

## American Buddhism

Contemporary Buddhism is one of the strongest and perhaps subtlest catalysts for change in United States history, soon to equal, if not surpass, the role of both Christianity and Judaism in the shaping of American religion, philosophy, values, culture and identity—even, perhaps, American politics and economics. It is a new *basso continuo* of change in America, finding expression not only in direct religious practices, but interpenetrating both intellectual and popular culture.

Like one of its central metaphors, the diamond net of Indra, which consists of a necklace of diamonds, each of which is connected with every other diamond, is separate and yet within each diamond is every other diamond, American Buddhism consists of many highly varied *sanghas* (local groups) whose common root is in the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha of 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E. India, and has now interpenetrated every aspect of American culture. It is found in common images in marketing (the Dalai Llama on Apple computer), in music (e.g., Philip Glass, Buddha Bar), in movies (*Seven Years in Tibet*, *Kundun*, *Matrix*; Richard Gere), psychology (the plethora of books on Buddhism and psychotherapy), philosophy (*The Monk and the Philosopher*), science ([www.neiltheise.com](http://www.neiltheise.com), the Dalai Llama's *The Universe in a Single Atom*), education (Naropa Institute, the rise of departments on Buddhism in universities and seminaries), restaurants (Zen Palate), bars (Zen, West Hempstead, NY) and politics (former governor of California, Jerry Brown). Buddhist thought may be found indirectly in some of the

most popular movies such as *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *The Lion King* and *Pocahontas*.

After a growth of 170% between 1990-2001, according to the American Religious Identity Survey, Buddhism has become the fourth largest religion in America with at least 1.5 million members (after Christianity, Judaism and Islam), approximately seven per cent of the population.

Its beginnings, however, were subtle and small.

Buddhism first came to America, as many religions move, through commerce and trade. The first American merchant ship, The *Empress of China*, which reached Canton in 1784, was the first of many American merchant ships, often members of the East India Marine Society, which brought Buddhist statues and artifacts along with silk, lacquer ware, furniture and porcelains back to America.

In literary and intellectual circles, Asian religion appeared in Benjamin Franklin's *Oriental Tale*, in the writings of Joseph Priestley, the letters of John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, and most notably in Hannah Adams' *Dictionary of All Religions* (1817). Dissatisfied with the Christian bias in all the existing reports of other religions, Ms. Adams set about to present other religions in the world in a more objective light. Using a Romanization of the sound of the Chinese character for Buddha, Ms. Adams wrote, "The most predominant sect is that of *Foe*...."

The direct contact with actual Buddhists on American shores came with Chinese immigrants who began to arrive around 1820. Their number increased

considerably beginning with the California Gold Rush of 1849, such that, by 1852, there were some 20,000 Chinese in California. Within a decade, nearly one-tenth of the California population was Chinese. The first Buddhist temple in the U.S. was built in 1853 in San Francisco. By 1875, there were eight such temples. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which forbade the importation of any more Chinese laborers, stalled further immigration from China. Chinese Buddhism remained primarily a practice among the Chinese until the second half of the twentieth century.

Chinese Buddhism has grown enormously in the U.S. in the past fifty years. Largely a monastic group, the “City of Ten Thousand Buddhas” was established by Hsuan-Hua in Talmadge, California in 1959. It continues as the headquarters of the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association. In 1978, the Hsi Lai Temple was established outside Los Angeles. Today there are over 125 Chinese Buddhist organizations in the U.S., and they comprise an eclectic combination of different Buddhist schools, including Ch’an, Vinaya, T’ien-t’ai, Tantra and Pure Land traditions. This eclectic approach may be found also in the Vietnamese Buddhism that came with the many immigrants from the war in Vietnam, and the Korean Buddhists who came in the last fifty years.

It was Japanese Buddhism that, from its first appearance, sought to engage non-Asian Americans. Its arrival may be dated from the *World Parliament of Religions*, which was held in conjunction with the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. Among the participants was Shaku Soen, a Roshi who would return to America ten years later to promote Rinzai Zen Buddhism.

The Pure Land School of Japanese Buddhism sent missionaries, Shuye Sonoda and Kakuryo Nishijima, to San Francisco in 1898, to establish the Buddhist Mission of North America. In spite of the Japanese Immigration Exclusion Act of 1924, by 1931, they had established thirty-three temples.

With the United States' occupation of Japan after World War II, however, a qualitative leap was made by two gifted American soldiers who subsequently devoted their lives to the study and practice of Japanese culture and religion: Philip Kapleau, an American who learned about Zen as a court reporter for the War Crimes Trials, returned to the U.S. to found a Rinzai Zen training center in Rochester, New York; and Donald Keene, who established a department of Japanese Studies at Columbia University.

These efforts by Americans coming back to bring Zen to other Americans were matched by the advent of three Japanese Zen masters: Taizan Maezumi, Roshi, who established the Zen Center of Los Angeles in 1967; Shunryu Suzuki who founded the San Francisco Zen Center; and Soyu Matsuoka Roshi who established the Chicago Buddhist Temple in the Soto Zen tradition. At about the same time, though not an official Zen master, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, through his prolific writings and teaching at Columbia University, made Zen Buddhism well known throughout America, especially in academic circles. Suzuki's work achieved its greatest recognition in his last years in America, 1950-1958. Hakuun Yasutani Roshi, who first came in 1962, brought an integrated approach of both the Soto and Rinzai Zen traditions, as had Taizan Maezumi Roshi.

With the efforts of these teachers, Zen Buddhism sprouted exponentially during the 1960's, as American counter-culture went through a revolution that, through a combination of dissent against the growing war in Vietnam, rebellion against entrenched authorities in both politics and education, the death of God movement, the hippie movement and the experience for many of hallucinogenic drugs with its mind-expanding (and sometimes destructive) effects, opened a path for non-traditional, non-Western religion.

The most recent entry of Buddhism into the United States is the Tibetan. Although there had been Tibetan Buddhist in the U.S. before, the great influx of Tibetans was prompted by the Tibetan holocaust in which Chinese Communists invaded Tibet and tried to extinguish its religion. Many people, including the Dalai Lama, went into exile at that point, to India, Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim and America.

The other Buddhist tradition that has grown considerably in recent years, due to the instability of Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma (Myanmar), is the Theravadan tradition. Because of the influx of immigrants from those countries, many temples have sprung up in major American cities. Like their predecessors from China and Japan in the earliest days, they tend to settle into their respective ethnic communities and focus on the needs of the newly migrated.

Although one may easily discern clear differences in the history and development of the Buddhism that came with immigrants from Asian countries, both recent and distant past, and the history and development of the Buddhism

that grew with primarily Euro-American converts, there are several other developments that resist such a dichotomizing perspective.

While the references to Buddhism's presence in American pop culture above may be superficial ( a designation which post-modernism would not deem negative), there are other developments that suggest Buddhism's influence is a major factor in American cultural change.

1. One of the main conditions that prepared American soil to be receptive to Buddhism was the flourishing of psychology and psychotherapy in the culture at large. Although the number of people who themselves entered into personal psychotherapy might be relatively small, from the 1960's on, the idea that the human mind was largely responsible for how people behave, that that mind was itself highly conditioned (from both depth psychological and behaviorist perspectives), and a source of unknown powers for creative and destruction (the unconscious); and that attention to the mind's assumptions and conditioning could bring healing and transformation, made Buddhism a natural fit, because of the central role of mind in every aspect of the Buddhist quest for alleviating suffering. Buddhism, with its central admonition to look within for the source not only of one's problems and existential questions, but for their resolution, entered American culture like a fish takes to water.

Psychology and Buddhism became twin partners engaged in the process of transformation. The number of books and conferences dealing with them as mutually enhancing as well as significantly different practices is incalculable. It

set the stage for a global, not just American evaluation of the relation between psyche and spirit. Prompted, to take just one example, by American, Japanese and British psychologists, there have now been two International Conferences on Buddhism and Psychotherapy in Kyoto. There are now entire training programs in psychology at Buddhist institutes and universities, and Buddhism has come to be recognized as offering a model of mind that deserves to be included in the curricula of training programs for psychotherapy and chaplaincy.

2. Although Jesuits had been deeply engaged in the study and practice of Buddhism in Japan for hundreds of years, and a Jesuit wrote one of the most comprehensive histories of Buddhism in English (Dumoulin), it is reasonable to say that the birth of Buddhist/Christian dialogue as a mutual exchange between equals, rather than an exercise in polemic or condescension, was prepared in both a broader (larger audience) and deeper (as a dialogue between Buddhist and Christian monks) way by the Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton. Moments before he died in Bangkok, Thailand, ending his only trip to Asia with his talk on "Marxism and Monastic Perspective," Merton urged that the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity be continued across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries. It has been continued since his death through a variety of forms and forums, including at least two events at Merton's own monastery, the Abbey of Gethsemani in Bardstown, Kentucky. The dialogue was broadened to include other Christians and Buddhist groups, and lay people as well as monastics through the Society for Buddhist Christian Services, which holds biannual conferences ever since. The impact of these dialogues continue to shape not

only emerging consciousness among Buddhists and Christians, but has created a much more comprehensive attention to all religions, leading many to prefer to speak of spiritualities rather than religions. Buddhist is thus a catalyst not only for Buddhist/Christian dialogue, but also for religious/spiritual consciousness in American generally.

3. It is perhaps not possible to tell the story of Buddhism's explosive growth among converted Buddhists without a reference to the war in Vietnam in the 1960's and 1970's. Although America was deeply divided by the war and torn apart within over its worth, it unquestionably served to alienate many Americans from everything that was considered to be its cause—the Establishment in political, economic, educational and religious leadership. Among that alienated group, many found common cause and common mind with Buddhists in opposing the war, working for immigration and resettlement of displaced Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians, and conducting campaigns for peace. Led pre-eminently by a Zen Buddhist priest, Thich Nhat Hanh, Engaged Buddhism emerged not only in America but also around the world as an effort to raise consciousness and create change. It is distinctive within Buddhism in its emphasis on taking the personal transformation of consciousness that comes from meditation and reflection and shifting it to social consciousness and action for social change. It continues today as a powerful movement advocating for ecology, education, and political and economic reform, as well as opposing war. It is significant within America especially in offering a uniquely Buddhist approach to consciousness raising and public confrontation, and finds expression through

the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in Berkeley, California and its journal, *Turning Wheel*.

4. The surge in Buddhism since the 1960's happened at the same time as the rise in women's consciousness, the concern for women's rights and the political, literary and economic critique of patriarchy. Unsurprisingly therefore, Buddhism has become not only a catalyst for American change, but has itself been changed by the feminist movement, challenged to look at and change its own long-entrenched patriarchy within Buddhist texts and hierarchies. Among others, Rita Gross and Stephanie Kaza have been on the forefront of integrating a feminist perspective into Buddhist thought and practice from the academic side. Enkyo O'Hara, Joan Halifax, Eve Marko and Myotai Treace, among others, have themselves not only been ordained but received full transmission and authorization to teach, and have developed their own sanghas.

With a critical analysis of patriarchy now clearly on the table of American Buddhism, the questioning of other aspects of patriarchal assumptions continues apace, with respect to understandings of gender identity and sexual orientation. Buddhism shares with Christianity, Judaism and Islam a checkered history of views on homosexuality and transgender issues. As the gay and lesbian (and later, bisexual and transgender) liberation movement followed the civil rights movement for African Americans and the women's rights movement, so Buddhism in America finds itself changing its traditional assumptions about sexual differences (cf. work of Roger Corliss).

These four developments within American Buddhism are not experienced or shared with all Buddhists in America. Some immigrant Buddhists coalesce into islands of self-protected and self-sustaining communities, focused on the preservation of forms of language, culture and religious practice, as they knew it on their native soil. Their children and grandchildren deal constantly with the often excruciatingly complex issues of assimilation and acculturation within America, often setting generations in conflict with severe fragmentation over authority and the challenges of a pluralistic America. We have grown, however, beyond the simple dichotomy of immigrant versus converted Buddhists into much greater complexity.

There are two small examples of what may open in the future: the first is the small book written by Eric Liu, former Clinton speech writer, *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker*. Liu traces in great depth his own struggle as a second generation Chinese to come to terms with his father and the culture his father left behind, forcing the son to forge a new identity and bring his learning into the emerging American culture. This kind of personal reflection is a heart-warming and thought-provoking model of how one might struggle with all the issues of how to reclaim pieces of tradition and bring what remains valuable into the future. The second example is in a course taught by Dr. Paul Knitter, Paul Tillich Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology and World Religions at Union Theological Seminary in New York, called "Double Belonging." Knitter makes the case for people who practice in two traditions and maintain them simultaneously without reducing one to the other, nor rejecting one in favor of the

other. This is one model for how to live between now and some as-yet-undetermined future form.

Although it is not possible to predict how these many movements within and outside Buddhism will affect its future in America, one may safely say that, consonant with the pluralism that pervades every dimension of American life, it may be more appropriate to look for the continuing varieties of Buddhism than to assume any reduction in its complexity. If it so emerges, American Buddhism will thereby be both profoundly Buddhist and profoundly American.

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### **Bio sketch**

Rev. Robert Kaizen Gunn, Ph.D., is Director of Zen at United Church, an affiliate sitting group of the Village Zendo of New York City. He began studying Zen Buddhism over sixteen years ago under Roshi John Daido Looi, and has been studying with Roshi Enkyo O'Hara for the past six years. His middle name, "Kaizen" is the dharma name given by Roshi Enkyo, and means "unfolding Zen."

He has been active in Buddhist/Christian dialogue through the Society for Buddhist/Christian Studies. Most recently he gave a paper at the Second Kyoto Conference on Buddhism and Psychotherapy in Japan, on "Two Arrows Meeting in Mid-Air: Self and No Self in Buddhism and Psychotherapy." He is the author of ***Journeys into Emptiness: Dogen, Merton and Jung and the Quest for Transformation***. Paulist Press: 2000.

He is a psychotherapist with a private practice of psychotherapy in Manhattan, and is a lecturer in Psychiatry and Religion at Union Theological Seminary. He is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and is currently pastor of the United Church of Rockville Centre, Long Island. He has served churches in Maine and Massachusetts as well as New York.