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Editor's Note: This issue of E Pluribus focuses on Buddhism in America and features a listing of Buddhist centers in Ohio. This is intended simply as a resource and a history, and in no way is an endorsement of Buddhism over any other tradition.

A Short History of Buddhism in America

In the imagination of most Americans, the word "Buddhism" evokes a range of images and ideas, many of them suggested by popular culture: a solitary meditator absorbed in practice, undisturbed by his or her surroundings; a Vietnamese monk aflame in protest in a crowded street; cartoon images of a sedated-looking Richard Gere on *The Simpsons*. Perhaps one thinks of the Dalai Lama's easy smile or the rotund, laughing statues on Chinese restaurant tabletops. Today, these images abound in American media through travel magazines, war stories from Southeast Asia, and even on posters and clothing, a counter-culture image of escape from the pace of Western living. For most Americans, these images are of something distinctly *other*. Buddhism, it would seem, is something that happens in the East, or among celebrities, and is often thought of as too philosophically and practically abstract for the American temperament.

On the contrary, many Americans might be surprised to know that Buddhism in the U.S. isn't just monks in colored robes and with shaved heads on TV, but millions of practitioners and well over a thousand meditation and practice centers stretching from Hawaii and southern California to Maine. With around three to four million American adherents, Buddhism is the third or fourth largest religion in the U.S., and, according to recent studies, is growing rapidly.[1] There are many kinds of American Buddhists: immigrants born into the tradition; Euro-American converts; members of other religions who practice Buddhist meditation; weekend retreat goers; academics, and many others. The tradition's American history is one of immigration, scholarship, popular fascination, and a growing curiosity about the intersections of spiritual practice and science. The increasing number of Buddhists and centers suggest that its future role in America will be even greater, and that it will only become more important for the average American to have a decent understanding of Buddhist origins both in the East and the U.S. The rest of this short article seeks to shed light on those origins.[2]

According to tradition, 2600 years ago, in what is today Varanasi, India, a man who was once a prince, and then an ascetic living in the forest, came to have deep insights into the nature of human existence and the means to achieving profound peace of mind and heart. Siddhartha Gautama, or the Buddha, realized that characteristic of even the best aspects of life was a feeling of unsatisfactoriness that stemmed from clinging to the impermanent ego, and the failure to recognize the impermanence of everything. Even the best of things would go away, and because we naturally cling to those people and things we love, we will naturally hurt when they die or move on. He realized, too, that to stop the unsatisfactory feelings, one had to stop clinging to things. He devised a plan, now called the Eightfold Path, which would help people through such desires to a state of being so simple and pure it would be called *nirvana*, referring to the "extinguishing" of anxiety-causing desire. In a land where the cyclic pattern of existence, or *samsara*[3], was widely accepted (and still is among most Hindus and Buddhists), the Buddha's path also meant eventual freedom from reincarnation.

Siddhartha taught from the age of 35 to 80, and those who followed him most closely gave up their possessions and family life and became the first *sangha*, or practicing community. From India, the Buddha's teachings, or *dharma,* spread south and southeast, becoming what is today the *Theravada* tradition ("the way of the elders") in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam and throughout Southeast Asia; it moved north and northeast through China, Korea, and Japan, becoming the *Mahayana* tradition ("Great Vehicle); and into the Himalayas, mostly Tibet, Nepal, and northeastern India, becoming *Vajrayana* Buddhism ("Diamond Vehicle"). Theravada focuses on the communities of monks and nuns who work towards enlightenment as the lay communities support them, earning merit for doing so. The Mahayana tradition encourages all – monk, nun, and lay persons alike – to help each other seek enlightenment. Vajrayana, the "Diamond Vehicle," teaches that anyone can achieve enlightenment in this very lifetime through specific, stringent practices. Each tradition blended with previous local traditions, creating unique, composite forms of Buddhism in each place, and the history of Buddhism in America is no different.

American Buddhism has a couple of origin stories. Some of the earliest Buddhists arrived with Chinese immigrants during the Gold Rush in California, and by the 1850s the coastline saw temples supporting the Taoist-Buddhist-Confucian religious blend of tens of thousands of Californian Chinese.[4] Another origin of American Buddhism is remembered through the great American Transcendentalists of the 19th Century – including Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson – who helped Americans see that the connection between people and nature is one more porous than previously thought, and who incorporated their early knowledge of Buddhist texts into their discussions about theology.[5] According to the scholar of American Buddhism Richard Seager, though, it is these writers' influence on a generation of American writers nearly a hundred years later that is their greatest lasting contribution to Buddhism.[6]

The most popular, and perhaps the earliest of America's Buddhist converts, Seager says, were the rather motley pair Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, the former a Russian immigrant to America and the latter an army colonel. The two of them spent considerable time in Sri Lanka and India—where Olcott remains a well-respected figure – studying Theravada meditation. In 1875, after taking refuge (declaring their intent to support the Buddha's teachings, way of life, and followers), they founded an organization in New York City called the Theosophical Society, a combination of Buddhist meditation and worldview, western occultism, science, and Judeo-Christian ideas.[7] It played an important – if somewhat controversial – part in introducing Buddhism to the West, and also gave rise to an interesting and little explored connection between Buddhist meditation and modern, Western Neopagan practice.[8]

Buddhism's emergence into Western academia came not through the voices of American converts, but through native, Asian Buddhist voices during the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. This early multireligious gathering, though said to have "emphasized the superiority of Western culture to the level of an egregious caricature,"[9] and have a "liberal but definitely Christian flavor,"[10] was still an impressive effort – the first of its kind – at involving traditions from across the world in a productive, interfaith dialogue. The result was media fascination over the representatives from India, China, and especially Japan.

There, Shaku Soyen represented Japan's Rinzai Zen tradition, and, after his well-accepted presentation in Chicago, returned to the U.S. in 1906 to begin speaking tours. His student, D.T. Suzuki, became one of the earliest prolific writers on Buddhism in the U.S., famously working as a visiting professor at Columbia University in the mid-1950s and influencing such important writers as Psychologist Carl Jung[11] and Christian monk Thomas Merton[12]. Suzuki's lectures were picked up by popular American magazines like *Vogue* and *Time*, making his teachings hip and household.

Because of missionary-style work of these early Japanese presenters, not only Zen, but other East Asian Mahayana traditions grew quickly in the U.S. Notable were Nichiren Buddhism, which focuses its study on the *Lotus Sutra* almost exclusively, and Pure Land Buddhist traditions, which focus on achieving rebirth in a paradise realm and then achieving *nirvana* from there. The latter of these traditions, in 1898, was established by two Japanese immigrants in San Francisco as the Buddhist Mission of North America. Today called the Buddhist Churches of America, it remains the oldest and most stable Buddhist organization in the U.S.,[13] perhaps not in small part due to its ability to adapt to a new home, made clear by its inclusion of the word *church* in its title. Though there were certainly active schools of Buddhism from China and areas of Southeast Asia at the time, it was Japanese traditions, riding the wave of the Parliament in Chicago – and even in the face of the Japanese Immigration Exclusion Act of 1924 – that spread the most rapidly and visibly in the first half of the 20th century.

In the wake of the new-found interest in Zen, and recalling the early American writers like Thoreau and Walden, the three poets Jack Keruoac, Alan Ginsberg and Gary Snyder became the Euro-American face of Buddhism in the 1950s. As Seager notes:

> *The Beat Movement…played an important, and at times highly controversial, role in the popularization of Buddhism. Early Beats…helped to Americanize the dharma through their creative use of Buddhism in poetry and other literature. Keruoac became the archetypal spiritual rebel; Ginsberg, the ecstatic and ironic holy man. Gary Snyder…a central role in…Keruoac's…*The Dharma Bums…*spent much of the 1960s practicing in a Japanese monastery.*[14]

While the poets undoubtedly brought Buddhism to a new level of respect and understanding among a younger, well-educated demographic, and surely inspired Euro-American converts, they also highlighted the differences between immigrant Buddhists, many of whom could be most easily recognized by the rituals they performed or the organizations to which they belonged, and many of the convert Buddhists, who, perhaps, studied a few books and followed Buddhism philosophically and theologically. As Snyder lived in a monastery, the Buddhism of Keruoac's poetry was more philosophical and less practical.

This merely emphasizes the difficulty of determining just who should be counted "Buddhist," a question that has troubled surveys to this day. As Jan Nattier writes in her article, "Who Is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America":

> *…if a college sophomore buys a book on Zen by Alan Watts, reads it, likes it, and subsequently begins to think of himself as a Buddhist – but without ever having encountered any form of Buddhism beyond the printed page – should he be included within the scope of a study of Buddhism in North America?... if an elderly Kalmyk Mongol from New Jersey – … a thirteenth-generation Buddhist – occasionally places offerings of money and food before Buddhist images at her local temple, but does not meditate or chant sutras and knows little of the technicalities of Buddhist doctrine, would such criteria lead her to exclusion from the list? …If one were to count Christians or Jews only those who are active members of a religious organization, the populations of these groups in the Unites States would suddenly plunge dramatically.*[15]

Though Buddhism has adapted many times to many new lands, it is only recently that Buddhist literature is so widely available and that students of the Dharma can simply read on their own without requiring a teacher to pass on the tradition (though the relationship between a teacher and student is highly

regarded in most Buddhist organizations). This will continue to be an interesting study, but a deeper look is beyond the scope of the current work.

Next to the Japanese movements and those of the Beat Poets, the work of exiled Tibetans, preserving their traditions in the wake of a Chinese invasion, has been the most widely publicized and influential movement of Buddhism in America. Even into the 1940s, Tibetan Buddhism remained much in the shape in which it had existed for centuries, mainly due to the isolated nature of Tibet, kept deep within the Himalayan Mountains and long closed to outsiders. Blending with the native Bon traditions, Tibetan Buddhism is distinct with its boldly colored prayer flags, complex mandalas, and often fierce-looking deities, starkly contrasting the simplicity of the Japanese Zen traditions. After Mao Zedong's Communist party took control of China in 1949 and invaded Tibet shortly thereafter, tens of thousands of surviving Tibetans followed the Dalai Lama – the spiritual and political leader of Tibet – out of the country in exile to India, Sikkim, Nepal, and various places in the West. They brought with them their distinctive colors and pleas for help, attracting not only the CIA and U.S. government (relationships revealed in later memoirs released by former agents)[16], but also Hollywood, student movements, and even, later on, tens of thousands of concert goers and musicians at the Tibetan Freedom Concerts. America became a safe place to preserve texts and remained a strong opponent of Communism, creating an ideal ally, even if only most fervently among students and those without much political clout. Amidst such political support, the Tibetans found a country ready to study Buddhism.

The study of Tibetan Buddhism found an interested following in academia quite quickly, and with programs like those at the University of Virginia, Columbia University, and UC Berkeley, the reprinting and analysis of the Tibetan canon has become well ingrained in the American University system. Over the last two decades, dozens of Tibetan experts have received their PhDs and continue to teach across the country. The widespread support of Tibetans in America has even led to the expected rebirth of certain key *tulkus* (reincarnated spiritual teachers) on U.S. soil. This is less a surprise to the Tibetans than anyone else, though. According to Prebish:

> *They [Tibetan Buddhists] continue to grow rapidly, being very attractive to Euro-American Buddhists. It is no wonder, then, that they quote the thousand-year-old saying attributed to the sage Padmasambhava to explain their rapid growth: 'When the iron bird flies, and horses run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the World, and the Dharma will come to the land of the Red Man.'*[17]

Today, with political instability in much of Southeast Asia, the ease of access to key Buddhist texts online, and the growth of its academic study, Buddhism will only grow in America. Weekend Zen retreats like those at Dai Bosatsu Kongo-Ji in the Catskills[18] will continue to attract weary businessmen and women, seeking a meditative weekend to slow their minds. As the technological and financial distractions continue to mount, a need for a tradition that offers a consistent practice to return to the simplicity of things may become ever more attractive. And the questions raised more and more by scientists about the role of the conscious control of the mind in physical health may warrant answers from some of those most adept at exploring their own minds. What is clear is that knowledge of the history and basic philosophy of Buddhism has become an essential piece of understanding modern American religion, and American identity as a whole.

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References

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[1] Seager, Richard H. *Buddhism in America.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999): 11.
[2] An exhaustive treatment of American Buddhism is far beyond the scope of this work, and I've limited my focus to two prominent traditions in America, those of the Japanese and Tibetan.
[3] *Samsara* is a Sanskrit term referring to cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that humans are believed to undergo. This is a particularly distinguishing factor of Hinduism and Buddhism as compared to the "one-timer" worldview of many Western traditions.
[4] Prebish, Charles. "Introduction" in *The Faces of Buddhism in America.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
[5] For an analysis of Buddhist ideas in Walt Whitman's writing, see Sterne, Melvin. "Shakespeare, Buddha, and King Lear," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 14 (2007): http://www.buddhistethics.org/14/sterne-article.html
[6] Seager, 35.
[7] Seager, 35. This topic is treated thoroughly in Washington, Peter. *Madame Blavatksy's Baboon: A History of the Misfits, Mediums and Misfits who Brought Spiritualism to America.* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993).
[8] It can be argued that Buddhist meditation as practiced by early Theosophists gave rise to its use in later British and American Neopagan practices. Aleister Crowley is, perhaps, the most notable figures who studied Buddhism in Asia and returned to the West to form new movements based on his experiences. For Crowley's involvement with Sri Lankan Buddhism and Gerald Gardner (a founder of modern Wicca), see Sutin, Lawrence. *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley.* St. Martin's Griffin, 2002.
[9] McRae, John. "Orientall Verities on the American Frontier: The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions and the Thought of Masao Abe," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 11 (1991): 7-36.
[10] McRae, 14.
[11] Suzuki, D. T. *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism,* Forward by C. Jung. (New York: Grove Press, 1964): 9.
[12] Merton, Thomas. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite.* (The Abbey of Gethsemane: New Directions, 1968): 59.
[13] Prebish, 5.
[14] Seager, 41-42.
[15] Nattier, Jan. "Who is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America," in *The Faces of Buddhist America* (ed. Prebish, Charles S. and Kenneth K. Tanaka). Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998: 184-5.

[16] See Knaus, John Kenneth. *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival*. Public Affairs, 1999.
[17] Prebish, 6.
[18] Visit the website: http://www.daibosatsu.org/index.html

"In Praise of the ACIP CD-ROM: Woodblock to Laser"

*Editor's Note: *The following poem embodies the spirit of adaptation and modernization in American Buddhism, and is perhaps indicative of the awe that many experienced as technology changed the face of their traditions.*

A hundred thousand
Mirrors of the disk
Hold the great classics
Of authors
Beyond counting.
No longer
Do we need
To wander aimlessly
In the pages of catalogs
Beyond counting.
……………………………………
With a single push
Of our finger
On a button
We pull up shining gems
Of citations,
Of text and commentary,
Whatever we seek;
This is something
Fantastic,
Beyond dreams.[18]

Gelek Rinpoche

Buddhist Centers in Ohio

For the most comprehensive and up-to-date listing of Buddhist practice centers (Dharma centers) in Ohio, please visit the following website, provided by the Yellow Springs Dharma Center (http://www.ysdharma.org/Default.aspx?tabid=109). The Complete Guide to Buddhist America *(Morreale, Don. Boston/London: Shambhala, 1999) is a decade old, but provides information on over 1,000 Buddhist organizations from nearly every tradition across the United States and Canada.*

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