

Buddhism in america

[Religion](#), [Buddhism](#)



Buddhism is above all the religion of illumination. It seeks to aid those who study and practice at its feet to break throughout all that can fetter or delude in the monarchy of conditioned reality, and become free in Nirvana, Unconditioned Reality. Buddhism does this by leading one to identify the Four Noble Truths the Buddha himself discovered some twenty-five hundred years ago on the eve of his enlightenment. Beneath the numerous sectarian forms and rich accruals the faith of the Enlightened One has acquired in its journeys through numerous cultures and many centuries, Buddhism eventually depends on these principles.

First, life as it is typically lived is unsatisfactory, shot through with anxiety, suffering, and insignificance. Second, this state is the result of attachments or desires, for in a universe of frequent flux and change, seeking to cling to anything from the grossest passion to the subtlest idol of the mind to the idea of being a permanent separate self can never bring anything but sorrow in the end. Third, the condition of suffering and desire can be struck at its point of origin ; there can be an end to desire. Fourth, that can be attained by following the Eightfold Path, which culminates in Right Concentration or Meditation.

For meditation is the condition of mind that reverses the mind's ordinary outflow toward entangling objects of sensory or mental attachment. Zen has been the best-known form of Buddhism in America. This is first of all since it has been fortunate in producing a remarkable series of advocates on these shores: Soyen Shaku, Nyogen Senzaki, above all D. T. Suzuki. That in turn owes to Zen's relative tolerance and emphasis on

humanistic culture and education in its homelands, and its relation to China and Japan's great custom of arts and letters.

But it is also no doubt true that no other account of Buddhism would have communicated itself quite so well to the American mind. Zen's boast of breaking through words and philosophies in favor of "direct pointing" and "immediate experience," its artistic minimalism and rapport with nature, all appealed to major strands of American consciousness. "Senzaki, certainly, considered Zen none other than the American practicality of William James or John Dewey in another guise" Rick Fields, 1992, p14.

Yet that other guise was not without significance, for while Zen could hark to the American images of ease and self-reliance, it also offered entree into another world of spiritual and cultural wonders, from the inscrutable Zen "riddles" or koans to the Zen-related martial arts. Zen's draw for Americans has lain first in its spiritual efficiency, second in its combination of otherness and homeliness. Its greatest spokesman in the West, D. T. Suzuki, like his disciple Alan Watts, subjugated the mix with a sure hand, offering the reader now a whiff of the exotic, now a supportive correlation with a motif of the West.

Different aspects of Zen have appealed to diverse segments or generations of Americans. The age of Soyen Shaku and Senzaki Nyogen was, to judge from their own words, eager to hear of the sensibleness of Buddhism as well as its pointing to that beyond all reason. In the 1950s, the image of the "Zen lunatic" came to the fore in the work of such "Beat" writers as Jack Kerouac, who summed it all up in *The Dharma Bums*. The 1960s and 1970s, the era of

the great Zen centers and the counterculture, was involved in Zen as a spiritual discipline and total, often communalistic, way of life.

All through, still others, from poets like Gary Snyder to composers like John Cage, have been mostly interested in the relation of the Zen vision to artistic creativity. The tensions of these varying Zens are well spoken, and perhaps resolved, in the essay by Alan Watts here reproduced, *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*. Whether in tragic conflict or massively lucrative trade, seldom have two nations of such diverse cultural heritage been as intensely involved in one another's lives as have Japan and the United States in the twentieth century.

The diffusion of Zen to America, though but a tiny fragment of that exchange, helps divulge the spiritual dimensions, too seldom yet appreciated, of this significant meeting. From a historical perspective, American Buddhism is also an era making undertaking. One of the great spiritual traditions of Asia is moving west. For about four hundred years, western missionaries, explorers, scholars, and seekers explored Asia, wondered about Buddhism, and studied it. A few even practiced it.

The foundation for the transmission of the dharma to the West was ready by many people over many years, but the appearance of the dharma as a significant element in American religion is a development that by comparison occurred only very lately. During the eighties and nineties, many Americans were debating amongst themselves what Buddhism was in this country and what they required it to be. They came up with many diverse ideas about how to form American forms of the dharma, so there is not a single answer to that question, nor is there likely ever to be.

There is not one American Buddhism, any longer than there is one American Judaism, Islam, or Christianity. Zen meditation is valuable among Americans, Western associate with Zen has now reached a point where an understanding of the larger historical framework within which Zen articulated itself is also necessary. Such an understanding is significant not only for a more balanced academic view, but also for a more staid appraisal of the meaning of Zen practice for modern American life. The fundamental character of Zen emerged as part of a complex dialectic within Buddhism, and we cannot understand Zen until we realize what it is critiquing.

If we take its statements out of their Buddhist context and construe them instead within our own cultural context, they are apt to mean something quite diverse, particularly in the realm of ethics. Zen's iconoclasm had a different meaning within a cultural context where Buddhist moral teachings were extensively affirmed than it does today to contemporary Americans who lack any such background and who are perhaps already suffering from an excess of moral relativism (Rick Fields, 1992, 194). Buddhist meditation developed and practiced in East Asia.

It thus seeks to balance our acquaintance with Zen meditation which, as it is the only East Asian practice with which many Westerners are familiar, is often held up as the archetypal form of East Asian Buddhist meditation by placing it alongside other, evenly representative and vital forms of meditation: the invocation of the Buddha's name (nien-fo) in Pure Land; visualization (as exemplified by Hsuan-tsang's visualization of Maitreya); and Chih-i's monumental T'ien-t'ai synthesis of Buddhist ritual, cultic, and meditation practices.

Meditation has been a notoriously vague and multivalent idea—a circumstance that stems, no doubt, from its comparative lack of elaboration and systematization in the Western religious traditions, particularly in their post-Enlightenment forms. That the concept lacks any clearly defined and usually accepted referent in our own general cultural experience does not restrict its attractiveness indeed, it in fact enhances it. Meditation is a very useful category in particular as it can be understood in so many ways.

In America it is believed that we should employ "meditation" in the broadest possible sense in the same sense that we find Buddhists using the term "dhyana" to include both samatha-bhavana and vipasyana-bhavana (Kapleau, Philip, 1980). There are two reasons for doing this both significant, and both inextricably consistent. First, we must recognize that such an inclusive conception of meditation is required if we are not to obscure what is most distinctive and characteristic about the Buddhist viewpoint on religious practice.

Second, only by coming to terms with what is distinguishing and characteristic in Buddhist culture can we gain a better understanding of ourselves. The understanding we seek must not only inform our perception of the alien culture; it should also change our own experience, the understanding of our own culture. The true value of any cross-cultural exploration, after all, lies not in how successful we are in reducing the alien culture to the terms of our own experience.

True understanding, rather, is born only when we should expand our own perspective to hold what initially appears to be alien. Yoga is also very significant type of meditation that is very popular among Americans. In yoga,

lengthy meditations lead first to the telepathic powers such as those the Buddha attained and eventually to the realization of the illusoriness of all material appearances. In the Yogacara view, there is a sense in which any experience is just as real as any other, whether actually internal and hallucinatory or ostensibly external and objective.

All that is eventually real and continuous of the individual is the pure subject, the mind store (alaya-vijnana), although it, too, changes. " It is this mind store, or alaya-vijnana, that experiences, judges, contemplates, and remembers, thus comprising a locus of identity and continuity through many obvious bodies, or lifetimes". Ellwood, Robert, 1986. It might well be argued that the alaya-vijnana concept is just a rehabilitation of the old Hindu notion of atman, without the persistence on its ontological permanence and immutability.

The early Buddhist perspective says that phenomenon are all that exist and that the apparent self is dogged by the phenomena that it encounters. The Yogacaraphilosophy, by contrast, says that mind is all that exists, and all obvious phenomena are merely its own projections. Coupled with the belief in medium teachings, the concept that all is only mind has tremendous implications for Vajrayana Buddhism. If all is only mind, the procedure of death and rebirth is no longer an inevitable feature of an external reality to which all must submit.

It then becomes unnecessary to actually undergo a long succession of lifetimes, for by changing one's conscious thoughts, the whole succession can be broken or abridged. Even the law of karma is elevated to a completely different level. No longer are physical actions seen as having

expected physical effects. Rather, mental acts are the only acts that have any effects at all, either in actually external happenings or in apparently internal feelings and visions.

Karmic determination of an individual's future good or ill can thus also be evaded or aborted by mental purification and concentration. Mantras, mudras, and samadhi are requisite to affect this change of consciousness necessary to attain nirvana. Here, too, the Vajrayana departs from conventional Samkhya Yoga, in allowing the consumption of meat and wine, and even intercourse with women, encouraging at each step the understanding that none of these phenomena are ultimately real.

Under the tutelage of a Vajrayana Lama (guru), the student expects to develop psychic powers, to leave his body, and to experience the Absolute in reverie. Thus, he will prepare himself for the moment of death when he will direct his consciousness out of his body and into final union with Truth (dharmakaya), rather than permitting any further cycles of rebirth. Though, many Americans think that Zen is a Buddhist tradition without formal ritual, which is not actually the case.

Zen was first introduced into this country in books that led lots of Americans to think of it as a philosophy rather than a spiritual tradition along with concepts of meditations especially yoga. People also be apt not to think of Zen sitting meditation, while a practitioner might face a wall or sit with downcast eyes for hours, as ritual activity. But every day or even twice-daily stints of yoga, during which a practitioner notes the movement of his or her mind, help to structure the lives of numerous American Buddhists, one of the primary functions of rite.

In America, Zen calls up particular genius of art and verse, ink wash, tea ceremonies, haikupoetry, whose special genius is to portray nature just as it is, without theory or theology, yet so vividly as to leave one deeply moved without being quite sure why. Work Cited Ellwood, Robert, ed. Zen in American Life and Letters. Los Angeles : Undena Press, 1986. Kapleau, Philip. The Three Pillars of Zen. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965, rev. ed. 1980. Rick Fields, How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America, 3rd rev. ed. (Boston: Shambhala, 1992), 194.