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Once the Esoteric Path of an Intellectual Elite, Buddha's Faith Now Has a Rainbow of Followers

A rusted Japanese freighter slipped into San Francisco Bay eastbound from Hawaii. The dawn was darkened by heavy fog. Blasts of cold, salty ocean spray hazed the handful of Chinese and Japanese who huddled on the deck, excitedly trying to catch first sight of land. The year is circa 1889. The first Buddhist immigrants had reached American soil. A century later, 4 million Buddhists call America home!

Before Christianity arrived in the 15th century, Indians and Asian/Eskimos had long espoused mystic teachings akin to Buddhism-karma and the interconnectedness of all life. In this way, Buddhism's growing presence in the US-like Hinduism's-is more fairly the reemergence of an older spiritual outlook and vision than the import of something new.

Buddhists in America today are mostly Japanese and Indochinese, but increasingly non-Asians are swelling memberships. The exotic denominational rainbow can dazzle the unprepared-e.g.: Jodo Shinshu Pure Land, Nichiren Shoshu, Vipassana Theravadan Southern School, Gelug School of Tibetan Vajrayana, Diamond Sangha and Soto Zen. Over 500 Buddhist societies exist nationwide. Houston, Texas havens 10 heavenly Buddhist temples for their 70,000 Indochinese, and the Texas Buddhist Association is putting up a US$2 million, 500-by 200-foot temple/facility. Woodstock, New York, just became parent to a Tibetan Buddhist monastery that installed a $35,000 eleven-foot high, gold-plated Buddha. And just as Buddha taught that each soul had to work out his or her own salvation, so does each organization define its own character and direction. No central dogmatic authority will be tolerated.

Growth and the Language Barrier

Until 1960, Buddhism survived in the US little-known and less understood. Then two brilliant Buddhist authors, Roshi Suzuki and Alan Watts made Zen Buddhism household words and captured a large following of intellectuals. But in 1978, a sudden tidal wave of immigration began from many Buddhist Indochinese countries-principally Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma and Taiwan-bringing in one decade well over a million Buddhists to America. Today, if you call a Buddhist temple, a helpless flutter of sweet, lilting Chinese or Japanese may disarm you until a second-generation teenager comes on the line, and says, "Hi, my grandmother and our priest don't speak English. Can I help?" This language barrier unavoidably polarizes Asian Buddhist and non-Asian into separate groups-"ethnic" and "elite," in the words of Jan Nattier, Assistant Professor of Religion, University of Hawaii. "Ethnics" are Asians and want Buddhism to be like it was in Asia-monks run the temples; lay people feed the monks. "Elitists" are non-Asian, educated, and opt for meditation over temple worship. But now a new "Mixed" category is clearly emerging. Bishop Yamaoka, of the Jodo Shinshu sect, told HINDUISM TODAY, "Our abbot told us it's time we woke up...We should open our doors [to] everyone-Black White, Brown and Purple. For the 'die-hards,' the earlier generation people, it will take longer to get used to. But, facing reality, our younger generation feels, 'why not? We work with these people; we play with them. Why not accept them?'"

Realistically, that will take time. Meanwhile, Buddhist immigrants are busy building temples. Their orthodox design projects an unequivocal Buddhist identity and symbolizes a decision to build Buddhism in America with an Eastern, not Western, character. Those Hindus that conjecture Buddhists consider themselves part of a larger Hindu family are simply wrong. "I don't know much about Hinduism. I'm close to Buddhism," Mr. Hwang, director of the Texas Buddhist Association, told HINDUISM TODAY. But the interior overlap of these two religions persists. When we asked 17-year-old Kali Nalluran, of San Francisco, to interview a Buddhist teen-ager for this article, her mother said, "Oh, that'll be easy. Her best friend is a Buddhist."

Youth and the Future

To the youth, a mountain of dusty scripture and a couple millenia of tradition is, frankly, unimpressive. They want Buddhism convincingly explained, and in English. Or forget it. So organizations are hastily drafting sketchy Buddhist lessons-years behind Singapore, which employed a 12-man team to create two courses for its Buddhist youth. "Youth complain they can't talk to their priest because he doesn't speak English. They sometimes feel the temples are irrelevant because they're focused on death and filial piety instead of on this life," explained Professor Bloom, Berkeley Institute of Buddhist Studies.

"When a religion comes to a new country, it changes itself" Prof. Reynolds, Buddhist Studies, University of Chicago Divinity School, told HINDUISM TODAY. "If it doesn't, it doesn't establish itself. Buddhism did that when it went from India to China and now it's doing that coming from Asia to America. We see more social service, stronger emphasis on lay practice and how Buddhists can live in a modern industrialized society." Though institutions may creatively modify Buddhism to best adapt in the US, the "Light of Asia's" 2,500-year-old core message of meditative serenity, aesthetic refinement and spiritual compassion probably won't."