

Forum: Diversity and Divisions in America Buddhism

INTRODUCTION BY CHARLES S. PREBISH



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Although the counterculture of the 1960s inspired much interest in Zen and the various Tibetan Buddhist traditions, by 1975 there were no more than several hundred thousand Buddhists in North America. Most of them belonged to either Buddhist Churches of America, a series of predominantly ethnic communities in the Japanese Pure Land tradition, or the then-titled Nichiren Shoshu of America, popular with so-called American converts and composed largely of women and minorities.

If we fast-forward to the turn of the century, most reasonable estimates cited between four and six million Buddhists in North America. Fueled by the 1965 change in American immigration law, there was a huge influx of Buddhist immigrants from war-torn Southeast Asia. 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.

Scholars and practitioners trying to understand the Buddhist movement in America have, at various times, developed typologies to explain the diverse forms of Buddhism that were developing. This task was complicated by the fact that in many major American cities and communities, virtually all of the Asian Buddhist cultures and sectarian traditions were present simultaneously, sometimes even in the same neighborhood. Some researchers (myself and Paul Numrich) postulated “Two Buddhisms,” composed essentially of Asian-immigrant Buddhists and American-convert Buddhists. Others (Jan Nattier) suggested “Three Buddhisms”: elite Buddhism, evangelical Buddhism, and ethnic Buddhism. More recently, Martin Baumann argued for “traditionalist” versus “modernist” Buddhism. Other terms, such as “cradle Buddhists” and “nightstand Buddhists,” also appeared. Each of these typologies and labels had supporters and detractors, and each, to some extent, worked well as a description for a particular time and circumstance.

Typologies, however, are never set in stone.

Today, Buddhism in America is incredibly diverse and no longer seems to fit into the neat typologies of previous decades. With many Chinese and Japanese families now in their fifth and sixth generation on American soil, “ethnicity” no longer works as an explanatory term for understanding differences in Buddhist practices and communities. American Buddhism, if there is such a thing, is maturing in a continual process of formation and change.

Moreover, as the study of Western Buddhism has developed into an exciting subdiscipline of the larger field of Buddhist studies, more fieldwork projects are revealing just how diverse Buddhist communities are becoming. New researchers like Jeff Wilson and Wendy Cadge are finding that the newest buzzword in American Buddhism is “hybridity.” Unlike the older “parallel” communities, in which two groups—one Asian and one convert—occupied the same temple, newer Buddhist communities are developing that bridge both sectarian and ethnic lines. Thus it is no longer unusual to find meditation groups in Pure Land temples and intra-religious dialogue groups in previously convert temples.

Our panelists provide an interesting mixture of old and new, male and female, meditation and faith, scholarship and practice in American Buddhism. As they explore the issue, they show that communication and dialogue—Buddhist ecumenism—seems to be replacing the isolation that previously characterized individual Buddhist groups. Buddhism has only been on the North American continent for about 150 years, and it’s still in what Richard Seager called the “heroic age,” marking the beginning of the various communities. Seager points out that “even the most ardent Americanizing convert stands only a step, perhaps two, removed from an Asian teacher, who probably arrived here as an immigrant.” So while we recognize that the immense diversity in American Buddhism provides many challenges, it reflects the nature of America itself.

Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, California.



Buddhist Faith Fellowship gathering in Middletown, Connecticut.

BUDDHADHARMA: Does an ethnic divide exist in Western Buddhism?

DUNCAN WILLIAMS: Yes of course there is a divide, and that's quite natural. There are many divisions between Buddhist groups in North America, and these divisions are not just on ethnic lines. There are many traditions of Buddhism, and styles of practicing Buddhism, as well as countries of origin.

The ethnic makeup of a Buddhist temple or community might be predominantly Thai, Japanese, Sri Lankan, Caucasian, or mixed. If we think of Christianity in America, we could ask the same question. There have been Irish Catholics, Swedish Lutherans, Russian Orthodox. They're all Christian, but they come out of different religious lineages as well as countries of origin, and they bring with them all the things that go with that—language, culture, and so forth—which always creates a certain kind of division. It's not unique to Buddhism.

SOCHO OGUI: We are all very different, and have very different backgrounds, so of course there is a divide. Yet I think we are all working toward enlightenment awareness. The divide—between traditional and non-traditional or Americanized and non-Americanized—should not be personal. This is a very Buddhist principle. We can see and enjoy our unique differences.

For myself, I am making an effort to make Jodo Shinshu, or Shin Buddhism, a major religious tradition in America. We have our unique differences from other groups, but at the same time, we are working to be part of the dynamic Buddhist movement in America today. To do so, we may have to change a lot of things but also maintain the best of our tradition, the uniqueness of the tradition.

When I came over in 1962, it was such a shock to see how things were done in the Buddhist Churches of America, so different from what I had experienced in Japan. I was almost going to give up and go back home. The different lifestyle, culture, and language seemed more than I could overcome. But I met Shunryu Suzuki Roshi at the BCA bookstore, and I started going to Soto Zen meditation at Sokoji Temple, and that encouraged me to stay. Before that, my eyes had been more concentrated on the movement of the community and the society, but I did not pay attention to myself and allow myself to sit down and settle.

WAKOH SHANNON HICKEY: The tendency to talk about American Buddhists as either “ethnic Buddhists,” which is usually code for Asian-American or Asian-immigrant Buddhists, or “convert Buddhists,” which is usually code for Caucasians, is problematic. As Duncan was implying, we don't think of African-American Christians as ethnic Christians; we think of them as Christians first, and then

PHOTOS (LEFT TO RIGHT): DON FARBER; ELI WILLIAMSON-JONES

Members of the Los Angeles Sangha Council gather to celebrate the Buddha's birthday.



“For the first time in the history of Buddhism, we have this multiplicity of traditions in one place at one time. We can choose to be grateful about that or we can consider it a problem.”

— Duncan Williams

maybe as Baptists or some other denomination. There is also ethnic diversity among convert Buddhists that is overlooked by using the “ethnic” label. Such categorizations also disregard people like Duncan, who are of mixed parentage.

There are simply too many kinds of Buddhists and too many diverse communities to fit neatly into categories. That said, there are some important differences that we ought to take seriously in how the various communities function and the roles they play in people’s lives.

RON KOBATA: The differences among the various practitioners of the Buddhist path in America are nothing more than a reflection of the unique character of America itself. The key thing about our differences is that we *are* different. No more than that. Historically, Buddhism developed in more or less homogenous societies and cultures and was first brought here as so-called “baggage” with our ancestors. Now, Buddhism of all kinds is going through a process of adapting to the unique multicultural circumstances of America, just as Buddhism has always done through its 2,500-year history. It adapts to the host culture—in this case, one that is extremely diverse—in order to make dharma meaningful in today’s context for as many types of people as possible.

BUDDHADHARMA: Wakoh was talking about African-American Christians being considered Christians first. Do most American Buddhists think of themselves first as part of a large community of many types of Buddhists and then as part of a particular tradition, or the other way around?

DUNCAN WILLIAMS: That distinction arises apart from anything to do with ethnic versus convert, or

whatever you choose to call it. There tends to be devotion to one teacher or lineage first, before one feels commonality with people of other lineages. For some Buddhists, that’s very important. In other denominations, that is less emphasized, but it is not about ethnicity. It’s about practice.

WAKOH SHANNON HICKEY: I do think there’s an unfortunate human tendency in religions for people not only to be committed to their own religion but also to think that they have the one truth above all others. Self-righteousness feels so satisfying. We all like to belong.

I’ve certainly heard various kinds of Buddhists try to talk about pure or essential Buddhism. Even within various traditions, people will speak of what they’re doing as the purest form, such as saying that the essence of Zen is zazen, to the exclusion of other aspects of the tradition. As Reverend Kobata said, Buddhism is always changing and adapting according to time and place. For anyone to think they possess the one true thing perhaps reflects a lack of awareness about the broad and diverse history of the Buddhist tradition.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS: The question is, how can one have a healthy attitude about the preferential veneration of one particular lineage and at the same time respect that other people have their own way of approaching Buddhism? We know that all Buddhists are trying to tackle a common problem: how to alleviate suffering. Some people do it through devotion to a particular buddha or bodhisattva, other people may practice meditation, other people may practice chanting, and other people may venerate or study texts.

The Buddha taught many different things, and in the history of Buddhism, Buddhists have come

up with many different ways to alleviate suffering. The challenge today, as Buddhism continues to spread in the West, is to come up with a way to respect that other people have interesting, valid, appropriate approaches that may not work for us but may be a wonderful Buddhist path for them. Being a good Buddhist doesn't require me to think of my tradition as especially true in comparison to others. It can be true and appropriate for me, and I can approach the paths of others with respect and curiosity.

One of the fascinating things about America is that, for the first time in Buddhism's long history, we have many lineages and traditions next to each other and sometimes in dialogue with each other. At times they may not be in dialogue with each other, but they may all be on the same street. You may have a Thai Theravada temple, and just down the street a Tibetan one, and then a Vietnamese one. For the first time in the history of Buddhism, we have this kind of diversity and multiplicity of traditions in one place at one time. We can choose to be grateful about that or we can consider it a problem.

SOCHO OGUI: Since we are not perfectly enlightened yet, each of us needs some kind of pathway, like a stream or river, to carry us. Each path needs to be based on the Buddha, dharma, and sangha, and especially a realization of dharma, for which you better have some kind of teacher. There are 84,000 paths, and each stands on the Buddha, dharma, and sangha, so each path is respected. As we go through each unique path, we can go beyond even Buddhism, and our stream can lead into the great ocean and become one taste alike. But we all need some path to go through, just like we would with any field we enter in this world.

Does this Japanese wisdom work? Sometimes I speak very strange English, so you better be careful and don't believe it too easily.

BUDDHADHARMA: Very strange English can be very helpful sometimes [laughter].

You have all discounted the term "ethnic Buddhism" as inappropriate and also called into question the notion of a divide to some extent. Yet we know that members of communities sometimes view other Buddhists with at least skepticism. How do BCA members and the hierarchy regard other forms of Buddhism or other Buddhist groups?

RON KOBATA: I obviously can't speak for the whole hierarchy or membership, but I don't think in general that we have, within our tradition, the notion of having a monopoly on the truth. The spirit that Socho Ogui was conveying is pretty representative of our tradition, even though we have the Japanese term, Jodo Shinshu, which means "true sect of the

HOW WE SEE EACH OTHER

Wendy Cadge explores how members of two very different American Theravada communities—Wat Phila in Philadelphia and the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center—see each other's practice.

To fully understand how people at Wat Phila and CIMC understand their personal practices, it is helpful to listen to what they say when they describe each other. White Buddhists have been quoted as saying that Asian Buddhists do not practice. What they mean when they say this is that Asian Buddhists do not meditate, because for many white Buddhists, as evident at CIMC, Buddhist practice equals, or at least starts with, formal sitting meditation. Bob, a practitioner at CIMC for several years, told me in an interview that "Buddhism is meditation." Jack Kornfield writes, "I saw that the majority of Buddhists in Asia do not actually practice. At best they go to the temple devotionally like Westerners go to church. They go once a week to hear a sermon or a few moral rules or to leave a little bit of money to make some merit for a better rebirth in the next life." This emphasis on meditation as the core of Buddhist practice for laypeople, as articulated by Kornfield here and at CIMC, is new and developed in America.

Practitioners at Wat Phila are generally quiet about the activities of white Buddhists. Many say that all Buddhists are the same but occasionally express genuine puzzlement at the activities of white Buddhists. "It seems pretty much lately that more and more people are interested in Buddhism," Noo, a middle-aged Thai engineer, told me over lunch, "but most of the time I can see that they are modifying it [from] the real Buddhism.... Some of them like meditation, so they just chose that part, the meditation. But if you do the meditation and you say 'I am a Buddhist,' you're not a total Buddhist you know.... It's like halfway. Just like when you go to school to learn to be a programmer, you can't say, 'I'm a computer engineer.' You're just a programmer." While people at Wat Phila recognize what white people are doing as meditation, some view it as only one of the practices central to Buddhism.

White practitioners' attitudes toward Thais' practices were evident one evening when I was driving home from CIMC with a friend after a meditation class. We talked about a Thai temple in Boston that I had visited the Sunday before and she had visited some weeks earlier as part of a Buddhism class she was taking.

"We met the abbot and he showed us his path for walking meditation outside; it was just beautiful, that he can walk there between the trees," she told me.

"What about the laypeople?" I asked. "How do they practice?"

She seemed a little confused at the question. "They mostly seemed to be practicing generosity through dana," she told me. "They come and cook and serve the food."

"So this is their practice?" I asked.

She was silent for a few moments and then spoke carefully, reflecting on the time she spent working as a cook at a Buddhist retreat center. "Yes, I guess that could be their practice. When I was working at IMS [Insight Meditation Society], cooking was a large part of my practice and the teachers worked with me a lot around that." Considering the cooking done in Asian temples as part of Buddhist practice was a stretch for my friend, who, like many at CIMC, view practice as starting on the meditation cushion.

From *Heartwood: The first Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America*, by Wendy Cadge. Published by University of Chicago Press.

pure land.” In America, we have a history of being a minority group and a minority religion, so we have a tendency to be more humble. We’re not so inclined to have a presumption about having any kind of predominance.

SOCHO OGUI: Yes, many Japanese-Americans who experienced World War II were subject to a great deal of discrimination and segregation. To a certain extent, Shin Buddhism in America is tied up with that identity, and that presents a great challenge in trying to make Shin Buddhism a major tradition here. Despite these problems, I always emphasize that in America each culture and race is very well respected. When we identify as Buddhist followers, we have to go beyond our ethnic boundaries.

WAKOH SHANNON HICKEY: Even though I am suspicious of talking about an “ethnic divide” per se, I recognize that there is discriminatory thinking that’s embedded in a history of Asian exclusion and anti-Asian violence, including the internment of the Japanese during World War II. That history is part of a karmic legacy that we’re still having to work through. I’ve definitely seen white convert Buddhists look down their noses at so-called ethnic Buddhism and arrogantly dismiss it as merely “cultural.” From the other side, for folks who have been on the receiving end of discrimination and hostility, there’s some understandable ambivalence to try to bridge what divides us as fellow Buddhists.

As Americans and Buddhists, we need to look at issues of power, privilege, violence, and how those of us in the dominant culture have benefited from privileges afforded us, to the detriment of others. It’s hard to do that. It’s easier to gloss over such things and think we are not part of them. We’re not going to really deeply understand our fellow Buddhists or bridge some of the painful gaps unless we’re willing to do the hard work and introspection that our practices are very good at encouraging us to do.

RON KOBATA: Part of our resistance to expanding out, as an ethnically oriented institution historically, subconsciously comes from wanting to maintain control of our own situation. Being subjected to prejudice from a dominant culture has inclined many of us, particularly from our older generation, not to want to relinquish power within our institution by inviting people from non-traditional backgrounds to take part.

The example of the Sokoji Temple in San Francisco comes to mind. When Suzuki Roshi was here, he had to make a deep personal decision between maintaining the ethnic sangha that he was serving versus branching off with a new group of

convert Buddhists. When he decided to branch out, that was a very major change in American Buddhist history.

BUDDHADHARMA: It seems only natural, and probably healthy, that people who were in a minority and oppressed in various ways would want to have a religious/cultural/social tradition that provided a refuge for them. That was certainly the case with many immigrant Catholic communities, for example, in the major cities of North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

WAKOH SHANNON HICKEY: African-American churches provide another potent example of that.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS: If we talk about immigrant Buddhists or immigrant practitioners of any faith, there’s a first generation that behaves in one kind of way. Once you have people born in the new country, things start to change quite a bit. By the time you reach the fifth or sixth generation, as we have in many religious communities in America—including some Buddhist communities that have been here for over a hundred years—it’s a much different picture.

It’s quite important, when looking at that timeline, also to recognize the history of these Americans’ religious life and social life. Most of the Asian-immigrant Buddhist groups have faced challenges that convert Buddhists never faced: exclusion acts, the internment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans, temples that couldn’t incorporate unless they had white board members, racist land-ownership laws that prevented Asian-Americans from owning the land to put a temple on, and so on. It’s quite remarkable that these people remained Buddhists.

There is still an underlying assumption in this country that to be a true American, you need to be white and you need to be Protestant. There are still lingering elements from the American nativism of the turn of the twentieth century. If you aren’t white, you need to act white to be American, and if you don’t convert to Protestantism, you need to try to become as Protestant as possible, even if you’re Jewish or Buddhist, which is why so many Japanese-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and Korean-Americans converted to Christianity.

For those who did not convert to Christianity, there is deep resistance to the notion that to be a good American, you have to be Christian and white. At the same time, everyone in this country who’s a Buddhist is a fellow minority. It’s not the norm to be Buddhist in this country like it is in some countries, so there’s a way in which people can cooperate to take refuge together in the Buddha, dharma, and sangha, whatever the history of the community you come from.

I’ve definitely seen white convert Buddhists looking down their noses at so-called ethnic Buddhism and arrogantly dismiss it as merely “cultural.”
—Wakoh Shannon Hickey

(Opposite)
The late Ven. Thich Thien-An and students at the International Buddhist Meditation Center in Los Angeles.

WAKOH SHANNON HICKEY: When I first started practicing Buddhism, it was in a BCA church. I was very warmly welcomed by people there, but I had had very painful experiences with Protestant Christianity, so the pews and the hymn singing and the style of worship, if I may use that term, were in some ways too familiar and something I was trying to get away from. What I didn't realize was that those adaptations were a response to racist persecution, an attempt to not look so different from the dominant culture, to ease the pressure on the community. Coming to understand that history really changed my understanding of that kind of practice and my own feelings about it.

SOCHO OGUI: I understand what Wakoh Sensei is saying. Even today, we still use the word "church" instead of "temple." That originally started so that someone could say they were going to church this coming Sunday, which was very important for Japanese-Americans of a certain time period. When I first came here, I could not understand the hesitations and intimidations, the fact that people could not identify themselves as Buddhists at their school. It takes enormous effort to go beyond such deeply ingrained hesitations. We still call it the Buddhist Churches of America, but the time has come to review that kind of thing and to begin to encourage people to stand on their feet and confidently introduce Shin Buddhism to the world.

RON KOBATA: This was all part of the Buddhist process of adapting to a host culture. We wanted to look less alien. We were affected by the McCarthy era too. As I was growing up, I was reluctant to acknowledge I was Buddhist. It was still seen as pagan. But as I look at my children and succeeding generations, it is different for them. Perhaps we can attribute it to the influence of convert Buddhists and to the Dalai Lama's influence. To say you're a Buddhist now has a certain kind of sophistication, a positive image. That is the result of convert Buddhists, who on the whole are educated, thoughtful, and socially upper-middle class. The fact that people in the dominant culture are acknowledging Buddhism, and the value and the treasure of the buddhadharma, makes it easier for us traditional Buddhists to feel good about being Buddhist.

BUDDHADHARMA: Duncan pointed out that the term "American" can carry a lot of baggage. What does that say about the notion of "American Buddhism"?

DUNCAN WILLIAMS: If we use American in the limited way I was talking about before, we find that American Buddhism can be defined as white

WHOSE AMERICAN BUDDHISM?

From an historian's point of view, says Richard Seager, it's too soon for any group to define or lay claim to American Buddhism.

During the 1980s, some observers began to use the phrase "American Buddhism" to denote expressions of the dharma that developed among converts in and around the 1960s counterculture and were shaped by subsequent events in the 1970s and '80s. The phrase was meant to convey the idea that converts' innovations were giving rise to uniquely American forms of Buddhism that could claim normative status and be understood as the wave of the future. At about the same time, others deliberately began to use the phrase "Buddhism in America" to convey the idea that there are many expressions of the dharma in this country, some associated with immigrants, others with converts, but none that can be characterized as normative. This difference in emphasis reflects a running debate over which group can legitimately claim to carry the standard for the dharma in the United States, a question that refers to the distinctly different claims of Americanness converts and immigrants can make. Converts often believe that their experience as native-born gives them a uniquely American perspective from which to interpret the dharma. Advocates for the immigrants tend to point to the centrality of the immigrant experience and its importance to the nation's religious history as a different, but no less valid, claim to Americanness.

Given the extraordinary diversity in the worldwide Buddhist community and the amount of time needed for any religion to take root in a new culture, I think that it is premature to announce the establishment of a unique, authentic form of American Buddhism. Writing as a historian rather than a partisan in current debates, I am most interested in the long-term challenges involved in building viable forms of Buddhism, whether among converts or immigrants. Observing the current vitality of the American Buddhist landscape, I often wonder how it will change, even within the next thirty years or so, as some forms continue to thrive and others fall by the wayside. All the groups under consideration...have successfully negotiated the problems of becoming established. But they now face new challenges to their survival over the long haul, be these rooted in economic considerations, leadership and succession issues, or in keeping and replenishing their membership. The definition of American Buddhism will be determined by those forms that survive the winnowing process that can be expected during the early decades of the twenty-first century.

From *Buddhism in America*, by Richard Hughes Seager.
Published by Columbia University Press.



THE NEXT GENERATION

Sumi Loundon explains how young American Buddhists are crossing the ethnic-convert divide.

I recently attended a Jodo Shinshu Friday evening service, attended by older Japanese people. The monk from Japan, in long black robes leading the service, closed with a metta meditation that had the flavor of a yoga technique, though he just called it meditation. I asked him after the meeting if this practice was native to his tradition, and he replied that he actually picked it up through living in New York City. He felt it helped the parishioners focus on the other aspects of the ceremony, such as the bells, chanting, and the dharma talk, because they were more focused and relaxed. It was surprising to see a fairly traditional group casually bringing in a distant Buddhist cousin from a non-Mahayana lineage...

There is now a substantial generation of Asians who have lived most of their lives in America, gone to school with non-Asians, and know English fluently. Young non-Asian Buddhists today attend colleges and live in dormitories with a high proportion of Asians in a way that the older generation did not... [and] there is a small but substantial group of non-Asians who have also “inherited” Buddhism as kids. Likewise, there are some Asian-Americans who have converted to Buddhism.

In my view, there is a tremendous amount to be gained if young Buddhists can continue to cross the divide between so-called convert and ethnic Buddhisms. Young Asian Buddhists have said that Buddhism in Asia has gotten too heavy with tradition and isn't evolving to the immediate needs of modern people rapidly enough. Similarly, it seems that Buddhism is losing its appeal to many young Asians in the West, many of whom like to attend Christian church with their friends. Non-Asian Buddhists say that they feel like the Buddhism in America doesn't have enough tradition or institution to sustain families, social needs, and communities in the long term. Some aren't happy with just meditation in meditation centers; they also want chanting, monks, child care and education, potlucks, community outreach, and so on. If the two sides begin to take steps to visit with one another, then there may be a refreshing exchange of ideas and support that may not be generated if the communities continue to develop separately.

From *Blue Jean Buddha: Voices of Young Buddhists*, edited by Sumi Loundon. Published by Wisdom Publications.



Vietnamese Buddhist Temple, Los Angeles.

Buddhism; in fact, given that it comes from the post-World War II generation, it tends to mean white countercultural Buddhism. It's about the rejection of something in their culture. Why, for example, does this brand of American Buddhism need to be rational? It needs to be rational because Christianity is seen as irrational. On the other hand, it often rejects priestly forms of Buddhism and is more individualistic, which is very Protestant. It's also very non-institutional, which is a certain strand of Americanism.

If these characteristics are used to develop our model for American Buddhism, then I don't think we will end up with a very helpful umbrella. I think it's better to think about American Buddhism as being in a continual process of formation that includes the type of Buddhists that have been around for a hundred years and those for whom Buddhism is not necessarily counter-cultural.

If we think of the people in the Vietnamese-American community today or the Cambodian-, Laotian-, or even Japanese-American communities, Buddhism might be actually a somewhat conservative element in their respective communities. I think of the Japanese-Americans who served valiantly in Europe in World War II. The majority of those people were Buddhists. They put Buddhism on the map even in an institution as conservative as the American military. There was a “B for Buddhism” campaign right after the war, to have that put on soldiers' dog tags. These people are a very good example of a racial minority that is clearly American, served the American nation, and were also clearly Buddhist.

So there is a thing called an American Buddhist that's not white countercultural and does not reject clergy or ritual. For American Buddhism to have a positive meaning, it has to include a much wider range of people, which may not be quite so simple. For example, the Vietnamese-American Buddhists in Orange County are probably the most Republican-voting group in this country. American Buddhists are both liberal and conservative and include people from all kinds of different political, social, and economic backgrounds. So let's have a broader and more open definition of American Buddhism. To uphold American Buddhism as a countercultural movement is not an ideal that we should strive for.

RON KOBATA: I will add, though, that I was part of the sixties generation, and some of us felt we had to try to Americanize our church, in the sense that we saw American as being less feudalistic than we perceived the institutional traditional church as being. We were looking at the term “American” in its more democratic sense, the sense of equality, creativity, and so forth. That was part of what you would call our countercultural experience.



Karma Triyana Dharmachakra, Woodstock, New York.

BUDDHADHARMA: It wasn't just a matter of adapting for protective reasons as existed in the earlier history of the BCA, but this was a situation of evolutionary and even revolutionary change for you.

RON KOBATA: For some of us, Ogui Sensei was in the vanguard of that movement overall, but some of us definitely saw ourselves as part of the sixties generation. Americanizing Buddhism meant making it more relevant. We were also pretty arrogant.

BUDDHADHARMA: Would you say that there is some tension in the BCA now about its future direction?

SOCHO OGUI: Of course, but these are good, positive tensions. For the first time in our history, the president of the BCA is Caucasian. In Spokane, Washington, as the Japanese-Americans aged and began to fade away from the community, the leadership did not include any Japanese-Americans. Even though some object, I remind people that we are living on the soil of the United States of America and we need to be understood by the majority of people here.

WAKOH SHANNON HICKEY: We have to take care when it comes to ritual forms and try to truly understand their significance. Some converts to Soto Zen, for instance, think in terms of getting rid of what they consider the cultural baggage of Zen and sticking to the pure essence. I've come to think about that differently over the years. The ritual forms are not simply cultural; they are themselves the form of training, the pedagogical method.

Some people also dismiss certain groups and traditions as cultural Buddhism, focused on devotional practices and rituals. But they tend to overlook, or treat lightly, rituals such as the morning service in convert Zen centers around the country, which involves devotional practices, prostrations, chanting, offering incense, and other forms. American Buddhism is not separate from so-called "cultural Buddhism."

BUDDHADHARMA: Traditionally, churches have provided a much broader array of services and methods of observance for people than many American Buddhist groups, which see themselves as meditation centers aimed at personal practice. Traditional

Suzuki Roshi had to make a deep personal decision between maintaining the ethnic sangha that he was serving versus branching off with a new group of convert Buddhists. When he decided to branch out, that was a major change in American Buddhist history.

—Ron Kobata

churches, including many in the Buddhist world, offer rituals and rites of passage such as weddings and funerals; religious practices that range from silent reflection to singing, chanting, and movement; social events; and pastoral care, such as caring for the sick, elderly, and those in crisis. Have some Buddhists rejected religiosity and cultural practices to such an extent that they have cut themselves off from the fuller role that spirituality can play in people's lives?

DUNCAN WILLIAMS: The question here is how do we transmit Buddhism and what is it that we are transmitting? Sometimes Buddhism is best transmitted in strict, formal, highly controlled ways. At other times, it can be most powerful in an informal and subtler vein, like a mother saying something to her child that may not be scriptural but is a Buddhist teaching nonetheless.

Sometimes it's best transmitted ritually, and with music. It can be transmitted in a temple, a cave, or a family room. Some things cannot be learned in a meditation center or transmitted in a program. We should be glad we have the full range of transmission here in America. There is a lot we can all learn from the larger Buddhist culture.

WAKOH SHANNON HICKEY: I would like to add that Buddhism can also be transmitted in nonreligious ways, and even in therapeutic ways, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. The program may seem individualistic, but I have noticed that many people who go through this eight-week training find themselves wanting community afterward. A seed gets planted in somebody who might otherwise not be interested in Buddhism. I am at times concerned, though, that in presenting Buddhism outside the tradition, something might get lost in translation.

SOCHO OGUI: Since there is no end to how much sitting you can do, I think those who have been sitting enough should stand up, walk into the community, and work for the people. They can teach in schools and activate the Buddhist teachings in their communities and societies. Better to not just keep sitting.

RON KOBATA: Today, the responsibilities and expectations of Buddhist priests in the BCA are quite different from what is expected from priests trained in our Shin tradition in Japan. As a result, when they come here we have to put them through a reorientation, a minister-training program. They have to expand their understanding of their role and what is expected of them as American Buddhist priests. They are often under the impression that we're simply maintaining a tradition, whereas over the course of a century in this country, we have developed something new. We're not essentially ritual-

ists and performers of ceremonial functions. We are much more pastoral. We do not have a feudal relationship. Members are not blindly obligated to support us. We're kind of like employees, serving the goodwill of our members, including what Socho was just talking about. We are obligated to reach beyond our members to share the dharma with the larger community. Buddhism can play an important role, providing an alternative view to the fundamentalist orientation that is the dominant cultural presumption in this country.

WAKOH SHANNON HICKEY: In the American Soto Zen Buddhist community, we have also been discussing the way clergy are prepared, because as Ron was saying, what is expected of clergy in this culture is different than in some of the Asian Buddhist cultures. We need to prepare clergy to be more pastoral and to meet the diversity of people and diversity of need we encounter in American culture.

Perhaps the most American characteristic of American Buddhism is that it's diverse. In the Buddhist community at Duke University, we have Caucasian, African-American, and Latino folks, most of whom were raised Protestant and got interested in Buddhism later. We have international students from Buddhist countries who are cradle Buddhists. We have international students who got interested in Buddhism after they came to the United States. It's not a simple picture.

BUDDHADHARMA: What you all have pointed to in various ways is not so much a divide in Buddhism in America as a tremendous diversity, which can be regarded as richness. But of course, as you have noted, there are still prejudices, some quite deep-seated. Are there things that Buddhists and Buddhist groups should do in an effort to take part in the larger Buddhist community and share in the richness of each others' heritage?

SOCHO OGUI: In Los Angeles and San Francisco, we are very active in the Japanese and American Buddhist Federations. This fall we are going to begin trying to organize a national Buddhist council, which would bring together all the different types of Buddhists in the United States and create something very beneficial for the nation and the world.

RON KOBATA: The BCA has also been invited to sit on a committee to organize a conference in 2008 under the topic of race and ethnicity in American Buddhism, which should be very similar to the discussion we're having. Representatives of all the various traditions are coming together to address these kinds of concerns.

WAKOH SHANNON HICKEY: In addition to having a very diverse group of Buddhists, and even non-

Even today we use the word "church" instead of "temple." Originally that started so someone could say they were going to church on Sunday, which was very important for Japanese-Americans during a period when they were too intimidated to identify themselves as Buddhists.

—Socho Ogui



(Top) Members of the Village Zendo, New York City.

(Bottom) Temporarily ordained monks from the Vietnamese Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles.

Buddhists, participating in our group at Duke, we are also part of an intra-Buddhist group of people involved in various kinds of prison ministries, so we can meet the needs of Buddhist inmates and Buddhists who volunteer to serve inmates in North Carolina prisons.

DUNCAN WILLIAMS: I think we need more activities that are in the spirit of this conversation. It may be that we will have more councils and other kinds of formal settings for intra-Buddhist interaction, but more basically, we need to get to know, to engage in dialogue with, and to appreciate and learn from our Buddhist neighbors. Our own Buddhist tradition provides us with imagery that can inspire us, such as the jewel net of Indra from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*: the universe is made of an infinite number of jewels extending in every direction, and each of these jewels is connected in a massive net, and each jewel reflects all of the other jewels. We need to recognize our interconnectedness as Buddhists in this particular neck of the woods called America. At a simpler level, we need a spirit of neighborli-

ness. Our neighbors may have very different ways of doing things, but we can all get along.

WAKOH SHANNON HICKEY: That reminds me of some advice that Thich Nhat Hanh has given to people who are interested in Buddhism. He tells them if you're raised in some other tradition, don't move off your roots too quickly. There is definitely value in going deeply into a particular tradition—studying it and practicing it deeply and wholeheartedly—instead of taking a smorgasbord approach, tasting a little of this and a little bit of that. At a certain point, though, going deeply into a particular tradition opens one to other traditions and enables one to make connections to other people from a deeply rooted place. To use another common Buddhist image, if we plant our roots deeply, we can let our branches spread.

SOCHO OGUI: Let's keep doing this kind of work, so we can build up our interrelationships and understand that we are different streams that end up alike in the ocean of dharma. **BD**