

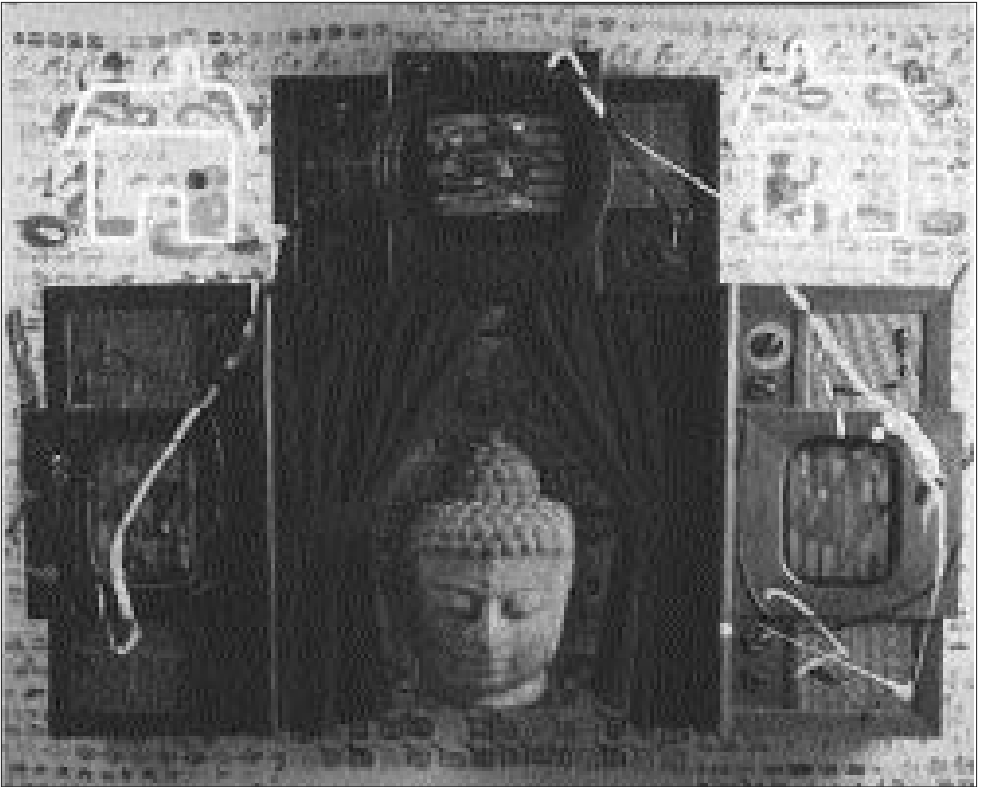
Buddhism Comes To Main Street

by Jan Nattier

Buddhism is big news in America these days. Whether through a *New York Times* article carrying the Dalai Lama's latest remarks or a CNN spot on a political fund-raising scandal at a Taiwanese branch temple in Los Angeles, whether by seeing Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* or following Tina Turner's life story in *What's Love Got to Do With It?*, Americans have become more aware than ever before of something called "Buddhism." But it is not only as interesting bits of cultural and political exotica that Buddhism has entered the American consciousness. Increasingly, Americans themselves are becoming Buddhists. Though precise statistics are impossible to come by, according to most estimates between one and two million Americans now consider themselves practicing Buddhists.

American Buddhists are a far from homogeneous lot. The austere minimalism of a Zen meditation hall contrasts starkly with the riot of color in a Tibetan Buddhist center, and the mostly Caucasian crowd of baby boomers arriving for a talk on meditation at a Vipassana center outside San Francisco bears little resemblance to the multigenerational gathering of Thai Buddhists assembling in Chicago for a celebration of the Buddha's birth.

And there are conflicts, as well as contrasts, within Buddhist America. Like many other religious groups, Buddhists frequently find themselves divided by class, culture, or ethnicity. At an outdoor lecture by a famous Vietnamese monk, three Asian-American friends cluster together, feeling the not altogether friendly stares of the mostly Caucasian (and overwhelmingly vegetarian) crowd as they try to enjoy their hot dogs and potato chips. At a small Japanese-American Buddhist church, the parishioners chafe at the identity of the new minister appointed to serve them: a Caucasian man in his thirties, who converted to Buddhism only 10 years before. The differences



Homeless Buddha (1992), by Nam June Paik

can be fundamental. Writing in the Buddhist journal *Tricycle*, Victor Sogen Hori describes how, at the conclusion of a week-long Chinese-style Zen retreat he attended, the white American and ethnic Chinese Buddhists offered profoundly different views of their experience. One Chinese woman broke down in tears as she described the deep sense of shame and repentance she had felt over her selfishness. Her white American coreligionists were often impatient with such sentiments. These participants, Hori writes, “spoke uniformly of how the long hours of meditation had helped them get in touch with themselves . . . and assisted them in the process of self-realization.”

How, then, can we get our bearings in this new and confusing territory? For Americans, especially those raised as Christians, doctrine might seem the obvious place to start. Yet there are relatively few propositions that would be accepted by members of all Buddhist communities. That a person known as the Buddha had an experience of “enlightenment,” that we live not once but many times, and that our karma (which simply means “actions”) will have an effect on us in the future, are all ideas that would be accepted by most Buddhists. But beyond this minimal consensus, differences emerge almost immediately, including disagreements over such fundamental matters as which scriptures are really the word of the Buddha.

Buddhist practices are diverse as well. While one group views medita-

tion as essential, the next insists that Buddhahood is accessible only through recitation of a certain mantra, and a third considers ritual empowerments by a guru to be required. Watching elderly Buddhists reverently offering small gifts of money or food to the Buddha in hopes of achieving a better rebirth, one realizes that in still other groups enlightenment, at least in this life, isn't the issue at all.

With some persistence, though, we can identify a few major fault lines within Buddhist America that can serve as basic points of orientation. First is the obvious distinction between those who were born into the faith and those who have become Buddhists by conversion. That the majority of "hereditary Buddhists" are Asian Americans is hardly surprising. Some observers have even argued that the fundamental divide within American Buddhism is a racial one, separating "white" and "Asian" practitioners.

The distinction is real, reflecting the perennial gap between the enthusiasm of the recent convert and the calm assurance of the hereditary believer as well as differences in cultural heritage. Yet recent converts to Buddhism are by no means all Caucasians. The membership rolls include African Americans and Latinos, as well as a few Asian-American "re-converts" who were raised in Christian or in nonreligious homes. To make sense of the landscape of Buddhist America, one must go beyond race and ethnicity to consider an entirely different factor: the ways in which these various forms of American Buddhism were transmitted to the United States.

Religions—not just Buddhism—travel in three major ways: as import, as export, and as "baggage." (They may also be imposed by conquest, which, happily, is not a factor in this case.) Religions transmitted according to the "import" model are, so to speak, demand driven: the consumer (i.e. the potential convert) actively seeks out the faith. "Export" religions are disseminated through missionary activity, while "baggage" religions are transmitted whenever individuals or families bring their beliefs along when they move to a new place. It is these divergent styles of transmission, not matters of doctrine, practice, or national origin, that have shaped the most crucial differences within American Buddhism.

To begin with the import type, consider a hypothetical example: a college student living in the Midwest in the 1950s finds a book on Zen Buddhism in the public library and thinks it's the greatest thing he's ever heard of. So he buys a plane ticket, heads off to Japan, and begins to study meditation in a Zen temple. After several years of practice and some firsthand experience of Buddhist "awakening," he returns to the United States and establishes a Zen center, where he begins to teach this form of Buddhism to other Americans.

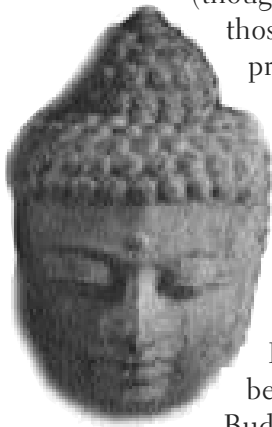
The important point to note here is that the importer (in this case, the

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college student) deliberately seeks out the product and takes the initiative to bring it home. But for this to happen, two crucial resources are required: money and leisure time. Buddhist groups of the import variety, in other words, can be launched only by those who have a certain degree of economic privilege. And not surprisingly, in these groups (as in other voluntary associations), like attracts like. Thus, the upper-middle-class status of the founders tends to be reflected in their followers, with such communities drawing a mostly well-educated, financially comfortable, and overwhelmingly European-American constituency.

A convenient label for the groups formed by the import process, then, would be “Elite Buddhism.” But this kind of Buddhism is more than a matter of socioeconomic background. At first glance, the groups belonging to this category would seem to span the full spectrum of Buddhist traditions: there are a number of schools of Tibetan Buddhism, various centers teaching meditation practices known as Vipassana (drawn primarily from Southeast Asia), and Japanese, Korean, and Chinese varieties of Zen. Yet a closer look reveals that what these groups all have in common is far more significant than the divergence in the sources of their inspiration. For the very names of two of these three types (Vipassana and Zen) mean “meditation.” On the level of practice, then, the most striking feature of Elite Buddhism in America is its emphasis on meditation.

Meditation is, of course, part of the traditional repertoire of most (though not all) Asian Buddhist schools, at least for those who have undertaken a full-time monastic practice. What is distinctive about Elite



Buddhism, however, is not its heavy emphasis on meditation but its scanting of other aspects of traditional Buddhism. For example, though monasticism has been the central Buddhist institution (and monastic life considered an essential prerequisite to enlightenment) in the vast majority of Buddhist countries, Elite Buddhists have been largely uninterested in becoming monks or nuns, preferring to see their Buddhist practice as a way of enhancing the quality of their lives as laypeople. While traditional

Buddhists have spent a great deal of energy on activities that are best described as “devotional,” Elite Buddhists, many of them still fleeing the theistic traditions of their youth, have little patience with such practices. And while codes of ethics have played a central role in traditional Buddhist societies, they have had little appeal for Elite Buddhists, many of whom were drawn to Buddhism by what they saw as its promise of a more spontaneous life. Indeed, until fairly recently, when scandals involving sexual affairs and financial mismanagement in several American Tibetan and Zen communities forced some serious rethinking, ethical codes were given almost no attention in Elite Buddhist circles.

Elite Buddhism thus represents not simply an Asian religion transplanted to a new environment but a curious amalgamation of traditional Buddhist ideas and certain upper-middle-class American values—above all individualism, freedom of choice, and personal fulfillment. These “non-negotiable cultural demands” have reshaped Buddhist ideas and practices in significant ways, yielding a genuinely new religious “product” uniquely adapted to certain segments of the American “market.”

The “export” process of transmission has produced American Buddhist groups of a strikingly different type. Because the transmission itself is underwritten by the home church, the potential convert does not need money, power, or time to come into contact with Buddhism of this sort, only a willingness to listen. Encounters with a missionary may take place on a street corner, in the subway, or even in one’s home. Export religion is thus something of a wild card: it can attract a wide range of adherents, or it may appeal to no one at all.

Since what fuels the formation of Buddhist groups of this type is energetic proseletyzing, an appropriate label for such groups is “Evangelical Buddhism.” And one Buddhist organization in America, above all, fits this category: the Soka Gakkai International. This group (whose name means Value-Creating Study Association) began its life in Japan in the 1930s as a lay association devoted to spreading the teachings of the Nichiren Shoshu school. According to this school (one of the many strands of Mahayana Buddhism), all beings have the potential for Buddhahood, but this inherent Buddha-nature can only be made manifest through chanting of the mantra “*namu myoho renge kyo.*” These words—which literally mean “homage to the *Lotus Sutra*,” one of the most popular Buddhist scriptures in Japan—are believed to be powerful enough not just to change the practitioner’s spiritual state but to improve his or her material circumstances as well. The Soka Gakkai, in other words, teaches a form of Buddhism in which both material and spiritual happiness can be attained not through many lifetimes of strenuous practice, or even weeks or months of meditation retreats, but through the daily recitation of a simple phrase.

Both the simplicity of the practice and the fact that this form of Buddhism addresses economic as well as spiritual needs has meant that the Soka Gakkai, from the time of its arrival in the United States during the 1950s, has had the potential to appeal to a very different, and far less privileged, audience than the Elite Buddhist traditions. Unlike the latter—most of whose members are college educated, with many holding graduate degrees—only about half of Soka Gakkai members have attended college, and barely a quarter hold bachelor’s degrees. Statistics compiled by the Soka Gakkai itself show a wide range of educational levels and occupations; my own observations suggest a center of gravity in the lower-middle class.

But it is in the ethnicity of its members that the distinctiveness of the Soka Gakkai is most obvious, for it has attracted a following that

includes large numbers of Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans (not all of Japanese ancestry). According to a 1983 survey compiled by the organization itself, fully 55 percent of its members had non-European ethnic backgrounds.

The fact that Evangelical Buddhism has undergone fewer changes in America than Elite Buddhism is the direct result of its mode of transmission. Because the Soka Gakkai was established by missionaries accountable to the home organization, its Japanese leadership has been able to limit the extent of its adaptation to American values. Indeed, one former member remarked that the only real difference between the American and the Japanese Soka Gakkai is that members in America usually sit on chairs.

Yet the remarkable success of the Soka Gakkai in the United States—at one point the organization claimed a membership of 500,000, though even Soka Gakkai officials now admit this figure was far too high—would not have been possible if its values had not harmonized with the aspirations of the audience it addressed. In particular, the Soka Gakkai has been able to tap into the “American dream” of upward mobility, a dream that has often been difficult to realize for those who find the obstacles of racism and exclusion in their path.

Finally we come to the category of “Baggage Buddhism”—though perhaps we should have begun with this type, for here at last we meet with Buddhists who were simply born into the faith of their ancestors. Like Export Buddhism, this type involves travel to America by Buddhists from Asian countries, but the migration is not for religious purposes. Instead, these Buddhists (or their ancestors) came as immigrants to the United States to pursue



Members of the Soka Gakkai attend a regular gathering in Philadelphia.

economic opportunity, or, especially in the case of recent refugees from Southeast Asia, to escape persecution at home.

Baggage Buddhists span the full range of schools and national origins, ranging from Theravadins from Cambodia to Mahayanists from Korea to Kalmyck Mongols of the Vajrayana school. But to the outsider, these organizations display remarkable similarities. Above all, they tend to be deliberately monoethnic in membership at the outset, for they serve not only religious purposes but operate as supportive community centers as well. Such temples may provide language lessons, a place to network for jobs, and above all a place to relax with others who share one's own cultural assumptions and to whom nothing needs to be explained. Though all Buddhists (of course) have their own ethnicity, it is only in Buddhist groups of this type that ethnicity serves as the primary defining feature. This type can therefore be labeled "Ethnic Buddhism."

Buddhism in America, at this stage in its history, thus includes participants of three quite different sorts. But though all would call themselves Buddhists, communication across (or even within) these three categories is often difficult, even nonexistent. Within the Elite category we do find considerable exchange; it is not at all unusual for participants to move easily from Vipassana practice to Tibetan Buddhism to Zen. Yet Elite Buddhists do not accord the same acceptance to members of Evangelical and Ethnic Buddhist groups. Since they do not practice meditation—so the reasoning goes—members of these two latter groups cannot be considered "genuine" Buddhists.

Such exclusion-by-definition has not, needless to say, been viewed kindly by those who are excluded—especially the Ethnic Buddhists, whose roots in the faith usually are many generations deep. But it is not only Elite Buddhists whose map of the Buddhist world renders other practitioners invisible. Evangelical Buddhists, too, operate on the basis of a narrow definition of "true Buddhism" (their expression), considering both Elite and Ethnic Buddhists to have missed something essential since they do not practice the chant taught by the Soka Gakkai. Ethnic Buddhists tend, in general, to be less critical of their coreligionists, in large part because they have not abbreviated the spectrum of "real" Buddhism so severely, retaining as they do a broad range of the moral, meditative, and ritual practices that were current in their homelands. Ironically, though, these Buddhists have little incentive to communicate with other Ethnic Buddhist groups, precisely because part of their mission is to preserve their own distinctive culture.

Even when attempts to cross the boundaries dividing these groups are made, the results can be discouraging. When Americans of non-Asian descent are drawn to Ethnic Buddhist temples, for example, the result is often what Paul Numrich of the University of Illinois calls, in *Old Wisdom in the New World* (1996), "parallel congregations": rather than merging to form a single organization, Asian and

non-Asian American Buddhists have often found their visions of Buddhism to be so incompatible that they simply meet at separate times in the same building.

Given these deep rifts within American Buddhism, we might well ask whether any of these subgroups will succeed in becoming a permanent part of the American religious landscape. For Ethnic Buddhists, the question is the one faced by all immigrants: will our children follow in our footsteps? For earlier generations of Asian immigrants, the value of remaining members of a religion viewed as “deviant” by mainstream society was not at all self-evident. Of the roughly 500,000 Japanese Americans in the United States today, for example, fewer than 20,000 are registered as members of the Buddhist Churches of America, the largest Japanese-American Buddhist organization in the country. The vast majority of Japanese Americans have either become Christians (virtually all of them Protestant) or claim no religious affiliation at all.

Things may be different today. Though Buddhists, especially Asian-American Buddhists, still encounter hostility and even violence in some parts of the country, the very fact that Buddhism is now relatively well known in the United States—and even carries, in some circles, significant prestige—may mean that more recent Asian Buddhist immigrants will view their ancestral religion as an asset, not a liability. So far, though, the evidence suggests that this may not be enough to stem the tide of religious assimilation. Ironically, recent Asian immigrants seem to be converting to Christianity (and increasingly its evangelical forms, as Stanford University religion professor Rudy Busto observed in *Amerasia Journal* last year) as rapidly as European Americans are becoming Buddhists.

For Evangelical Buddhists, the greatest challenge may arise not from circumstances in the United States but from events in Japan. In 1991, after years of wrangling between the Soka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, the Soka Gakkai was formally excommunicated by its parent organization. The real sources of the conflict appear to lie in a struggle between the priesthood and the lay organization for financial and political control, but each side has portrayed the dispute as resulting from the religious heresy and moral corruption of the other. The Soka Gakkai has attempted to take the rhetorical high road, likening its separation from the priesthood to the Protestant Reformation, but it remains to be seen whether its membership will find this representation convincing. While the American organization still seems viable, a serious decline in the number of subscribers to the organization’s weekly newspaper (which in recent years has dipped below 40,000) suggests that the schism may have dealt it a painful blow.

The Elite Buddhist groups, by contrast, would seem at first glance to be in good health: major bookstores offer entire shelves of publications on Tibetan Buddhism, Vipassana, and Zen, and mainstream

newspapers and magazines frequently carry articles on the subject. So thoroughly do Elite Buddhist concerns (such as “engaged Buddhism,” much of it the result of Western social activism exported to Asia and subsequently re-exported to the West) dominate the media’s picture of Buddhism that these groups often appear to be the only game in town.

Yet Elite Buddhist groups have one striking demographic peculiarity: virtually all of the communities now in existence were formed by people who came of age during the late 1960s and early ’70s, and members of succeeding age cohorts have joined in much smaller numbers. If such communities do not succeed in attracting younger members (and in retaining the children of the first-generation converts), they will soon fade from the American religious scene.

History offers American Buddhists a chastening lesson. During the 1890s, the United States experienced a “Buddhism boom” not unlike that of today. The *New York Journal* reported that “it is no uncommon thing to hear a New Yorker say he is a Buddhist nowadays,” the historian Thomas Tweed writes in *The American Encounter with Buddhism* (1992). A number of Protestant ministers worried in print that their congregations might be attracted to this strange faith. Public interest was strong enough to provoke the *Atlantic Monthly* to run a feature article titled “The Religion of Gotama Buddha.” Yet by the early 1920s the boom was over, and Buddhism became all but invisible in American life save for a handful of Asian-American congregations.

If today’s American Buddhists are to avoid the fate of their predecessors of a century ago, they must accomplish two things. First, they must move beyond the concept of Buddhism as a matter of individual “religious preference,” grounding it instead in the everyday practice of families and larger social networks. Second, they must create sturdy institutions to take the place of today’s informal associations of like-minded practitioners. In dealing with the first necessity, Ethnic Buddhists, who have always seen their religion as a family affair, are clearly in the lead. The Evangelical Buddhists, with their ready-made organizational structures imported from Japan, may well have the edge in establishing institutions.

Ironically, it is the Buddhists we hear the most about in the American media—the Elite Buddhists—who have so far attracted the least diverse membership, and thus have the greatest challenges to overcome if they are to survive into the next generation. Yet each of the main branches of American Buddhism clearly has much to learn from the others if all three hope to continue to flourish on American soil.