

Western Buddhism: Past, Present and Future

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Although Buddhism spread throughout Asia it remained virtually unknown in the West until modern times. The early missions sent by the emperor Ashoka to the West did not bear fruit. Religious intolerance, cultural chauvinism and racism are among the reasons why people of European extraction remained contemptuous of things Asian and unwilling to explore Asian religious traditions. Major changes in attitudes have occurred only in the past fifty years or so. Knowledge of Buddhism has come through three main channels: Western scholars; the work of philosophers, writers and artists; and the arrival of Asian immigrants who have brought various forms of Buddhism with them to Europe, North America and Australia. The first graduate program in Buddhist Studies in the West was not offered until 1965, but many programs have followed since then. In recent years, Buddhologists have been called upon to help Western governments with foreign policy decisions and to train diplomats going to Asia, a role reminiscent of past imperialist practices. Buddhists believe that Buddhism itself can die out for eons only to be reborn in the distant future when the time and social conditions are right. Perhaps that is the case today. Communist suppression, Christian condemnation, and Capitalist materialism have taken their toll on

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institutionalized Buddhism in Asia. Is the West now the stage for a revitalization and integration of the Buddhist faith worldwide?

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I. Buddhism's Bumpy Path into Western Consciousness

Although Buddhism spread throughout Asia it remained virtually unknown in the West until modern times. The early missions sent by the emperor Ashoka to the West did not bear fruit. Religious intolerance, cultural chauvinism and racism are among the reasons why people of European extraction remained contemptuous of things Asian and unwilling to explore Asian religious traditions. Major changes in attitudes have occurred only in the past fifty years or so. Knowledge of Buddhism has come through three main channels: Western scholars; the work of philosophers, writers and artists; and the arrival of Asian immigrants who have brought various forms of Buddhism with them to Europe, North America and Australia.

II. The First Interaction

Some two millennia ago, a Western influence helped to shape an important Buddhist legacy. The Buddha's face or body was not part of the iconography during the first five centuries after Sakyamuni's extinction. Such representation was deemed inappropriate because the Buddha's existence was separate from that of sentient beings. In fact, the historical Buddha had explicitly declared that he was not to be identified with his body. Thus the early symbols of worship such as the *stupas*, the "diamond" throne, the *bodhi* tree and the eight-spoked Dharma wheel were relics that emphasized the complete transcendence

of the Buddha.

The attitude toward representing Buddha in human form changed around the 1st century C.E. Some of the earliest Buddha statues were produced in Mathura, a city on the upper Ganges River, and in Gandhara, in what is today northwest India and northern Pakistan. These people had long been influenced by Hellenistic culture and, like the Greeks, made images of Apollo and other gods. Thus, they saw no problem in reproducing the Buddha's likeness.

Of course, a more fundamental reason for the statuary stems from the belief that anyone, not just Sakyamuni, has the potential to discover the Truth, attain enlightenment and become a Buddha. Methods employed for finding the Truth include visualizing or contemplating the Buddha or chanting the Buddha's name, and physical images, namely images of the Buddha, could be greatly helpful for these activities. The most important reason for creating a Buddha image is to portray the intangible authority and sanctity of the Buddha via a tangible object.

Buddhist influence was marginal in the West at the beginning of the Common Era, although some scholars suggest that Buddhist monks and teachings had reached as far as Egypt.

Europe before the advent of Christianity was relatively tolerant, but when Constantine (272-337) was converted to Christianity the Church used the power of the state not only to exclude anyone else but even to subject suspected Christian heretics to death and torture. The Catholic Church also became obsessed with religious and secular unification after the fall of the Roman Empire, and Europeans generally grew more insular and suspicious of outsiders. Religious heterodoxy was rigorously attacked and eradicated. Eastern thought was effectively barred from entry.

III. 13th Century: What If?

Buddhist influence in Europe could have been much greater from the thirteenth century had the Mongols continued their conquest of the West. Mongol forces under Batu Khan were mopping up the Hungarian army when Genghis Khan (1162-1227) died, prompting the general to immediately return to Mongolia to join the power struggle for succession. The Mongols were unable to mount a unified attack on either Europe or Egypt thereafter, but the European powers would surely have either surrendered or been razed had the Great Khan's empire remained intact.

The regions under Mongol control accommodated religious differences, and the Mongol leadership embraced Buddhism strongly until their rule over China ended in 1368 (Thereafter, the practice of Buddhism diminished among the Mongols, deteriorating into mere superstition or giving way once again to the indigenous religious conceptions of the Mongols and to shamanism).

The Chinese court clearly demonstrated the Buddhist ethic of toleration during the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), and the Mongols united territory on an unprecedented scale. European explorers such as Marco Polo (1254-1324) and subsequent Renaissance writers penned glowing stories about Genghis Khan and Mongol government administration. However, such European admiration had degenerated into racist contempt by the eighteenth century, the time of Europe's so-called "Enlightenment" period.

IV. 14th-17th Centuries: Minimal Movement Westward

Despite Christian intolerance, Buddhists managed to reach the fringes of Christianity, which was adept at either demonizing or sanctifying pagan gods in order to herd more believers into the flock. The Sanskrit biography of Sakyamuni was translated into Chinese in the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the Common Era and later translated into Persian and Greek. From the Greek, it was translated into Latin. The

legend gradually made its way into the vernacular and in the sixteenth century the Catholic Church unwittingly included the Buddha in its list of saints under the name “Josaphat,” a corrupted transliteration of “Bodhisattva” (in reference to Sakyamuni before his enlightenment). The Sanskrit term became “Budhasaf” in Arabic, “Iodasaph” in Georgian, “Ioasaph” in Greek and finally “Josaphat” in Latin.

By the 1600s, Jesuit missionaries were all over Asia, trying to convert the Indians, Chinese, Japanese and Tibetans to Christianity. They unwittingly told the Asians stories of Saint Josaphat, who was never formally canonized but did have a feast day on 27th November. One Italian Church remains dedicated to him, and his relics are supposed to reside in another French Church. The Josaphat legend even found its way into Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. However, isolated borrowings such as the St. Josaphat story provided no Buddhist insights to the Western audience. This was a completely Christian character, providing no clue of the original Buddha.

The Catholic missionaries carefully studied the Asian religions they were so eager to replace, seeking to find and exploit weaknesses. Early European colonizers, especially those from the Catholic countries, were driven by a God-given duty to convert the “heathen” natives to the Christian Truth. Their chauvinism led to numerous excesses in the fifteenth century onward, from the Spanish annihilation of native Americans in the New World to the Portuguese persecution of Buddhists in Sri Lanka.

Protestant Europeans tended to be more tolerant toward Asian customs and religions, probably because they, too, had been victims of Catholic suppression. Protestant merchants returned to Europe with fascinating stories of advanced civilizations in the “exotic” East, suggesting that “civilized” societies might exist beyond Europe’s borders.

European intellectuals began to embrace the concept of cultural relativism, paving the way for the European and American “Enlightenment” of the eighteenth century.

V. 18th Century: Keys for Unlocking Closed Minds

In Zen teaching, “enlightenment” occurs when one intuitively understands the interconnectedness of all things and the complete transparency of both the mind and material world. “Enlightenment” in eighteenth century Europe, on the other hand, was a movement to liberate Western society from intellectual tyranny of the Catholic clerics and from the political tyranny of the privileged class.

Intellectuals such as Voltaire (1694-1778), Hume (1711-1776), Kant (1724-1804), Diderot (1713-1784), Franklin (1706-1790) and Montesquieu (1689-1755) postulated that true knowledge could only be gained through scientific method. They sought to apply human reason systematically to understand nature and human nature, discovering the laws of science and human psychology to change and improve the quality of life for all people. They considered all other sources of knowledge, especially religion, to be culturally relative.

Politically they promoted the study of human society through the budding disciplines of psychology, comparative sociology and secular history to find abstract laws that could be applied for social reform. The emphasis on a universal human nature helped “Enlightenment” intellectuals expand their horizons, and their desire to understand nature led to important scientific discoveries. Unfortunately, Western scientific advances served to verify the Eurocentric feelings of superiority.

The study of human nature prompted the need to find a moral

basis for all religions. Eighteenth century European scholars began to examine foreign belief systems to understand the origins of spiritual values rather than simply to learn dogma. They recognized the intrinsic morality of human nature, so they sought out what was good and moral in other societies. Yet, in the Darwinian spirit, they also believed that European civilization had evolved further than any other. They justified imperialism as a noble enterprise aimed at enlightening the rest of the world.

Indeed, the European “Enlightenment” included a highly unenlightened focus on the Mongols as the symbol of everything evil or defective in Asia. This sentiment was fostered despite the fact that the Mongol Empire had ceased to exist some four centuries earlier.

In 1748, French philosopher Montesquieu in his *The Spirit of the Laws* asserted that the Mongols had “destroyed Asia, from India to the Mediterranean, and all the country which forms the east of Persia they have rendered a desert.” Montesquieu glorified the tribal origins of Europeans as the harbingers of democracy, while he condemned the tribal people of Asia.

The “Enlightenment” scientists went even further, suggesting that the Mongoloid race exhibited a close relationship to the Asian ape. In addition to facial features, one of their “proofs” was the similarity in postures, likening the lotus position to the way in which orangutans sat.

Christian colonialists thought to rescue the Asians from the horrible legacy of barbarian dictatorship and bloodthirsty savagery that they imagined was still being perpetrated by the Mongol hordes. The focus on the Mongols as the source of Asian problems was a rationale for European conquest of states from Japan to India. It developed as an integral theme in the ideology of European colonization. The supposed horrors of Genghis Khan and the Mongols became part of the excuse for rule by the more “civilized” English, Russian and French colonialists.

On the positive side, the “Enlightenment” fostered curiosity in

other cultures and prompted certain Westerners to collect, translate and study Buddhist texts as well as excavate Buddhist archaeological sites throughout Asia. However, the Buddhist texts introduced in the West were primarily objects of study, not worship, and European research was either politically or social-scientifically motivated. European scholars were seeking knowledge that would help them to control “the natives” who lived in their colonial empires more effectively or they were collecting data for their humanities research.

VI. 19th Century: Deepening Academic Interest

Western scholars saw Buddhism as part of a larger Asian puzzle. The French philologist Eugene Burnouf (1801-1852) was the first to realize that certain religions in China, Tibet, India, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia stemmed from a single tradition, laying the groundwork for the foundation of Buddhology. He realized while translating Sanskrit and Pali texts that the Western mind would never understand Buddhism outside of a historical context. In 1844 he composed an introductory history that became the basis for all subsequent Buddhist studies.

The scholarly study of Buddhism subsequently spread throughout the West, engaging specialists in philology, comparative religion, history, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and anthropology. However, the Buddhologists did not come up with the most creative applications of Buddhist thought. Here is a short list of famous nineteenth century Westerners who were personally influenced by Buddhism:

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was the first Westerner to publicly declare an affinity for Buddhism and was particularly impressed by the Buddhist move both beyond the concepts of an all-powerful God or earthly happiness. The First Noble Truth

(human suffering is an inevitable fact of life) resonated well with his own pessimist philosophy. Buddhist morality did not derive from the commandments of an external god but rather from the capacity of the individual to discover the Truth himself or herself.

Romantics such as Schopenhauer realized that the contemplation on art, music and other forms of culture allowed him to appreciate the moment without clinging to it. Schopenhauer influenced Wilhelm Richard Wagner (1813-1883), who attempted to compose an opera on the Buddha's life. Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), meanwhile, was impressed by the way that a Buddhist artist could focus on something as simple as a single blade of grass rather than having to elaborate a system.

The American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) began to explore Indian scriptures but could not distinguish Buddhism from Hinduism. He established the Transcendental Club, a mid-nineteenth century group of New England intellectuals that spawned Transcendentalism. Emerson understood that Buddhism nullified the concept of the self, but he did not like the idea of losing himself in *nirvana* nor did he appreciate the godlessness of Buddhism a problem that many Americans still have today.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), a neighbor of Emerson, translated part of the *Lotus Sutra* and was moved by the combination of contemplation and practice. He settled into a cabin near Walden Pond to explore non-theistic contemplation. With marginal knowledge of Buddhism he strove to live in the present moment without emotional or material distractions. He created an environment perfect for meditation and discovered many of the same things that the Buddha had done. Thoreau's classic work *Walden* introduces some of the most fundamental Buddhist principles. He discusses Buddhism in a truly American way

and gets away from religious rules and rituals to concentrate on the cultivation of mindfulness.

VII. Spreading the Word in Europe in the 20th Century

The study of Buddhism in Western circles was confined mainly to scholars and there was not much practice of the teachings before the dawning of the twentieth century. The pattern began to change in Europe after a significant number of Europeans tired of merely reading about Buddhism and traveled East to acquire firsthand knowledge of the Buddhist practices and to experience the monastic life.

Buddhist organizations began to be founded in the major European cities after World War I. The oldest and one of the largest of these is the Buddhist Society of London, established in 1924. Such organizations helped spark greater interest in Buddhism through their meditation sessions, lectures and circulation of Buddhist literature. Some of the Europeans who had studied Buddhism in Asia returned home as monks to inspire and strengthen local Buddhist circles. They were subsequently joined by Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka and other Asian countries.

Recently interest in Buddhism has grown markedly in Europe. The membership of existing Buddhist societies has increased, to include numerous professionals and scholars, and many new Buddhist centers have been established. Today, the major Buddhist traditions of Asia such as Theravada, Pure Land, Zen, Vajrayana and Nichiren Shoshu all boast significant followings in Europe.

VIII. Asian Movement to North America

Chinese immigrants settled in Hawaii and California in the

mid-19th century. These included practicing Mahayana Buddhists who built temples. However, the US passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, preventing more Chinese immigration. Some Japanese Buddhists continued to immigrate prior to World War II. They built temples and invited Japanese Mahayana monks to America.

Government discrimination against Asian immigration was not confined to the US. In 1908, the Canadian government imposed rules such as fluency in a European language to keep out Asians. Canada abolished its discrimination in immigration policy based on race and nationality between 1962 and 1967, and in 1971 the government proclaimed “multiculturalism” to be a national policy (Likewise, the “White Australia Policy” excluded most non-Europeans, and Asians in particular, from the country from 1901 to 1974).

Thus, institutionalized racism postponed any major movement of Asians to North America until institutionalized discrimination was reversed. That occurred in the US in 1965 with the passage of the Immigration Act.

Around this same time Asian conflicts created a mass exodus of refugees. Many Tibetans fled from their country after the Chinese takeover in 1959. They brought with them Vajrayana Buddhism, which gained a substantial following there. The wars in Indochina in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s also led many Vietnamese people to move to and settle in Europe, Australia and America.

Relaxed immigration laws subsequently allowed people from Buddhist countries such as Thailand to settle in the larger cities. All these people have all brought their beliefs to their new homes and helped to set up Buddhist centers. The Asian adherents to Buddhism in the West today tend to be conservative and follow the tradition as a whole to retain their cultural roots. Pure Land is the oldest, best organized and most financially endowed form of Buddhism among

Asians living in the West. However, the United States has also brought many different Buddhist lineages from Korea, Japan, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Burma and Sri Lanka together for the first time in history.

IX. Budding Interest

At the end of the nineteenth century, two outstanding Buddhist spokesmen, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) from Sri Lanka and Soyen Shaku (1859-1919), a Zen master from Japan, attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Their inspiring speeches on Buddhism impressed their audience and helped to establish a foothold for the Theravada and Zen traditions in America. During this period, the Theosophical Society, which teaches the unity of all religions, also helped to spread some elements of Buddhist teachings in America.

D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966), the first Buddhist master to settle in America, arrived in 1897. He stayed with Dr. Paul Carus, who composed the *Buddhist Gospel* to show parallels between Jesus and Buddha. Carus wanted to Westernize Buddhism by developing writings on the subject that would appeal to North Americas. Zen Masters inspired by Suzuki and others started founding groups in the US between the 1920s and 1950s, but Buddhist activities remained largely confined to the immigrant communities in the US through the first half of the twentieth century.

American servicemen returning from East Asia after the Second World War and Korean War brought back greater interest in Asian culture, including Zen Buddhism. Zen gained considerable popularity in the 1960s and early 1970s among American intellectuals seeking new forms of religious experience not based on the blind acceptance of the word of someone who claims to be a “prophet” or kinsman of a supreme God.

This was a time of widespread experimentation with mind altering

drugs, exposing many young people to the idea of expanded consciousness, heightening interest in teachings on the nature of the mind. Many sought a “pure, unfettered experience” from the meditative traditions such as Zen as an alternative to Christianity without the moral restraints. Westerners have generally not been attracted to the Asian “cultural baggage” of *karma*, rebirth, *nirvana* and Buddhist ethics. Hence, a sect such as Pure Land has made little progress with Westerners, even though its tenets can be compared to Christian grace.

The study of Buddhism in the West has finally engendered some tolerance toward non-Western religions. Non-Asians have also selectively borrowed Buddhist teachings to suit specific goals inside and outside academia, giving rise to some important questions: What lessons have Westerners been able to learn from Buddhism and incorporate into their lives? Has the attempt to transform Buddhism into a minor meditation therapy corrupted the Buddha’s message of liberation?

X. Eclectic Application

The first graduate program in Buddhist Studies in the West was not offered until 1965, but many programs have followed since then. In recent years, Buddhologists have been called upon to help Western governments with foreign policy decisions and to train diplomats going to Asia, a role reminiscent of past imperialist practices.

Buddhist meditation has played a role in shaping today’s “caring professions.” Psychotherapists today recommend that their patients use meditation methods borrowed from the Zen and Tibetan Buddhists, Hindus and Sufis. Medical professionals have adopted elementary techniques from Buddhist meditation to treat hypertension and help patients deal with chronic pain.

In the West, Buddhist ideas have often been extrapolated from their initial framework and applied in radically different contexts. Some Catholics have adopted Zen teachings to help in the search for their

God, and fundamentalists are trying to attract new believers by offering “Christian Zen,” with “Christian *koans* for spiritual realization.”

Such extrapolation extends to “engaged Buddhism” as well, using the Buddhist teachings on the interdependence of all things as a call to social and environmental reform. Some modern Neo-Confucian scholars such as Michael Kalton and Tu Wei-ming are doing the same thing, while the source of their inspiration can still be traced back to Buddhist and Taoist roots. Meanwhile, publications such as the *Tao of Physics* seek to bridge the gap between Western science and Eastern metaphysics.

American pop culture has packaged Buddhist-inspired concepts in a “new age” guise, but few non-Asians in American can appreciate the inspiration behind movies such as *The Matrix* or a TV sitcom called *Dharma and Greg*. Western interest in “alternative spirituality” continues to grow in the West, but it remains to be seen whether Buddhism will ever become a truly indigenous cultural force in its own right.

Buddhists believe that Buddhism itself can die out for eons only to be reborn in the distant future when the time and social conditions are right. Perhaps that is the case today. Communist suppression, Christian condemnation, and Capitalist materialism have taken their toll on institutionalized Buddhism in Asia. Is the West now the stage for a revitalization and integration of the Buddhist faith worldwide?

Glossary of Chinese Terms

(C=Chinese, J=Japanese)

Koan (J) 公案

Nichiren Shoshu (J) 日蓮 正宗

Tao (C) 道

Zen (J) 禪

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