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TJ McDonald

University of Central Arkansas

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TJ MCDONALD

TJ McDonald is an undergraduate at the University of Central Arkansas, majoring in Religious Studies and minoring in History.

In 2010, he was named the 2009–2010

Religious Studies Student of the Year at his

university. He is currently doing research

with Dr. Jim Dietrick on the influence of

Asian religious and philosophical traditions in

children's entertainment in the West, in addition to his thesis, which is concerned with "homegrown" American religious traditions, such as the Nation of Islam and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and what their backgrounds reveal about the religious environment of the United States. He plans to pursue Religious Studies in graduate school with an emphasis on religion in America.

TJ McDonald

AMERIYANA: THE WESTERN VEHICLE OF THE BUDDHA DHARMA

America is firmly steeped in the Christian and European-centered traditions of the past, leaving little room for any outside traditions that do not fit into that mold. However with the 19th century introduction of Buddhist culture, America began to welcome different traditions and saw its European-centric culture change. The changes were not one sided, however, as Buddhism also began to adapt to a Christian society with ideals different than those of its nativity. With the insertion of Buddhist tradition into American culture, there has been a vast change both in the host culture, as well as among the Buddhist immigrant community.

HISTORY OF BUDDHISM, A BRIEF SKETCH

To understand the evolution of Buddhism in America, we must first understand the history of the tradition in Asia. Buddhism began with the awakening of Siddhartha Gautama in sixth century B.C.E. India. The Pali canon, the earliest Buddhist texts, comprises the teachings of Siddhartha, early reports of his life, as well as accounts of how he achieved enlightenment. The Pali Sutras describe Siddhartha as a young prince who was to become either a great king or

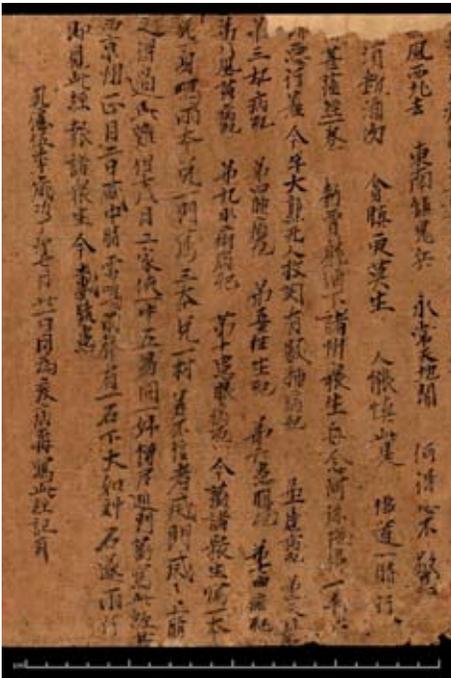
a great sage, depending on the path he took in life.¹ His father sought to keep him from anything that would frustrate his royal life or lead him into the life of a mendicant. This endeavor was successful until the young prince took a chariot ride through the royal park and encountered various forms of suffering, namely old age, sickness, and death. As he pondered the way all humans suffer these things, he developed a compassion for others that led him to leave home and become an ascetic wanderer on a quest to find “unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled, unexcelled security from bondage – nirvana.”²

The Buddha’s awakening to *Dharma*, the ultimate truth of life, came after several disappointments in monastic schools. He received ascetic training and practiced such self-depravations as suppression of breath and extended fasting. It was only when he practiced meditation while sitting under the Bodhi Tree that he reached enlightenment and decided to teach.³ Using *Upaya*, or skillful means, Siddhartha formulated the Four Noble Truths that teach the Dharma in a simple and clear form. His method was effective for five wandering ascetics who immediately converted to Buddhism and set out to teach the Dharma to others. When the Buddha had amassed a group of approximately 60 devout monks, he sent them out as missionaries. These missionaries quickly gained converts who desired to



Crowned Buddha Shakyamuni (Siddhartha Gautama), 11th century, India, Bihar (Asia Society Museum, New York, New York).

1. John S. Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism* 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson, 2008), 9.
2. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 26.
3. Strong, *Experience of Buddhism*, 22.



Sutra for the rescue of all living beings from suffering and calamity, Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, Gansu Province, China, ca. 967 CE (The British Library, London).

be ordained to the monastic life. This led to the development of the *Sangha*, or the order of ordained monks or nuns.

Over time different Sanghas assembled and were scattered throughout India. As they grew, they gradually began administering various practices and teachings. The different schools shared the Pali Sutras, which contained teachings on the *Dharma*, and teachings of discipline, or *vinaya*. As these communities grew apart, they developed differing views on the *vinaya*. Traditionally, it is said that there were eighteen schools, though only the Theravada school survives today.⁴ A new form of Buddhist school began to develop and emerge in the sixth century C.E. Mahayana Bud-

dhism came to be seen as a separate and distinct school of thought from the early schools. The break between Mahayana and the early schools happened over a long period of time, and as a result of many innovations. Buddhists began to study the *bodhisattva* path. During this time of study, some decided to abandon the striving to become an *arhat*, or an enlightened one, in favor of the goal to reach the status of Buddha instead. In the late sixth century, a group of Buddhists began to claim they had a faster, more direct path to achieving enlightenment. These were the Vajrayana Buddhists. Vajrayanists believed that by using ritual means taught by an enlightened guru, one could escape suffering and reach enlightenment faster than with Mahayana or the early schools. With missionary zeal, Buddhists shared their

4. Jas. Burgess, ed., "The Eighteen Schools of Buddhist Thought," April 2002. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/journals/ia/18sb.htm> (November 14, 2009).

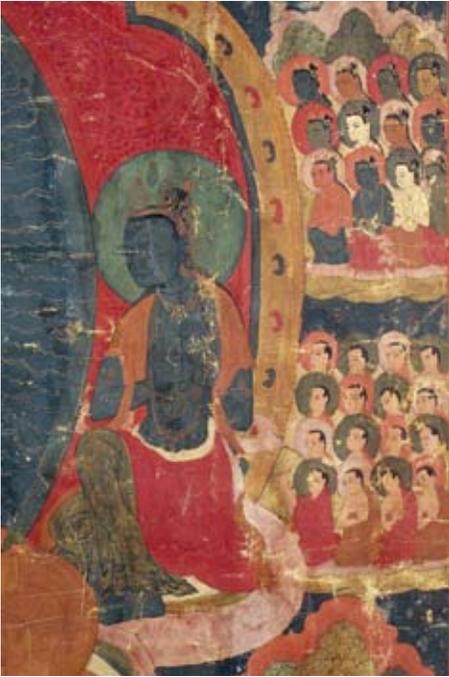
beliefs and Buddhism spread beyond its Indian roots.

Buddhism quickly began to grow and adapt to the changing Eastern world. It found wide acceptance in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand. These cultures were then searching for answers to the same questions that caused the rapid growth of Buddhism in India. The introduction of iron and writing into cultures often resulted in rapid, and even severe, social change; and these cultures entered a period of transformation, from tribalism to unification. The elevated civilization of Buddhist India entranced these areas.⁵ But, when Buddhism entered China, these changes had already occurred. China already had an advanced civilization, so it seemed less susceptible to the spell of Buddhism. Gradually, the tradition began to gain acceptance as it blended with indigenous Daoism and Confucianism. Buddhism also started to gain power as rulers began to request monks perform rituals on behalf of their countries. As these rituals were deemed effective, the tradition would gain traction on a larger scale.

Eventually, two forms of Buddhism became popular, which catered to the casual and illiterate practitioner. These two are known as Pure Land Buddhism and Ch'an Buddhism. Pure Land Buddhism focuses on Amitabha Buddha and his "pure land" in the West. According to this tradition, calling upon the name of Amitabha Buddha would ensure reincarnation of the reciter in this land. Ch'an Buddhism focuses on meditation. It asserts that truth is not found in the study of the scriptures. The texts are said to be like a finger pointing at the moon: If you fixate upon the finger you will never see the moon; you will never see the truth. In order to find the truth, you must meditate on that to which the scriptures are pointing. These traditions both employed missionaries who helped carry the beliefs to other lands, but it was largely through the immigration of the Chinese to America in the late 19th century that Buddhism found its roots in America.

The first Chinese ship arrived in America in 1849, and five years later,

5. Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 5.



Amitayus, the Buddha of Boundless Light, rules over the Western Paradise of Sukhavati, the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, 16–17th century (University of Michigan, Anthropology Museum. Koelz Collection. © Asian Art Archives, University of Michigan).

there were an estimated 13,000 Chinese men in the new world.⁶ By the 1880's, the American census bureau recorded slightly over 100,000 Chinese living in the United States.⁷ In 1852, the Tin Hou and Kong Chow temples were constructed in San Francisco.⁸ It was from these immigrants that America was first introduced to Buddhism on a large scale, but it should be noted that this Chinese flavor of Buddhism had little effect on the future "White Buddhism" in America. It was simply America's first encounter with the tradition. Two events following Chinese immigration can be credited with the establishment of Buddhism in America. First was the founding of the Theosophical Society in New York City followed by the World's Parliament of Religions.

In 1875, in New York City, Helena Petrova Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott, and William Quan Judge were among those who founded the Theosophical Society, a group initially organized to investigate, study, and explain Spiritualism, a monotheistic religion with heavy emphasis on mediums and contacting the spirits of the dead. In 1879, Olcott and Blavatsky left New York to establish the

6. Stuart Chandler, "Chinese Buddhism in America: Identity and Practice," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (London: University of California Press, 1998), 16.

7. *Historical Statistics of the United States Colonial Times to 1970*, pt. 1 (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1976), 14.

8. Chandler, "Chinese Buddhism in America," 16.



H.P. Blavatsky sitting with her sister Vera de Zhelihovsky. Standing behind are Vera (H.P.B.'s niece) with her husband Charles Johnston and Henry S. Olcott, London, October 1888

organization's international headquarters in India. While there, the two became Buddhists by taking the traditional five vows of the laity.⁹ While Olcott spent time in Sri Lanka, he sought out "pure" Buddhism in hopes of sharing it with America, which he felt had "Westernized" the original tradition. It was during his time of searching that Olcott was introduced to the Bodh–Gaya Maha Bodhi society, whose purpose was to revive the Indian study, practice, and observation of Buddhism. Henry Steel Olcott, referred to as the White Buddhist,¹⁰ was appointed as first director of the Bodh–Gaya Maha Bodhi society in 1891 while he was spending time in Ceylon. Olcott is responsible for making Ceylon the center for the Theravada missionary movement as well as writing the "Buddhist

9. Charles S. Prebish, *Luminous Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 5.

10. Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

Catechism,” a summary statement on the practices and teachings of Buddhism.¹¹ The Theosophical Society became a well-known group headed by two “White Buddhists,” thrusting the religion further into the public sphere.

The second major event in the development of Buddhism in America is the World’s Parliament of Religions held in conjunction with the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago. The occasion was a symposium in which representatives from different religions lectured on their traditions to overflowing audiences. Anagarika Dharmapala and Soyen Shaku were two of the most influential speakers for Asian Buddhism. Dharmapala delivered the closing address for the Parliament and asserted that the event “was simply the re-echo of a great consummation which the Indian Buddhists accomplished twenty four centuries ago.”¹² To Dharmapala, Buddhism’s entrance into America was the fulfillment of the work started when the Buddha first sent out missionaries. On his return to America in 1897, Dharmapala founded an American branch of the Maha Bodhi society further solidifying the place of Buddhism in America. Soyen, while not making a significant impact on the Western tradition himself, was active in sending Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki to America. Suzuki later became a chief proponent of Buddhism in the West.¹³

The World’s Parliament of Religions helped Buddhism gain notoriety in the New World and opened discourse on the legitimacy of the tradition. Two English-language magazines on Buddhism began publication. *The Buddhist Ray* combined Buddhist themes with popular occult ideas of the day, reminiscent of the Theosophical Society after the conversion of Olcott and Blavatsky. The second periodical was *The Light of Dharma*, which was published by Pure Land Buddhist missionaries. As publications like these began to sprout, Buddhism secured its

11. Emma M. Layman, *Buddhism in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976), 174.

12. Anagarika Dharmapala, “Opening Address,” in John H. Barrows, *The World’s Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World’s First Parliament of Religions, Held In Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893* (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), 95–96.

13. Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter With Buddhism: 1844 – 1912* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 30.

footing and began to grow, soon becoming an accepted tradition in America.

AMERICAN BUDDHIST TRADITIONS

As seems to be the case with Buddhism wherever it travels, the Dharma became the basis for many different traditions. As Buddhist missionaries with disparate views came from numerous countries to proselytize, countless forms of Buddhism developed on Western soil. The traditions that will be investigated in this paper include Chinese, Zen, Tibetan and Theravada, as well as a new and indigenous American tradition known as Engaged Buddhism.

Zen is a branch of Mahayana Buddhism that seeks access to truth through the practice of meditation. The origins of Zen Buddhism vary depending upon the person telling the story. Adherents claim that Zen came from Siddhartha himself. This story begins with the Buddha's announcement of a sermon in which he would preach the true Dharma. Thousands gathered around him to hear. The Buddha stood silent while the crowd began to worry he was ill. Eventually, he picked up a flower, held it in his hand and stared at it silently. His disciples tried to interpret what they saw, and one of them, Mahakasyapa, smiled. The Buddha acknowledged Mahakasyapa's reception of the truth of the Dharma by saying "I possess the true dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana, the true form of the formless, the subtle dharma gate that does not rest on words or letters but is a special transmission outside of the scriptures. This I entrust to Mahakasyapa."¹⁴ This account, though not historically verifiable, stands as an example of the teachings of Zen Buddhism. No scripture, god, ritual, or recitation can reveal knowledge; it can only be found through direct transmission from teacher to student. G. Victor Sogen Hori compares Zen Buddhism in America to Valentine's Day in Japan; their environment significantly changes both.¹⁵ As

14. Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History, Volume 1: India and China* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), 8–9.

15. G. Victor Sogen Hori, "Japanese Zen in America: Americanizing the Face in the Mirror," in *Faces of Buddhism*, 77.

the traditional Zen Buddhism of Japan entered America, it was viewed through the American lens of teaching, learning, social organization and enlightenment. Less than one hundred years after Soyen Shaku came to America, the Zen Buddhism he brought with him became thoroughly Americanized and adapted to its new culture.

A typical Buddhist teaching on the Four Noble Truths is that they are like a canoe used to reach a distant shore; they are a great way to achieve enlightenment, but once you reach the shore, you have to get out of the boat. The imported Zen Buddhism of America is much like this parable: many of the canoes employed in traditional Japanese Buddhism are cast away as hindrances to reaching enlightenment. One such example is the act of meditation and the way it is practiced. Traditionally, meditation is performed in the lotus, a cross-legged sitting position in which the feet are placed on top of the opposite thighs. In American Zen Buddhism, however, it has become accepted to sit in chairs if the lotus position is uncomfortable for the person meditating. Bernard Glassman is also an example of the change in Zen Buddhism as it has come to America. Glassman, who is number 81 in the line of Dharma Transmission as traced back to the Sakyamuni, runs his monastery in a bakery in upstate New York. In Greyston Bakery, Zen Buddhists get all of the “components of Zen training – *samu*, or work practice, *zazen* and face-to-face study with the teacher.”¹⁶ For Glassman, traditional Zen practice had become an obstruction, but in the bakery, a for-profit enterprise, he found a way to help his students achieve enlightenment in a modern capitalist setting. At Greyston, tasks like washing dishes are supposed to lead to enlightenment as much as the guided meditation of monks in Tibet. But even the end-goal of Buddhism as enlightenment has come into question with American Zen. Buddhist scholar and practitioner Helen Tworkov tells of an encounter with a Zen teacher who said, “I don’t give a shit about enlightenment.” She then commented “The quest for enlightenment has been derided of late as the romantic and mythic aspiration

16. Helen Tworkov, *Zen In America* (New York : Kodansha, 1994), 116.

of antiquated patriarchal monasticism.”¹⁷ Instead of looking for this outdated religious notion, these Buddhists are searching for ways to be attentive and mindful in everyday life; Buddhism has become basically, a set of ethics. In some ways, this development within Zen Buddhism does not at all resemble its original tradition, but it still claims to be that tradition, only sprinkled with capitalist and American ideas to appeal to a Western audience.

A second major form of American Buddhism is the Tibetan import of Vajrayana. In the early 1970’s, Tibetan lamas brought theocratic Tibetan Buddhism to the West, where its authority was challenged in favor of an individual, self-reliant, more democratic tradition. The American practitioners were quick to adjust the organization so that the senior Buddhist would be placed at the head, becoming responsible for the maintenance, upkeep and general administration of the *Sangha*.¹⁸ As with Theravada Buddhism, the monastic institution of Vajrayana Buddhism has yet to come into its own in America, but it is beginning to take shape. Its Western audience also challenges traditional Tibetan metaphysical notions. An example given by Amy Lavine in her essay on Tibetan Buddhism in America is that of the lamas and their reincarnations as young boys. The notion of incarnation as a young boy is just beginning to come into focus as the early lamas who brought Vajrayana to the West are beginning to die.¹⁹ The Dalai Lama, the traditional religious official of Tibetan Buddhism, has even begun to forego the traditional metaphysical notions in an attempt to garner further support for the movement. In *Ethics for the New Millenium*, the Dalai Lama questions the necessity of religion in life, focusing instead on the presence of needs and ethics of life. He asserts that those who wish to solve society’s problems do not have to be Buddhists, but simply humanists.

American Buddhism includes many Mahayana traditions, as demonstrated,

17. Tworokov, *Zen In America* (New York : Kodansha, 1994), 116.

18. Amy Lavine, “Tibetan Buddhism in America: The Development of American Vajrayāna,” in *Faces of Buddhism*, 104.

19. Lavine, “Tibetan Buddhism in America,” 109.

but there are also a small number of Theravada monks. Paul Numrich estimates this number to be between 450 and 600.²⁰ American Buddhism has traditionally been a lay oriented tradition, leaving the monastic lifestyle of Theravada Buddhism all but forgotten. American Theravada Buddhism abandons the traditional monastic aspects in favor of a non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian vehicle for simple Buddhist teaching. Instead of the classical denunciatory lifestyle of Theravada monks, the focus has been primarily on the tradition of insight meditation, *vipassana*. This form of meditation has become a very popular part of American culture, often practiced by the wealthy. This trend receives treatment in the section on American Buddhism and pop culture.

The meditation and recitation found in traditional forms of Pure Land and Ch'an Buddhism are not mutually exclusive. For this reason, Chinese Buddhism can be discussed as one tradition instead of discussing the former divisions that have all but disappeared in Pure Land and Ch'an. Despite the early appearance of Chinese Buddhism in America, its practice today is relatively limited. Practitioners are generally immigrants who tend to stay in their own communities, isolated from the outside.²¹ These communities focus on meditation and recitation as well as Sutra study. Further, they express devotion to the figures Amitabha Buddha and Avalokitesvara, two highly revered *bodhisattvas* in mainstream Mahayana Buddhism. The focus of Chinese Buddhism is the transfer of good deeds so that all people might attain enlightenment in Amithabha's Pure Land. Master Hsin Yun, the founder of Fo Kuang Buddhism, considers the goal not to reach the Pure Land, but rather to transform this world into a Pure Land.²² Thus, this tradition has special relevance in the modern world, which approaches this goal through environmentalism, in that sense creating a Pure Land.

There is also a unique form of American Buddhism that has taken the

20. Paul David Numrich, "Theravāda Buddhism in America: Prospects for the *Sangha*," in *Faces of Buddhism*, 150.

21. Chandler, "Chinese Buddhism in America," 16.

22. *Ibid.*, 22.

forefront. This new tradition seeks to perfect the world by changing it. Some call this “Liberation Buddhism” as opposed to “Extinction Buddhism” since it seeks to free the world from greed and hatred instead of allowing that greed and hatred to destroy the world. American Buddhism has more recently come to be known as Engaged Buddhism, and manifests a radical departure from the Buddhism first seen in India. Engaged Buddhism has taken practices of Asian Buddhism that do not fit in the Western context and adapted them to American culture. Engaged Buddhists openly welcome Western Christian ideals, allowing for an amalgamation of thought. There is a complete dismissal of the many traditional forms of Buddhism, referring to them as the cause of “2,500 years [of] male-centered interpretation.”²³ This tradition has moved toward agnosticism regarding beliefs including reincarnation and karma while upholding instead that liberation is not to be found in distant epochs of time but in this world, leading to social activism. Engaged Buddhists are typically white professionals reminiscent of the “White Buddhists” that founded the Theosophical Foundation, bringing the evolution of Buddhism in America full circle.

EFFECTS OF BUDDHISM IN AMERICA

As different Buddhist traditions entered America, they adapted to the culture and lifestyles already present. It was through this Americanization that Buddhism became a recognized tradition in the United States. In the confluence of Buddhism and American culture we see an effect that spreads far beyond the lives of individual practitioners. Monks such as Thich Nhat Hanh brought Engaged Buddhism to the forefront, affecting the views of the American populace towards war and influencing political figures such as Martin Luther King. The introduction of Buddhism also led to changes in mainstream Christian beliefs and psychiatry, as well the political and popular lives of Americans.

“Since Buddhist practice is to be awake and to be at one with ourselves, to

23. Jim Deitrick, (n.d.), “America’s New Buddhism” (lecture with PowerPoint® slides).

be whole and not to be caught in opposites, automatically then the practice is peace. Is *being peace*... So outer peace and social peace is a manifestation of inner peace.”²⁴ These are the words of Ruth Klein, president of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, and they serve as an introduction to the philosophy of Engaged Buddhism. In socially Engaged Buddhism, there is no distinction between the outer world and the world of the mind; they belong to the same reality. It is for this reason that groups like the Buddhist Peace Fellowship strive to provide an arena for understanding how to fight oppression and injustice. Engaged Buddhism opens up its adherents to political activism. By acknowledging the need to make the world a better place, the active Buddhist must leave behind the monastery and pick up their picket signs to rally for political change.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen monk, is one of these socially engaged Buddhists, and in fact coined the term “engaged Buddhism.” His activism for peace ultimately led to his exile and expatriation. Nhat Hanh was living in Vietnam as war with America broke out. In 1965, he spoke out at Van Hanh Buddhist University declaring that the North and South needed to find a way to end the war in favor of peace and mutual respect. Shortly thereafter, he retreated to the United States. After arriving in America he corresponded with Martin Luther King, Jr. and asked him to publicly denounce the war in Vietnam. He said “You cannot be silent since you have already been in action and you are in action because, in you, God is in action, too... Nobody here wants the war. What is the war for, then? And whose is the war?”²⁵ Hanh met with King in 1966, and in 1967 Dr. King spoke out at Riverside Church in New York City against the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Later that year, Dr. King nominated Hanh for the 1967 Nobel Peace Prize and said “I do not personally know of anyone more worthy

24. Sandy Boucher, *Turning the Wheel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 264.

25. Thich Nhat Nanh, “In Search of the Enemy of Man (addressed to (the Rev.) Martin Luther King),” in Nhat Nanh, Ho Huu Tuong, Tam Ich, Bui Giang, Pham Cong Thien, *Dialogue* (Saigon: La Boi, 1965), 11–20.

of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle Buddhist monk from Vietnam.”²⁶ The Buddhist peace ethic of Thich Nhat Hanh influenced Dr. King, and in turn aided the burgeoning anti-war movement in the United States.

Buddhism has also served as a catalyst in the development of modern Christian meditation. As Buddhism’s influence in Western society has grown, many Christian traditions responded by reviving and adapting meditative and devotional practice to their model of religious life. For example, the Jesuit father H. M. Enomiya Lassalle has written multiple books and delivered many lectures on Zen meditation for Christians and Westerners.²⁷ The spread of Buddhism has also opened a new dialogue between Christianity and other religious traditions, especially those in the East. This has not only led to exchange in ideas and beliefs, but a questioning of the limits of the ever-present European culture.²⁸

Meditation as found in Buddhism has also unlocked certain facets of Western psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy previously unexplored. At the end of the 19th century, Sigmund Freud explored the importance and inner workings of the unconscious mind. It was through his study of the unconscious that he derived methods for understanding human behavior and mental illness. In Buddhism, researchers in these fields have found adherents who have discovered ways to control their subconsciouses and certain intuitions. This has led to an attempt for Western psychotherapy to incorporate Buddhist meditation practices.

In 1969, Buddhist poet Gary Snyder composed what is now known as the *Smokey The Bear Sutra*, a poem that presents the American eco-conscious bear as a reincarnation of Vairocana Buddha. Snyder explained that “it might take this sort of Buddha to quell the fires of greed and war and to help us head off the bio-

26. Stephen Denney, introduction to “Nomination of Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King, Jr., 25 January 1967,” posted online 1996, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/025.html> (accessed November 15, 2009).

27. *Buddhism in the Modern World*, ed. Heinrich Dumoulin (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1976), 320.

28. *Ibid.*, 320.

logical holocaust that the twenty first century may prove to be.”²⁹ Snyder’s focus on the environment and community was the product of the Buddhist elements of *Sangha* and *samadhi*, that is, community and mindful concentration. In Snyder we see an example of the effect Buddhism can have on the practitioner and their worldview. By focusing on the environment, envisioning the planet becoming a Pure Land, and adapting the views from the ancient Buddhist teachings into modernity, Snyder has been able to become actively engaged in the political goal of improving and maintaining the environment.

Buddhism has also had a significant effect on American popular culture, in lifestyle, music, movies, and other media. The Vipassana meditation retreats are an example of the Buddhist lifestyle influencing the culture. The practice of Vipassana meditation is generally taught at ten-day courses where participants are taught the basics as well as how to interpret its results.³⁰ This style of meditation has become famous among the wealthy, from business executives to rock stars. In his readmissions letter to Harvard University, Rivers Cuomo, of the music group, *Weezer*, explained that since attending seven ten-day courses, “I have found that the areas of tension in my mind – the fear, the anger, the sadness, the craving – are slowly melting away. I am left with a more pristine mind, more sharp and sensitive than I previously imagined possible. I am more calm and stable.”³¹ This form of meditation has not just limited itself to the upper class, however. It is offered free of charge at all retreats and has been brought by its founder, S. N. Goenka, to correctional facilities.

Donaldson Correctional Facility in Bessemer, Alabama is a high security prison which houses prisoners serving sentences ranging from six months to life in prison. Prison Psychologist Dr. Ron Cavanaugh had heard of the benefits of medi-

29. Gary Snyder, *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry and Translation, 1952–1998* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2000), 244.

30. Vipassana Meditation, “Vipassana Meditation As Taught By S.N. Goenka in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin,” 1995 – 2010, <http://www.dhamma.org> (accessed November 14, 2009).

31. Rivers Cuomo, “What I’ve Been Up To Since I Left School,” July 30, 2004, http://weezerpedia.com/wiki/index.php?title=Harvard_readmission_essay (accessed November 14, 2009).

tation in prisons in India, so he introduced the Houses of Healing program to the prison, which had a heavy emphasis on meditation. After seeing improvement, it was suggested by Jenny Philips, director of the documentary film *The Dhamma Brothers*, that an intensive ten-day Vipassana meditation course be offered.³² The course was first offered for twenty prisoners who sat through ten full day sessions in which there was no talking or actions done outside of a strict schedule of meditation, rest periods, meal times and breaks. The majority of prisoners involved in the program were sentenced to life in prison, though the possibility of parole was available, leading many to be skeptical of the prisoners' intentions. One of Donaldson's Corrections Officers, Sergeant Joel Gilbert notes, "evidently something was working somewhere. They're more relaxed, they're easier to get along with, and they don't cause as many problems."³³ The prisoners ended the course accepting responsibility for their actions and realizing they had to make peace with society for their crimes.

The Dharma has also found a strong footing in Hollywood. Actor Richard Gere is often considered the Dalai Lama's most high-profile disciple.³⁴ In 1978, Gere traveled to Nepal, where he first became acquainted with Buddhism. He became a disciple of the Dalai Lama in 1982, and has since been a strong advocate for human rights and the Tibetan Independence Movement. His high profile career and acceptance of Buddhism has not been an exception in Hollywood. Other famous Buddhists include Harrison Ford, Orlando Bloom, Uma Thurman, and Oliver Stone. Recent films have included strong Buddhist overtones. One well-known example is the 1999 film, *The Matrix*. The film takes place in a universe that is understood to be an illusion, and features many parallels with Buddhist be-

32. See also Jenny Phillips, *Letters From the Dhamma Brothers: Meditation Behind Bars* (Onalaska: Pariyatti Press, 2008).

33. Andrew Kukura and Jenny Philips, *The Dhamma Brothers*, DVD, directed by Jenny Philips, Andrew Kukura, and Anne Marie Stein (Boston: Northern Lights Productions, 2008).

34. Life Positive, "An Interview with Richard Gere on his relationship with His Holiness, the Dalai Lama," April 1996, <http://www.lifepositive.com/spirit/world-religions/buddhism/gere.asp> (November 14, 2009).

liefs. The main character is considered a chosen one who is in charge of recruiting others and releasing the world from this illusionary state, obvious mirrors of The Buddha, Upaya, and escaping samsara.

Parallels are even found in children's media. In one production, five monks stand in front of a young boy and present him with four toys. He replies, "I know these. They are my toys." This story may sound similar to the way the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, was chosen, and it is. The reference, however, is not to that of a religious occurrence which led monks to believe the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama had been found, but rather to the episode of the children's television show *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, in which Aang is told that he is the reincarnation of the Avatar, a human manifestation of deity that is destined to save the world. Interestingly enough, Aang's master in the show is named Gyatso. This is just one of many examples of Buddhist influences that have crept into children's entertainment. There are many examples: *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Power Rangers*, *Pokemon*, *Dragonball Z*, *Avatar*, *Digimon*, *Spirited Away*, *Kung Fu Panda*, *The Karate Kid*, etc. It is through these media that pre-teens and adolescents begin to shape their worldviews and religious faiths. For example, from *Avatar*, one might learn of meditation and the protection offered by the avatar. From shows like *The Karate Kid* and *Teenage Mutant Turtles*, another might learn reverence and respect for a teacher or monk and the importance of mutual non-aggression. While there is no proof that these Asian influences are being perpetuated in media as a way to indoctrinate youth, evidence does seem to point to an effect on their spirituality.³⁵ Thus the presence of these Buddhist-influenced films, television programs, and actors might be considered effective missionary tools for converting a rising generation plugged in to popular culture.

Just as there are many different forms of Buddhism in America, there are also

35. The author's current research is focused on the effect of Buddhist-themed media regarding the spirituality of young Americans. He hopes to publish his findings in the near future. For a study of Buddhist-themed media and its effect on the spirituality of religious seeking adults, see Jin Kyu Park, "Creating My Own Cultural and Spiritual Bubble: Case of Cultural Consumption by Spiritual Seeker Anime Fans," *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6, no. 3 (2005): 393-413.

a variety of Buddhist practitioners. In his book *The Dharma Bums*, Jack Kerouac gives insight into two prominent types of Buddhist lifestyles lived in the mid-20th century. Kerouac himself typifies the first of these lifestyles. When questioned by Gary Snyder using Zen Buddhism word questions, Kerouac replies, “I’d say that was a lot of silly Zen Buddhism... I’m not a Zen Buddhist, I’m a serious Buddhist, I’m an old fashioned dreamy Hinayana coward of later Mahayanism.”³⁶ For Buddhists like Kerouac, holding the title of a Buddhist is not a matter of brooding over the texts or metaphysical questions, but about living life and growing out of the experiences had while living. Like the Engaged Buddhists that would come forth in the 90s, Kerouac practices little “b” Buddhism, focusing on the betterment of himself and society instead of the traditions. The second type of Buddhist presented in *The Dharma Bums* as a direct contrast to Kerouac is illustrated in the life of Gary Snyder. Snyder was raised as a backwoods boy and eventually found his Buddhist faith in the university:

When he finally got to college by hook or crook he was already well equipped for his early studies in anthropology and later in Indian myth and in the actual texts of Indian mythology. Finally he learned Chinese and Japanese and became an Oriental scholar and discovered the greatest Dharma Bums of them all, the Zen Lunatics of China and Japan.³⁷

Snyder was an active searcher for Bodhisattvas, declaring Kerouac and friends, Bodhisattvas and reincarnations of Mahayana scholars. He exemplifies the Buddhist scholar in America; one who rejects the Americanization of the tradition by maintaining the importance of belief in karma, samsara, reincarnation, and the Bodhisattva path. But, as previously mentioned, Gary Snyder became a prominent shaper of the Engaged Buddhism tradition, which has cast aside these beliefs. Kerouac, in writing *The Dharma Bums*, prophetically presented the future of Buddhism: a time when the “liberation buddhists” would cause a dwindling in

36. Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 8.

37. Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 6.

the number of “extinction Buddhists.”

Buddhism entered America as an ancient practice that did not fit within a society firmly grounded in Western Christianity. Its beliefs and practices were adapted to fit the American lifestyle while still maintaining its unique Eastern sensibilities. Over time, this Eastern uniqueness has, in turn, altered aspects of American culture. While these two institutions have formed a symbiotic relationship, they have gradually meshed into one another. America has made its mark on Buddhism by adapting its beliefs to the American west. Traditions that do not appeal to a capitalistic culture, such as monasticism, have been abandoned in favor of the practical aspects of meditation and devotion. Buddhism has placed itself in the forefront of American politics and pop culture, influencing important figures from political activists to teen idols. With this mutual transformation has come a melding together, as American Buddhism has become a separate entity from its Asian counterparts and has become an institution of its own.