

AMERICA SMILES ON THE BUDDHA—PART 1

By Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. John Weldon

“American Christianity must wake up and prepare itself for the coming confrontations with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.”—1997 lecturer at the Haggai Institute, Kihei, Maui, Hawaii

The cover story of the October 31, 1997 issue of *Time* magazine was titled “American’s Fascination with Buddhism.” It noted that Buddhism was now growing “ever stronger roots” in America and the West, pointing out that American entertainment had also “become fascinated with Buddhism.” Indeed, celebrity Buddhists, or those interested, include Steven Seagal who was declared the reincarnation of a 15th Century lama by the head of the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism; Richard Gere, the most famous disciple of the Dalai Lama; director Martin Scorsese of *The Last Temptation of Christ* fame; rocker Tina Turner, who follows Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism; Adam Yauch, the punk rock singer of the Beastie Boys; movie producer Oliver Stone; Phil Jackson, the Chicago Bulls’ coach who refers to himself as a “Zen-Christian” and is author of *Sacred Hoops*, and grunger Courtney Love.

Other indications of Buddhism’s increasing popularity include amazon.com, which lists over 1,200 titles on Buddhism. *Living Buddha, Living Christ* alone has sold over 100,000 hardcover copies. A supposedly non-religious Buddhist meditation is now taught to hundreds of business executives in such companies as Monsanto, where the potentially dangerous Vipassana meditation* is said to be offered. Finally, since 1988—a mere 10 years ago—the number of *English* language Buddhist teaching centers in America has increased from 429 to some 1,100—almost threefold!

The same issue of *Time* further observes that Jewish, Protestant and Catholic practitioners of Buddhism believe that, “Buddhist practice can be maintained without leaving one’s faith of birth.” Nevertheless, insofar as Buddhist practice tends to support and/or inculcate a Buddhist world-view,* such a view would be incorrect since Buddhist practice would then tend to distort one’s faith of birth.

Introduction: Buddhism in America

The reason we have selected the topic of Buddhism is our belief that Buddhism currently approximates the influence of Hinduism in the United States in the 1960s. Indeed, while the influence of Buddhism lags behind that of Hinduism in overall impact, it is today already approaching the influence of Hinduism in some areas. Hawaii and California, for example, have significant Buddhist influence and large Buddhist populations. The American Buddhist Directory, published by The American Buddhist Movement in New York, and other sources, list over 1,000 Buddhist groups and organizations currently active in the United States. (Each major school is represented—Theravadin, Mahayana and Tibetan/Tantric.) Men like D.T. Suzuki, the late Chogyam Trungpa, Daiku Ikeda and the Dalai Lama are having considerable impact through their writings and translations and/or as founders of American Buddhist religions.

The 1960s-1990s also saw an increase in academic studies of Buddhism and in the offering of numerous courses in Buddhism at American colleges and universities. A number of Buddhist

*See John Ankerberg/John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, chapter on Meditation.

schools were founded (e.g., the fully accredited Naropa Institute in Denver, Colorado, the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley, California, and the College of Oriental Studies in Los Angeles). Publications promoting Buddhism are on the rise. One of the most influential of Buddhist publications is the quarterly *Tricycle*. Buddhist psychotherapy is prominent within the pages of *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, the most scholarly periodical of the so-called “fourth force” psychology (behind psychoanalysis, behaviorism and humanistic psychology). There are now publishers who have devoted themselves to expanding Buddhist literature and influence in the United States (e.g., Shambala of Boston). Buddhism also has many indirect influences, as in Werner Erhard’s est and The Forum.*

Perhaps all this explains why there may now be as many as 6,000,000 Buddhists in the United States, only slightly behind the Muslims. How did America come to smile on Buddha?

After the landmark meeting in Chicago of the “World Parliament of Religions” in 1893, Buddhist teachers and missionaries began to arrive, namely, D.T. Suzuki, Nyogen Senzaki and others who in turn helped originate a growing Buddhist subculture in America. The new faith was soon popularized by American devotees such as Christmas Humphreys and Alan Watts and “beat writers” Alan Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder. (Alan Watts had maintained that Buddhism enabled him to “get out from under the monstrously oppressive God the Father.”) The recent waves of Indochinese war refugees continued to bring Buddhist peoples to America. Between 1970 and 1980, the U.S. population increased by 11 percent; in that same period the Asian population increased by over 140 percent. There are now an estimated 10 million Asians living in America, making them the third largest minority, behind blacks and Hispanics. These facts alone underscore the need for the evangelical church to undertake an active encounter with Buddhism.

Buddhism in the World

Buddhism encompasses both the teachings ascribed to Gautama Siddhartha (the Buddha) (c. 563-483 B.C.) as well as the subsequent, if questionable, development of this thought in later centuries. Almost innumerable forms exist. Some 200 sects can be found in Japan alone, many of them opposing one another in doctrine or practice. Our analysis must be recognized as being general, for there is no doctrinally precise Buddhism in the same sense that there is a doctrinally precise Christianity.** Still, nearly all Buddhism accepts

*Werner Erhard acknowledges his indebtedness to many religious systems, however, “I don’t think that any one of them in particular was more important than any other with the possible exception of Zen being the most influential.”¹ In the official biography of Erhard by philosopher William Warren Bartley, III, *Werner Erhard the Transformation of a Man: The Founding of Est*, Erhard is quoted as saying, “...of all the disciplines I studied, practiced and learned, Zen was the *essential* one.... It is entirely appropriate for person’s interested in est to also be interested in Zen.”² (For a thorough analysis of est/the Forum, see our *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, Harvest House, 1996.)

**For example, biblical Christianity everywhere has the same beliefs concerning the nature of God (infinite-personal/triune), the Person and work of Jesus Christ (incarnate Savior), the means of salvation (by grace through faith alone), etc. Buddhism, on the other hand, has quite different views as to the nature of ultimate reality, the nature of the Buddha, the means of salvation, etc. Considered historically, of course, there are endless sects and cults of Christianity from gnosticism, modalism and Arianism in the early... (continued)

certain key teachings. These are a) the four noble truths, b) the eight-fold path, c) the impermanence and/or *ultimate* nonexistence of all *dharmas* (things, events), and d) the need for enlightenment (liberation through awareness) in one form or another. We will discuss these later.

Other common beliefs in Buddhism involve the following:

1. The Three Jewels—(also known as “the Three Refuges”), Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. These refer to 1) following the Buddha, the enlightened one; 2) accepting the Buddha’s Dharma or teaching; and 3) living in harmony with the Sangha, the Buddhist community. In other words, one finds refuge in the Buddha, his teachings and the Buddhist community.

2. The Five Precepts—These involve rules of ethical practice (e.g., abstaining from harming all living things (*ahimsa*), false speech, sexual misconduct, etc.).

3. The Ten Precepts—These include the five precepts but add to them the aspiration to abstain from certain activities, e.g., accepting gold or silver, taking untimely meals, dancing and singing, forms of personal adornment and taking high seats or seats of honor.

The hundreds of millions of Buddhists worldwide can be divided into two broad schools, the Theravada and Mahayana.* While the Mahayanist is by far the largest, the Theravada is generally held to be “original,” i.e., “true” Buddhism. (According to the majority opinion then, Mahayanism developed centuries later.) The Theravada school is the only survivor of some 18 sects that arose in the first four centuries after Buddha’s death. The sects were collectively termed *Hinayana* or “lesser vehicle” by the *Mahayanists* (meaning “greater vehicle”). According to some, the term *Hinayana* was used because in the Hinayanist perspective enlightenment (or “salvation”), due to the rigors of the path, was possible for only a select few, whereas the later Mahayanists made enlightenment the possibility of all. According to others, the terms are used as follows: *Hinayana* Buddhists are those who seek to reach enlightenment merely for their own personal welfare, whereas *Mahayana* Buddhists seek to help others attain enlightenment as well, even though this involves the obligation to reincarnate time and time again until all “sentient beings” have attained enlightenment.

Geographically, Theravada is “Southern Buddhism” (the national religion of Thailand, Ceylon, Laos, Cambodia and Burma, now Myanmar); Mahayana is “Northern Buddhism” (China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Nepal). In the U.S., two typical Mahayanist schools are Zen and Nichiren Buddhism.

Although Buddhism may be broadly classified into these two schools, the Theravada and Mahayanist, many Buddhist scholars refer to three schools, adding the controversial Tibetan or Tantric Buddhism as a separate school.

The first Buddhist scriptures were written down by Theravadin monks about 400 years after the Buddha lived. These scriptures were written on palm leaves and became known as the Tipitaka or Pali Canon. The former term means “three baskets” and refers to the three-fold

(from previous page) ...centuries to their counterparts today: e.g., Christian Science, “Jesus Only,” and Jehovah’s Witnesses. But none are truly Christian. By contrast, almost all Buddhists sects, even those Buddha himself would probably or certainly not accept, are considered Buddhist by Buddhists today.

*Buddhist terms are frequently spelled differently because the Buddhist scriptures are divided into those of the Theravadins, which use the Pali language and those of the Mahayanists, which use the Sanskrit language. Thus, nirvana in Sanskrit is Nibbana in Pali. The Buddha is Siddhartha Gautama in Sanskrit but Siddhatta Gotama in Pali, etc.

division of the scriptures termed Vinaya Pitaka, Sutta Pitaka, and Abhidhamma Pitaka.

The first division, the Vinaya Pitaka, involves discipline for Buddhist monks concerning the 227 rules by which they are to live. The second division, the Sutta Pitaka constitutes the teachings of the Buddha on the four noble truths and the eight-fold path, as well as popular Buddhist literature that comprises the Dhammapada and the Jataka Tales. (The Dhammapada constitutes an anthology of the Buddha's sayings while the Jataka Tales are stories of the previous lives of the Buddha.) The Abhidhamma Pitaka involves philosophical teachings that underscore how Buddhists understand the meaning and purpose of life.

As Buddhism spread outward in different geographical directions, a number of different doctrines and scriptures developed. The Theravada school believes that scriptural authenticity is determined by the texts that were allegedly derived from the Buddha's teachings. However, the Mahayana school added additional scriptures it claimed were just as authoritative, even though these scriptures had little to do with the Buddha's teaching as handed down by the Theravadin school. These scriptures characteristically seemed to have originated by mystical revelations and "vary in form and introduce both mythological and philosophical features not found in the *Theravada*."³ Some general differences between the Theravadin and Mahayana schools include:

Theravada	Mahayana
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Buddha is a human teacher •Complete self-effort for enlightenment •Gods are rejected •Prayer equals meditation •Anti-supernatural •Attains the state of Buddhahood (nirvana apart from the world; one can only help oneself) •Atheism/agnosticism •Nirvana replaces Samsara (existence) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Buddha is an enlightened, supermundane, eternal being •Self-effort is necessary, however additional help from Buddha, Bodhisattvas, (Buddhist "saviors") and Buddhist gods is accepted •Gods are accepted •Prayer may also be petitionary •The supernatural is accepted •Attains the state of Bodhisattva (nirvana in the world; e.g., a Bodhisattva postpones nirvana to help others find it) •Atheism, agnosticism and/or polytheism •Nirvana is Samsara (existence)

Footnotes:

1. Werner Erhard Interview, *New Age Journal*, No. 7, p. 20.
2. William Warren Bartley, III, *Werner Erhard the Transformation of a Man: The Founding of Est* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1978) p. 121, italics in original).
3. Clive Erricker, *Buddhism* (Chicago, IL: NTC Publishing, 1995), p. 65, cf., 61-65.