

## Introduction

# American Buddhism as a Way of Life

*Gary Storhoff and John Whalen-Bridge*

There is an orientalism in the most restless pioneer, and the farthest west is but the farthest east.

—Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

Go forth on your journey, for the benefit of the many, for the joy of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, for the benefit and joy of mankind.

—Shakyamuni Buddha, *Vinaya I*, 21

America today is one of the most vital Buddhist countries in the world.

—Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*

Because of the focus of media, celebrity converts, popular film, and the popularity of the Dalai Lama, most Americans would find it difficult to overlook the prominence of Buddhism in American culture today, even though fewer than 1 percent of Americans are Buddhists.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that non-Western religions, especially Buddhism, are transforming the American religious perspective. Buddhism has expanded through a wide spectrum of American culture, including literature, art,

psychology, film, and other religious traditions. Our first volume in this series on American Buddhism, *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, demonstrated the profound influence of this very decidedly immigrant faith in American culture since the beginning of the twentieth century; the essays in that volume revealed the pervasive influence of Buddhism in contemporary American literature as well. Indeed, *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* represents the most complete treatment to date of Buddhism in American literature, including discussions of seminal writers of High Modernism such as Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound; innovative treatment of the Beats such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac; and—perhaps groundbreaking for contemporary studies of American Buddhism—analyses of Buddhist principles in literary works by contemporary writers of color, such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Lan Cao, and Charles Johnson.

*American Buddhism as a Way of Life* continues the series on Buddhism culture by examining in wide-ranging essays how Buddhism has been transmitted to America spiritually and materially in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Rather than focus in this volume on cultural practices such as literature, however, we have decided to emphasize how American Buddhism has indeed become a “way of life”—to paraphrase Pierre Hadot, whose title *Philosophy as a Way of Life* inspired our own: American Buddhism is, to draw on Hadot’s eloquence, “a way of life, both in its exercise and effort to achieve wisdom, and in its goal, wisdom itself. For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us ‘be’ in a different way.”<sup>2</sup> Americans typically search for new religious expression, as public opinion surveys repeatedly show. Released in February 2008, the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey conducted by the Pew Forum demonstrates conclusively the strength of American religion;<sup>3</sup> however, the Americans surveyed very much desire, using Hadot’s formulation, to “‘be’ in a different way” from the living styles offered by conventional religions: According to the Pew Report, 44 percent of the Americans surveyed have left their original religious home for another—Buddhism being one of those new residences.<sup>4</sup>

Yet Buddhism’s appeal to contemporary American society is ambiguous and sometimes contradictory: Where does a fashionable and trendy practice of Buddhism end, and where does a serious, committed, and devotional focus on Buddhism begin? In a visit to the local bookstore, one can purchase such titles as *Zen and the Art of Poker* or (perhaps aiming at a more ambitious audience) *Zen and the Art of Anything*. Also, this ancient religion has predictably invaded the Internet; for example, MSN.com offers a site called the Zen Guide

to American Cities, describing primarily vegetarian restaurants, sushi takeouts, health food stores, and massage centers. Part of the success of *The Matrix* films were their presumed basis in Buddhist epistemological principles. To many Americans, Buddhism has become the primary gateway to a meaningful life, an all-encompassing "Way."

To a great degree, then, Buddhism may have been superficially absorbed by segments of American popular culture, and the problem of deciding what is "serious" and what is a passing New Age fad may detract from the importance of the fact that at least a million Americans have indeed borrowed liberally from a wide variety of ancient Buddhist traditions, usually in a genuine effort to seek a new, more satisfying "way of life." It goes without saying that American culture has historically no clear institutional parallel to Buddhism, since the introduction of Buddhism to America has depended upon immigrants: The Buddhist influence is especially striking when we consider the cultural divide that has been traversed. Unlike Asia, America has no millennia-old categories of tradition, myth, and lore that center on Buddhist spiritual and meditative traditions. As the English immigrant Alan Watts writes in his introduction to *The Way of Zen*: "Zen Buddhism is a way and a view of life which does not belong to any of the formal categories of modern Western thought."<sup>5</sup>

On the surface it would seem that the prevailing worldview of the United States is antithetical to a Buddhist vision of reality—with its emphasis on no-self (*anatman*), emptiness (*sunyata*), and dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*). This tension between Buddhist thought and an American culture emphasizing individualism and self-reliance has long been noted and debated. For instance Richard Hughes Seager, in his discussion of the introduction of Buddhism in The World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, asks, "Could the teachings of Buddha about the nonexistence of the self be reconciled with American individualism? Could a tradition emphasizing contemplation thrive in a culture known for its extroversion and activism?"<sup>6</sup>

In spite of its cultural alterity, Buddhism has thrived in America, perhaps partly because many American Buddhists have developed a kind of reciprocity with their faith: as Buddhism changes them, they have changed the faith itself. Historically Buddhism has evolved wherever it has spread, responding as a vital and dynamic religion to local customs and emotional needs. It would be unreasonable to expect forms of Japanese, Tibetan, or Chinese Buddhism—all of which have a millennial lineage in specific cultural environments—to satisfy perfectly the needs of contemporary American Buddhists. And

although the understanding of Buddhism is often characterized by appropriation and misunderstanding, an orientalism usually combined with genuine sincerity, it is fair to say with James William Coleman in *The New Buddhism* that “Western Buddhism is no longer in its infancy, but neither has it reached mature adulthood. Fresh, innovative, and diverse, it still shows a good deal of adolescent awkwardness as well. But like most adolescents, it is easy to see the seeds from which its character is growing and its differences from the parents that gave it birth.”<sup>7</sup>

The contributors of *American Buddhism as a Way of Life* avoid the “mysterious Orient” perspective that has been apparent in the “adolescent awkwardness” Coleman describes, but instead they enthusiastically engage with the various ways Buddhism has become implicated in American culture. As the eleven studies in this volume indicate, the range of social concerns motivating serious American Buddhists to public service and political activism include various areas of community experience and suffering: race, human rights, gender relations and sexual orientation, hospice living and end-of-life decisions, the workplace and marketplace. As Christopher S. Queen writes, “The direction of contemporary Buddhism, like that of other ancient faith traditions, has been deeply influenced both by the magnitude of social suffering in the world today, and by the globalization of cultural values and perspectives we associated with the Western cultural tradition, especially the notions of human rights, economic justice, political due process, and social progress.”<sup>8</sup>

Buddhists of all sorts revere the Triple Gem of *Buddha*, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*, and this volume has taken an organizational cue from the central categories of Buddhism. *Buddha* signifies the effects of the teacher, and the first section of essays in this volume is about teachers. Part 1, *Buddha: The Teacher as Immigrant*, discusses two major influences of Buddhism in twentieth-century America: D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts. David L. Smith’s chapter on Watts focuses on Watts’s “authenticity” as a teacher of Buddhist philosophy: Does Watts deserve an exalted position as a Buddhist thinker and American disseminator? Part of the problem of Watts’s career, as Smith explains, is that Watts organized his beliefs on paradoxes. Watts himself denied his commitment to Buddhist practice even as he practiced Buddhism, and he insisted that he had nothing to teach, even as his followers made him a source of Buddhist teachings. In Smith’s nuanced analysis of the paradoxical nature of Watts’s career, Watts approached Buddhism in a complex, eclectic, though thoroughly modest way. Smith shows that Watts’s ambivalence in defining himself as a Buddhist

and his disavowal of the role of Teacher were both central to his Buddhist principles, which he derived from the paradoxes of both Eastern philosophy and the modern general systems theory of the double-bind. Smith's chapter carefully recuperates Watts's reputation while also explaining why Buddhism—as taught by Watts—was so popular among Americans.

Part 1 also includes two chapters devoted to D. T. Suzuki, another seminal teacher of American Buddhism. Carl T. Jackson surveys Suzuki's entire career, wrestling with the controversy first raised by Brian Victoria and other students of Buddhism: To what extent was Suzuki an advocate of the Japanese military aggression during World War II? Was Suzuki a Nihonist? Jackson presents a balanced account of this controversy, but the reader must encounter the evidence suggesting that Suzuki was at least an implicit sympathizer of Nihonism. Jackson argues that Victoria and other critics may not be accurate in their more extreme arguments insisting on Suzuki's guilt. The next chapter, "My Lunch with Mihoko" by Ellen Pearlman, presents a spirited defense of Suzuki with a personal narrative of her visit to Japan and her lunch with Mihoko Okamura, Suzuki's secretary during the last fifteen years of his life. Ms. Okamura, of course, is predictably fierce in her defense of her former employer, and whether or not readers are persuaded by Mihoko's apologetics, they will enjoy the charm and verve of Pearlman's account of her visit to Japan and her encounter with one of the last living members of what Pearlman calls the "first wave" of Buddhism's transmission to America during the 1950s.

*Dharma* examines the doctrines taught by the historical Buddha and also those developed by later Buddhist traditions; Part 2 of this volume is concerned with doctrinal discussions. *Dharma: Doctrine, Belief, and Practice in America* deals with how Buddhism has been naturalized into ethics and philosophy in modern and postmodern American culture. This section seeks to show how Buddhism's rich tradition of thought on ethics can be employed to address painful and contentious issues that are currently confronting American society; the chapters treat varied topics such as bioethics, racial identity formation, feminism, gay rights, and postmodernist theory. Each chapter demonstrates the way Buddhism extends beyond its own origins, so its ethics may therefore be understood within the context of its contemporary practice. This part is theoretically based, but it also proposes concrete and pragmatic actions a Buddhist might choose to take in American public life. The first chapter in part 2 is Michael Brannigan's "What Can Buddhist No-Self Contribute to North

American Bioethics?" Brannigan acknowledges the seeming contradiction between the American emphasis on individualism as it applies to patient rights, especially as these rights pertain to crucial end-of-life decision-making for the patient and his or her family. During such critical times, Brannigan proposes, Buddhism may provide emotional relief and a spiritual refuge for patients and families who must make difficult decisions. Furthermore, he argues that a consideration of the core Buddhist teaching, specifically the doctrines of no-self (*anatman*) and dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*), within the context of patient rights, may lead to major reassessments of American bioethics. Understanding these doctrines may, Brannigan asserts, result in diminished pain and greater compassion for patients, their families, and the caregivers caught between them. Brannigan's speculative chapter searches deeply into health care and ethics in America.

If Brannigan's essay explains how Buddhism may clarify or expand viable ethical alternatives for end-of-life decisions in America, Rita M. Gross's chapter demonstrates how an equally complex issue, abortion, may be reconceived using Buddhist ethics as a moral framework for the debate. In her chapter, "A Contemporary North American Buddhist Discussion of Abortion," Gross explains how confusion over language in the abortion debate—where "pro-choice" proponents are usually defined as "pro-abortion"—obviates rational thinking. Instead, she recommends the Buddhist virtues of mindfulness and compassion as linguistic resources. Like Brannigan, Gross argues that the doctrine of dependent origination would help clarify the ethical dimensions of the abortion issue, and also that introducing a clearer definition of "life" might help reduce the intense emotions of anger and guilt associated with the abortion debate. Gross's chapter shows that feminism in contemporary American politics is not inconsistent with fundamental Buddhist doctrine.

Judy D. Whipps's chapter, "Touched by Suffering: American Pragmatism and Engaged Buddhism," builds on Gross's chapter by demonstrating that Buddhist principles of compassion and mindfulness have never been entirely alien to American social action. In her discussion of Buddhism, Jane Addams, and the founding of Hull House, Whipps challenges the present-day reader to embrace Buddhist principles, as he or she imagines how best to engage with contemporary political problems and to evaluate the power of Buddhism in dealing with those in prisons, shelters, hospices, and on the streets. Although Buddhism is often considered a quietist religion, Whipps shows how the Engaged Buddhism movement, begun by the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, has philosophical connections with

early twentieth-century American pragmatists such as Jane Addams. Whipps also discovers in the increased practice of ordained Buddhist women a political impact on American political and social practice. Whipps's pragmatic and historical discussion of Buddhism and ethics is balanced by the next highly theoretical discussion of identity and the American self in relation to Buddhism. John Kitterman's "Identity Theft: Simulating *Nirvana* in Postmodern America," which develops postmodern theory, specifically the work of Slavoj Žižek, to interrogate the nature of the "real" in American society from a Buddhist perspective. Kitterman returns the reader to the question of how Buddhism can possibly survive in postmodern American culture. To what extent, Kitterman asks, can Buddhism thrive in a nation that simultaneously seeks the "real" with passion while simultaneously avoiding the "real" through simulation?

*Sangha* has a range of meanings, either referring to the monks and nuns who renounce worldly life to take up the Buddhist way exclusively, or denoting in a much more inclusive manner the community of Buddhist practitioners, whether robed or not. Part 3 of this volume has to do with the social dimensions of American Buddhism. The volume's third part is entitled *Sangha: Who Is an American Buddhist?* It begins with the perennial questions in American Buddhist studies: Who is an American Buddhist? What constitutes the Buddhist life in America? These questions have given scholars of American Buddhism much to think about. In fact, Peter N. Gregory likens answering these questions to the famous Buddhist parable of blind men attempting to describe an elephant: As each man touches a different part of the elephant, a different description of the animal is given—the point being that the subject (who is a Buddhist?) is almost too large to comprehend.<sup>9</sup> Robert Wuthnow and Wendy Cadge have recently taken a very different perspective to this question. Instead of what they term "the strictness hypothesis" of simply counting Buddhists—a controversial project—they recommend "a broader argument about institutional embeddedness"; that is, they attempt to assess Buddhism's great appeal to contemporary Americans and the reasons for it. They write, "Americans' receptivity to Buddhism requires paying attention to the institutions in which Buddhists and Buddhist teachings are embedded."<sup>10</sup> It is in the spirit of Wuthnow and Cadge's essay that the authors of this volume proceed.

"Buddhism," it could be said, is giving way to "Buddhisms": Given the plurality of practices and beliefs, the authors must reformulate definitions and descriptions. One of the foremost experts on the question, Charles S. Prebish begins part 3 by presenting a general



introduction to spiritual kinship in Buddhism in relation to family life. This discussion leads to his speculations about the “ideal” family life in Buddhism, whether of American converts or of immigrant Asians. Because American society brings together the various traditions of Buddhism into a close proximity that was not historically common in Asia, Prebish’s chapter is especially valuable for its exploration of how children are instructed in Buddhism—a study curiously neglected in earlier scholarship. His discussion of the family-oriented Buddhist, then, charts a new direction in Buddhist studies.

Part 3 continues with Lori Pierce’s discussion of Japanese American religious identity in the early-to-mid twentieth century. Pierce’s chapter, “Buddha Loves Me This I Know: Nisei Buddhists in Christian America, 1889–1942,” combines Prebish’s insights on the instruction of Buddhists to their children and the difficulties of reconciling Buddhist belief with an anti-Asian culture at the advent of World War II. As Pierce shows, second-generation Japanese Americans (Nisei) created a new American identity that was based on coordinating the Japanese values of their immigrant parents (Issei) with American cultural and social values such as individualism and freedom of choice. Despite the enormous pressure to reject Japanese values, Pierce shows, the majority of the Nisei remained true to their Buddhist faith. Pierce also connects the myriad philosophical and personal connections that supported American Buddhism in the early twentieth century.

If Pierce’s chapter deals with the oppression of Japanese Americans in Hawai’i after Pearl Harbor, Roger Corless forcefully asks what American Buddhists can learn from the gay liberation movement. “Analogue Consciousness Isn’t Just for Faeries” argues for social engagement by American Buddhists, showing how Buddhism itself could be modified by the principles of the gay pride movement in America. Unfortunately, Roger died as this volume was coming to press, so that he was never able to develop and expand his thoughts on queer theory and Buddhism; nevertheless, this essay is one of his last published works, one he hoped would inspire controversy, speculation, and critical thinking. For Corless, Buddhism as it is traditionally practiced is frequently based on a dualistic worldview, despite the claim that Buddhism is nondualistic. Corless reveals in his provocative analysis Buddhism’s potentially world-denying feature, and the often subtle homophobia concealed in Buddhist practice. As an alternative to this often obscured dualistic practice in Buddhism, Corless recommends Harry Hay’s concept of the “analogue” or “subject-SUBJECT consciousness,” which would allow Buddhism *and* Christianity to accept nonduality in practice, not just theory. Corless intended



his chapter to be speculative rather than definitive; perhaps the best memorial to him would be to consider his argument and respond to the issues in as lively a manner as “Analogue Consciousness” does.

We hope readers will find *American Buddhism as a Way of Life* to be an anthology of diverse and beautiful flowers, and so the volume concludes with an essay on gardening—one which emphasizes the growing centrality of Buddhism in American material and spiritual life. Jeff Wilson’s “‘A Dharma of Place’: Evolving Aesthetics and Cultivating Community in an American Zen Garden,” examines how two very different traditions of Asian Zen spiritualism and American materialism cross-pollinate in the making of the Rochester Zen Center garden. Wilson’s essay shows that the garden’s design expresses an intention to move the Zen practitioner from his or her own personal perspective toward the consciousness of being part of a group. The construction of the center itself thereby reflects the aesthetics and values that the Buddhist community celebrates—interdependent mutuality. Our volume on American identity and Buddhist culture, then, brings together eleven wide-ranging discussions of the intercultural engagement of two seemingly dichotomous worldviews. The contributors to this collection explore this relationship in a manner established in previous scholarship, but also with an enthusiasm for the contemporary synergy created by the potential fusion of American and Buddhist visions.

## Notes

1. Martin Baumann, in “The Dharma Has Come West: A Survey of Recent Studies and Sources,” online at <http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma/survey.html>, writes that in the mid-1990s there were three to four million Buddhists in the United States.

2. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 265.

3. Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” [www.religions.pewforum.org/reports](http://www.religions.pewforum.org/reports). Survey published 25 February 2008 (accessed 21 April 2008).

4. The survey reveals that .7% of those surveyed identify themselves as Buddhist, though as most commentators agree, the actual number of Buddhists is exceptionally difficult to ascertain. See, for example, Peter N. Gregory, “Describing the Elephant: Buddhism in America,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 11:2 (2001): 233–63. None of our contributors attempt to establish the number of Buddhists in America.

5. Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 3.
6. Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 37.
7. James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 217–18.
8. Christopher S. Queen, ed., *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 23.
9. Gregory, "Describing the Elephant," 233–34.
10. Robert Wuthnow and Wendy Cadge, "Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States: The Scope of Influence," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43:3 (2004): 363–80.