The Penetration of Buddhism in America: 
Its Reality and Significance

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Reality

According to Professor Diana Eck, a specialist in contemporary American religions at Harvard University, “Buddhism is now an American religion.” That Buddhism is seen as an American religion reflects the status of Buddhism in the United States today.

Buddhists currently make up 1 to 1.3 percent of the American population, or 3.5 million, making it the third-largest religion in the United States and constituting a seventeen-fold increase from the 1960s. Of course, the largest by far is Christianity, with about 75 percent of the population being Christian, followed by Judaism with 2 percent who are Jewish. Other faiths such as Hinduism are each less than 1 percent.

Beyond the three and a half million Buddhists, there are also those who do not claim to “be Buddhists” but are keenly interested in Buddhism, especially its meditation. These people are called sympathizers or, somewhat humorously, “Nightstand Buddhists.” They may not be members of any temples or centers but practice Buddhism in the privacy of their home by meditating and reading Buddhist books. While reading them, they often keep the books on their bedroom nightstand, hence the name. While there is no reliable data on the number of nightstand Buddhists, it is estimated to be a couple of million people.

Moreover, in an earlier survey, 12 percent of the people replied that Buddhism has had “an important influence on their thinking about religion or spirituality.” This amounted to about twenty-five million people. So, if we add up all three groups (Buddhists, nightstand Buddhists, and those strongly influenced by Buddhism), they amount to a little over thirty million people in America.

Factors for Growth

The growth of American Buddhism can be attributed to four factors, the importance of religion, societal openness, the Dalai Lama influence, and spirituality.

Importance of religion: America values religion to a much higher degree than most other developed countries. Ordinary people generally respect religious professionals, who also play vital leadership roles in the community. And many parents make concerted effort to provide religious education for their children, for religion is deemed to “be a positive thing” for providing children with spiritual and ethical foundation. If religion were not important, far fewer people would take interest in Buddhism.

Societal openness: The second reason for the growth of American Buddhism lies in the fundamental societal shift that took place in the 1960s, with greater openness toward religions other than Protestantism. For example, John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, was elected president, and the Catholic Church itself underwent the liberalization process of the Second Vatican Council. And the new immigration law helped to foster greater diversity with the arrival of
more people from non-Western countries.

Within this greater openness, Buddhism was no longer seen as an exotic religion of the Orient. In fact, many people interested in spiritual matters have regarded Asia to be superior to the materialistic West. Consequently, the appeal of Buddhism lies in the fact that it was one of the superior Asian religions that could more effectively respond to the spiritual decadence of the industrialized West.

The Dalai Lama’s influence: The third reason for the growth is the positive image of one single individual, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. He is well known as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and an exiled leader of Tibet, but his impact as a Buddhist promoter in the West has been enormous. He is highly loved and esteemed by the thousands who flock to hear his talks during his numerous American visits. The popularity of the Dalai Lama lies in the fact that he is regarded as a spiritual leader who is peaceful, tolerant, and accessible, thus helping to foster a new and refreshing element in American religiosity.

Spirituality: The fourth, and probably the most important, factor has to do with the change in the very nature of American religiosity, wherein people are more attracted to spirituality than to organizational religion. More people are heard saying, “I am not religious, but I am spiritual.” A noted scholar of religion, Wade Clark Roof, defined spirituality as “personal experience tailored to the individual’s own quests,” and he went on to define spirituality in five key terms, connectedness, unity, peace, harmony, and centeredness. This differs from the five terms that characterize traditional religion, which are God, sin, faith, repentance, and morals.

Buddhism, as presented in America, is characterized more by the former set of terms than the latter, which makes it more in accord with the changing trend. As part of this attraction to spirituality that stresses personal experience, Buddhism has been particularly effective in the following three areas.

The first is the healthy attitude of Buddhism when dealing with the suffering in life, such as old age, death, and “losing.” Buddhism sees suffering as a natural part of life that needs to be understood, accepted, and turned into a springboard for living a more full and meaningful life.

Second, Buddhism gives much value to the personal understanding of the individual, for the teaching cannot make sense if it fails to speak directly to the experience of the unique individual. This is the reason why many American Buddhists are particularly fond of these famous words of the Buddha: “Do not accept a statement on the grounds that it is found in our books . . . or because the teacher said so.”

The third area of spirituality lies in people’s attraction to meditation. This is probably the number one reason for the growth of American Buddhism. Many find Buddhist meditation easy to do, mentally therapeutic, and spiritually empowering and liberating. Sitting meditation, in particular, is the main practice in Zen, Theravada, and Tibetan schools, which have attracted the largest number of converts.

Significance

This growth of Buddhism in America has significance on two fronts, 1) the changes that are being brought to Buddhism and 2) the fundamental shift taking place globally from traditional religion to spirituality, particularly in advanced countries. I wish to elaborate on the second point as it is more pertinent to this symposium, but allow me to first briefly discuss the first point for it contains some extremely interesting “firsts” for this ancient religion with a history nearing 2,600 years.

Buddhism has generally moved “eastward” to cover much of Asia but had not spread as a religion in any significant way in a Western country. However, Buddhism has accomplished that for the first time in the second half of the 20th century in America and in Europe. One can now declare that the wall that had prevented the transmission of Buddhism to the West has fallen. Secondly, Buddhist transmission in Asia had gone from a central culture to its peripheral cultures as in the case of India to Tibet and Southeast Asia as well as from China to...
Vietnam, Korea and Japan. However, the transmission to America breaks with that pattern for America, despite the political and economic rise of China, is still the most dominant nation in the world. Third point has to do with the fact that most countries in Asia did not import Buddhism only for its teaching of enlightenment but for its artistic, technological and political purposes. The rulers sought these elements of Buddhism for the purpose of consolidating their political power and enhancing the artistic, architectural and technological quality of their society. To the contrary, in America it is the ordinary people, not rulers, who sought Buddhism for its original purpose, that of enlightenment and spiritual well-being.

These three firsts in the history of Buddhism are fascinating to discuss at length, but I will defer it for another occasion and move on to the second point, that the growth of Buddhism in America signifies a shift from traditional religion to spirituality among a growing number of people. This phenomenon, however, is not limited to America but can be found in other parts of the world, particularly in the advanced countries of the West and Asia. Japan is no exception in this regard. It is a global phenomenon of modernity that challenges traditional religions to rethink their modes of presenting their teachings and of their dealings with their adherents.

Based in part on Prof Roof’s definition alluded to earlier (i.e., “personal experience tailored to the individual’s own quests”), I wish to define spirituality as “individual’s experience of the sacred.” There are three features to this definition, which are 1) individual, 2) experience and 3) the sacred.

Taking up the last of the three features first, “the sacred” may overlap with the sacred sought in traditional religions, but spirituality also goes beyond them to include non-religious or secular sense of the sacred stemming from even such realms as nature, music, and visual art. Further, one other distinguishing quality of the sacred in spirituality can be seen in its emphasis on the “ordinary” activities of daily life. The sacred is realized not only in the extraordinary but also within the ordinary.

The emphasis on the “individual” as opposed to the collective is the other feature of spirituality. People interested in spirituality place far greater emphasis on the individual’s personal experience of the sacred rather on the external authority of religious tradition and its institution. Churches, synagogues, mosques and temples represent the collective sacredness of their respective time-tested traditions. However, many contemporary seekers have found their spiritual needs unfulfilled, for their traditional religions had failed to become meaningful without the teachings being more personalized or individualized.

The third feature of spirituality is “experience,” which is distinguished from simply rationally knowing the teachings or assenting to a set of creed or doctrines put forth by their religious institutions. Experience calls for one’s personal realization with not only the head but also the heart and the total being so that a seeker comes to “embody” the sacred, enabling the sacred to be fully appreciated by the totality of one’s being.

I am in agreement with scholars who have argued that spirituality is the consequence of modernity, whose greatest feature is individualism. Modernity has brought on the shift from the collective to the individual in many facets of life. And globalization has contributed to this shift by encouraging individuals to place lesser emphasis on institutions for they are less reliable and durable. For example, people can no longer rely on companies for life-time employment and thus cannot exhibit the same kind of loyalty to the company as in previous generations. Hence, people are forced to rely on themselves as the primary source of stability.

This focus on the individual has further led to the sacred being located in the inner self. Combined with the factors previously mentioned, modernity and globalization have led to the loss of clear identity so that people are less clear on knowing who they really are. In traditional societies, unlike today, people had prescribed roles that were permanent and clearly-defined. Today, people’s roles are not clearly defined and are extremely fluid. Consequently, many people are in search of their true self which is seen to lie within themselves. This shift has been referred to as the “subjective turn,” one of the characteristics of modernity.

The shift to the individual and the attendant need to understand one’s true self is one of the reasons for the
popularity of meditation as previously discussed. By some estimates as many as 20 million people meditate daily in America, attesting to its popularity and need. Meditation is now practiced beyond the boundaries of religion in such places as hospitals and therapy offices where it is seen to be effective in reducing stress and pain, enhancing the immune system and facilitating psychotherapeutic clarity.

However, some have regarded these aspects of spirituality as excessively “privatized” and “individualized” with the insinuation that its self-centered character leads to the sacrificing of community and sharing. It is true that, for example, some members of Insight Meditation groups in America have been prone to select only meditation at the rejection of rituals and the teachings of the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Even some of its leaders have voiced concerns about the “excessive” individualized character of meditation, in which some meditators hardly ever interact with their larger spiritual community.

However, I would like to see this trend toward individualized spirituality as a positive development and not necessarily a sign of spiritual decadence. Individual experience of the sacred is precisely the mode of religiosity that Shakyamuni Buddha experienced under the Bodhi tree at the age of 35. While no modern seeker can claim the same level of spiritual achievement as the Buddha, these modern Buddhist meditators have not deviated from the original aim of Buddhism.

In fact many of these seekers are well-read, as the term Nightstand Buddhists indicate, and have very good grasp of the philosophical dimensions of Buddhism, for many are well-educated and situated in the middle to upper middle income groups. They tend to be people who are dissatisfied with the teachings of traditional religions, which they regard as outdated and too simplistic in this globalized world. They are not looking for black and white answers to follow but seeking spiritual maturity to provide the foundation necessary for making their own decisions on religious and ethical matters.

Further, with growing religious diversity, many are seeking a form of spirituality that can provide a healthy and cooperative way for the various religious traditions to co-exist. The world can no longer afford religious intolerance, exclusivism and isolation among religions. There is less and less room for religions which considers it the only true religion and the only claim to truth. World peace requires an attitude of pluralistic openness. As Dr. Hans Kung, a noted Christen theologian involved in religious dialogue, stated, “There can be no world peace without peace among the religions, and there can be no peace among the religions without dialogue.” And many have found Buddhism to be that very tradition that can foster greater dialogue.

Buddhism, as presented in America, is attractive to those who value and cherish “thinking for themselves” and their personal experience. For these reasons, it is my view that Buddhism will continue to grow steadily, thereby enabling it to even surpass Judaism as the second largest religion in America in the next few decades. And this high level of attraction will be repeated in other advanced countries in the West, particularly Western Europe, Canada, and Oceania as well as in Asia among the thoughtful, educated class. In this sense, we are witnessing the realization of the prophetic view put forth by none other than Albert Einstein, who spoke about three stages of religion, 1) religion of fear, 2) moral religion and 3) cosmic religion. He felt that in the 20th century and beyond with the advancement in the sciences, humans would require cosmic religion, which “harmonizes the natural and the spiritual in a meaningful unity.” And he considered Buddhism to be a representative cosmic religion!