

The Emergence of American Buddhism

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I can hardly imagine speaking on any topic either more ambiguous or more exciting than the emergence of American Buddhism. Of course, some of you may even wonder if there is an American Buddhism, or if there are not instead several traditions of Asian Buddhism in America. That is the key question, and I hope that it will be answered in the course of my remarks today.

I've been following the development of Buddhist thought and practice in this country since the middle 1960's when, as a college student, I took a course on Chinese and Japanese art. My interest in Buddhism began with that course and has grown to encompass more and more of my life in the succeeding twenty-five years. I've watched what began as a tradition of Asian immigrants take root in California among non-Asians and begin to develop its own forms. I've wondered about some of those forms and have over the years taken my concerns to various authorities in the Buddhist tradition for discussion.

In 1983, while interviewing His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I asked him for his thoughts on the development of American Buddhism. I asked, "Where will the Western Buddhism come from? How long will [it] take to grow?" Would it "... evolve out of the hearts of the practitioners in conjunction with the [teachers] that come to the West?"

He said, "... we may need Western Buddhism, European Buddhism or American Buddhism ...," and he said that he thought "... the effort of combination is necessary. From the Tibetan side, there is the teaching, sharing experiences. Then from the Western side, mixing together the teaching or the Tibetan experience and their own experience, and putting them together.

... it might need some of their own experimenting ... these things will not come as a revolution, but come as an evolution ... without sort of a pre-plan; nobody can make a plan, Of course, we need sincere effort, sincere motivation. Then I think that some kind of shape will come." (*J. Transpersonal Psych.* 1984, vol. 16, no. 1)

His Holiness' thoughts validated some of my observations over the years. I thought it important that he, in fact, did suggest that there might be a unique American Buddhism developing. This suggests an answer to the long-term question of whether there will be an American Buddhism, or whether, as an alternative, there might be some Asian forms of Buddhism in the United States. On the other hand, it does not mean that there might not be both! In fact, I suspect that this will be the case, and I will explore some of what the interconnections of the two might be during my remarks today. I will, however, primarily be focusing on the development of something new, "American Buddhism," rather than on Asian forms of Buddhism taking root in America.

I also thought it important that His Holiness saw the process of development of American Buddhism as a gradual one, combining elements of American culture in the process of the unfoldment and development of this American Dharma. I had been wondering if perhaps some sort of tremendously charismatic teacher would be required, but His Holiness instead suggested that a natural development coming out of the intersection of cultures would be expected.

Beginning from the perspective of His Holiness' comments, I would like to pursue these kinds of ideas today, first reflecting on my own observations of some aspects of the American

encounter with Buddhism and finally giving a brief consideration to a possible role for the Pure Land traditions of Buddhism in the unfoldment of American Buddhism.

As I mentioned a few minutes ago, my initial interest in Buddhism developed out of my experience in a class on Chinese and Japanese art. I took the class because I was fascinated with Zen style landscape paintings, and this fascination developed out of my experiences traveling in the Sierra Mountains and Rocky Mountains. But the key point here was not my experience *per se*, but that it was by no means unique for the times. The late 1950's and early 1960's were a time when many Americans were gaining a broader intimation of the depths of Japanese culture. The conclusion of the second World War had created a situation in which differing cultures were directly exposed to each other. Thus, as the early countercultural movement of the "beatniks" arose in the U.S., it had cultural models other than European to engage. The arising of "beat Zen," as Alan Watts termed it, whatever its distortions of Japanese Zen, did, at any rate, bring an awareness of some kind of Buddhism into the general American mind.

If we look at "beat Zen," we find some clues to the initial influences on the emerging American Buddhism. Now you may consider it rash to refer to "beat Zen" as an early form of American Buddhism, but I believe that it was. I say this because the phenomenon was uniquely American, and because it was a style or type of interpretation of Dharma unlike anything to be found in Asia. In particular, it stressed the unconventional and "spontaneous," and looked to ancient Zen masters for support of modes of anti-establishmentarian behavior and in reaction to the norms of American life which were considered oppressive.

The general outlines of what followed in the American interest in Asian religions is known to us all and need not be repeated here in depth. However, I would like to highlight some specific points which I believe will have lasting importance for the development of American Buddhism.

As you know, a key issue in the 1960's was a seeking for alternatives to the excesses of American culture. This was a continuation of the tone set by the beat counterculture. College educated Americans at the time were exploring alternatives to their culture which were stimulated by a revulsion for American imperialism and racism both in the Southern United States and in Viet Nam. The general revulsion was not merely negative, however, because people were influenced by a sense of alternative possibilities. College courses in anthropology and psychology (especially the human potential movement) created this sense of alternate possibilities both for society and for the person. In particular, the broad teaching of cultural anthropology to college students eroded notions of American superiority by exposing students to other cultural ways of "being in the world" which were taught as being neither better nor worse than our own, merely different. This created an intellectual base which would be fertile soil for new social movements. Add to this the experimentation with drugs, and alternative American culture exploded in a variety of directions.

Buddhism was drawn into this explosion of experimentation. Interest was generally pragmatic, focusing on practice more than theory. The forms of Buddhism implicated were broad, including Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, as well as Theravada and Pure Land forms. Though many Americans began to practice various types of meditation, an important additional factor entered the process, and that was the great number of Americans who began to travel abroad "seeking" teachings and teachers. Among this group were a number with sufficient dedication to enter monasteries and nunneries.

This general countercultural social phenomenon attracted the interest of psychologists, and during the 1980's a new factor entered the process of developing American Buddhism: the psychologists. As the human potential movement embraced meditation, a growing number of psychologists began to practice meditation. Journals

were founded to disseminate studies about meditation and altered states of mind to psychologists, and as a result, a new kind of perspective on Buddhism began to arise among professional segments of American society. This is an important, and I believe, overlooked point. When some numbers of psychologists began to validate meditation as not being merely self-induced trance, and validated Buddhist psychology as being a system of considerable profundity, the country generally could no longer dismiss Buddhism as simply a strange foreign religion. In fact, the concern expressed by fundamentalist Christians is an indication of the fact that the Dharma had gained not only some popularity, but a kind of respectability in sections of the academic establishment, making it a real threat, of a sort, to fundamentalist Christians.

This brings us to 1990. Again, I would like to highlight some key elements affecting the current picture. One is the emergence from the monasteries and nunneries of Americans who have been practicing for 10 to 20 years. These people are sophisticated about the Dharma, and can teach it in America in a language and context which is accessible to Americans and free of many of the problems of speaking across cultures, problems which have hampered Asian teachers. Unlike the situation in past decades, these people are now met by more mature lay American practitioners. There is now a body of students who have been practicing and studying Buddhist thought for twenty to thirty years. Many of these lay practitioners have become relatively sophisticated in their understanding, if not always their practice, because of the burgeoning numbers of English translations of Buddhist sutras and commentaries by professors of Buddhism in the universities. This is another key development, for many of the classics are now available in readable English, with excellent commentaries in English by American professors of considerable understanding and experience with practice. And finally, there is the ecological crisis which is now upon us, and there is evidence

of an emerging movement which could be called "Green Buddhism."

Here, with Green Buddhism, for me, the story folds back upon itself, and I believe, suggests to us the next significant development in the emergence of American Buddhism. With the publication of books such as *Dharma Gaia* I find the circle completing itself. What was the appeal of a new aesthetic (for me, of landscape painting) is now becoming insight into a whole new mode of relation to the environment. Where the excesses of American culture were, in the 60's, seen in the domain of politics and imperialism, I believe that in the 1990's they will be seen in the domain of ecology. Where in the 60's and 70's individual interest was very inwardly turned toward the self (often narcissistically), in the 90's I believe that it will, of necessity, be outwardly turned as a diseased environment presses for attention.

What will be the key features of Green Buddhism as it emerges in the next decade and intertwines with past developments?

Where previous American interest in Buddhism was on emptiness and meditation, in the 90's I believe it will focus on the flip-side of emptiness, that is, on dependent origination or interconnectedness. And I believe that with the American sense of social conscience and idealism, this will have implications for social action. Where in the past few decades attention was focused on freeing the individual through meditation, I believe that in the 90's attention will expand to healing the environment and our fellow beings. If I am correct in this assessment, then a general reconsideration of the Bodhisattva Vow within the context of teachings on interconnectedness will of necessity supplant a practice of meditation which merely seeks individual salvation. And here is where Shin Buddhism may have a special contribution to make. To explore this contribution requires that I magnify my focus on a certain element of the vision of the future I have proposed. This element is time; in fact, a new sense of time.

A reading of American history indicates that Americans have rarely thought about much more than the immediate future. For the most part, people think about the limits of their own lifetimes; occasionally they think about their children's lifetimes. However, our government and corporations rarely think far into the future. In many corporations five years is considered long-range planning. But the ecological crisis is forcing us to think in much longer periods of time. Whether it is chemical pollution that we fear, or nuclear waste pollution with a lethal life of a quarter of a million years, Americans must more and more consider the effects of their actions on the unborn generations which will be the grandchildren of their grandchildren's grandchildren. And even this is too short a span. Be that as it may, it is more and more recognized and supported by the scientific establishment that unless we act in the present with future generations in mind, there will be no future generations.

This is a radical shift in perspective. It highlights the fact of our interconnectedness, that we must think about future beings each time we drink from a plastic bottle, each time we dump a plastic bag, and each time we consume a kilowatt of nuclear-generated electricity. In fact, what is *pratīyasamutpāda* but a recognition of this kind of interconnectedness?

Now, as each of us takes a breath, we must consider how much less healthful that breath is because of our auto exhausts, and thus we cannot hide from the fact that each of us is polluting the air each of us needs for our life each time we drive a car. What is this if not *pratīyasamutpāda*?

Those of you familiar with the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh are familiar with this form of Dharma. Joanna Macy has linked this teaching with a perspective she calls "deep time," a sort of non-Buddhist language for Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching. By this language we would say that not only do our actions affect our fellows of today, but they affect our fellows of tomorrow. Thus, by this

route, it is seen that socially responsible action must take future beings into account. How does this differ from the Bodhisattva Vow?

Though each of us may not vow to save all beings from samsara, yet, as we act in an ecologically responsible manner within the context of deep time, we are in fact acting for the benefit of unborn generations. This sort of action, as it becomes more widespread, even outside Buddhist communities, will set the stage for people to have a deeper capacity to understand the Bodhisattva Vow. For it is a mere split hair between beginning with actions for the ecological benefit of future generations and ending with a realization that the source of ecological problems is not chemicals or radiation; those are the symptoms. Rather, the source of the problems is the ignorance and hubris which builds nuclear generating stations without worrying about how to dispose of the nuclear waste. When ignorance is seen as the source of the danger to future generations, then the ending of ignorance will be seen as the source of security for future generations. Then the split hair dividing the way of the bodhisattva from the way of the socially and ecologically responsible citizen will disappear, and the Mahayana way will be seen as the quintessentially socially responsible way.

When we see our current dilemma as caused by ignorance and seek to save both ourselves and future generations from the products of that ignorance, then we will develop a new appreciation for the vows our ancestors took to save us from our own ignorance. And here will be fertile ground for Shin Buddhism, and indeed all the Mahayana schools, for I believe that only our faith in the power of the great bodhisattvas and their concern for us as the unborn generations of their future will sustain us in our time as we effectuate our concern for those as yet unborn generations of our future.

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