

## **Buddhism in the United States: an ethnographic study**

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# Buddhism in the United States: an ethnographic study

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This paper focuses on Buddhism in America, an neglected area of inquiry in anthropological study. There is a need for modern ethnographic studies to shed light on historical issues, paradigms for comparative inquiry, and thus, explore the impact of Buddhism on modern American society (Glazier, 1997). The enormous growth of Buddhism in the last quarter century (Smith, 2002) makes this an especially pertinent topic in American anthropology. We utilize Glazier's model to add Buddhism as a topic in the area of modernity studies.

This is a preliminary study of the nature of Buddhism in America. We conducted participant observation with a Buddhist meditation group in a north eastern state in the US for four months in the spring of 2010. Based on our preliminary ethnographic data, we believe that a unique perspectives of Buddhism in America can be identified: non-religious and therapeutic involvement or use of Buddhism. Also, new forms of practice become evident, for example, 'walking meditation' and 'bowing to other Buddhists,' are identified as characteristics of Buddhism in America. It is interesting to note that at the end of meditation sessions, participants not only bow to the Buddha statue, but also bow to each other. This is a unique ritual dynamic which appears to be consistent with the worldview of American people - being equal and individual. The meditation group also practiced 'walking meditation' which is easy to do in everyday life. Additionally, we observed that American meditation rooms provide additional cushions to sit on which are a further element, along with walking meditation, which help American beginners to meditate more easily.

These study observations shed light on the current situation by providing new lenses from which to understand and focus on different ritual performances/interpretations of Buddhism, and their meanings and functions in society. The most important reflection is that religious change is not an isolated cultural phenomenon but that it happens within multiple aspects of social change (Winzeler, 2008). Thus, 'a change in symbolic contents can be meaningfully achieved only if the social reality changes as well' (Malefijt, 1968: 359). Spiro states that 'ritual activities can be a form of expressive culture' (p. 120), and the different and unique forms of rituals of Buddhism may be expressive of different elements of American culture.

**Key Words:** Buddhism, stress reduction, emotion management, ethnography

## **Rationale**

Despite frequent attempts by academics to do so (Di Giovine, 2011), it is still challenging to categorize visitors at a destination – religious or not. This paper provides insights on how this process can be challenging when looking at religious motives, by

exploring the activity of individuals engaging in religious activity even though they are not religious. Just as pilgrims accumulate capital internal to their practices, which may or may not equate with the expectations that accompany that role, this study found that without being religious, people can engage in meditation (religious) practices within the context of

exploring their 'true self.'

In the context of American society, non-religious practitioners seek practical standards of excellence (like stress reduction and emotion management) and these are the standards of expectation as to what constitutes good meditation in America. However, in a Buddhist country like Thailand, different expectations apply, since meditation is linked with praying to Buddha and merit making to monks. Thus, this paper forms the beginnings of a journey of exploration whereby differences in practices and meanings in different cultures or countries can be explored. It is offered here as a discussion piece, and we hope that the initial findings of this current work will generate ideas, suggestions and comments from colleagues.

## Introduction

This paper focuses on Buddhism in America, an area of inquiry lacking anthropological study. There is a need for modern ethnographic studies to shed light on historical issues, paradigms for comparative inquiry, and explore the impact of Buddhism on modern American society (Glazier, 1997). The enormous growth of Buddhism in the last quarter century (Smith, 2002) makes this an especially pertinent topic in American anthropology. We utilize Glazier's model to add Buddhism into the data on modernity studies. This is a preliminary study exploring the nature of Buddhist meditation in the United States.

We also use the work of Edward Said, who, in his book *Orientalism*, describes a trend which he gives the same name. Orientalism according to Said, is the caricatured perception of the East held by the West. This perception held of the 'orient' by the West is completely misrepresentative and based on incorrect assumptions. It has, however, led to the study and continued production of knowledge that viewed the East in such a way. Typically, Orientalism stereotyped Eastern cultures as sexualised, mystical, despotic and timeless. This was in contrast to the occident, or West, which was moral, rational, democratic and modern (Said 2003). Many of these representations were the product of *Orientalist* writers in the modern pre-twentieth century, such as Sir Richard Francis Burton – translator of the Kama Sutra.

After World War II, anthropologists began to study world religions that spread beyond their original places and times such as Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism (Winzeler, 2008). They have studied world religions in Latin America, India, China, South Eastern Europe and more recently in Western society itself (Winzeler, 2008). Furthermore, they have broadened

their research to include the resultant larger-scale societies when small-scale religions synthesized and modified to become larger ones, and people converted to the world religions. As a result, the *same* religion can be interpreted, reinterpreted, and practiced in various ways in different areas by different people (Winzeler, 2008). Through the course of this essay we will first describe what Buddhism can be, and describe its manifestation in America. In describing its manifestation in American society, we wish to also explain why it has gained greater popularity within the United States, and how this can be viewed within the context of an American 'world view'; i.e. how it is that a belief system which differs greatly from that traditionally held within the Christian West can be adopted to serve the needs of such a society. By examining the reasons why persons within America come to adopt Buddhism as a way of life, and with what perspective they approach it, one can come to understand why it differs from Buddhist practices within other cultural contexts. This will hopefully help to illuminate current discourse on American Buddhism and related religious movements outside of their 'traditional' geographic location.

## What is Buddhism?

Buddhism is a social morality which emphasizes the law of Karma, the sum of good and evil done in this life and in previous ones which determines one's fate in life and rebirth in the next (Spiro, 1967). Spiro (1967) further explains:

*It is through morality that one increases one's store of merit; it is one's merit that determines one's karma; and it is one's karma that determines one's rebirth* (p. 258).

Goldberg (2002) asserts that Buddhism is the new model of morality in America, which motivates people to engage in Buddhism. In addition, Buddhism is a religion of reason, rejecting faith: 'its truths are to be accepted on the basis of reason (applied to experience), and its goal (nirvana) is to be attained by intellectual process of meditation' (Spiro, 1967: 260). Practices include the support of the monk, earning merit, the avoidance of various forbidden or sinful activities such as taking of life, human and animal (Spiro, 1967).

In Buddhism, unlike many religions, there is no God, and everyone can become a Buddha (though whether in this life or the next, differs depending on the school of Buddhism). Instead of worshipping a God or gods, its purpose is to achieve nirvana through intellectual meditation (Spiro, 1967); Buddha was a human being who achieved absolute wisdom and consciousness. In Buddhism, individuals are taught to follow their own

path. Because of this, Durkheim rejects the belief in gods as a distinguishing characteristic of religion, since Buddhism contains no such belief (Spiro, 1966). Durkheim stressed that religion is social and organized, and is shaped through collective representations of society and culture; the most essential rites are performed together (Winzeler, 2008). This possibly explains why the practices or rituals of Buddhism have developed a distinctly American approach in the United States.

### Buddhism in America

The meeting of the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 is considered as the first contact between Buddhism and North American culture (Goldberg, 2006). Jumping forward in time, there has been a dramatic increase in Asian American Buddhist communities since the 1965 change in US immigration laws and the resultant expansion of practicing communities (Prebish, 1999). In recent years, Buddhism has been spreading globally in diverse ecological, linguistic and cultural contexts (Glazier, 1997). In North America, for example, thousands of meditation centers and groups are appearing, and

*Buddhist meditation centers, social justice movements, eco-Buddhists, Buddhist Internet sites, and university courses in Buddhism are flourishing* (Goldberg, 2006: 285).

In fact, the US population of Buddhists has increased from 0.2% in 1990 to 0.5% in 2001 (Eller, 2007).

It has been theorized that there has been a desire in modern Western society to search for mental or spiritual fulfillment. Prebish (1999) describes how the various Buddhist practices and rituals in America can impact the changing, shifting framework of American values and lifestyles. Thus, Buddhism has tended 'to promote sober, compassionate . . . disciplined, mercantile, and literate polities' (Glazier, 1997: 349), and these can have a positive effect on modernization in the state capitalism (Glazier, 1997). People who are interested in Buddhism may search for mental well-being or serenity. If so, the spread of Buddhism across America can be viewed as social change with symbolic contents, reflecting the American social reality. Winzeler (2008) notes that 'the kind of religious beliefs that people hold reflects the kind of society they live in' (p. 62). Viewing religion through the lens of social change, one can theorize that the American interpretation of Buddhist morality is a driving force for the adoption of Buddhism as a religion and philosophy. From this new perspective, people can reshape their values to come to value a simple, humble,

and compassionate life. As the Dalai Lama said to Americans: 'if you only think me, me, me, the small problem will look so big' (Ekman, 2007).

Many psychologists have found that 'Buddhism' helps people manage their emotions, but, most focus on the benefits of meditation such as therapy, treatment of memory loss, and mental training. There is a Zen Buddhist saying: 'recognizing the spark (that arises to initiate an emotion) before the flame (by which they mean the emotional behavior that enacts the emotion)' (Ekman, 2007: 238). Ekman (2007) discusses the Buddhist view of emotions; through Buddhist meditation, people can gain more control over their emotions with awareness gained by watching themselves. He goes on to say that

*we would have even more choice if we were able to become aware of the automatic appraisal as it is happening, and modify or cancel it at will* (Ekman, 2007: 74).

He concludes, if we can become aware that an emotion has begun to drive our behavior, we can consciously consider whether our emotional reaction is appropriate to the situation we are in, and whether our reaction is at the right intensity and manifesting itself in the most constructive way. Ekman's Orientalized and Americanized interpretation of Buddhism may help some Americans to control their emotions so that they feel less stress from external factors, though it is an incomplete or selective interpretation which fails to encompass the totality of Buddhist belief.

The stress reduction center at the University of Massachusetts has found that when people practice mindfulness meditation, the brain effectively stimulates positive emotions such as compassion. Kabat-Zinn *et al* (1992; 1995) have conducted research on the effectiveness of stress coping and other Buddhist meditation treatment and have found that Buddhist meditation effectively helped with patients' depression, stress and anxiety in the short term. They report that people who meditate for a certain time recover from mental or physical illness or negative life events faster than people who do not meditate. They also acknowledge that meditation is a useful method because it is cost-effective, since one session can include about 30 patients simultaneously, and people can meditate at home. It not only cures depression and stress, but it also makes people more insightful about life. Additionally, Kozhevnikov *et al.* (2009) found that meditation temporarily boosts people's ability to retain an image in their visual memory for a long time. According to them, meditation allows practitioners to access a heightened state of visual-spatial awareness

that lasts for a limited period of time. Therefore, due to its many psychological benefits, Americans are becoming more interested in meditation and this often leads to an interest in Buddhism or Vedic philosophy.

It is perhaps these material, concrete benefits apparently provided by Meditation, and associated with Buddhism, that can lead a person from the materialist West to consider adopting an idealized version of Buddhism as a belief structure. The empirical results yielded by these practices may well appeal to people in the same way that 'self-help' books promise a magic solution to make one self-sufficient, successful, slim, and self-disciplined by following a twelve-step program (Teide, 2001). It is perhaps the reifying effect of these Orientalist representations (Said, 2003) of Asian cultures that effectively allows Buddhism to become a commodity for mass consumption (here we use the term reification to imply both the philosophical fallacy, and the Marxist concept) (Bottomore, 1991: 463-465). One medium through which one may commodify an intellectual tradition for mass consumption is through the production of books. One can find examples of books concerning Buddhism which appeal in the same manner as those by pop-psychologists:

*One Breath at a Time: Buddhism and the Twelve Steps* (Griffin, 2004),

*Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (Batchelor, 1998),

*Buddhism for Mothers: A Calm Approach to Caring for Yourself and Your Children* (Naphali, 2010),

*Why I am a Buddhist: No-Nonsense Buddhism with Red Meat and Whiskey* (Asma, 2010).

Excluding the word 'Buddhism,' there is little to distinguish these books from any other self-help books one might find. It must be noted that we are not suggesting that these authors are disingenuous or intentionally disrespectful towards Buddhism, but that it is symptomatic of writing through a western perspective to a western audience.

Perhaps what we see in these books is as clear an example of Foucault's 'Technologies of the Self' as one could hope to find. Technologies of Self are, according to Foucault, the practices

*which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality* (Foucault, 1988: 18).

In many of these books one sees the explicit expression of how religious practices may be applied for the forming of oneself into an ideal or improved person. Perhaps the question is - What aspects of American existence prompt persons to try model themselves into something influenced by Orientalism? i.e. what is perceived as the characteristics or virtues of Buddhist practitioners? This is perhaps a question that cannot, and should not, be answered in this essay but one which definitely warrants further examination elsewhere. It must be noted that these technologies of self may not necessarily be religious (though through many traditions they often are) e.g. the practice of counting to ten to cope with angry impulses; the action taken is upon oneself with the aim of modifying one's behavior such that one does not experience those impulses anymore - the effects are not in how one acts to alter circumstance.

Following Vuonic's (1996) assertion that people increasingly want to satisfy their spiritual needs, Possamai (2000) notes that urban, educated and middle class people are involved in alternative religious activities, and increasingly engage in yoga, meditation and consultation with alternative health practitioners. Americans who feel rootless seek to find new orientation of life, and may seek for true meaning of their life through spiritual or religious traditions such as Buddhism. Because of individualism and mobility, it is accepted that Americans constantly explore new ideas and attend to their spiritual growth (Possamai, 2000). Buddhism, as people in the West are exposed to it, may therefore provide for Americans an appealing synthesis between the secular recommendations of pop-psychology and the spiritual void within the modern world as described by Possamai. Buddhism is given validity as a possible route to self-improvement not only by scientific authorities referenced earlier, but also through the latent Orientalist notions of 'Eastern Wisdom' (Goldberg, 1999). Initially, Americans were presented with a reified form of Buddhism as translated from original language texts (Goldberg, 1999: 343). These did not offer a nuanced contextualized understanding of Buddhism as a living tradition, and thus people were left to interpret it themselves. This is the crux of Orientalism (Said, 2003), and this is why these texts are treated as being almost without author, and given validity by their own isolated existence. It is inevitable therefore that through this interpretative requirement of people, that it is a Western representation of the Buddhism which we can see being practiced in America; not Buddhism as it is within the context of its own continuous tradition. It must be noted that there is no reason to believe there is a 'right' or a 'wrong' way in which to

understand religion including a religions' own interpretive parameters, therefore though Buddhism as practiced in America differs substantially from how it is practiced in Asian countries, does not mean that it is not in and of itself valid or any less worthy of anthropological investigation. To suggest that American Buddhism is invalid because it does not fit an idealized model of Buddhism as we perceive it to exist in various Asian countries or communities, is perhaps to fall into the same Orientalist pitfalls that created the multitude visions of idealized Buddhism in the first place. The suggestion being that Buddhism 'is' something, and any deviation 'is not', veers towards the notion of doctrine as translated by early Orientalist scholars. It also implies that Buddhism is a static, or even stagnant, phenomenon, which further supports the latent Orientalist notions of the East being the source of 'ancient wisdom,' and lacks the rationality of the Occident that allows one to continually interpret and reason through one's belief structures.

### **Ethnographic Data**

Bernard (2006) notes that ethnography can involve fieldwork, interviews, surveys, archival data, library work and experiments, and some studies are impossible to conduct without participant observation. Thus, we undertook participant observation with a Buddhist meditation group in a north eastern state in the US, in the spring of 2010. As Bernard (2006) states, when researchers wants to know what participants 'actually do,' there is no better way than watching them. Thus, we attended weekly Buddhism study meetings on Fridays and meditation sessions on Sundays in order to meditate with the informants. The regular contact and informal conversations with them helped us to construct interview questions and adjust them based on their comments and responses. Through the participant observation, we were able to figure out some basic information about the people who are engaged in or interested in Buddhism and meditation. The majority of participants who attend the sessions were women who were in their 50s and 60s, living in the local area. Usually on average, 10 to 12 people came to the meditation sessions.

This meditation group follows *Tick Nat Han's* Buddhism: 'meditating with sitting on chairs', and 'walking meditation' that is easy to do in everyday life. These practices are outlined in his books and according to him, meditation is not about following strict rules, but, being able to meditate as a part of everyday life. Therefore, he has created easy meditation methods like walking meditation: you simply focus on your breath while walking, avoiding any thoughts in your mind.

These meditation group women read his words out loud before all meditating together; they do meditation with sitting on chairs and walking meditation for an hour, instead of sitting on the floor in a traditional meditation pose. The author's words are mainly about appreciation of life with a calming tone and presented in simple sentences.

After a meditation session, participants stay and have tea time, or do activities like chanting or dancing. Meditation takes only one hour but tea time, chanting and other activities often took another two hours. They seemed to enjoy the time there. One lady prepared the chanting and dancing session and said, 'it is good for mindfulness, and it cleans up the mind!' An interesting feature of these sessions was that in the end of meditation the participants bow to the Buddha statue, and also bow to each other. When one of the researchers went to Buddhist temples in Korea or went to Thai temples in Los Angeles, this bowing to other people was not experienced. In these instances, people only bow to the Buddha statue and monks. This is a different ritual dynamic and perhaps reflects the worldview of American people - being equal and individual.

Consistent with the literature review of anti-materialism, morality and Buddhism, one afternoon, participants talked about 'dumpster diving' during tea time after meditation. They were concerned that Wal-Mart was going to throw away left-over food products after a certain time of a day, and wanted to know when, so that they would be able to pick up the food: they also wanted to help children who could not afford food (a woman said, she was a healer in her past life in an area where people were dying from starvation. She always worries about people who don't have food. And that's why she wants to help starving children. It seems like she believes that it is her mission.) Therefore, some women in the meditation group were not only there for meditating, but also gathering with like-minded individuals and wanting to help society. Based on this study, we found that people tend to come earlier before the meditation, or stay longer after meditation, to chat with other people and have tea or make new friends. Before and after the meetings, they stayed for another hour or so, to chat and catch up. The lady who led the meditation group offered tea for everyone after the meditation.

Among the twelve regular women attendees, only three of them consider themselves Buddhists. In the near future for the next project, we would like to ask questions like, 'Are you Buddhist? If so, what is being Buddhist? If not, why don't you consider yourself as a

Buddhist?' We will attempt to understand what Buddhism means or what it is to be Buddhist for them.

### Conclusion

Religious ritual consists of patterned behavior and sequences (Geertz, 1973). Rituals can be social dramas, where 'socially appropriate interaction with the supernatural, communication, effective action, social and political power, and entertainment' (Eller, 2007: 131) are performed. Accordingly, one unique perspective of Buddhism in the United States we believe that can be identified is the non-religious and therapeutic involvement or use of Buddhism. Also, new forms of practice can be pointed out as characteristics of Buddhism in the United States, for example, according to our current study, 'walking meditation' or 'bowing to other members / Buddhists'. Interestingly, at the end of meditation sessions participants not only bow to the Buddha statue, but also bow to each other. This is a different ritual dynamic which appears to be consistent with the worldview of American people - being equal and individual. The meditation group also practiced walking meditation which is easy to do in their everyday lives. *Tick Nat Han* is a monk and Buddhist teacher who emphasizes that meditation is not about following strict rules, but being able to meditate as a part of everyday life. In doing so, he created simpler methods of meditation for Westerners like 'walking meditation' for those who are not used to the traditional sitting pose. Additionally, we observed that American meditation rooms provide additional cushions for participants to sit on. these help people to meditate more easily.

Marvin Harris who studied the anthropology of religion from the cultural materialist view, was particularly interested in culinary cultures (Winzeler, 2008). He questioned why, for example, Indian people do not eat cows while others (mainly Westerners) do. He also said that people often behave in certain ways or eat certain foods without knowing why, but do so because it is part of their culture. However, Harris found that cows actually have an economic function in Indian society. Therefore, religious practices are related to practical functions. This is an important theory and provides evidence to help understand the myriad functions and meanings of religion in society. Is it possible that certain forms of practices or rituals of Buddhism in the United States reflect this perspective. For example, 'walking meditation' was created for Westerners because they are not used to sitting in the traditional meditation position. As such, for functional purposes, new forms of practice have created in America. Additionally, Buddhism books in Asia are

more focused on the underlying texts and principles, whereas there are more scientific approaches in the United States, i.e., therapeutic studies among clinical psychologists and neuroscientists, even some physicists. Interestingly, Buddhism is used for stress reduction and other therapeutic purposes widely in the United States, while that kind motivation is difficult to find in Buddhism in the East.

What one sees in the American adoption of Buddhism and 'Buddhist' practices is that these technologies of self are applied in a way which is adapted to American cultural norms and aspirations. The secularization of Buddhism is exemplified by the title of the book *Buddhism without Beliefs*, in which the Wisdom of the Orient may be validated according to scientific research so as to be viewed in such a way as to be presented as an effective technology of the self which may be adopted by Americans. It is also evident through the pervasive and latent ideologies that characterise the manner in which Buddhism is perceived and popularised. In Orientalism we see the idealised and vastly misrepresented vision of Ancient Eastern Wisdom, with the stoic calm practitioners of this belief structure. These caricatured visions of Asian society are symptomatic of the latent Orientalist ideology through which we (mis)represent these cultures. Upon this myth Westerners base their ideal model for their better self. Coupled with this is the Capitalist modes of production, that pervade throughout our economic and social existence, and through which, Buddhism is produced, and reproduced, in American society. These two ideologies are in our view inextricably linked in this phenomenon; were it not for the reification of Buddhism through Orientalist depictions it could not so easily be viewed as an object of empirical scientific inquiry, and/or an object that could be sold in so many bookstores across the US.

Those discussions can shed light on the current study by providing new lenses from which to understand and focus on different ritual performances/interpretations of Buddhism, and its meanings and functions. The most important idea is that religious change is not an isolated cultural phenomenon but that it happens with multiple aspects of social change (Winzeler, 2008). Rather, '... a change in symbolic contents can be meaningfully achieved only if the social reality changes as well' (Malefijt, 1968: 359). Spiro states that 'ritual activities can be a form of expressive culture,' (p. 120) and the different and unique forms of Buddhism rituals may be expressive of different elements of American culture. For example, without having a monk or temple, anyone can organize



meditation groups and practice meditation, and also use simpler forms of practice than the traditional ones. They also focus more on practical outcomes like stress reduction and emotion management through engaging in Buddhism instead of being religious.

Finally, this preliminary study finding clearly has its limitations as the meditation group population does not represent the whole of American society. Future work needs to be conducted with a bigger sample size over a longer time period of participant observation. However, this attempt at an ethnographic study about the nature of Buddhism in the United States can be fruitful as the majority of work on Buddhism and meditation has only been done using experiments. Anthropological study can provide deeper understanding about the phenomenon based on a bottom-up, participant approach.

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