[What] he has heard.* Having only just heard the teachings of the Buddha, it is important to transmit them to others precisely as he has heard them. Once he begins to comprehend the meaning of the teachings, he should preach lucidly and in a way that is appropriate to the listener, but for the initiate it is sufficient to repeat exactly what he has heard, in case he should inadvertently transmit the teachings incorrectly.

• *To expound . . . according to his ability.* The words “according to his ability” have two meanings. One is “suited to one’s strength” and the other is “putting forth all one’s strength.”

It is hardly possible for a person who has heard the teachings for the first time to preach them as well as a high or learned priest. If a beginner discusses a teaching falteringly and is a poor speaker, then that is only natural. If he has a talent for writing, then he ought to transmit the teaching to others through the written word. Whatever the case, he should transmit the teachings according to his abilities and experiences. This is the first meaning of “according to his ability.”

However, no matter how poor a speaker may be, if he earnestly endeavors to transmit the teachings to others to the best of his ability, his enthusiasm will undoubtedly make an impression on his hearers. In short, his sincerity is important. This is the second meaning of the words “according to his ability.”

TEXT and all these people, having heard it, accept it with joy and again go on to transmit the teachings; these others, having heard it, also accepting it with joy, and transmitting the teachings, and so on in turn to the fiftieth [person]—Ajita! I will now tell you about the merit of that fiftieth good son or good daughter, who joyfully accepts [the sutra]. Do you hearken well!

COMMENTARY Why does the Buddha refer to “the merit” of the fiftieth person who has heard the teachings? This expresses strongly the greatness of the teachings of the Lotus Sutra.

The reason for this merit is that the first person, who attends an assembly, has been able to hear a sermon directly from a leader who is accomplished in the Dharma and has persuasive power. Therefore he has been deeply moved by the sermon.

The person who transmits the teachings to others is the one who has just heard them. He has no extensive knowledge of the Dharma, no deep faith in it, and no experience in preaching it. Even if he can transmit the teachings to

An overlook of Sacred Eagle Peak at Rajgir, Bihar, India. Atop the summit are the ruins of a brick platform, from which the Buddha is believed to have imparted the teachings of the Lotus Sutra.

others exactly as he has heard them, as they are transmitted from that person to the next and on to the next, the joy the hearer feels will decrease in proportion to the hearer's distance from the original speaker.

So when the teachings are finally transmitted to the fiftieth person, they will be diluted, and in most cases they will not make any striking impression on the hearer. At most, he is likely to respond with a halfhearted "Oh, really?"

In this regard, however, the Lotus Sutra is different from other teachings. Its contents are immeasurably so great that as long as they are correctly transmitted from one person to the next, even the fiftieth person is bound to receive them with great joy. Of course, the joy the fiftieth person feels will inevitably be less than that of the first person, but even this degree of joy produces a great merit. We must realize the deep meaning of the words "the merit of that fiftieth good son or good daughter, who joyfully accepts [the sutra]."

Then the Buddha speaks of the merit of the fiftieth person who joyfully receives the truth. We should carefully note that the various merits are expressed in the sutra in highly symbolic ways, with abstract points represented in concrete forms. We ought not to take such words and phrases literally but grasp the true spirit hidden within them. If we do not, we will be in danger of falling into a foolish misunderstanding of the teachings. The same caution is necessary in reference to the various merits in the following chapters.

TEXT "It is as [the number of] all the living beings in the six states of existence, in four hundred myriad kotis of asamkhyeyas of worlds, born in the four [ways], egg-born, womb-born, humidity-born, or born by metamorphosis, whether they are formed or formless, whether conscious or unconscious, or neither conscious nor unconscious; footless, two-footed, four-footed, or many-footed—it is as the sum of all these living beings. Suppose someone, seeking [their] happiness, provides them with every article of pleasure they may desire, giving each being the whole of a Jambudvīpa full of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, moonstone, agate, coral, amber, and all sorts of wonderful jewels, with elephants, horses, carriages, and palaces and towers built of the precious seven, and so forth.

COMMENTARY *Six states of existence.* See the January/February 1993 issue of *Dharma World*, on "Transmigrate within the six realms of existence."

• *Born in the four [ways].* This means the following four categories: egg-born beings, womb-born (viviparous) beings, humidity-born beings (worms and insects produced in damp ground), and born by metamorphosis (beings whose origin is unknown, produced spontaneously as a result of karma). In short, that means all kinds of living beings.

• *Whether they are formed or formless.* Of the three realms of existence, the beings of the realm of desire and the realm of form each have form, so they are called "formed," and beings of the formless realm do not, so they are called "formless."

• *Conscious.* This refers to beings with a mental state in which the mind wanders.

• *Unconscious.* This indicates beings whose conscious mind has ceased wandering and entered a state of clarity and serenity.

• *Neither conscious nor unconscious.* This refers to spiritual beings who dwell in the "formless realm" whose existence can be imagined in spirit alone. "Neither conscious" indicates the mental state of those who have extinguished all the coarse defilements of those who belong to the lower mental state. "Nor unconscious" means the mental state in which subtle defilements still remain. The latter is the highest state within the three realms of existence, but it is still the realm of heaven (one of the six states, or realms, of existence), and one has not yet attained buddhahood.

TEXT This great master of giving thus bestows gifts for full eighty years and then reflects thus: 'I have bestowed on all these beings articles of pleasure according to their desires, but now they have all grown old and worn, over eighty years of age, with hair gray and faces wrinkled, and death is not far off—I ought to instruct and guide them in the Buddha Dharma.' Thereupon, gathering together those beings, he proclaims to them the Dharma and instructs them; and by his revealing, teaching, benefiting, and rejoicing, they all in a moment become srota-apannas, sakridagamins, anagamins, and arhats, free from all defilements, having all acquired mastery of profound meditation and completed the eight emancipations. What is your opinion? May the merits obtained by this great master of giving be considered many or not?"

COMMENTARY *Revealing, teaching, benefiting, and rejoicing.* See the March/April 2004 issue of *Dharma World*, on "Showing, teaching, befitting, and gladdening them."

• *Srota-apannas, sakridagamins, anagamins, and arhats.* See the November/December 1992 issue of *Dharma World*.

TEXT Maitreya said to the Buddha: "World-honored One! The merits of this man are very many, infinite and boundless. Even though this master of giving had only made gifts of all those articles of pleasure to those beings, his merits would be infinite; how much more when he causes them to attain arhatship?"

Then said the Buddha to Maitreya: "I will now speak clearly to you. The merits attained by this man in bestowing

those means of happiness to all beings in the six states of existence of four hundred myriad kotis of asamkhyeyas of worlds and causing them to attain arhatship do not compare with the merit of that fiftieth person who, hearing a single verse of the Dharma Flower Sutra, receives it with joy; they are not up to one hundredth, or one thousandth, or one fraction of a hundred thousand myriad kotis; the power of figures or comparisons cannot express it.

COMMENTARY There are two reasons why the power of figures or comparisons cannot express the merit of the fiftieth person.

The first is that material donations differ fundamentally from the donation of the Dharma. To donate material things to others is certainly a good deed. But the merits of such actions are limited and relative.

Suppose, for example, that we give some money to needy people. A relatively small sum may help someone get back on his feet again. But another person may lead a more comfortable life while he has the money, then be no better off when it is spent. In some cases the money may even be counterproductive, encouraging the person to become idle or extravagant. Thus, however good a material donation may be, it is a limited and relative good.

When we donate money and goods to others, if we can teach them how to use these things effectively in order to start their lives anew, our donation will truly help them. This kind of teaching is included within the donation of the Dharma; material donations become more effective when the donation of the Dharma accompanies them. It would be ideal if social security were carried out this way.

But even this kind of donation is limited and relative, for its merits will end with one's life. The donation that is truly valuable and eternal is that of the Dharma—to give the Buddha's teachings to others. This kind of donation is not limited to one's present life but endures through one's future lives, and nothing is so important as the merits so obtained.

The second reason why the merit of the fiftieth person is beyond comparison is the qualitative difference of donations of the Dharma. The Buddha points out to Maitreya Bodhisattva that this great master of giving bestows all kinds of gifts to all beings in the universe and also gives them the donation of the Dharma by preaching the Buddha Dharma, leading them to attain arhatship. But the merits obtained by this man do not compare with the merit of that fiftieth person who hears a single verse of the Lotus Sutra and receives it with joy and gratitude. At first, this may seem strange, but it has the following meaning.

To attain arhatship, the mental state of having extinguished all defilements, is the pinnacle of Hinayana teachings. But

if a person who has attained such a state isolates himself in the mountains, the merits he attains stop right there. The Buddha's teachings are very valuable, but their value only becomes fully manifested when a person preaches them, elevating his hearers and giving them strength and courage, thus improving society as a whole. If Buddhist monks and other people of faith isolate themselves in the mountains after their own enlightenment and devote themselves to performing funeral and memorial services, then they are not putting the Buddha's true spirit to practical effect.

The teachings of the Lotus Sutra, however, are not limited to liberating oneself alone from suffering; their main object is the bodhisattva practice of liberating other people as well. When a person hears even a single verse of the Lotus Sutra and receives it with joy, his feeling of joyful acceptance is certain to develop into the power to liberate other people and the world.

Suppose that arhatship is equivalent to the maximum figure of 100 because this mental state indicates one's own enlightenment. On the other hand, the joy one feels on first hearing a single verse of the Lotus Sutra may be worth only one point as his own enlightenment. However, there is a great difference in value between the figure 100 indicating Hinayana enlightenment and the figure 1 representing Mahayana teachings. This is because the figure 1 in the Mahayana teachings expands without limitation and possesses the potential of increasing eventually to 1,000 or 10,000.

For example, a person's own enlightenment can be compared to 500 bushels of rice put away in a storehouse. With that much stored up, a person would have enough for a lifetime. But that is as far as it goes. That rice may be eaten by pests such as mice or it may even rot. In contrast, the sense of one's first rejoicing over the teachings of the Lotus Sutra is like one bushel of rice seed sown in a field. Since these seeds are alive, they have the potential for vigorous and steady growth and can produce thousands or tens of thousands of bushels of rice. Even though a person's own enlightenment is incomplete, it is extremely valuable.

This is why the merits of a person who hears a single verse of the Lotus Sutra and receives it with joy are incomparably greater than those gained in the practice of giving maximum material donations, or even than the merits gained by donation of the Dharma, causing others to attain arhatship.

If this is the joy of the fiftieth person who in turn hears and rejoices in the teachings, what about the joy of the first person?

TEXT Ajita! If the merit of such a fiftieth person who in turn hears the Dharma Flower Sutra and accepts it with

joy is indeed so infinite, boundless, and numberless, how much more is the happiness of those who among the first hearers in the assembly receive it joyfully, whose surpassing [happiness] still more infinite, boundless, and beyond number or compare.

COMMENTARY As explained before, because of the immeasurable value of the teachings themselves, the hearer can accept with joy even those transmitted in turn from one beginner to the fiftieth person, who is also a beginner. How much greater is the impact on a person who has heard the teachings directly from a preacher who has thoroughly mastered the Way. Joyful acceptance of the teachings will bring about major changes in his life and have a boundless influence upon society.

To this point the Buddha has preached the merit of the person who has received with joy and is deeply grateful for the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Next, he states that even a person so unenlightened that his contact with the teachings fails to move him deeply will nevertheless obtain very great merit.

This shows us just how important it is to have the opportunity to encounter the Dharma. It is true that we all possess the buddha-nature, but we cannot attain liberation unless our buddha-nature awakens through such an opportunity. Therefore, to come into contact with the teachings is before everything else a prior condition for liberation, and the opportunity to encounter them must be said to be very precious indeed. Needless to say, our providing such an opportunity to others is also very precious.

TEXT “Again, Ajita! If anyone, for the sake of this sutra, goes to a monastery and, either sitting or standing, hears and receives it even for a moment, by reason of that merit in his next bodily rebirth he will acquire the most excellent kind of elephants, horses and carriages, jeweled palanquins and litters, and ascend to celestial palaces.

COMMENTARY Since ancient days this has been called the merit of “hearing the sutra for but a moment.” Strictly speaking, this *moment* was one-thirtieth of a complete day, or forty-eight minutes as we measure time today. In other words, a very short time. That one can be reborn in the heavenly realm as a result of just having heard the teachings for even such a short period of time means that encountering the Dharma will provide a great turning point in that person’s life.

Further, “a monastery” refers not just to a place where monks reside, but also to places where the Dharma is preached and practiced. The Jetavana Monastery and the Bamboo Grove Monastery were built in this fashion.

TEXT If again there be anyone who sits down in the place where [this] Dharma is preached, and, when others come, persuades them to sit down and hear it, or shares his seat with others, that person’s merit, on his bodily rebirth, will give him a Shakra’s seat, or a Brahma’s, or the seat of a holy wheel-rolling king. Ajita! If, moreover, anyone says to another: ‘There is a sutra named the Flower of the Dharma; let us go together and listen to it,’ and if he who is persuaded hears it but for a moment, that person’s merit, after his bodily rebirth, will cause him to be born in the same place with bodhisattvas [who have attained] dharani. He will be of keen faculties and wise;

COMMENTARY Shakra (or Indra) and Brahma were originally gods of the Brahman religion, and within Buddhism they are taken as the supreme guardian gods of the Buddha Dharma. A holy wheel-rolling king, or *cakravartin*, is the greatest king, who rules this world correctly and peacefully on the basis of the Buddha Dharma. To be able to sit side by side with such benevolent deities and such a high personage means to be equally exalted.

• *Bodhisattvas [who have attained] dharani*. These are bodhisattvas who possess the power to instruct others not to do any evil and possess the power to encourage others to do good.

TEXT for hundreds of thousands of myriads of ages he will never be dumb nor have unpleasant breath; [will] ever be free from ailments of the tongue or ailments of the mouth; his teeth will never be dirty and black, nor yellow, nor with gaps, nor fall out, nor irregular, nor crooked; his lips will not be pendulous or twisted and shrunk, not coarse and rough, nor have sores and pustules, not be cracked and broken or awry and out of shape, neither thick nor big, neither sallow nor black, having nothing loathsome; his nose will not be flat or crooked and distorted; the color of his face will not be black, nor will it be narrow and long or ever be hollow and crooked, having nothing whatever unpleasing; his lips, tongue, and teeth all will be beautiful; his nose long, high, and straight; his face round and full; his eyebrows high and long; his forehead broad, even, and upright. His sign of manhood will be perfect.

COMMENTARY He states here in a variety of ways in which one can be reborn not only spiritually but also physically perfect and that we need not inquire into each condition of someone’s rebirth. It is enough if we accept that a person’s spirit can transform his physical features.

When we look at portraits and images of learned or noted priests, sages, and saints from ancient times, we find few who are endowed with physical beauty in the ordinary

sense. In depictions of the ten great disciples of the Buddha, no one would call any of them particularly handsome, with the exception of Ananda and Rahula. Most of them have unprepossessing faces, which has given rise to the saying “A person with a face like an arhat.” Nevertheless, they each have an inexpressibly gentle, compassionate, noble face of profound wisdom.

The influence of someone’s spiritual rebirth is not limited to his mental aspect but also shows in his physical appearance. This is how we should interpret this passage of the sutra.

TEXT In whatever age he is born, he will see the Buddha, hear the Dharma, and receive the teaching in faith. Ajita! Just notice this—if the merit obtained from persuading one person to go and hear the Dharma is such as this, how much more is that of one who with his whole mind hears, preaches, reads, and recites it, in the assembly interprets it to the people, and practices what it preaches.”

Thereupon the World-honored One, desiring to proclaim this meaning over again, spoke thus in verse:

“If anyone in an assembly / Hears this sutra, / Though only one stanza, / And joyfully proclaims it to others, / And thus its teaching is transmitted / Till it reaches the fiftieth [hearer], / The happiness obtained by this last / I now will explain. / Suppose a great master of giving / Who provides for a countless throng / During full eighty years / According to all their desires, / Then sees them decayed and old, / Gray-haired and faces wrinkled, / Teeth sparse and forms withered, / And thinks their death approaches; / ‘Now,’ says he, ‘I must teach them / To obtain the fruits of the Way.’ / Then by tactful methods he / Teaches them the true Dharma of nirvana:

COMMENTARY *The fruits of the Way.* This phrase means the results that can be obtained by learning the Buddha Way.

• *The true Dharma of nirvana.* This indicates, in this case, the nirvana of Hinayana Buddhism. “True” here means “correct,” not true in the absolute sense.

TEXT ‘All worlds are unstable, / Like water bubbles or will-o’-the-wisp. / Do you all hasten to beget / A spirit turning in disgust from them.’ / All of them on hearing this Dharma / Attain arhatship, / Perfect in the six transcendent faculties, / Three clear views, and eight emancipations.

COMMENTARY *Unstable.* This means insecure, that is, changeable, unreliable.

• *A spirit turning in disgust from them.* This phrase means the mind which abhors these worlds so full of suffering and tries to turn away from them.

• *The six transcendent faculties.* See the July/August 1992 issue of *Dharma World*, on “The six divine faculties.”

• *Three clear views.* See the May/June 2001 issue of *Dharma World*.

TEXT The last, the fiftieth [person], / Who hears one verse and rejoices— / This man’s felicity surpasses that [of a great master of giving] / Beyond the power of comparison. / If a hearer whose turn is [so remote] / Has such boundless felicity, / How much greater is his who, in the congregation, / First hears one verse with joyfulness. / Let a man exhort but one person / And bring him to listen to the Dharma Flower, / Saying: ‘This sutra is profound and wonderful, / Hard to meet in thousands of myriads of kalpas.’ / Persuaded, he goes to listen / And hears it but for a moment; / The reward of such a persuader / Let me now discern and preach. / Age by age his mouth will never suffer, / His teeth not be gapped, yellow, or black, / Nor his lips thick, awry, or cracked, / With no loathsome appearance; / His tongue neither dried up, black, nor shrunken; / His nose high, long, and straight; / His forehead broad, level, and upright; / His visage elegant and dignified; / A joy for men to behold; / No fetid breath from his mouth, but / The scent of the utpala flower / Ever exhaling from his lips. / [Or] suppose one on purpose visits a monastery / To hear the Dharma Flower Sutra, / And hearing it but a moment rejoices; / Let me now tell of his happiness. / He will hereafter be born among gods or men, / Have fine elephants, horses, and carriages, / Jeweled palanquins and litters, / And ascend to celestial palaces. / If, in the place of preaching, / He urges men to sit and hear the sutra, / Because of this felicity he will attain / The seat of a Shakra, a Brahma, a wheel-rolling king. / How much more with him who singlemindedly / Hears and expounds its meaning / And practices according to [its] teaching— / His happiness is beyond limit.”

COMMENTARY With this the chapter comes to an end. Throughout it we have been shown that the most important thing for the believer is to cultivate a mind that is attentive to the teachings and grateful for them. And that if we are grateful for them, then we will simply be unable to refrain from sharing the teachings with others.

To be continued

In this series, passages in the text sections are quoted from *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 1975, with slight revisions. The diacritical marks originally used for several Sanskrit terms in the text sections are omitted here for easier reading.

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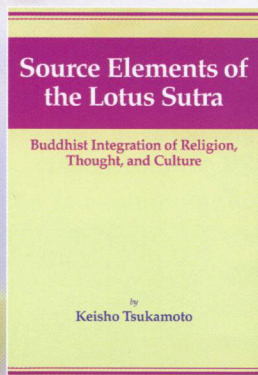
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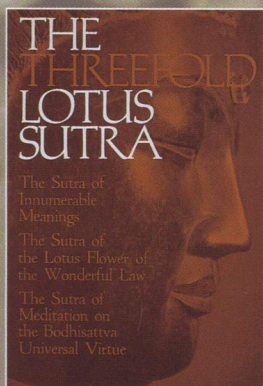
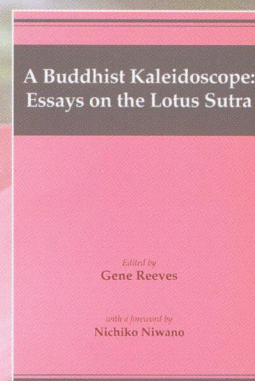
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