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Everyday Dharma and Perfect Enlightenment: Contemporary Buddhist Hermeneutics

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Professor Karma Lekshe Tsomo examines the contradictions and innovations that characterize the adoption of Buddhism by Americans. Adapting Buddhism to fit Westerners has brought fruitful new directions to Buddhism, she argues, at the same time that it has resulted in some distortion of or discarding of traditional Buddhist practices and goals.

The recent upsurge of interest in Buddhist teachings and practice in Western societies has come as a surprise to many people. Today the Asian tradition of Buddhism, which was once viewed not only as antiquated and superstitious, but also as pessimistic and nihilistic, is now influencing many aspects of contemporary Western society, from psychology to government. While many express skepticism about Buddhism's recent popularity, dismissing it as Hollywood hype or New Age charlatanism, new Buddhist centers and publications continue to appear. Buddhist influences are seen in architecture, advertising, and video games. His Holiness the Dalai Lama appears on *Oprah* and *Larry King Live*, fragrances are marketed with such names as "Zen" and "Samsara," and allusions to Buddhism crop up frequently in the popular media. As Buddhist traditions and contemporary society intermingle, Buddhism has become a major player in the culture wars.

Teaching Buddhism to university students forces me to continually reevaluate Buddhism and the ways it is being interpreted in modern society. After twenty years of traditional training in Asia as a Buddhist monastic, I returned to the United States to find that Buddhism had become a

part of contemporary discourse. In addition to several million Asian and Asian-American Buddhists, there now were large numbers of Americans from other ethnic backgrounds who had embraced Buddhism, either in theory or in practice, and who were adapting it in new and creative ways. Over a period of forty years now, living in Hawaii, California, Europe and in Asian Buddhist cultures, I have observed many of the dialectical processes that are involved in the American assimilation of Buddhism. Both as an observer and a participant, I have been a witness to the acculturation process.

As Buddhism is adapted to new cultural contexts, certain aspects of the tradition are emphasized, while others are ignored or rejected. The dynamics of Buddhism's transmission to the West is analogous to its transmission from India to China, Southeast Asia and Japan. The term "Buddhism" designates a panoply of traditions that have continued to evolve in vastly different cultural contexts over many centuries. There is the temptation when viewing this process to want to assess these reinterpretations of Buddhism according to the extent to which they are authentic; however, such a project raises difficult questions about standards for measuring authenticity and even the value of creating such standards. Criteria for authenticity are elusive, since different versions of the canon include variant teachings. What is original Buddhism anyway? one might ask. Ultimately, people are attracted to Buddhism if they find it meaningful.

A proliferation of Buddhist publications in English, including scholarly works and popular magazines such as *Tricycle*, *Shambhala* and *Turning Wheel*, are evidence of a new hermeneutics, as this ancient way of life is received in new, rapidly changing cultural contexts. The new Buddhist centers that have mushroomed over the past thirty years combine elements of both tradition and contemporary life, serving as crucibles for a vibrant, dynamic process of acculturation of Buddhist thought and practice. Clearly, a generation of interlocutors has successfully adapted these ancient teachings in ways that are relevant to an entirely new population. Here I would like to examine some of these adaptations alongside traditional interpretations and practices.

I. Cultures in Contrast

In many ways, traditional Buddhist and contemporary Western cultures are exact opposites. A traditional Buddhist takes birth in an extended community, in an environment inhabited by myriad beings seen and unseen, in one of many successive rebirths that unfold over enormous expanses of

time in countless world systems. In contrast, a Western individual is usually born into a nuclear family at a specific time in a linear, historical timeline. Traditionally, Buddhists aim to transcend the sufferings of this world by controlling sense desires, while Western cultures extol the enjoyment of the pleasures of the senses. The traditional Buddhist assigns great importance to the welfare of future lifetimes, whereas Western individuals tend to focus primarily on the welfare of this life. Buddhist traditions commingle with indigenous beliefs and practices, while Western religious traditions may bifurcate from other traditions and other aspects of life. In countless respects, the Buddhist and American cultural frameworks seem divergent, often antithetical.

Of course, congruencies can also be found. Traditional Buddhist and contemporary Western cultures similarly value human happiness, freedom and education. Both have highly developed systems of ethics and human psychology. Both value honesty, integrity and other, similar spiritual values. Both are currently in the process of profound transformations brought about by new technologies and sweeping social changes.

In light of these many contrasts and coincidences, Buddhism's recent popularity in North America is intriguing. Buddhism's acculturation is being fully documented, in a self-reflective process, establishing Buddhism in America as a new academic discipline.¹ Numerous publications have addressed questions such as: If the Buddhist and Western cultural frames are so different, why are so many Western people attracted to Buddhism? If Buddhist and Western values are similar, why are Westerners abandoning the religious traditions of their birth? Is a merging of traditions possible? Is it desirable? What would such a merger look like? However we answer these questions, this pooling of intellectual and spiritual resources will precipitate a constructive engagement beneficial to both.

For this reason, I intend to explore the points of convergence and contrast in an attempt to more fully comprehend this historical intersection of ideas and praxis. I draw on my own experiences of living and studying for many years in both Asia and the West. As a teacher I have encountered the ways in which Buddhist theory and values are understood differently in the West than they are in Asia. The discrepancy between traditional and contemporary interpretations of Buddhist ideas and ideals has caused me to take new approaches and develop new methods in teaching. These experiences have also raised questions for me, questions that challenge both Buddhist and Western assumptions about the nature of individuals and human society. I am convinced that this dialogical encounter will be a fruitful contribution to cultural studies.

To begin this dialogue, Melford Spiro's work provides a useful theoretical framework. Based on fieldwork in Burma, he distinguishes three traditional Buddhist approaches:

1. apotropaic Buddhism, meaning ritual or supernatural practices for protection and blessing;
2. kammatic Buddhism, or practices for the accumulation of merit;
3. nibbanic Buddhism, or practices for the achievement of liberation (*nirvana*), primarily through meditation.²

These three orientations are found to a lesser or greater degree in all Asian Buddhist cultures, though the categories may be designated differently. For example, Geoffrey Samuel, working in the Himalayan cultural context, refers to these three orientations as:

1. a pragmatic orientation, aimed at achieving this-worldly benefits and avoiding misfortunes through shamanic rituals;
2. a clerical or ethical orientation, based on the principle of karma;
3. a *bodhi* orientation, aimed at achieving liberation or perfect enlightenment.³

The task I attempt here is to see whether and to what extent these categories are applicable to the experience of American Buddhists.

Referring specifically to Buddhists in the United States, I posit three clearly distinguishable categories: Asian Buddhists, Asian-American Buddhists, and non-Asian-American Buddhists. The first category consists primarily of Asian immigrants and their families who are born Buddhist. They attend services conducted in their own language at temples associated with their own ethnic or cultural heritage, which are presided over by monks or nuns of a similar ethnic or cultural heritage. Examples include Buddhists from Cambodia, Korea, Laos, Taiwan, Thailand and Sri Lanka. The second category, Asian-American Buddhists, mostly consists of Japanese-Americans, many of them fourth-, fifth-, or sixth-generation Americans, who are also born Buddhist. They attend services typically conducted in English at Japanese temples presided over by Japanese or Japanese-American married priests. Examples are the members of the Jodo, Jodo Shinshu, Nichiren, Shingon and Tendai temples that are located throughout the United States, the largest sect being Jodo Shinshu, with a membership of approximately 300,000.

The third category consists of native-born Americans of a variety of ethnicities, primarily Caucasians, but also including African-Americans,

Native Americans, multiracial Americans and others. Non-Asian-American Buddhists attend meditations or services at Dharma centers or temples where meditation instruction, chanting, or teachings are conducted primarily in English. They may be led by either monastics, laypeople, or people who consider themselves “neither lay nor ordained,” or they may be intentionally “leaderless.”

Using this division of American Buddhists into three general categories, I intend to apply Spiro’s conceptual framework to the non-Asian segment of the American Buddhist population, rather than to the entire Buddhist population in the United States. The rationale for focusing on this segment is, first, that the entire American Buddhist population is too large and too disparate for meaningful conclusions to be drawn, and, second, that the Asian Buddhist population is very similar in orientation to Spiro’s research sample, whereas the non-Asian-American segment is quite dissimilar, providing the greatest contrast to Spiro’s sample population and therefore the best test of his taxonomy.

Applying Spiro’s first category, apotropaic Buddhism, we find that non-Asian-American Buddhists have little or no interest in rituals or supernatural practices for protection. Although they may find these practices culturally exotic, most shy away from these practices and many are overtly critical, regarding ritual practices as superstitious, a sign of Buddhism’s degeneration, un-Buddhist, or typical of the “cultural baggage” that often accompanies the Dharma. Although Western people care as much as anyone about their own health and well-being as well as that of their families and friends, and some surely send prayers heavenward in times of need, generally speaking the protective power of shamanic ritual practices is not a central concern.

Regarding the second category, kammatic Buddhism, non-Asian-American Buddhists generally have little or no interest in practices aimed at the accumulation of merit, either. Although the notion of karma has gained currency, at least insofar as it pertains to this life, there is little understanding of or interest in the notion of “merit,” which is regarded as something akin to “brownie points.” A concern with quantifying good deeds and tallying future rewards strikes many as tacky and incompatible with the Dharma. The notion that merit or virtue can be transferred to future lives is contingent upon the theory of rebirth, which many non-Asian Buddhists do not fully accept. The theory that the benefits of one person’s meritorious deeds can be consciously transferred to another person is not only hard for non-Asian Buddhists to accept, but is questioned by many other Buddhists as well.

Taking up Spiro's third category, nibbanic Buddhism, it is unclear how many non-Asians engage in Dharma practice with the achievement of liberation in mind. Like most Asian Buddhists, many non-Asian Buddhists view this achievement as a distant goal, one that seems a bit unrealistic or at least one that lies far in the future. Many Buddhists in the United States, Asian and non-Asian, question whether or not liberation is truly an attainable goal in this life and are curious to know whether liberated beings (*arhats*) exist today. If they do, where do they live and how can they be recognized as such? Although there are monks in Burma who are reputed to be arhats, most Asian Buddhists doubt their own capability to achieve such a lofty attainment and aspire instead to achieve nirvana in the next life.⁴

II. Buddhism through a Critical Lens

Buddhism today finds itself in a new chapter of human history with new technologies, concerns, and challenges. Several generations have received a secular education founded on a scientific materialist view of the world, with character development left to families and the influences of the media. After a century of unprecedented human catastrophes, faced with daily reports of macabre crimes and conflicts, many sense that human moral and personal development have not kept pace with scientific advances. In this climate, it is clear that traditional value systems must address contemporary social, economic, and political realities. The Buddhist traditions are attractive to the extent that they are willing to tackle these sticky issues in meaningful ways. In the process, the Buddhist teachings are mediated by Asian and Western interpreters who also act as culture brokers, seeking to bridge the gap between traditional values and modern life. Although it is too early to predict the ultimate outcome of this meeting of cultures, the engagement has already been constructive for both Buddhism and contemporary society.

The historical critical method is a useful tool in bridging these cultures. Buddhism's long history of critical thought makes it a comfortable fit in a cynical world. The Buddha enjoined his followers to test his teachings through their own experience "as they would test gold." Westerners encountering Buddhism see a tradition without a formal creed and without membership quotas, one that does not enjoin literal interpretation of scripture. In addition to meditation, contemplation and analysis of the teachings in pursuit of insight are encouraged. This approach seems comfortable to generations of Americans educated in secular schools that encourage critical thinking skills. Individuals who develop an interest in

Buddhism are free to explore a variety of philosophies and practice traditions, apply them as they wish, and draw their own conclusions.

In approaching Buddhism, Westerners inevitably assess Buddhist ideas from within their own cultural and personal frames of reference, rather than on the basis of faith and tradition. Westerners often struggle with the tensions that exist between Buddhist assumptions about the world and their own accustomed views and values. Although no catechism of beliefs is required, certain concepts are rarely questioned in Buddhist societies, namely, karma, rebirth, and the possibility of liberation. These underlying Buddhist assumptions about the world may pose obstacles for Western people who have been raised to view the world from an entirely different set of metaphysical presuppositions. Unless broadly interpreted, even the refuge formula (“I go for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha”)—traditionally the mark of becoming a Buddhist—may be difficult for Western students to accept.⁵ The process of rethinking traditional assumptions can be uncomfortable.

To take a specific example, the notions of karma and rebirth, traditionally intrinsic to South Asian thought, may be difficult or impossible for Western people to fully accept. Although the concept of karma finds parallels in the Bible, it presumably applies to just this life and the next. Extending the law of cause and effect over many lifetimes is a stretch for people educated within a Jewish, Christian, or scientific materialist worldview.⁶ Many regard the theory of rebirth as a cultural accretion and contend that Buddhist methods work just as well without assuming the existence of past and future lives. American Buddhists are mainly concerned about handling the problems of this life and feel that the here and now was the Buddha’s chief concern, too. Many conceive cause and effect as operating in this life, but not beyond. As it happens, however, the discourses of the Buddha clearly presume the existence of rebirth and teach a liberation from suffering that applies not just to this life but to all future lives, too. From a traditional perspective, the attainment of liberation ensures that one will never again experience rebirth. Any attainment that falls short of eradicating the afflictions of future lives is not genuine liberation. Only one who has achieved liberation need not worry about death and the sufferings of future rebirths.

To take another example, today many people are questioning the traditions they were born into, often because certain beliefs must be accepted on faith. Many prefer what they see as Buddhism’s more liberal approach.

American Buddhists are mainly concerned about handling the problems of this life.

Buddhism, at least as it is presented in many American Buddhist centers, requires no commitment to doctrine, and ethical choices are left to the individual. This openness regarding beliefs and ethics is comfortable for many because it suits their secular upbringing and their preference for individual freedom of choice.

The lack of a definitive Buddhist doctrine also raises questions, however, including questions about religious identity. What characteristics or principles are indispensable for a tradition, organization, or person to be considered Buddhist? The absence of a well-defined creed leaves Buddhism open to endless permutations. Some Zen centers in the United States, for example, do not consider themselves Buddhist, even when the path they present stands solidly within the Buddhist tradition. Buddhist ideas are also appropriated or plagiarized by many teachers who market them as their own, often distortedly.

III. New Approaches to Buddhism

Although Buddhism's mutability can be a problem, it can also be a strength. Buddhism's flexible approach to religious experience has enabled the Buddhist teachings to survive and flourish for thousands of years. The tolerant approach that Buddhism extends to other belief systems is reflected in the multiplicity of Buddhist practices and systems of thought that exist today. There are several reasons why this openness has hastened Buddhism's acceptance in Western society. First, it is not necessary to reject one's own religious heritage. Second, it is possible to weigh the teachings for oneself, select what one finds most useful, and leave the rest. Third, critical thinking is encouraged, which appeals to a public weary of dogmatism and proselytizing. Fourth, some Buddhist traditions are flexible enough to consider issues of contemporary concern, such as gender, sexual orientation, and bioethics, and to revise their thinking if necessary.

To understand the new American Buddhism, I suggest a new paradigm that may replace or supplement Spiro's theoretical framework in describing American Buddhists. This theoretical framework posits three categories: the therapeutic orientation, the philosophical orientation, and the social justice orientation. The therapeutic orientation entails the application of Buddhist principles to dealing with the problems of life. In an age of high expectations and anxiety, people seek strategies for coping with hardships and uncertainties in their personal lives. This search often leads people to Buddhist meditation and other methods of personal development, known to Buddhists as mental cultivation (*bhavana*). The popularity of books like

Pema Chödrön's, which offer practical antidotes to fear, grief, and uncertainty, is evidence that Buddhism is a resource for dealing with specific psychological needs.⁷ Articles about personal growth appear regularly in Buddhist periodicals. In an increasingly violent and chaotic world, thousands of people are using Buddhist methods to create inner peace and more harmonious relationships. Some criticize this therapeutic approach as trivializing, "feel good" Buddhism, which does nothing more than offer Band-Aids for the problems of life. Others say that using the Buddha's teachings as a self-help remedy, minus its philosophical framework, reduces Buddhism to a bland spirituality that will yield no genuine inner transformation. At the same time, adapting to the needs of contemporary society may indeed stretch the teachings in new directions, but such extensions need not diminish or distort them. If the aim of Buddhist practice is to relieve suffering for oneself as well as others, then popularizing methods to diminish stress, fear, unhappiness, and conflict is neither trivial nor in violation of tradition. Instead of reaching only the privileged few who can devote themselves full time to spiritual practice, this therapeutic approach reaches a broad segment of the population. Even if it does not lead to nirvana, this popularly accessible approach to Buddhism accords well with egalitarian American values.

The second approach, the philosophical orientation, uses the Buddhist teachings to explore the metaphysical questions of life. Whether due to the secular orientation of modern society, to dissatisfaction with mainstream religions, or otherwise, many people are turning to Buddhist teachings for ideas about the meaning of life and what happens to us after we die. Although some practice Buddhism as a religion, with praises and petitions, most see it primarily as a path to understanding the human condition. This, after all, was the Buddha's own approach when he first left the palace and encountered sickness, old age, and death. Buddhism's philosophical dimension is comfortable for people who disdain or distrust "religion." Although the description "night-stand Buddhist" may be used derisively, there need not be anything amiss in skipping the chanting ceremonies and reflecting on Buddhist concepts about the nature of reality instead. Such has been the choice of many Asian Buddhists in past centuries.

Buddhist ethics and epistemology, in particular, are gaining attention. Buddhist thinking on the nature of consciousness, the mechanics of perception, and the process of dying are key contributions to contemporary intellectual discourse. The Mind-Life conferences between Tibetan scholars and Western scientists over the last two decades have provided forums for these rich confluences of knowledge and for cutting-edge dialogue

about matters of great human concern.⁸ This mutual cross-fertilization of influences, which transcends ideologies, may be a lasting contribution to world cultures.

These ideas also have practical relevance. Buddhist views are being sought on issues of war and peace, end-of-life care, gender ethics and bioethics. Recent advances in biomedical technology, such as cloning and stem cell research, raise ethical issues that concern health care professionals, hospital chaplains, and the aging. Because modern medical technologies were unknown and undreamed of in the Buddha's day, these new moral questions are causing Buddhists to examine traditional Buddhist perspectives, revisit the texts, reevaluate what they find there, and apply the teachings to issues of contemporary relevance. This dialogue between Buddhism and science is a meeting of two vastly different worldviews. There is an orthodoxy in each of these systems, but if each is willing to listen, their constructive engagement can make a valuable contribution in today's multicultural society.

The third approach, the social justice orientation, entails the application of Buddhist principles to the problems of society. This orientation, which the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh calls "engaged Buddhism" and the Chinese monks Taixu and Yinshun call "humanistic Buddhism," has much in common with Catholic liberation theology.⁹ In an age of environmental degradation, overpopulation, new medical technologies, widespread economic injustice, religious strife, sexual slavery, the marketing of violence, and imminent nuclear danger, people seeking new ways of thinking about social realities from non-Western perspectives have been exploring how Buddhist social theory can be used to address urgent human tragedies.¹⁰ Buddhist social theory can be seen as a logical extension of Buddhist psychological theory, as social institutions reflect greed, aggression, and ignorance, the three root afflictions of individuals' minds. As David Loy puts it,

In short, our global economy institutionalizes greed; the military industrial complex at the heart of most developed nation-states institutionalizes aggression; our media and even our universities institutionalize ignorance of what is actually happening.¹¹

Buddhism has valuable resources to contribute to a nonviolent social revolution. To optimize Buddhist contributions, however, Buddhist traditions must update their resources. Issues of gender equality and sexual orientation, for example, require Buddhists to revisit the scriptures, challenge their teachers, and question traditional assumptions and representations. New medical technologies and social urgencies are forcing Buddhists to develop

responses to a host of urgent social issues, such as racism, sexism, classism, militarism, homophobia, teen pregnancy, capital punishment and biomedical ethics. Debates about abortion, cloning and stem cell research are opportunities for dialogue with doctors, nurses, caregivers, chaplains, family members and the general public. This new social justice orientation is taking Buddhists in new directions, such as hospice work, prison work, substance abuse programs, and youth programs, which are not only benefiting society but also infusing Buddhist institutions with new life.

Social engagement poses many practical challenges for Buddhists. One recurring question is how to balance personal needs and active engagement in the world. The needs on the streets are endless and time-consuming. Working in the world is full of opportunities for practice but also full of frustrations and hassles. It is not so difficult to remain calm and compassionate when surrounded by calm and compassionate companions in a monastery or retreat environment. It is quite another thing to maintain a calm, compassionate attitude when working in the everyday world of greed, hatred, corruption, and self-interest. Modeling Buddhist ideals in a materialistic society can be a great contribution, offering alternatives to greed and aggression; still, swimming against the stream can be exhausting.

For Buddhists to be effective agents of social change also requires a radical restructuring of Buddhist institutions. If Buddhism is to become a force for social transformation, it can no longer be confined to temples, monasteries, and universities. The world has become so complex, with so many crying needs, that Buddhists can no longer ethically avoid a commitment to social transformation. His Holiness the Dalai Lama repeatedly enjoins nuns and monks to engage actively in alleviating the sufferings of the world. He in fact has said that the time for monks and nuns to sit on a cushion in a monastery and meditate is finished and that now they must actively take part in society as doctors, lawyers, and educators to work for the good of the world. He often cites the commendable example of Christian nuns who work ceaselessly to relieve the sufferings of the poor and needy throughout the world, and he encourages Buddhist nuns and monks to follow their example. The fact that many American Buddhists come from Jewish and Christian backgrounds, and therefore have been raised with a strong social consciousness, may be precisely what inclines them toward active social engagement.

IV. Into the Future

Fifty years after the advent of the “Beat Generation,” when innovators like Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder initiated a Buddhist counterculture, it is

clear that the global upsurge of interest in Buddhism is not just a passing fad. Although some aspects of Buddhist influence may be shallow and fleeting, some may also endure. The use of Buddhist elements in advertising, Buddhist references in popular music, and Hollywood's fascination with Tibet in a spate of films like *The Little Buddha* are among the many ways that Buddhist ideas and aesthetics have permeated popular culture. Certain ideas, like "What goes around comes around," have become so thoroughly infused into contemporary culture that they are not even recognized as Buddhist. Although key elements of traditional Buddhism may not gain currency, certain practical methods for managing anger, reducing stress, and improving relationships have been easily adopted and put into practice. Despite many differences in culture and values, through the writings and personal charisma of Buddhists like H. H. Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhism can no longer be blithely dismissed as antiquated superstition or "flavor of the month" pop psychology. Interest in Buddhist classes, retreats, and cultural contributions continue to be strong, despite a shortage of qualified instructors.

A clash of cultures is still evident, however, as the Buddhist renunciant ideal confronts the American dream. The tensions revolve especially around the pleasures of the senses, orthodoxy, and ethics. Contemporary American life is unabashedly sensual, and even spirituality, Buddhist spirituality included, is often marketed with a sensual public in mind. Announcements of the third Conference on American Buddhism, for example, were emblazoned with ads for workshops on "Sex as Practice," and tantric practice is pursued by thousands of Westerners who hope to combine progress toward enlightenment with sexual satisfaction. But this sensual dimension of popular culture contrasts starkly with the Buddhist teachings on the restraint of the senses. Further, in a consumer culture, the Dharma is often turned into a commodity, evidenced by the price tags attached to Buddhist talks and retreats. As Buddhism becomes popular, critics can fairly claim that it is becoming commercialized, distorted, and watered down.

A clash of cultures is also evident within American Buddhism, since a variety of Buddhist traditions have taken root. This variety is an advantage, in that it speaks to a multiplicity of needs, dispositions, and attitudes. To some extent, also, the future of Buddhism in the West will be market-driven. Those approaches that best suit the needs of the times will naturally survive and thrive; those that are irrelevant will disappear, in a process of natural attrition. A critic might counter, though, that a Buddhism at the mercy of the market is doomed to distortion. In a society where physical attractiveness and pleasure predominate, serious practitioners may be by-

passed in favor of good-looking teachers who offer an effortless, “fun” path to enlightenment.

Selecting attractive aspects of the tradition while dispensing with the more uncomfortable aspects also raises questions. Although the tradition has been reconstructed repeatedly, the Buddha’s teachings are a holistic system, and it is unclear what the end result will be if elements that seem appealing are extracted and the rest discarded. Change is often uncomfortable, and real psychological transformation is unlikely to result when one follows a path that does not call into question one’s habitual patterns of thought and behavior. A poignant example is Buddhist practice apart from a foundation of ethics. Traditional Buddhist societies demand that teachers observe pure moral conduct, and while scandals certainly occur, village societies have their own internal monitoring systems. Today, with cell phones and modern transport, these social controls are breaking down everywhere. As a result, cases of sexual exploitation, abuse of authority, and classism have been among the rough spots in the Western acculturation of Buddhism.

The series of scandals that American Buddhism has already experienced, with more in the offing, can lead Americans to legitimately ask: Where does moral authority lie in the “new Buddhism”? In a tradition that assigns moral responsibility to the individual, who is responsible for the tradition at large? In the West, many say they feel closer to teachers who have the same weaknesses as they do. There are some who go so far as to claim enlightenment for themselves and their teachers, despite ethical lapses. Errors of judgment on the part of such teachers may be evidence, as their disciples say, that their teachers are human, but these errors open the tradition to exploitation and abuse. From the point of view of tradition, the path to enlightenment is premised on strict ethics, and traditional Buddhists ask how teachers without integrity can claim to authentically represent the Buddha’s teachings.

Even where integrity and ethics are not in doubt, the question of authenticity confronts Americans as they encounter a variety of national traditions and syncretic teachings. Traditional Buddhists accept that the received teachings are an accurate representation of the Buddha’s teachings, that they can be verified through personal experience, and that they lead to liberation or enlightenment. In American Buddhism today, however, there are many different presentations of the Dharma, with each claiming the authenticity of tradition, although their teachings disagree,

*What aspects of the
Buddhist teachings are
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often in significant ways. How are students to discern which teachings are authentic when the traditions themselves disagree? What aspects of the Buddhist teachings are indispensable and which are negotiable? If the Buddha's teachings are reconfigured, will they still result in enlightenment? Verifying the teachings through personal experience is the obvious path to finding answers to such questions, but that takes years of intensive practice in a supportive environment. In this dilemma, it is perhaps inevitable that American Buddhists opt for the goal of achieving basic sanity as much more realistic than a goal of pursuing full enlightenment.

In societies that are not traditionally Buddhist, the teachings can easily be misunderstood and misrepresented. Anyone can create a website, label it Buddhist, and launch a new interpretation of Buddhism, whether or not that person has the slightest notion about Buddhism. With new information systems, there is no way to control how Buddhism is propagated or by whom. The only antidote is to provide more and better websites, online journals, catalogues of Buddhist texts, videos, and Buddhist studies programs. The Buddha advised his followers to accept that which is in accord with the Dharma he taught and to reject that which is not. Americans will have to become discriminating and exercise good judgment if they hope to achieve results.

Despite all these difficulties, the meeting of Buddhist and Western wisdom, both in academic and popular culture, is a creative engagement that bodes well for both sides. From its side, Buddhist approaches to understanding the mind, overcoming addictions, and dealing with the problems of life will continue to inform and enrich contemporary cultures. From its side, Western approaches to critical scholarship, environmental protection, and social justice will continue to inform and enrich Buddhist cultures. These cultural confluences promise more than the sum of their parts.

Two additional groups may serve as intermediaries in the assimilation of Buddhism. The first group includes second-generation Asian-American Buddhists, especially those from Chinese, Taiwanese, and Vietnamese backgrounds. These young people have been raised in Buddhist families but are American-educated. With insight into both Buddhist and American cultures, they can act as culture brokers or bridges between the two. The second group includes Americans who are attracted to traditional forms of Buddhism. Combining an American education and Buddhist training, sometimes even receiving monastic ordination, they also act as bridges between the cultures. With insights from all these directions, eventually an authentic acculturation is possible. The challenge is to create systems of meaning that incorporate the best elements of each.

Notes

1. For example, see James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); David R. Loy, *A Buddhist History of the West: Studies in Lack* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann, eds., *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Jeffrey Paine, *Re-Enchantment: Tibetan Buddhism Comes to the West* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2004).
2. Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 31–161.
3. Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Society* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), pp. 5–8.
4. In a study conducted in 1961–2, Spiro asked the residents of a village in Upper Burma the question, “What do you desire for your next existence?” The villagers’ responses reveal that 65 percent aspire to nirvana. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
5. The complexities of establishing Buddhist identity are discussed in Thomas A. Tweed, “Who Is a Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures,” in Prebish and Baumann, *Westward Dharma*, pp. 17–33.
6. Galatians 6.7: “Whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” This verse echoes Job 4.8, “Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same.”
7. For example, Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000); *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002); and *Comfortable with Uncertainty* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002).
8. These conferences have resulted in a series of publications, the latest of which is Daniel Goleman, *Destructive Emotions: A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2003); Daniel Goleman, *Healing Emotions: Conversations with the Dalai Lama on Mindfulness, Emotions, and Health* (Boston: Shambhala, 2003); Francisco J. Varela and Jeremy W. Hayward, eds., *Gentle Bridges: Conversations with the Dalai Lama on the Sciences of the Mind* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001); Zara Houshmand, Robert B. Livingston, and B. Alan Wallace, eds., *Consciousness at the Crossroads: Conversations with the Dalai Lama on Brain Science and the Mind* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1999); and Dalai Lama, *Sleeping, Dreaming and Dying: An Exploration of Consciousness with the Dalai Lama* (Boston: Wisdom, 1997).
9. “According to Taixu, bodhisattvas on the true path would propagate a ‘worldly Buddhism’ or a ‘humanistic Buddhism’ (*renjian fojiao*), a form of the religion that was neither monastically nor devotionally centered but energetically concerned with perfecting human life and advancing the social order.” Don Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu’s Reforms* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), p. 226. “Yinshun further extended Taixu’s ‘Buddhism for human life’ (*rensheng fojiao*) through an emphasis on a ‘Buddhism

in the human realm' (*renjian fojiao*).” Ibid., p. 270. I am grateful to Elise DeVido for this reference.

10. Examples of this new genre are David Loy, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003); Christopher Queen, Charles Prebish, and Damien Keown, eds., *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2003); Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft, eds., *Dharma Rain* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000); Christopher S. Queen, ed., *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Boston: Wisdom, 2000); Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds., *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Ken Jones, *The Social Face of Buddhism: An Approach to Political and Social Activism* (London and Boston: Wisdom, 1992); and Fred Eppsteiner, *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988).
11. Loy, *The Great Awakening*, p. 88.