

2 The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West

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INTRODUCTION

As Buddhism was propagated for its first twenty-five hundred years in diverse societies throughout Asia, a wide range of practices came to be followed both by “professional” Buddhists—namely, priests, monks, nuns, contemplatives, and scholars—and the laity. Differences in practices were especially salient in the training of professionals, ranging from the austere monastic training of forest monks in northern Thailand to the pastoral training of Jōdo Shinshū priests in Japan and the highly philosophical and scholastic training of *lamas* in the monastic universities of Tibet. In the twentieth century, Buddhist practitioners, both professional and lay, emigrated throughout the world to an unprecedented degree. Buddhist immigrants to the West—referring to Europe and all lands colonized by Europeans—have left Asia primarily for two reasons: they came seeking greater economic opportunities or they were fleeing from the oppression of communism. They brought their Buddhist heritages with them.

In addition to the expansion of Buddhism due to the migrations of Asian Buddhists, the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented growth of interest in Buddhism by non-Asians. In the literature on this subject, Westerners who practice Buddhism are commonly referred to as *converts*, and the purely religious nature of Buddhism is rarely called into question.¹ But the reality is far more complex and interesting. Drawing from a typology suggested by Stark and Bainbridge,² three groups of Western practitioners of Buddhism can be identified: (1) members of an audience for Buddhist teachings, who may participate occasionally in Buddhist meditation retreats, initiations, or other group practices; (2) those who enter into a student relationship with a Buddhist teacher; and (3) those who have a self-conscious sense of converting to Buddhism and who thereafter refer to themselves not simply as having an interest in Buddhism or as studying Buddhism, but as being Buddhist. Members of the first two groups include, for example, devout Roman Catholics, Jews, clinical psychologists, and a

wide range of other religious and nonreligious people. This points to a high degree of eclecticism in Western Buddhist practice by people who combine selected Buddhist ideas and practices with those of their own religious heritage, New Age movements, or simply their personal beliefs and preferences.

This raises the complex and fascinating question as to whether Buddhism should be regarded straightforwardly as a religion, either in Asian cultures—which did not until recently develop the discrete disciplines of religion, science, and philosophy as we define them today—or in the West.³ Clifford Geertz argues that those who adhere to a religion characteristically accept divine authority as a basis for escaping from adversity through the use of ritual and belief in the supernatural.⁴ While this may generally be true of Asian Buddhists, it is not the attitude of many Buddhist audiences and students or even of many self-avowed Western Buddhist converts. Buddhism in the West frequently is not practiced as a religion; many Westerners who engage in Buddhist practices do not regard themselves as Buddhists; and, to make any study of Buddhist practice all the more intriguing, many of the religious, or quasi-religious, practices of Asian Buddhists, such as fortune-telling, palm-reading, funerary rites, and propitiation of mundane gods and spirits, cannot be deemed truly *Buddhist* in any canonical sense of the term.

For all the diversity of Buddhist practices in the West, general trends in the recent transformations of Buddhist practice, which will be illustrated throughout this essay, can be identified. These include an erosion of the distinction between professional and lay Buddhists; a decentralization of doctrinal authority; a diminished role for Buddhist monastics; an increasing spirit of egalitarianism; greater leadership roles for women; greater social activism; and, in many cases, an increasing emphasis on the psychological, as opposed to the purely religious, nature of practice.

The structure of this presentation of Buddhist practices in the West will be based upon the traditional Buddhist triadic classification of practice as (1) a way of viewing the world, (2) a matrix of meditations, or ways of cultivating the mind, and (3) a way of life. It is important to recognize that in Buddhism the views one holds are not regarded as mere “theories,” as opposed to “practices.” Rather, engaging with the world by way of Buddhist views is an essential element of Buddhist practice, as indicated from the beginning by the inclusion of *right view* as one element of the Eightfold Noble Path. Second, while the English term *meditation* often has the narrow connotation of sitting quietly while calming the mind, the Buddhist Sanskrit term *bhāvanā* has the much broader meaning of *cultivation*, as in methods for cultivating the mind. Thus in this essay I shall include under

the rubric of *meditation* all formal practices of focused concentration, mindfulness, prayer, chanting, and other ritual activities that are performed as means of cultivating one's heart and mind or expressing one's faith. Finally, the way one views the world and applies oneself to formal practice manifests in the type of life one leads, so this is the third and often most public aspect of Buddhist practice.

In an essay of this brevity, it is not possible to do justice to the whole range of practices of immigrant Buddhists from Central, East, and Southeast Asia, as well as the Buddhist practices of Western Buddhists and non-Buddhists. For simplicity's sake, I shall focus on just five representative schools, most of them comprised of both Asian and Western members. These are: (1) Theravāda Buddhism and the *vipassanā* movement, (2) Zen Buddhism, (3) Nichiren Shōshū Buddhism and Sōka Gakkai International, (4) Jōdo Shinshū and Pure Land Buddhism, and (5) Tibetan Buddhism. Although these five traditions have established themselves in distinct ways in different Western societies, these differences in practice, too, cannot be explored within such a brief essay, so I shall focus on elements of practice that are common throughout the West, with no special emphasis on any one continent.

THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM AND THE VIPASSANĀ MOVEMENT

The Theravāda Buddhist worldview is originally based on the Pāli Buddhist canon, as interpreted by the great fifth-century commentator Buddhaghosa and later Buddhist scholars and contemplatives. For the immigrant Theravāda Buddhist laity, the central feature of this worldview is the affirmation of the reality of reincarnation and karma. The possibility of achieving *nirvāṇa* is primarily a concern for Buddhist monastics, while the laity are more concerned with avoiding karma that would propel them to a miserable rebirth, and with accumulating meritorious karma that will lead to a favorable rebirth and, in the long run, to ultimate liberation.

The principal Theravāda Buddhist meditative practices of meditative quiescence (Pāli: *samatha*) and contemplative insight (Pāli: *vipassanā*) are rarely practiced by the immigrant laity, for these are generally thought to require a monastic way of life and rigorous training that are not feasible for the householder. On the other hand, the laity as well as monastics do commonly engage in the practice of individual and group chanting, which primarily entails paying homage to and taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. As part of the regular services in the temple, ritual offerings are made to the Buddha, as well as to mundane gods, most of whom are intimately associated with particular locales in Asia. In the West, such

propitiation of mundane gods seems to be on the decline, due at least in part to the separation from the regions with which those gods are affiliated.

Over the course of daily life, lay Theravāda Buddhists may occasionally take the eight precepts for a period ranging from one day to a week, during which time they may stay in a temple and devote themselves to religious practices, including meditation and chanting. The eight precepts include the more common five lay precepts of refraining from (1) killing, (2) stealing, (3) false speech, (4) sexual misconduct, and (5) the use of intoxicants, in addition to the three precepts of refraining from (6) eating after midday, (7) enjoying worldly amusements, and (8) indulging in luxurious sleeping arrangements and sexual intercourse. As a direct result of their belief in the efficacy of karma, Theravāda lay Buddhists commonly make offerings of food, goods, and money to the ordained Sangha. Such meritorious conduct is thought to lead to a better rebirth either for themselves or for their deceased loved ones, depending on how the merit is dedicated by the person who performs this service. Around the world, immigrant Theravāda Buddhists from various southeast Asian countries have also established after-school programs, Buddhist summer camps, and Sunday Dharma schools, all centered around their temples, which are commonly run by ordained monks and nuns.

The formal meditation practices of quiescence and insight meditation, traditionally practiced primarily by monks and nuns, have been appropriated by the modern *vipassanā*, or insight meditation, movement, which began to spread during the latter half of the twentieth century throughout South Asia and the West. Asian and Western monastic *vipassanā* teachers generally promote the traditional views of Theravāda Buddhism, as well as the monastic ideals of detachment and renunciation. Many Western lay teachers, in contrast, draw freely from other schools of Buddhism, non-Buddhist contemplative teachings, and humanistic psychotherapy, in which the spirit of renunciation plays a moderate role at best. Moreover, in this lay movement, which attracts a high proportion of non-Buddhists, belief in reincarnation, karma, and *nirvāna* are commonly de-emphasized, if not outright rejected, by both teachers and students. This is certainly not to imply that the meditative practices taught in this movement lack an underlying worldview, but rather that the views of *vipassanā* meditators are very diverse and that many of them are incompatible with those of Theravāda Buddhism.

In the lay-oriented *vipassanā* centers throughout the West, meditation is taught in a way that is largely divorced from the monastic and lay elements of the Theravāda tradition, together with its vocabulary, history, and literature. For these reasons, the *vipassanā* movement presents arguably the most decontextualized, or rather diversely recontextualized, form of

Buddhist practice in the West. Rather than a religion, *vipassanā* is presented as the cultivation of mindfulness as a means of psychological healing and spiritual awakening. Silent meditation retreats, involving sitting and walking meditation, are commonly held for periods ranging from three days to three months, with intermittent times for work and listening to Dharma talks by the leader of the retreat.

The various forms of *vipassanā* meditation are based on, or at least inspired by, the meditation techniques preserved in the Pāli writings of Theravāda Buddhism.⁵ The primary Pāli source for these methods is the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, or the Buddha's *Discourse on the Applications of Mindfulness*, which is correctly regarded as the primary treatise on insight meditation in early Buddhism. The first stage of this meditative training in insight is cultivating mindfulness of the respiration. According to a commentary on this *sutta*, composed in the fifth century by Buddhaghosa, before *applying* one's mindfulness to inquire into the nature of reality, one first *cultivates* mindfulness by attending steadily and vividly to the respiration. By following the gradual steps of this preliminary training, one progressively achieves the first, second, third, and fourth stages of meditative stabilization (Pāli: *jhāna*).⁶ Upon reaching the fourth stabilization, according to Buddhaghosa, one experiences a "purity of mindfulness due to equanimity,"⁷ in which one's whole being is pervaded with a pure and lucid mind. While dwelling in this state of equipoise, says a late master of the Theravāda tradition, the meditator is "intensely conscious and mindful of the object whereon his mind is concentrated, free from all mental disturbances, having eliminated every kind of activity, both bodily and mental."⁸ Buddhaghosa adds that once one has achieved this state of mental purification, one can remain in such a state of uninterrupted, unsullied meditative absorption for a whole day.⁹

As a foundation for the cultivation of insight, one is encouraged in the Theravāda tradition to achieve the fourth stabilization, although such a high degree of meditative concentration is not considered to be imperative. This tradition does maintain, though, that one must achieve at least the first of the four stabilizations, which is an extraordinary state of sustained meditative equipoise in itself.¹⁰ To achieve *any* of the four stabilizations is a formidable task, generally requiring years of intensive, sustained meditation, usually pursued in the context of a monastic, or cloistered, way of life. This is obviously not very inviting to or feasible for Westerners, who generally have time for at most an hour or two of meditation each day, fitted into a busy, highly non-monastic way of life. The modern *vipassanā* tradition accommodates the modern way of life by de-emphasizing the

detachment and austerities of monasticism and the rigorous training in meditative stabilization. Moreover, some recent advocates of *vipassanā* meditation have proposed that the only degree of meditative concentration, or *samādhi*, needed as a prerequisite for insight practice is momentary stabilization (Pāli: *khaṇika-samādhi*). As I have explained elsewhere, this proposal is based on a misinterpretation of authoritative Pāli treatises, and does not represent the Theravāda tradition as a whole.¹¹

A complementary practice also often taught and practiced in the *vipassanā* tradition is the meditative cultivation of loving-kindness.¹² In this practice, one cultivates thoughts of loving-kindness first for oneself, then for one's friends, then for strangers, and finally for one's enemies. The aim of such meditation is to break down all barriers to loving-kindness, so that one can embrace all sentient beings in a spirit of affection and friendliness. This meditation is the first of four cultivations of the heart known as the *divine abidings* in immeasurable loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.¹³

The dominant theme for practice throughout each day is to maintain mindfulness in all one's activities, distinguishing between (1) the phenomena presented to one's perceptual awareness and (2) the mind's emotional and conceptual superimpositions upon perceived phenomena. *Bare attention* is cultivated in place of the mind's compulsive associations and conceptual wanderings throughout the day.¹⁴ As mentioned previously, many *vipassanā* meditators do not regard themselves as Buddhist converts at all, and in this movement there is a general de-emphasis on ritualism and the celebration of the traditional ceremonial cycle of Buddhist holidays, the foremost being Vesak, which commemorates the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and final passing in *nirvāṇa*. Moreover, for obvious reasons, there is little emphasis in this movement on accumulating merit, either by serving the ordained Sangha or by other virtuous deeds. On the other hand, *vipassanā* meditators have been very active in altruistically introducing mindfulness practices into non-Buddhist venues such as stress-reduction clinics, prisons, hospices, psychology clinics, and sports clinics. Such activism is pursued as a good in its own right, without consideration for any personal benefits in future lives, and this attitude is widely seen by its advocates as an improvement upon the more traditional Buddhist attitude of accruing merit for oneself.

ZEN BUDDHISM

Zen is the specific form of Buddhism which the "Bodhidharma lineage" assumed in Japan, especially during the post-Heian period. Closely related

schools of East Asian Buddhism include Ch'an in China, Sōn in Korea, and Thien Buddhism in Vietnam. In the West over the past century, all of these have interacted with each other and with the Theravāda and Tibetan traditions as they never did when they were confined to their host countries. The views of traditional Zen Buddhism are based on the teachings on emptiness in such Buddhist scriptures as the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* and the *Diamond Cutter Sūtra*, and on the Buddha-nature as expounded in other Mahāyāna *sūtras* and commentaries. They also rely heavily on the writings of the great Zen masters of the past, none being more important than the thirteenth-century Japanese contemplative Dōgen.

The two main schools of Zen are Sōtō and Rinzai. In the Sōtō Zen tradition, the primary practice is zazen, or "just sitting" in a full-lotus posture, mindfully attending to one's respiration, often while counting breaths to help maintain the attention. The eyes are kept open but cast down and lightly focused, often while facing a blank wall. In such practice there may be no object at all on which one meditates, for the aim is simply to be aware of the mind's incessant activity without being drawn into it and identifying with it. The underlying principle here is that the mind by its own nature is pure, indeed it is none other than the enlightened awareness of a Buddha. So the meditator's chief task is to "get out of the way," so that this innate Buddha-mind can manifest.

The Rinzai school is known for its emphasis on the meditative use of *kōans*, which range from stories or remarks made by earlier Zen masters in conveying the spirit of the Zen tradition, to paradoxical questions designed to transcend one's ordinary dualistic way of thinking. These pithy, often paradoxical, stories and questions are to be contemplated while in meditative equipoise, and are designed to break through one's habitual structuring of experience in terms of such dualities as subject and object, good and bad, "I" and "not I." When the mind is simply quieted, such conceptual structuring may merely go dormant, without bringing about any deep breakthrough to a conceptually unmediated realization of one's Buddha-nature. So these questions are designed to arouse the habitual conceptual structuring of experience, shatter it, and thereby achieve *kenshō*, in which one realizes one's own Buddha-mind. In both the Sōtō and Rinzai traditions, walking meditation, done either slowly or quickly, is also practiced in Zen centers and monasteries between periods of formal sitting. In addition, it is the custom for student and teacher to meet privately, especially during retreats, so that the teacher can offer personal guidance to individual meditators.

While the Sōtō and Rinzai schools were traditionally followed separately in Japan, in the recent past they have increasingly been combined

both in Japan and in the West.¹⁵ Zen masters who have emigrated to the West commonly teach the theory and practice of Zen in close accordance with their own Japanese traditions, but many of their non-Asian disciples who have become teachers in their own right have de-emphasized the more theological, philosophical, and ritualistic elements of this tradition. As Zen is increasingly practiced under the guidance of Western *rōshis*, the focus has shifted more toward meditation practice alone.

In terms of their way of life, many traditional Zen Buddhists take the sixteen precepts taught in the Sōtō tradition: taking refuge in the (1) Buddha, (2) Dharma, and (3) Sangha; following the three pure precepts of (4) doing no evil, (5) doing good, and (6) doing good for others; and following the ten grave precepts of (7) not killing, (8) not stealing, (9) not engaging in sexual misconduct, (10) not lying, (11) not becoming intoxicated, (12) not speaking of others' faults, (13) not elevating oneself while demeaning others, (14) being generous to others, (15) not being angry, and (16) not slandering the Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha. While such precepts set the ethical constraints on one's day-to-day life, the general spirit of Zen is to maintain a mindful spontaneity that is brought to such diverse activities as the practice of archery, calligraphy, flower arranging, gardening, martial arts, and poetry.

Like the worldwide *vipassanā* movement, Zen Buddhist meditation in the West has been removed from its monastic milieu in Japan and other East Asian countries and introduced into lay life, with the demands of the workplace and family obligations. Another similarity between *vipassanā* and Zen in the West is their assimilation of views from other Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions, especially those of humanistic psychotherapy. Since the vast majority of Western Zen practitioners are laypeople, in addition to daily meditation sessions, intensive practice is condensed into retreats to fit their schedules. Such silent retreats, called *sesshins* (meaning "collecting the heart-mind"), usually last from three to seven days, or for as long as three months, and are held at regular intervals throughout the year.

As Zen has been assimilated into the West, the traditional ceremonial life of the Japanese temple, together with its linguistic and social customs, has gradually become marginalized. Few Western Zen followers have chosen to make the commitment of entering full-blown Zen monastic practice by taking monastic ordination, or *tokudo*. On the other hand, this movement in the West has been socially active in founding the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and other organizations committed to providing employment for the needy, homeless, and unskilled, and to establishing facilities for the homeless, for childcare, and for job training. The parallels with the

modern *vipassanā* school are obvious: both are shifting away from monasticism, traditional beliefs, and customs, and both are emphasizing private and group meditation, combined with service to the community and the environment.

NICHIREN SHŌSHŪ BUDDHISM AND SŌKA GAKKAI INTERNATIONAL

The school of Buddhism founded by the thirteenth-century Japanese reformer Nichiren is one of many East Asian Buddhist sects that are centered on the *Lotus Sūtra*. The organization of this movement, known as the Nichiren Shōshū Temple (NST), is strongly sectarian and committed to converting the world to what it deems to be the one “true Buddhism.” Here is a purely religious approach to Buddhism, in which enlightenment can be achieved only through reliance upon the Nichiren priesthood, specifically the lineage of the high priest at Taisekiji, which is the basis for the authority of this school.

The central meditative practice of Nichiren Buddhism consists of chanting the *daimoku*, “Nam-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō,” meaning “Homage to the Sublime Dharma Lotus Sūtra.” This is chanted by a group in unison, sometimes with the accompaniment of drums, for between fifteen and twenty minutes, while facing the *gohonzon*, a small paper scroll that is a consecrated replica of scrolls originally inscribed by Nichiren. The *gohonzon* is enshrined in an altar and thought to embody the Dharma and Nichiren himself, who is regarded as an incarnation of the Buddha. The power of the *gohonzon* is believed to flow from the camphor-wood original carved by Nichiren himself, which is housed in the temple at Taisekiji. Following the chanting of the *daimoku*, Nichiren Buddhists may then recite selected passages from the *Lotus Sūtra* for as long as two hours a day. This highly devotional mode of practice is aimed at achieving material benefits, such as financial prosperity and good health, as well as spiritual insights. Its overall purpose on a very practical level is to help people take responsibility for their own lives, learning how to transform adversities into benefits.

Apart from the formal meditative practices of chanting and recitation, Nichiren Buddhism very strongly emphasizes the importance of *shakubuku*, a form of evangelizing and preaching, designed to convert others to this sect, relieve poverty and disease, and eventually realize a utopian vision of world peace and harmony. In line with these ideals, this school is known for the high value it places on progressive education, political

activism, and the development of Buddhist family life. Another important element of Nichiren Buddhist practice is making the pilgrimage to Taisekiji, the head Nichiren Shōshū temple near Mount Fuji.

Until 1991, the Nichiren Shōshū Temple worked in collaboration with the lay branch of this movement, known as Sōka Gakkai (Value Creation Society), which has established national organizations on every continent. Like the NST, the Sōka Gakkai is a form of evangelical Buddhism, largely comprised of non-Japanese, with more converts from African and Hispanic racial backgrounds than any other school of Buddhism, due in part to its successful efforts in evangelizing in cities. But tension mounted as the lay-centered Sōka Gakkai rebelled against what it deemed the overly authoritarian nature of the priest-centered NST, resulting, in 1991, in the excommunication of the Sōka Gakkai by the NST. Following this formal schism, the Sōka Gakkai took on the name Sōka Gakkai International (SGI), and this is the organization that most non-Japanese followers of Nichiren adhere to today.

The worldview of the SGI is very similar to that of the NST, with the exception that it rejects the NST's insistence that the Sangha consists solely of the priesthood, which must be relied upon to achieve enlightenment. Abandoning this hierarchy, the SGI focuses more on the equality of all people due to their common Buddha-nature. Unlike the *vipassanā* and Zen movements in the West, the SGI is a purely lay organization, so it does not have to contend with the tension between the monastic and lay ways of life. Formal practice according to the SGI consists of the same chanting and rituals as taught by Nichiren, and they are performed in order to achieve the psychological benefits of mental focus and clarity, the pragmatic benefits of material success and prosperity, and finally the spiritual goal of realizing one's Buddha-nature. Although street solicitation and evangelizing have decreased in recent years, this well-organized, home-based movement maintains a stance of social activism and encourages religious dialogue both among Buddhists and with members of other faiths.

JŌDO SHINSHŪ AND PURE LAND BUDDHISM

Based upon such Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures as the *Sukhāvataīvyūha-sūtras*,¹⁶ Pure Land schools originated in China and later spread in different forms into Japan and other East Asian countries and now to the West. Jōdo Shinshū, or "True Pure Land School," founded in the thirteenth century by the Japanese master Shinran, is one of those sects, and most of its followers in the West are Japanese, some of them second-

and third-generation immigrants. The central belief of Jōdo Shinshū, or Shin Buddhism, is in the existence of the Pure Land of Sukhāvātī, a heavenly environment in which one may be reborn and achieve enlightenment. This Pure Land was created eons ago by the bodhisattva Dharmākara, who dedicated the merit of his practice to the creation of this ideal realm for all who sincerely and joyfully entrusted themselves to the Buddha he was to become, namely, Amida, or Amitābha, meaning “Infinite Light.” Amida is regarded by Shin Buddhists as the source of all love and compassion, and the possibility of achieving rebirth in his Pure Land stems from his power, not that of the individual practitioner. Unlike all the preceding Buddhist traditions discussed here, this school believes that all practices that rely upon one’s own powers—of meditation and so forth—are fruitless.

Outwardly, the central practice of Shin Buddhism is the recitation of the *nembutsu*, pronounced *Namu Amida Butsu*, meaning “Homage to Buddha Amitābha.” This is chanted not as a means to gain rebirth in the Pure Land, but as an expression of joyful gratitude to Amida for having already granted this desire. Psychologically, chanting this phrase is a way of entrusting oneself to Amida, who is believed to support one through the adversities and vicissitudes of life. Inwardly, followers of this tradition seek to sustain their faith in Amida, which leads to insight into the Mahāyāna doctrines of interdependence of all things in the universe and the oneness of all sentient beings.

In addition, Shin Buddhists commonly perform specific ritual practices associated with the principal holy days of their Buddhist calendar. Worldwide, followers of various sects of Pure Land Buddhism also express their faith by engaging in altruistic social action, such as charity and disaster-relief work, ritual release of captive animals, and following a vegetarian diet.

TIBETAN BUDDHISM

Among all the schools of Buddhism presently being propagated in the West, Tibetan Buddhism is internally the most diverse, in terms of its views, meditative practices, and lifestyles. More so than other schools of Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism has a long-standing tradition of non-monastic contemplatives and religious leaders. This fact inspires many Western lay followers of Tibetan Buddhism to believe that they may achieve states of spiritual realization comparable to those of such great lay contemplatives as the eleventh-century householder adept Marpa; his renowned lay contemplative disciple Milarepa; and the late head of the Nyingma order of Tibetan Buddhism, Dudjom Rinpoche. The worldview in support of such effective

non-monastic practice is found in the teachings of Vajrayāna, or Buddhist Tantra, which promotes the ideal of sublimating sensual desire, rather than the Buddhist monastic ideal of simply eliminating all such desires. But Tibetan Buddhism is not simply Vajrayāna, for it also incorporates the monastic ideals of early Buddhism, as well as the bodhisattva ideals of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The meditations taught and practiced in Tibetan Buddhism are difficult to synopsise within an essay of this brevity, for they are extremely diverse.¹⁷ To begin with, while meditation in the Zen and *vipassanā* traditions is mostly non-conceptual in nature, in Tibetan Buddhism, meditation includes not only the cultivation of non-conceptual concentration and mindfulness, but a wide range of conceptually discursive practices. Tibetan Buddhist meditative practice usually begins with reflecting on such topics as “the four thoughts that turn the mind,” namely: (1) the significance of having a human life of leisure and spiritual opportunity, (2) death and impermanence, (3) the unsatisfactory nature of the cycle of existence, and (4) the laws of karma. In addition, this tradition is known for its strong emphasis on ritual chanting of prayers, mantras, and long liturgies, all of which are conceptually discursive in nature.

Tibetan Buddhist practice includes extensive and diverse methods for the cultivation of meditative quiescence (Skt. *śamatha*) and contemplative insight (Skt. *vipaśyanā*). Unlike the range of quiescence techniques taught in the Zen and Theravāda traditions, Tibetan Buddhism strongly emphasizes the practice of visualization as a means for developing attentional stability and vividness.¹⁸ When it comes to the cultivation of insight, some meditations are highly analytical, drawing from the syllogistic modes of inquiry set forth in the Madhyamaka philosophy of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti. These are aimed at experientially ascertaining the absence of inherent existence, or the emptiness, of all phenomena, including oneself.¹⁹ More widely taught and practiced in the West, however, are the meditations set forth in the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen, or Atiyoga, traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. These are far less discursive and analytical, and, like Zen meditation, are aimed at recognizing the nature of one’s own primordial awareness, unstructured by any concepts or other conditioning. Indeed, the practices of Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen are at least on the surface so similar to Zen and the contemporary *vipassanā* tradition that a growing number of Western Buddhist teachers and students are combining techniques from these historically separate traditions.

In Tibetan Buddhism, a prominent genre of teaching given for day-to-day living is the practice of *lojong* (Tib. *blo sbyong*), or “mind-training.”

The most widely taught and practiced *lojong* is the “Seven-Point Mind-Training” initially taught in Tibet in the eleventh century by the Indian Buddhist teacher Atīśa.²⁰ One of the central features of this type of training is the transformation of all the vicissitudes of life, including adversity and felicity, into spiritual maturation. Such practice may be combined with the specific Vajrayāna techniques of cultivating a sense of “divine pride,” identifying oneself with an archetypal embodiment of one’s own Buddha-nature, and cultivating a “pure perception” of reality. In the latter, one seeks to view all external things and events as displays of embodiments of enlightened awareness, all sounds as enlightened speech, and all mental events as displays of one’s own Buddha-mind. In marked contrast to the “bare attention” emphasized in the *vipassanā* tradition, both the mind-training tradition and the practice of Vajrayāna powerfully employ one’s intellectual and imaginative faculties in daily life.

CONCLUSION

As the light of multiple Asian Buddhist traditions is refracted through the many facets of the prism of modern Western civilization, a broad spectrum of ways of viewing the world, meditative practices, and lifestyles is cast upon the contemporary cultural landscape. Judging by the trends noted in the above traditions of Buddhist practice in the West, it would appear that a kind of Buddhist protestant reformation is in the making. In this reformation, as in the Christian Protestant Reformation, the role of monks, nuns, priests, and professional contemplatives is on the decline; there is an erosion of the very distinction between laity and clerics; and the importance of the laity, very much including women, is on the rise. These changes are induced by multiple and diverse influences, including individualism and nonconformism, democracy and egalitarianism, humanistic psychotherapy, feminism, the disenchantment of the natural world as viewed by modern science, and, of course, Christianity and Judaism.

The nature of these influences is varied and complex. For instance, many Westerners practicing Buddhism reject the Buddhist assertion of rebirth in miserable states of existence, such as hells, as a result of sinful behavior. The basis of their objection to this Buddhist belief is that it is *too compatible* with Christianity. On the other hand, some Westerners who practice Buddhism and who may even regard themselves as Buddhist discard the Buddhist assertions of the continuity of consciousness following death and the efficacy of karma from one life to the next, on the grounds that they are *too incompatible* with modern science. This is an interesting position to

take in light of the fact that current scientific understanding of the nature of consciousness is scant at best. In the words of two of America's most prominent philosophers of mind, "Consciousness stands alone today as a topic that often leaves even the most sophisticated thinkers tongue-tied and confused,"²¹ and "where the mind is concerned we are characteristically confused and in disagreement."²² But perhaps ongoing dialogues and increased collaboration between Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and cognitive scientists will shed clearer light on such problems.²³

Buddhism makes many extraordinary claims about the capacity of human consciousness for achieving dramatic and irreversible kinds of transformation. These include the complete elimination of all mental afflictions (Skt. *kleśa*); freedom from the cycle of rebirth; boundless love and compassion; a vast expansion of awareness, both in terms of ultimate truth and various modes of extrasensory perception (Skt. *abhijñā*) of the phenomenal world; and a wide variety of paranormal abilities (Skt. *siddhi*). Such assertions are the "currency" of the faith of traditional Buddhists, who have been encouraged to accept the validity of these claims on the basis of the gold standard of experiences of generation upon generation of accomplished Buddhist contemplatives and saints, beginning with the Buddha himself.

As the role of professional contemplatives declines in the present reformation of global Buddhism, it remains to be seen whether this alleged gold standard will be maintained. A process of declension and laicization has obviously been taking place within the past two generations, during which there has been a rapid dilution of Buddhist views and practices in the West, as well as a high degree of assimilation of non-Buddhist ideas and techniques. With the disappearance of professional contemplatives and their alleged accomplishments, some Western Buddhist teachers, apparently disillusioned by the inability of contemporary meditators to corroborate the truth-claims of earlier Buddhist adepts, have already begun to claim that many traditional accounts of Buddhist insights and transformations are counterfeit, or misleading.²⁴

In all schools of Buddhism, worldviews, meditative practices, and lifestyles are profoundly interrelated, making it impossible to understand Buddhist practice without taking into account this entire triad. Moreover, given the inextricable relationships among these three facets of practice, it is infeasible to alter or discard Buddhist worldviews without this having a powerful influence on one's meditative practice and way of life. If the way one views the world is out of accord with traditional Buddhist worldviews, there is no way that one's meditation and lifestyle can be

Buddhist in any manner that accords with traditional Asian forms of Buddhism.

Certainly some Western Buddhists, following the lead of their Asian teachers, are committed to maintaining the “purity” of their own traditions, without influence either from other Buddhist schools or from any non-Buddhist elements. As a general trend, it appears that the more religiously oriented Buddhists are, the less they tend to be eclectic in this sense of drawing from different Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions, and the more they emphasize the practice of viewing the world by way of Buddhist beliefs. More secular Buddhists, on the other hand, seem less concerned with the intact preservation of ancient traditions and more pragmatically concerned simply with exploring what ideas and meditation techniques help them in their daily lives. The tension between these two trends—of tradition versus modernity, of preservation versus innovation, and of continuity versus adaptation—is a prominent feature of Western Buddhism today.

Never in its long history has Buddhism gone through such a dramatic and swift array of changes, while it was violently suppressed during the twentieth century by Communists throughout much of Asia, and its traditions were subsequently carried throughout the rest of the world, often intermingling with each other in unprecedented ways. Buddhism has always emphasized the ubiquitous reality of impermanence and change, and it is now passing through a period of such profound and swift change—and in turn having such a significant impact on its host societies—that the future course of these transitions is hard to foresee. While the status of Buddhism as a religion is being seriously challenged by many of its own followers, its impact on the West goes far beyond the simple conversion of a small minority of the population to the Buddhist faith. The full nature and extent of this impact on Western ideas, values, and ways of life can hardly be anticipated this early in the story of Buddhism’s unprecedented globalization.

NOTES

1. See, for example, the excellent overview of Buddhism in America in Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

2. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), chapter 2.

3. For a more detailed analysis of the status of Buddhism within the Western framework of religion, philosophy, and science, see the section called “Tsongkhapa’s Methodology” in B. Alan Wallace, *The Bridge of Quiescence: Experiencing Tibetan Buddhist Meditation* (Chicago: Open Court, 1998).

4. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 104.

5. See Nyānaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation: A Handbook of Mental Training Based on the Buddha's Way of Mindfulness* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973). For a modern overview of the teachings of Theravāda Buddhism, see Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, rev. ed. (New York: Grove, 1974).

6. See Soma Thera, *The Way of Mindfulness* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1975), 71.

7. Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, translated by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1979), II.IV.183.

8. Paravahera Vajirañāna, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1975), 41.

9. Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, II.IV.125.

10. On a technical point, while the commentary and subcommentary to the text maintain that one must achieve the first actual stabilization (Pāli: *appanā-samādhi*), Nyānaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, suggests on page 103 that the first liminal stabilization (Pāli: *upacāra-samādhi*) is a sufficient basis for the successful cultivation of insight in Theravāda Buddhist practice. Buddhistologist Winston L. King, in *Theravāda Meditation: The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1980), concurs with Nyānaponika Thera on this point.

11. See Wallace, *The Bridge of Quiescence*, 258–61.

12. See Sharon Salzberg and Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997).

13. See B. Alan Wallace, *Boundless Heart: The Four Immeasurables* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 1999).

14. For a popular, well-written account of this practice, see Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987).

15. See D.T. Suzuki, Erich Fromm, and Richard De Martino, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Harper, 1970); Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1988); Rōshi Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment* (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1989); and Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation*, translated by Mobi Ho (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

16. See Luis O. Gómez, *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996).

17. For an overview of Tibetan Buddhist meditative practice, see B. Alan Wallace, *Tibetan Buddhism from the Ground Up* (Boston: Wisdom, 1993).

18. See Gen Lamrimpa, *Calming the Mind: Tibetan Buddhist Teachings on the Cultivation of Meditative Quiescence*, translated by B. Alan Wallace (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 1995).

19. See Gen Lamrimpa, *Realizing Emptiness: The Madhyamaka Cultivation of Insight*, translated by B. Alan Wallace (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 1999).

20. See Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, *Enlightened Courage: An Explanation of Atisha's Seven Point Mind Training*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 1993), and B. Alan Wallace, *Buddhism with an Attitude: Tibet's Seven Point Mind-Training* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 2001).

21. Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown 1991), 21–2.

22. John R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1994), 247.

23. See James H. Austin, *Zen and the Brain: Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Press, 1998); Christopher de Charms, *Two Views of the Mind: Abhidharma and Brain Science* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 1997); Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead, 1995); Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994); H.H. Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* (Boston: Wisdom, 1996); and Zara Houshmand, Robert B. Livingston, and B. Alan Wallace (eds.), *Consciousness at the Crossroads: Conversations with the Dalai Lama on Brain Science and Buddhism* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 1999).

24. To cite just two examples, see Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (New York: Riverhead, 1997), and Jack Kornfield, "No Enlightened Retirement," *Inquiring Mind* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2000), 20-1, 49.