UNDERSTANDING THE AMERICAN BUDDHIST

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Introduction

One of the most vexing questions in the nascent field of American Buddhism is, “Who is a Buddhist?” Buddhism has become so well integrated into the American religious landscape, popular culture, and academy that it is often difficult to tell who American Buddhists are. Unlike the Abrahamic religions, Buddhism has no official “conversion” ritual, and in any case many Americans would prefer not to “convert” to a religion.¹ Scholars have attempted to deal with this dilemma by looking first at Americans who publicly engage with Buddhism, either through joining a Buddhist group, writing about it in some public forum, or answering surveys and questionnaires. Unfortunately, looking at these sources inherently limits the scholarly understanding of American Buddhism because, in sending out surveys or looking at Buddhist groups, one makes an initial assumption as to who “counts” as a Buddhist. Therefore, before scholars probe what they guess to be the American Buddhist population, it is helpful to turn first to the disseminators of Buddhism in America.

This thesis catalogues the different ways three Asian Buddhist teachers present Buddhism to American audiences. Taking this approach has two benefits. First, it gives scholars a theoretical foundation of how Americans can incorporate Buddhism into their religious identities. Second, successful teachers often echo the desires of their audiences. Therefore, studying their messages reveals some of the beliefs and practices of American Buddhists. After examining three different Buddhist teachers, we will be better equipped to understand how Buddhism fits into American life. This new understanding shows that

¹ Some argue that taking refuge in the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha) is the Buddhist conversion ritual, but I strongly disagree. Any scholar who has done fieldwork with a Buddhist group has taken refuge dozens of times, and Buddhist countries do not necessarily see the Three Jewels a “conversion.” I discuss this problem in more details later.
our current framework for discussing changing religious identities – namely the word “to convert” – is inappropriate for discussions of American Buddhism.

**Methodology**

The first three chapters examine the work of D.T. Suzuki, the Dalai Lama, and S.N. Goenka, respectively. These three men spread the *dharma* through written works, *dharma* centers, and public teachings, all of which I use as source material. Each chapter will highlight major themes in that particular teacher’s work and elucidate how those themes make Buddhism approachable for different segments of the American religious landscape.

In the first chapter, I discuss two aspects of D.T. Suzuki’s presentation of Zen Buddhism. Firstly, throughout Suzuki’s work lies an assumption that Zen is superior to Christianity. Suzuki’s writings span several decades and his audience changed several times. Thus, although his anti-Christian writings would perhaps be considered *faux pas* today, they appealed to the 1950s and 1960s intellectualist counter-culture. Suzuki’s largest American audience was therefore those who were disaffected with Christianity or even “organized religion” on the whole. Secondly, Suzuki stresses that Zen uniquely transcends the category of “religion” because Zen originates in the “Orient,” which is more mystical than the “West.” This appeals to American esoteric spirituality and even foreshadows the modern “spiritual, but not religious” movement.

Next I turn to the Dalai Lama, who has an entirely different way of spreading the *dharma*. One of his most commonly expounded themes is Buddhism’s compatibility with science, and this forms another level of American interaction with Buddhism. The Dalai Lama also discourages religious conversion, while simultaneously encouraging the
adoption of Buddhist practices. These teachings drastically change the way we conceptualize American Buddhism because they imply that one can engage with Buddhist practices with variable levels of commitment, belief in Buddhist metaphysics, or understanding of Buddhist principles.

Finally, S.N. Goenka’s 10-day *vipassana* meditation course provides more novel ways for Americans to practice Buddhism. Goenka echoes some of the Dalai Lama’s themes, such as the compatibility of Buddhism with science. Goenka also emphasizes the practicality of the *vipassana*, which sets it apart from other religions – indeed, from religion altogether. Lastly, Goenka provides his students with a Buddhist metaphysical framework, going into detail on such things as *karma*, reincarnation, and the Ten Perfections, without requiring that students accept all aspects of Buddhist teaching. Indeed, Goenka encourages students to accept only those concepts that make sense. Therefore, students not only have practical elements of Buddhist practice in their spiritual arsenal, but also conceptual aspects of Buddhist teaching.

This thesis concludes with a reexamination of the current scholarly understanding of changing religious identities. First, I discuss the term “to convert,” arguing that it is inadequate for scholarly usage. Next, I propose a new way of speaking about shifting religious identities. Finally, I will apply the findings of the first three chapters to the new model.
Chapter I
D.T. Suzuki and his Zen

Introduction

Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki is often portrayed as the most important figure in the history of American Buddhism even though he did not found a single Zen center or cultivate any American students. Instead, Suzuki’s impact is largely intellectual; indeed, he was not a roshi—a teacher qualified to guide Zen practitioners. Although Suzuki was a scholar, not a roshi, his influence can still be seen in the way Americans see and interact with Buddhism. In this chapter, I will discuss two of Suzuki’s main themes that still influence American Buddhism.

The first such theme is his stance on Christianity; to summarize briefly, Suzuki uses Christianity as a foil for Buddhism. He either implicitly or explicitly compares the two and Buddhism comes off as passive, peaceful, serene and wise compared to Christianity, which is active, violent, overly rational and illogical. Presenting Christianity and Buddhism as opposites would make it difficult to integrate Buddhism into the modern American religious identity; however, Suzuki readers were primarily part of the counter-culture, and thus would have agreed with Suzuki’s anti-Christian arguments. These arguments have been filtered through the generations, but as I show later, they are still a part of Buddhism in America.

The second is Suzuki’s assertions that Zen is the essence not only of Buddhism, but also all religion. As we shall see, this philosophical approach to Zen can be applied to the American religious identity in myriad ways. Moreover, Suzuki's presentation of Zen as somehow apart from and above traditional religion taps into a longstanding esoteric
tradition in the United States. Including beliefs such as Perennialism, Theosophy, and the umbrella category of the New Age Movement, American esotericism can be defined as various attempts to discover Universal Truth or self-actualization by eschewing traditional religion. This sets the stage for Buddhism’s entry into the New Age, and we shall see echoes of this in later chapters.

**Historical Context**

To better understand D.T. Suzuki and his impact on American Buddhism, one must take into account the huge variety of historical circumstances that affected him. Therefore we must examine – albeit briefly – not only the events of his life, but also the historical events that may have affected his worldview.

Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki was born on October 18, 1870 – just seventeen years after Commodore Matthew Perry and four warships sailed into Edo Bay, signaling the end of nearly 200 years of Japanese isolationism and serving as the catalyst for tremendous societal change.\(^2\) A mere two years before Suzuki's birth, the Tokugawa Bakufu was overthrown and the Meiji Restoration began. In 1918, when Suzuki was 48, Japan's first party government came to power.\(^3\) Just shy of his 75\(^{th}\) birthday, Japan surrendered to Allied forces, ending World War II. At the time of his death in 1966, Japan had survived occupation and witnessed the creation of a democratic system.

The coming of Commodore Perry introduced Japan to western imperialism in a way that could not be ignored. During the early Meiji era, into which Suzuki was born, Japan's basic policy was to modernize and thereby gain respect from the western nations. The ideal result would be twofold: Japan would not be subject to western imperial

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\(^3\) Hane and Perez, *Modern Japan*, 201.
designs and it would be able to participate in international politics from a more authoritative position. Japan's efforts at modernization first led to an adoption of all things Western; Japan sent students abroad to learn in Western schools and brought Western professors to teach in its own. Christian missionaries translated the Bible into Japanese, provided medical assistance, and taught both secular and religious topics. The rise of Western influence directly contributed to the ardent Japanese nationalism characteristic of the later Meiji era through the end of World War II.

Before Perry's arrival, Japan was a traditional, agrarian society. The shift towards modernization brought sweeping changes in nearly every aspect of society. For many Japanese in power, Westernization was merely a means of preserving national identity; the only way to maintain independence was to match Western civilization and might. Thus, for some, chauvinism was lurking in the background of all efforts to modernize. Others saw the race towards “modern civilization” as killing Japanese culture, causing reactive, as opposed to proactive, nationalism. When Suzuki was about 15, Japan witnessed a growing sense of reactive cultural nationalism. With this context in mind, we can better understand particular aspects of Suzuki’s writings, namely his complicated relationship with Christianity and the West.

It is also important to place Suzuki’s audience in a historical context. In fact, it is more accurate to speak of Suzuki’s audiences, since his writings spanned several decades. As I show below, Suzuki considered his Western audience too active and overly rational for meditation. This could explain his complete disinterest in teaching Westerners to

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4 Hane and Perez, *Modern Japan*, 84.
6 Hane and Perez, *Modern Japan*, 112.
7 Hane and Perez, *Modern Japan*, 112.
practice Zen – simply put, Suzuki thought Westerners unprepared for serious practice. Thus, he focused on Zen’s philosophical teachings. Suzuki’s subject matter and his heady, dense style meant that his audience would have to be well-educated, which in the 1940s through 1960s would mean that they were predominately white, and at least middle class. If these men and women picked up Suzuki’s books, it meant that they were interested in learning about, or personally exploring, philosophies they considered “exotic.” This is a theme to which I return later.

**The Essence of Buddhism**

Now a monograph, *The Essence of Buddhism* (hereafter *The Essence*) was originally two lectures given to the Japanese imperial family on April 23-4, 1946 - less than nine months after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. According to the preface in the first edition, written by Christmas Humphreys, President of the Buddhist Society, London, the lectures were given “[as] part of a general scheme for making the Japanese Imperium more democratic” by informing the emperor of “aspects of Japanese life with which his previously secluded position had made it difficult for him to become familiar.”

The Buddhist Society, London first published the lectures in English in 1947. D.T. Suzuki was dissatisfied with the result; therefore, he revised the translation, “[amplifying] it so that readers of the West may understand it better”. The second edition was published later in 1947. Suzuki’s revision demonstrates his desire to make Zen approachable to Westerners.

Comparing the revised edition with the unrevised reveals the limits of Suzuki’s

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criticism of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The first paragraph of both versions are nearly identical, painting a caricature of religion. Suzuki draws from Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, calling religion an “opiate of the masses” and a “superstition” with “no direct communication with life itself.” Suzuki’s choice of sources is revealing. In their writings about religion, Marx and Freud primarily focused on Christianity and Judaism, and each had a negative opinion of religion in general. Thus, although Suzuki claims to describe religion, he actually describes Judeo-Christian religion, deliberately focusing on qualities he perceives as negative. It follows that for an audience to sympathize with this point, they must be somehow dissatisfied with Abrahamic religion; indeed, this was the case. In both versions of the book, the introduction sets the tone for the rest of the book; Christianity continues to serve as a foil for Buddhism.

There is one important difference between the two versions that sheds light on Suzuki’s appeal to the esoteric. The difference is one brief sentence from the first edition, which Suzuki omitted from the second: “At least [critics such as Marx and Freud] claim that God is merely an object of selfish prayer.” The purpose of this sentence is the same as the rest of the paragraph – to critique Judeo-Christian religion. Nevertheless, Suzuki intentionally omitted it from the second edition. It is most likely that Suzuki simply recognized the severity of this phrase and the potential for disastrous misunderstanding, so he omitted it. This explanation is dissatisfying, however, because much of Suzuki's writing about Christianity could be seen as controversial. The question then becomes, what sets this phrase apart from the others, so much so that Suzuki deleted it? The most logical reason is that this statement negates God, which goes against American

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esotericism. Suzuki was well aware of American esoteric traditions, including Theosophy, Christian Science, and especially Swedenborgianism, and it seems likely that he changed his text in order to better appeal to his esoteric readers.\textsuperscript{12} Although they may not agree about the nature of the Ultimate, members of the esoteric tradition all agree that it is there, and most agree that it is some kind of \textit{Being}. Claiming that God “is merely an object of selfish prayer” fits in perfectly with Buddhist cosmology, which denies a permanent deity. However, denying the existence of God – and even calling God a delusion – is antithetical to American esoteric religion. Therefore, in order to appeal to this sector of American spirituality, Suzuki omitted this statement.

\textbf{Christianity and Esotericism in The Essence}

In the first edition of \textit{The Essence}, Suzuki makes only limited reference to Christian concepts, while in the second edition he uses Christianity as a tool to attract readers to Buddhism.

For example, Suzuki uses Christian terms to help him explain Buddhist concepts. The first such instance appears early in the first lecture. Here, Suzuki explains discrimination and non-discrimination, claiming that the realization of non-discrimination is \textit{nirvana}, which is similar to reincarnation in the “Hindu philosophy” and to “the giving up of life in order to gain it” in the New Testament.\textsuperscript{13} Citing the New Testament, something with which the contemporaneous American reader is likely familiar, helps Suzuki get his message across. Logically, of course the comparison is flawed. Non-

\textsuperscript{12} For a discussion of Suzuki’s interest in the American esotericism, see Thomas Tweed, “American Occultism and Japanese Buddhism: Albert J. Edmunds, D.T. Suzuki, and Translocative History.” Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 32/2: 249-281. In this article, Tweed demonstrates that Suzuki was exposed to American esoteric ideas, particularly Swedenborgianism, by American Albert Edmunds. Suzuki’s wife, herself deeply interested in American esoteric spirituality, also played a role in Suzuki’s interest in these traditions.

\textsuperscript{13} Suzuki, \textit{Essence}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., 16.
discrimination cannot be compared to “giving up life in order to gain it,” since the New Testament implies that one should give up one's life to God. Buddhist nirvana rejects this wholesale. The truth of this comparison is not at issue, however. The important issue is that Suzuki used a Christian notion to help American readers understand a complicated aspect of Zen philosophy.

Comparing non-discrimination to both Christian and Hindu concepts appeals to the “golden thread” of Perennialism – those aspects of religion that remain unchanged, regardless of which tradition to which they belong. Again, the accuracy of the comparison is unimportant. Instead, it is significant that Suzuki's readers see three different concepts in three different religions all describing a single phenomenon. Suzuki makes the same appeal later in the text. Explaining that the practical purpose of religion is to strip man of his material attachments by way of non-discrimination, he writes that the state in which one is “thoroughly naked” is “where Buddha speaks to Buddha, this is where 'I am before Abraham was,' this is where one can say, 'Tat ivam asi.'”\(^{14}\) Again, not only does Suzuki use Christianity as a tool to aide understanding, but also he points out underlying similarities among different religious traditions, thus appealing to the American esoteric traditions.

Besides using Christianity as a tool to explain Buddhism, Suzuki often reinterprets Christian theology in a Buddhist way. A particularly salient example occurs during Suzuki's explanation of this statement: “distinction is non-distinction and non-distinction is distinction.” Suzuki explains that this bewildering statement “attempts to reach the foundation of [the intellect] by means of negation-affirmation.” Simultaneously negating and affirming something helps the intellect to transcend itself, freeing one from

discrimination and allowing one to enter the field of non-discrimination. Suzuki compares the process of leaving discrimination and entering non-discrimination to “living in Christ by dying to Adam [or] Christ's rising from the dead.” Suzuki then quotes the New Testament in an effort to explain his meaning:

'And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.' One must die before one can rise, and this rising is acceptable by faith and not by reasoning. The merging of contradictions, the self-identity of distinction and non-distinction, is achieved by faith, which is personal experience, the opening of the Prajna-chakshu ('the eye of transcendental wisdom'), the thinking of the unthinkable.”

Suzuki's explanation effectively turns the resurrection of Jesus into a Zen Buddhist metaphor. “Dying to Adam” now means giving up discrimination, and “living in Christ” now means living in the world of non-discrimination. Similarly, Christ's rising from the dead means that Christ “died” to the world of discrimination and was “reborn” in the world of non-discrimination. By equating faith with personal experience, Suzuki reinterprets Paul's words to mean that it is only by personal experience that one can experience awakening – the opening of the Prajna-chakshu eye. Throughout Suzuki's works, personal experience is that which elevates Zen above other traditions; thus, by moving from “faith” to “personal experience,” Suzuki can use Christian terms to make a Buddhist assertion. By reinterpreting Christian theology in terms of Buddhism, it is almost as though Suzuki attempts to convince his audience that, although they grew up in a Christian milieu, they are already Buddhist.

Suzuki uses the same reasoning to reinterpret prayer as a Buddhist practice.

Again, the difference between the first and second editions of the book illuminates the themes under examination. In the first edition, Suzuki writes that prayer originates from one's desire to transcend *karma*. Trying to escape from *karma* is contradictory, since humanity is inherently bound by *karma*; one cannot change the course of nature simply because one desires a different set of circumstances. Prayer is also contradictory because it attempts “to separate ourselves from things which are inseparably part of ourselves.” According to Suzuki, this makes prayer “of the essence of religious life.” The implication is that both prayer and religious life are negative.

Suzuki omits this sarcastic definition of prayer in the second edition, opting instead to validate prayer as a means a spontaneous reaction to life’s inherent suffering. When there is no way out of a bad situation, prayer is the natural response. The second edition does not imply that prayer is silly, as the first edition did. Instead, Suzuki reinterprets prayer as an instinctive response to imprisonment in Karmic bondage. Suzuki points out that people do not really pray to God because they do not really know to whom or to what they pray. Prayer is simply a knee-jerk reaction to adverse conditions. Instead of miracles and divine intervention, Suzuki argues that prayer “will shake off every possible piece of contamination attached to the human heart, and make it...thoroughly free from Karma-consciousness.” Suzuki does not tell the reader that his or her prayers are in vain. Instead, he offers a new, Buddhist reason for praying. Perhaps most drastically, Suzuki argues that prayer can actually lead to *nirvana*, total freedom from karmic bondage. In sum, Suzuki imbues Christian practices with Buddhist meaning. So much so, in fact, Christian practice is no longer Christian practice – it is

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Buddhist, and it leads to nirvana. This type of rhetoric is quite different from the syncretism we see in later Buddhist teachers, as another example will make even clearer.

In once instance, Suzuki points out the failures of Christianity and implies that Buddhism corrects those errors. This example is unique to the revised edition of the text, implying that Suzuki added this portion for the benefit of his Western audience. In a discussion on the “purpose” of life, Suzuki explains that our intellect inhibits us from realizing the nature of life. Instead of seeing life for what it is, humans must question everything they come across. He references the Sermon on the Mount, to explain: “We cannot just live without asking questions. We apparently cannot even leave the sparrows of the air and the lilies of the field alone, but have to inquire whether they are increasing or decreasing the glory of God.”19 In the verses Suzuki alludes to, Jesus tells his audience not to worry about food or clothing, since God will provide these things. This is similar to Suzuki’s point that one should not fret over life’s minutiae. However, by making this allusion, Suzuki criticizes Christians for being unable to live like the “birds of the air” or the “lilies of the field.” Suzuki’s implicit assumption is that Japanese Zen Buddhists can live without questioning everything.

The differences between the two versions of The Essence provide a unique insight into Suzuki’s presentation of Zen to an American audience. His changes indicate his desire to win Buddhist converts by proving that Buddhism is somehow superior to Christianity. He does so first by using Christian concepts as a tool to explain Buddhist ones. By the end of the process, however, Suzuki has appropriated Christian concepts for Zen Buddhism, arguing that these Christian practices, however misguided, ultimately lead to Buddhist nirvana. The differences between the texts also show that Suzuki was

19 Suzuki, Essence, 2nd ed., 75. Suzuki references Matthew 6:25-34
unwilling to risk offending the American esoteric tradition, but took some care to avoid alienating American esoterics. He therefore altered the text accordingly. He also drew several parallels between Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism, indicating continuity among the traditions. In the next text, Suzuki's arguments are much less subtle.

**Christianity in Suzuki's Later Writings**

An examination of Suzuki's later writings, those directed toward a Western audience, will show that he presents Zen as a competitor against Christianity. Ironically, such a vigorous comparison between the two religions was bound to limit Suzuki's future success in the West, but was critical in establishing Buddhism among the counter-culture. *Living by Zen* was published in 1950, four years after Suzuki lectured the Japanese imperial family on Zen Buddhism. In his preface to this book, Suzuki writes that, after the war, he

> “met several young American and English inquirers about the teaching of Zen, whose approach was more or less in the modern scientific spirit. This made him go over anew the ground which he had been accustomed to cover in a somewhat old-fashioned way. Moreover, he has reconsidered to some extent his understanding of Zen in accordance with the later experience and reflection.”

Whatever occurred during these meetings with American and English inquirers seems to have affected significantly Suzuki's presentation of Zen. Unlike *The Essence*, which Suzuki superficially modified in order to reach a Western audience, *Living by Zen* reflects a more fundamental change in Suzuki's tone. In *Living by Zen*, Suzuki continued to use Christianity as a foil for Buddhism, but he did so by vehemently criticizing Christianity,

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20 It is difficult to determine exactly what Suzuki meant when he indicated “the West.” Based on his writing, he seems to conflate Europe and America into one monolith.

exposing its flaws in order to highlight Buddhism's superiorities.

An example will help to demonstrate Suzuki's whimsical and biting treatment of Christianity. As early as the third paragraph, Suzuki writes that it is human nature to get bogged down with self-evident questions. This tendency to lose ourselves in obvious questions is the height of stupidity, and stupidity is “another word for curiosity, and curiosity is what God has implanted in the human spirit. Probably God himself was curious to know himself and created man, and is trying to satisfy his curiosity through man.”22 Thus, Suzuki blames God for the curiosity (read: stupidity) that causes humanity such trouble. Moreover, God himself suffers from this same flaw, for he created humanity in order to satisfy his curiosity. The punch line of Suzuki's implied joke here is: “If only God practiced Zen, then he wouldn't have had to put us through so much trouble!” This reading may seem exaggerated, however, another example should demonstrate Suzuki's harshness.

Further in the text, Suzuki writes that Zen's irrationality sets it apart from other religions. All religions are irrational, Suzuki argues, but Zen's irrationality is of a different sort:

“...Take the Christian statement that God sent his only son to save mankind from final condemnation. To say the least, it is highly irrational. God is supposed to be omniscient and omnipotent, and he must have been fully aware of man's destiny when he created him; if so, why did he take the trouble, or had he to take the trouble, of sacrificing his only-begotten son for sinful mankind? Apart from his omniscience, could he not prove his omnipotence by some other means than that of giving his only son to be crucified on the Cross? If God were as rational as we humans are, he need not be so irrational as to transform himself into one of us in order to prove his boundless parental love for us. These and many other 'irrational' questionings could be

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raised against the Christian conception of God and his plan for salvation.”  

In this passage, Suzuki questions Christianity with the same “modern scientific spirit” embodied in the American and English inquirers. Suzuki’s questions portray Christian cosmology and soteriology as illogical; the fate of all mankind rests on a complicated, perhaps convoluted, series of events. Not only is the Christian cosmology irrational, but also it is violent. Suzuki takes up this theme seven years after Living by Zen was published, Suzuki published Mysticism Christian and Buddhist: The Eastern Way.

The appendix of Mysticism, entitled “Crucifixion and Enlightenment” contains what is perhaps the most vehement, blunt attack on Christianity in all of Suzuki’s writings. There is no sense of syncretism in this text; it is a polemical comparison between Christianity and Buddhism in which Christians are portrayed as violent and oafish. Apart from this appendix, most of the book is standard Suzuki: He highlights the universality of Zen, aspects of which can be found in the mysticism of Meister Eckhart. Eckhart, Suzuki argues, cannot be seen as truly Christian because he does not fit into the “rationalized modernism” or “conservative traditionalism” generally associated with Christianity. Instead, he relies on his own experiences, instead of myths and legends, and therefore breaks new religious ground.

Suzuki begins “Crucifixion and Enlightenment” by establishing the insurmountable gap between East and West. Buddha and Christ embody the differences between the hemispheres. The crucified Christ calls to mind “the gap that lies deep between Christianity and Buddhism. This gap is symbolic of the psychological division

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25 Suzuki, Mysticism, 11.
separating the East from the West." The rest of the appendix takes this separation for granted, and seeks to prove that the East is superior to the west. Suzuki mentions several key differences between East and West. The first the West's acceptance of the ego, as opposed to the East's denial of it. Because Westerner's embrace the ego, which “is by nature defective,” it always frustrates Westerners. The crucified Christ represents the Westerner's struggle with the defective ego; being unable to fix the ego's inherent problems, the Westerner kills it. The “oriental mind,” on the other hand, is not fooled by the ego and is uninterested in corporeality. Thus, there is no need to struggle against the defective ego. The Buddha's serene death represents the Easterner's calm acceptance the ego for what it is. These characterizations imply that Westerners are brutish. Their reaction to the illusory ego is not to transcend it, but to kill it violently. Even destroying the ego does not solve the problem, however, because “the soil of the earth sill clings to [the ego] though the resurrected [ego] goes up to heaven.” In other words, the only way to rid oneself of the ego effectively is to transcend it, not to confront it head on. Thus, Zen is superior to Christianity because it allows one to completely defeat the ego.

In most of his writings, Suzuki limits his criticisms to Christian theology. In *Mysticism*, however, he uses the image of the Crucifixion as a means of criticizing the West on the whole. The crucified Christ's vertical position suggests “action, motion, and aspiration...a fighting spirit...It also gives one the feeling of personal self-importance born of individuality and power.” The description of the West as violent helps to explain why so many of the 1950s counter-culturists were attracted to Suzuki, especially the Beat

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poets. Suzuki's descriptions of the West resound to those grappling with the complexities of the new, Atomic age, and his descriptions of the East appealed to them. For example, compare the violence of the crucified Christ to the Buddha, either seated in meditation or lying in death. A seated posture conveys "the notion of solidity, firm conviction and immovability...[it] is also the symbol of peace, tranquillity, and self-assurance." In death, the Buddha "lies horizontally like eternity itself."\(^{31}\) Given the tense political climate of the 1950s, attacks on Christianity and the West would not likely win support from the average American, but that is not his goal. Suzuki even remarks that he "cannot help associating [the image of the crucified Christ] with the sadistic impulse of a physically affected brain."\(^{32}\) Although this statement is somewhat anomalous in its vitriol, it is emblematic of Suzuki's overall treatment of Christianity. Although he is not always as vicious, the underlying attitude remains comparable. Suzuki's writings on Christianity simultaneously help explain why such a masterful writer and thinker failed to garner widespread support and interest in Buddhism and why he became so popular among the counter-cultural movement.

Modern American religion is paradoxical. On the one hand, America is undeniably a Christian nation. Of all the major world traditions, Christianity is far and away the dominant. On the other hand, there are countless smaller religious traditions and practices. These smaller traditions have existed since the American's beginnings and still flourish today. Because Suzuki took the dualistic approach of Buddhism versus Christianity, he was doomed to fail in reaching a mass audience, especially during the nationalist frenzy following WWII and the McCarthy era. Nevertheless, he had a

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significant impact on the 1950s and 1960s intellectuals and counter-culturalists. Suzuki's other method of presenting Zen, as a religion that transcends the very category of religion, has had more lasting, widespread success.

**Suzuki's Zen and the American Religious Marketplace**

Recently, Suzuki’s writings have been criticized for painting an essentialist, idealistic and ultimately unrealistic portrait of Zen Buddhism. This section is unconcerned with the accuracy of Suzuki's claims or whether they represent “real” Zen. Instead, the purpose of this section is to examine two aspects of Suzuki's presentation of Zen that would appeal to the American religious marketplace: Orientalism and esotericism. By Orientalism, I refer to the treatment of all things “Oriental” as somehow set apart or special merely by their Oriental-ness. By esotericism, I refer to any of the new religious movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including Swedenborgianism, Christian Science, Mesmerism, Perennialism, Theosophy, etc. Although these esoteric traditions declined in America, some of their core beliefs continue in the New Age movement. Those beliefs include an emphasis on the experiential nature of spirituality, a single, ultimate truth from which all religions draw, and a common core of ethical teachings that all religions share. As we will see, Suzuki invokes these concepts in order to prove the primacy of Zen. Although his success in this area is debatable, his frequent reference to Orientalist and esoteric principles endeared his version of Zen to a specific segment of the American population.

*An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, unlike the other texts examined, was in no way intended for an American audience. Nevertheless, the ideas presented therein are representative of Suzuki's lifelong presentation of Zen Buddhism. Originally written in
1934 and published by the Eastern Buddhist Society in Japan, *An Introduction* was not translated into English until sometime later and perhaps did not gain serious popularity until 1949, when it was republished with an introduction by Carl Jung. Although *An Introduction* was not written specifically for an American audience, it is an example *par excellence* of Suzuki’s appeal for American Orientalists and esoterics.

Whatever Suzuki’s original intentions were in writing *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, a side effect was creating an appeal in American readers. He begins by separating Zen Buddhism from the other schools of Buddhism. “Hinayana,” as Suzuki calls it, is the acorn out of which the oak tree, Mahayana, grew. Although both Theravada and Mahayana share the same material, Mahayana is obviously more fully developed. Out of Mahayana comes a “unique order claiming to transmit the *essence* and *spirit* of Buddhism directly from its author...*(emphasis mine)*.”  

Suzuki also aims to separate Zen from the taint of Indian philosophy found in both Mahayana and Theravada and to establish Zen as a unique religion.  

By cutting through thousands of years of development, Suzuki can claim that Zen is not simply the superior school of Buddhism, but Buddhism itself. Without the accumulation of superfluous philosophies and politics, Zen comes directly from Buddha himself, meaning it more accurately conveys the spiritual truths Buddha taught. This claim simultaneously legitimizes Zen by drawing a direct connection to the spiritual authority of Buddha and also makes Zen attractive to the American esoteric traditions. Claiming to have direct insight from the Buddha is standard across all Asian Buddhist traditions – S.N. Goenka makes the same claim, for example – but the average New Ager may not know that. Daren Kemp, scholar of New

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Age spirituality, notes that the Buddha is one of the most venerated figures in the New Age because he achieved self-actualization.\textsuperscript{35} When one sees Suzuki’s Zen through the New Age lens, one can see its appeal: Zen offers the same experience the Buddha had, namely, a perfect self-actualization.

Paradoxically, a section that seems to be simply Japanese triumphalism could also appeal to America's interest in the exotic, “Oriental” other. Suzuki begins rather bluntly by writing that Zen “is unique in various ways in the history of religion.”

Suzuki claims that Zen is also unique from “other forms of mysticism,” implying that religion and mysticism are different things.\textsuperscript{37} Suzuki does not directly state that religion and mysticism are different, but this reading is supported by Suzuki’s insistence that the ideal religion is experiential. This is also why Suzuki asserts that Zen transcends religion, and is the paragon of mysticism. Mysticism leads to a direct experience of Truth, and therein lies the uniqueness of Zen. But why is Zen superior to other mystic traditions? Zen developed from the “Oriental mind,” which is characterized by a disdain for particulars and preference for the whole, as well as “something calm, quiet, silent, undisturbable, which appears as if always looking into eternity.”\textsuperscript{38} Clearly this would appeal to a Western sense of the “exotic East.” Even today there is a tendency to assume that those from the “East” have a certain ancient wisdom and a capacity for contemplation that exceeds those neurotics in the “West.” Richard King summarizes Suzuki’s appeal:

Thus, D.T. Suzuki’s version of Zen and Vivekananda’s neo-Vedanta became ideal Asian exports to the disaffected but spiritually inclined Westerner searching for an exotic alternative to institutional Christianity in the religions of


\textsuperscript{36} Suzuki, \textit{Essentials}, 4.


\textsuperscript{38} Suzuki, \textit{Essentials}, 7.
the ‘the Mystic East’. Indeed, Suzuki’s abstract, universalized and non-institutionalized ‘Zen’, like the neo-Vedanta of Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan, provided a classic example of the universality of ‘mysticism’, increasingly conceived as the experiential ‘common core’ of the various ‘world religions’.  

There is also perhaps a hint of Perennialism in Suzuki's words. Suzuki skillfully makes Japan the epicenter of the Perennial, evidenced by one of his most sweeping claims: “Therefore, I may bold to say that in Zen are found systematized or rather crystallized, all the philosophy, religion, and life itself of the Far-Eastern people, especially of the Japanese.” Now we find an interesting twist to Suzuki's arguments. Zen is peculiar among the world's religious traditions because of the people from which it originated. Appealing to a specific people helps Suzuki to reify Zen's uniqueness because he can relate all of Zen's idiosyncrasies to those of the Japanese people, or rather, the Japanese mind – indeed, Suzuki dedicated a full article to “the Oriental Way of Thinking.” Moreover, by tying Zen to Japan, Suzuki invokes all of the exotic, alluring aspects of Japanese culture. He makes no mention that I have found of Japan's imperialist experiments, but instead he emphasizes Japan's passivity by arguing that Zen is inherently passive (see Mysticism section above). In effect, Suzuki conflates Japan, Zen, and the Orient just as he conflates Christianity and the West.

One must also keep a critical eye on the date that An Introduction was written, 1934, which coincides with a continuous rise in Japanese militarism and chauvinism. I do not mean to imply that Suzuki glorified the “Oriental” in order contribute to Japanese chauvinism, but it is important to bear in mind that the cultural tide in Japan could not

39 Richard King, Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East.' (London: Routledge, 1999), 156.
40 Suzuki, Essentials, 8
have washed over Suzuki without leaving some residue, so we must hesitate to label Suzuki's Orientalism an intentional method of proselytization. It seems more likely that Japanese chauvinism, or Suzuki’s own Orientalism, inspired him to proselytize.

Regardless of Suzuki's intent, the result is the same. Americans read Suzuki's writings and detected not only exoticism and esoteric teachings, but also Orientalism. The fascination with the Oriental “Other” should not be underestimated, as it is likely one of the primary reasons that Buddhism did not die out in America all together in the mid twentieth century.

Ultimately, Suzuki's brand of intellectual, scholarly Zen failed to take hold in America, possibly because early practitioners quickly discovered the gap between Suzuki's idealistic descriptions and reality. Inspired by Suzuki's descriptions of Zen, they went to Japan to study. Much to their chagrin, they found Zen monks bowing, chanting, ringing bells, and lighting incense – not altogether different from what they may have experienced at Catholic Mass. Zen, they found, was undeniably a religion, with religious ritual and doctrine. This, coupled with Suzuki's pugnacious approach to Christianity meant that, although intriguing for intellectuals, a purely intellectual Zen would not gain a solid foothold in America. Instead, practice-oriented Zen would become the most popular form of Buddhism in America. Although intellectual Zen did not become as popular as practical Zen, there would perhaps be no Zen at all without D.T. Suzuki’s writings.

Buddhism did not resurge in 1970s America directly through Suzuki, but he profoundly influenced the Beat generation. It is unsurprising that these poets, already on the fringe of American culture, would dive headlong into Suzuki's heady, intellectual
Zen. Only some of the Beats actually practiced, but all of them spread the dharma through their writings. A perusal through Tricycle, the American Buddhist periodical, reveals the impact of the Beat poets. Alan Watts and Jack Kerouac are listed as “ancestors” of the American Zen lineage. Tricycle ran an unpublished work, Wake Up, by Jack Kerouac. Allen Ginsberg was interviewed, and articles about the Beat poets can be found in several issues. In one article, “Alan Watts Reconsidered,” the author explains the connection between D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts:

It was through Humphreys that Watts met D.T. Suzuki, who would be his primary teacher of Zen (and who was also accused of being a popularizer and a dilettante). Watts' first book, THE SPIRIT OF ZEN—composed when he was 19!—was largely a summarizing of Suzuki's work, though it also laid out themes that Watts would spend the rest of his life developing.

And,

It is true that Watts never underwent—or particularly believed in—rigorous Zen training; as with D.T. Suzuki, his spiritual practice was to some extent his vast scholarship and his writing (though he did practice calligraphy, archery, and other Zen activities).

In these excerpts, we see that Suzuki directly influenced not only Alan Watts’s interest in Zen, but also his interpretation of Zen practice. In the final chapter, I will discuss the implications of this “intellectual” practice of Zen.

To date, Buddhism cannot compete toe-to-toe with Christianity for the lion's share of America's religious marketplace. Nevertheless, it does have a firm foothold among America's non-traditional religions, largely due to the work of the Beats and Suzuki’s appeal to the Orient and esotericism. The next two Buddhist teachers we shall examine

42 For a particularly salient article, see Tricycle, vol. 5 no. 1, http://www.tricycle.com/special-section/buddhism-beat-generation.
exemplify how Buddhism has secured a lasting place in the New Age.
Introduction

Perhaps no Buddhist teacher is more famous than His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama. Since his exile in 1959, the Dalai Lama has been a tireless champion of the Tibetan cause. He has spoken in dozens of countries, authored or co-authored around thirty books, and won the Nobel Peace Prize. In popular culture, the Dalai Lama has been referenced in or the focus of films such as Golden Globe nominated *Seven Years in Tibet*, one of the first films to bring the Tibetan issue and the Dalai Lama to wide audiences, and *Kundun*, which was nominated for four Academy Awards, including one for its soundtrack, composed by Philip Glass, who has connections to Buddhism. \(^{44}\) Actor Richard Gere has spoken out on behalf of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan cause, even in his capacity as a Academy Award presenter, which caused the Academy to ban him from ever presenting again. The Dalai Lama has also gone digital; His Holiness's Twitter.com account has an impressive 1.5 million followers. \(^{45}\) His name has become synonymous not only with Tibetan Buddhism, but also Buddhism on the whole. Out of the three teachers examined in this study, the Dalai Lama has the widest audience, and therefore the most likelihood of affecting people's understanding of and relationship with Buddhism.

This chapter identifies and examines four themes from the Dalai Lama's written work that have direct relevance for Buddhism in America: Buddhism and self-help, Buddhism and self-help, Buddhism and self-help, Buddhism and self-help,...

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\(^{44}\) For more on Philip Glass’s connection with Buddhism, see two interviews in *Tricycle* magazine: vol.1, no. 2, [http://www.tricycle.com/interview-first-lesson-best-lesson?page=0,0](http://www.tricycle.com/interview-first-lesson-best-lesson?page=0,0) and vol. 17, no. 3, [http://www.tricycle.com/magazine/special-section/satyagraha-special-section-unbending-intent-interview-philip-glass?page=0,0](http://www.tricycle.com/magazine/special-section/satyagraha-special-section-unbending-intent-interview-philip-glass?page=0,0). As these interviews demonstrate, narrowing down the exact nature of Philip Glass’s Buddhist practice is difficult, owing to the multiplicity of spiritual authorities from which he draws. I will discuss this kind of spiritual syncreticism in relation to American Buddhism in the final chapter.

\(^{45}\) As of 3/30/2011. [http://twitter.com/dalailama](http://twitter.com/dalailama). This means the Dalai Lama is ranked 173rd for most Twitter followers. To contextualize, he has over twice the number of followers as *The New Yorker* and over three times as many as former Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin.
Buddhism as an adjunct religion, conversion to Buddhism, and Buddhism and science. For the sake of clarity and organization, I have selected one or two texts that exemplify each of these three themes. *The Art of Happiness* shows how the Dalai Lama's message can be interpreted as one of self-help, or self-actualization, reminiscent of the New Age movement. *The Art of Happiness* helps to explain how and why Buddhism has become part of the New Age movement, whose adherents are inherently difficult for scholars to classify. In *The Path of Wisdom*, the Dalai Lama explains that Buddhism is not an exclusivist religion, meaning one can practice Buddhism and any other religion. Moreover, Buddhism can be used to augment one's practice of another religion. The flexibility with which the Dalai Lama presents Buddhism contrasts starkly with D.T. Suzuki's vehement defense of Zen, and demonstrates difficulty of labeling American Buddhists. *Freedom in Exile* and *My Spiritual Journey* offer the Dalai Lama's own opinions on religious affiliation and conversion. Finally, *The Universe in a Single Atom* demonstrates that the Dalai Lama sees Buddhism and Science as complimentary ways of understanding the world.

**Buddhism and Self-Help**

In recent decades, a bond has developed between Buddhism and psychology, particularly self-help psychology. *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* is emblematic of this connection. In this book, the reader can see an interplay between the Dalai Lama's message and Howard C. Cutler, the co-author. Cutler assembles the content of various public speeches and interviews into a coherent narrative, but in the process he allows his own voice to come through. The result is a unique artifact of Buddhism in America. From Cutler's interpretations of the Dalai Lama's message, we learn that he sees Buddhism as a

*The Art of Happiness* turns the Dalai Lama's teachings of Buddhism into a step-by-step plan for self-actualization. Howard Cutler, a psychotherapist, writes in the introduction that he originally wanted to write a self-help book, but eventually realized that the Dalai Lama's teachings were too complex, so he abandoned the plan. Nevertheless, the final result has the unmistakable traits of a self-help book, which takes Buddhism out of the religious sphere and into the secular world, where it can be applied as a method to improve one's life. In order to make this book more practically applicable, Cutler intentionally omitted “portions of the Dalai Lama's discussions that concern some of the more philosophical aspects of Tibetan Buddhism.”

Cutler's decision to make these omissions does not run contrary to the Dalai Lama's teachings in other books, where he encourages readers to accept whatever aspects of the teachings they see fit. Moreover, Cutler's omissions demonstrate a foundational point in my argument: Buddhist teachings and practices can be separated from Buddhist religion. As we shall see below, this opens up a wide variety of possibilities for Buddhist practice in America.

Before he explains the method to reaching happiness, Cutler must first explain the underlying assumption of the book: “*The purpose of our existence is to seek happiness*” (emphasis original). This claim is simultaneously religious and secular. On the face of it, this statement fulfills one of the most important functions of religion: Meaning.

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48 Cutler and Dalai Lama, *Happiness*, 16.
Instead of legitimizing his claim with religious proof, however, Cutler cites a number of scientific studies and surveys – primarily from the field of psychology – proving that seeking happiness does not lead to self-absorption and egotism; instead, the pursuit of happiness encourages kindess towards others.\(^{49}\) Choosing science as a legitimizing tool as opposed to the Dalai Lama's religious authority is a bold statement, demonstrating that Cutler wishes to keep this book secular, divorced from its Buddhist roots as much as possible. It also means that a reader can accept the premise without identifying him- or herself as a Buddhist. To this point, Cutler writes,

> Because of [religion’s] potential to breed divisiveness and hatred, it is easy to lose faith in religious institutions. This has led some religious figures such as the Dalai Lama to try to distill those elements of a spiritual life that can be universally applied by any individual to enhance his or her happiness, regardless of religious tradition or whether he or she believes in religion.\(^{50}\)

Divorcing Buddhist teachings from religion has complicated effects on describing individual religious identity. I will return to this point in the final chapter.

After establishing the premise of the book, Cutler moves on to describe, in general terms, how happiness can be achieved by disciplining the mind. Mental discipline teaches one to curb one's instinct to compare oneself to others, thereby create a “degree of stability within” that will keep you happy “even if you lack various external facilities that you would normally consider necessary for happiness.”\(^{51}\) Cutler's language in this excerpt seems intentionally scientific, further reflecting his desire to keep the text secular. Beyond that, Cutler taps directly into the materialism about which Americans are self-conscious. He goes on to write that deep, inner contentment – the kind that can be

\(^{49}\) Cutler and Dalai Lama, *Happiness*, 16-18.

\(^{50}\) Cutler and Dalai Lama, *Happiness*, 306.

found by following this method – helps to fight the thirst for material pleasures we face every day.\textsuperscript{52} A strong sense of inner worth acts a barrier against dependence on material things; in the event that one loses everything, one has an anchor to one's own happiness.\textsuperscript{53}

The interplay between the Dalai Lama's teachings and Cutler's interpretations are most visible in the next section of \textit{The Art of Happiness}, which explains the method for achieving happiness. The most fundamental teaching is the law of cause and effect.\textsuperscript{54} The Dalai Lama explains it as follows: “if you want a particular event or experience to occur, then the logical thing to do is to seek and accumulate the causes and conditions that give rise to it.”\textsuperscript{55} The explanation is simple and straightforward. Presented in this context, it would be impossible to tell that this teaching originated in religious doctrine. Cutler's interjections reveal the effect of the Dalai Lama's presentation of \textit{karma}. Cutler writes that he “found something very appealing about the Dalai Lama's approach to achieving happiness. It was absolutely practical and rational … I liked that fact that rather than classifying mental states, emotions, or desires on the basis of some externally imposed moral judgment such as 'Greed is a sin' or 'Hatred is evil,' he categorizes emotions as positive or negative simply on the basis of whether they lead to our ultimate happiness.”\textsuperscript{56} With this statement, Cutler reveals that he makes an underlying distinction between Buddhism, which he sees as practical and rational, and religion on the whole, which is an externally imposed set of rules to follow.

Cutler again relies on science as a source of legitimation for the Dalai Lama's

\textsuperscript{52} Cutler and Dalai Lama, \textit{Happiness}, 28.
\textsuperscript{53} Cutler and Dalai Lama, \textit{Happiness}, 32.
\textsuperscript{54} Cutler and Dalai Lama, \textit{Happiness}, 38.
\textsuperscript{55} Cutler and Dalai Lama, \textit{Happiness}, 39. The inner quotations indicate that Cutler is quoting the Dalai Lama.
\textsuperscript{56} Cutler and Dalai Lama, \textit{Happiness}, 41.
teachings, writing that “the very structure and function of the brain” makes it adaptable, thus making training the mind possible.\textsuperscript{57} By impressing upon the reader that Buddhism is not religious and then using scientific jargon to explain why Buddhism's teachings are reasonable, Cutler further removes \textit{The Art of Happiness} from the realm of the religious in the mind of the reader. Adopting the book's proposed method can therefore be seen as a secular lifestyle change, not a change in religious affiliation. Therefore, for both Cutler and his intended audience, “religion” is something to be avoided, while “spirituality” is not as distasteful.

In the final chapter of the first section of \textit{The Art of Happiness}, Cutler makes the most religious assertion thus far. In essence, it states that humans can return to their “innate state of happiness.”\textsuperscript{58} Cutler bases the assertion that humanity's native state is happiness on the “Buddhist doctrine of 'Buddha Nature' [which] provides some grounds for the belief that the fundamental nature of all sentient beings is essentially gentle and not aggressive.”\textsuperscript{59} The authors do not rely solely on Buddhist teaching for their assertion; instead, they argue that there is other evidence. First, the behavior of a mother towards her child demonstrates that humans are brought into the world based on acts of compassion and affection. Beyond that, as we get older we find that our health improves when we feel happy and declines when we feel angry or afraid. The Dalai Lama attributes the obvious and tremendous suffering in the world to the human intellect, which developed after the more instinctive urge to be happy as a way for humans to conquer their environments.\textsuperscript{60} As previously mentioned, this is only the second time that the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} Cutler and Dalai Lama, \textit{Happiness}, 44.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Cutler and Dalai Lama, \textit{Happiness}, 52.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Cutler and Dalai Lama, \textit{Happiness}, 53.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Cutler and Dalai Lama, \textit{Happiness}, 53-4.
\end{itemize}
authors have invoked a specifically Buddhist notion in their plan for happiness, but the Dalai Lama offers evidence that makes Buddha Nature seem more plausible. Not only does this make Buddhism itself seem more reasonable, but also it further allows the reader to accept the teaching as secular, instead of religious. Nevertheless, with the inclusion of Buddha Nature, we are reminded that the teaching is fundamentally Buddhist, and although readers of this book may not label themselves as such, if they so choose, they are practicing Buddhism to some extent.

*Insights from Cutler*

Cutler's commentary reveals a tendency to highlight negative aspects of Western culture while revering positive aspects of Eastern culture. For example, Cutler argues that Westerners have a fundamentally negative view of human nature. Cutler cites famous Western thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and George Santayana, all of whom argue that humans are inherently selfish and aggressive, for the proliferation of this view of humanity. Early psychologists – most famously Sigmund Freud – adopted this pessimistic view of humanity and even encouraged it, resulting in its entrenchment.\(^6\)

Cutler’s negative West / positive East dualism is another permutation of what Richard King calls a “nostalgia for origins,” which is the tendency for Westerners to look to the East as a “gateway to its own past – to the lost innocence and childhood of humanity.”\(^7\)

Although most Eastern nations have been objectified in this way, Tibet has captured – and continues to capture – the Western imagination in an unparalleled way. In the Western imagination, Tibet is a window into humanity’s past, an isolated and unmarred

\(^6\) Cutler and Dalai Lama, *Happiness*, 56-7.

\(^7\) King, *Orientalism*, 147
ancient tradition, a utopian ideal, or an ancient cache of wisdom.⁶³ We see these Orientalist notions scattered throughout Cutler’s comparisons between East and West, and it is reasonable to assume that they will resonate with a sizeable portion of the book’s readership.

Finally, Cutler uses the Dalai Lama as an ambiguous source of legitimation for *The Art of Happiness*. Cutler writes that the Dalai Lama has an “understanding of the factors that ultimately lead to happiness...based on a lifetime of methodically observing his own mind, exploring the nature of the human condition, and investigating these things within a framework first established by The Buddha over twenty-five centuries ago.”⁶⁴ Cutler points to the Dalai Lama's experience in exploring his own mind based on an ancient method of doing so as his qualifications for writing on the subject. Cutler did not mention the Dalai Lama's status as a religious adept or spiritual leader. Likewise, throughout the entire text he downplays the religiousness of Buddhism. It is therefore ironic that Cutler mentions the Buddha, a religious leader, and Buddhism, an ancient religious tradition as a way to buttress his secular method of attaining happiness. In this way, Cutler gets the best of both worlds. He has the authority of an exotic, ancient religious tradition without the distasteful trappings of religion.

**Concluding The Art of Happiness**

The remainder of *The Art of Happiness* deals primarily with examples that will help the reader put the proposed method into action. A brief look at a two examples will show that, once again, Cutler uses the Dalai Lama's obviously Buddhist teachings while downplaying their religiousness. The first instance comes from a section entitled “Human

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⁶⁴ Cutler and Dalai Lama, *Happiness*, 63.
Warmth and Compassion,” in which the Dalai Lama speaks about the prevalence of divorce. He argues that a relationship built on immediate attraction is more likely to fail, since all emotions – such as lust or idealized romance – are unenduring. This advice is unarguably rooted in the Buddhist notion of impermanence. In the Buddhist cosmology, everything is constantly in flux. The Dalai Lama does not make this attribution directly, or perhaps Cutler omitted it.

In another case, the Dalai Lama says that, in coping with the death of a loved one, one should not repress grief or somehow try to stop the process. Instead, one should be aware of one's feelings of loss and worry, so that they do not lead to self-absorption. If this happens, one may begin to think that they are the only person undergoing this type of suffering. Eventually, depression occurs. To help combat this pattern, one should try to think about others who have undergone similar or worse tragedies. Again the Dalai Lama's response is clearly based on Buddhist principles. First, he cautions against egotism and self-absorption, which is in direct opposition to anatman, or the Buddhist notion of the self as ephemeral. If one uses grief as a way to shore up one's own ego, that is regression on the Buddhist path. Second, the Dalai Lama appeals to interdependence to help mitigate the suffering caused by death. If one can use death as a way to feel connected to the rest of humanity, not only will one's own grief dissipate but also one can develop compassion for others. Cutler quotes the Dalai Lama on this point:

Initially, of course, feelings of grief and anxiety are a natural human response to a loss. But if you allow these feelings of loss and worry to persist, there’s a danger…they can lead to a kind of self-absorption…you get the feeling that it’s only you who is going through this. Depression sets in. But in reality, there are others who will be going

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65 Cutler and Dalai Lama, *Happiness*, 100-1.
through the same kind of experience. So, if you find yourself worrying too much, it may help to think of the other people who have similar or even worse tragedies.\(^\text{67}\)

Cutler does not make mention of the Buddhist roots of this teaching. In fact, in his teaching on death, the Dalai Lama directly refers to the Pali story of Kisa Gotami, a mother who was driven to madness by the death of her son. According the story, Buddha brought her to realization by instructing her to get mustard seeds from a household that has never had a member die. After visiting a number of homes, she realized that her grief was not unique. This example, among others, shows that Cutler uses the Dalai Lama’s teachings to separate *The Art of Happiness* from “religious” Buddhism. In the final chapter, we will see that this separation makes determining the American religious identity difficult.

*The Art of Happiness* is a particularly interesting source to examine because in it one can trace Cutler's adoption and interpretation of the Dalai Lama's teachings. When the Dalai Lama himself writes for beginners, he affects a straightforward style, using only the most necessary technical jargon. Dr. Cutler simplified the teaching beyond even the Dalai Lama's simplest texts, removing nearly all references to Buddhism and relying mainly on science. The question of whether Cutler's modifications mean that *The Art of Happiness* is “real Buddhism” is irrelevant here. Instead, we should ask the following questions: Can reading this book inspire significant life change in a person? Can a reader follow the lifestyle – wholesale or in part – that is presented in *The Art of Happiness*? If the answer to these questions is affirmative, then clearly *The Art of Happiness* has some impact on Americans. The real challenge comes when we are faced with readers who do accept the teachings of the book, adopt the lifestyle presented therein, but who do not

\(^{67}\) Cutler and Dalai Lama, *Happiness*, 146.
attribute these changes to Buddhism.

**Buddhism as an Adjunct Religion**

Another of the Dalai Lama's popular works, *How to Practice: The Way to a Meaningful Life*, helps us understand how Buddhism can be seen not as a religion, but as a practical lifestyle that can easily be attached to another religion. The Dalai Lama himself wrote this book in Tibetan, since he can more easily express himself in that language. It was translated by Jeffery Hopkins, a former chief translator for the Dalai Lama and Professor of Tibetan Studies at the University of Virginia. Based on the simplicity and straightforwardness of his writing, this book is intended for a lay audience. It is divided into six parts. The first is a primer to Buddhism, designed to explain to the reader some of the fundamental assumptions of the book. The next three sections are titled “Practicing Morality,” “Practicing Meditation,” and “Practicing Wisdom,” based on the three divisions of the Eightfold Path. Each section has a practical element, describing how to enact morality, meditation, and wisdom into one's daily life. The next section is a cursory introduction to Tantric Buddhism. There is very little practical instruction in Tantric practice, since the uninitiated are more likely to harm themselves in the attempt. The final section of the book traces the steps on the path to enlightenment.

In describing Buddhist practice, the Dalai Lama demonstrates a remarkable degree of flexibility, encouraging readers of all faiths to experiment without any pressure.

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69 One may reference the introduction to the Dalai Lama's autobiography, *Freedom in Exile*, in which he writes, “Because of constraints on my time, I have decided to tell my story directly in English. It has not been easy, for my ability to express myself in this language is limited. Furthermore, I am aware that some of the subtler implications of what I say may not be precisely what I intended. But the same would be true in a translation from Tibetan” (Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), xiii-xiv.)
to adopt Buddhism wholesale. The first such instance appears in the introduction, in which the Dalai Lama describes the purpose of the book with a sensitivity to religious pluralism: “In the following chapters I will describe specific Buddhist techniques for gaining mental peace and greater capacity for compassion within the framework of working to overcome what Buddhists consider to be wrong notions about how beings and things exist.”\(^70\) The tone of the book is thus set: This is what Buddhists believe. He neither makes truth claims nor says that Buddhism is the sole means to happiness. He goes on to say that, although in “Buddhist terms, this is the path to enlightenment … anyone can make use of particular steps toward self-improvement as they see fit.”\(^71\) This sentiment appeals directly to Americans who are opt to integrate several religious beliefs and practices into their lives, rather than choosing one exclusively. As I discuss later, syncretic spirituality is an important aspect of American Buddhism. The Dalai Lama offers an open invitation for seeks to pick which aspects of Buddhist practice they find useful. Moreover, the Dalai Lama again appeals to the notion of “self-improvement.” Taken together, these ideas help explain Buddhism's place in the New Age, which is characterized by both syncretism and self-actualization. In sum, with these words, the Dalai Lama gives license to a *bricolage* approach to spirituality that has existed in America since its founding.\(^72\)

*How to Practice* represents a sea change in how scholars must view American Buddhism. Instead of a stand-alone tradition, the Dalai Lama portrays Buddhism is seen more and more as an *adjunct* religion: a set of practices rooted in a particular religion – in

\(^{70}\) Dalai Lama, *How to Practice*, 14.
\(^{71}\) Dalai Lama, *How to Practice*, 14.
this case, Buddhism – that actually improve a practitioner’s faith or practice in another religion. For example, when the Dalai Lama explains *bodhicitta*, the aspiration towards enlightenment, and *bodhisattva*, a compassionate, enlightened being who vows to bring all sentient beings to awakening, he makes allowances for those who already practice another religion: “People who are not Buddhists – Christians, Jews, Moslems, and so forth – can generate an other-concerned attitude of equal value by thinking, 'I will bring about help and happiness for all beings.””\(^7^3\) Cultivating *bodhicitta* and vowing to become a *bodhisattva* are undeniably Buddhist goals. They are rooted in Buddhist cosmology and strive towards the Buddhist soteriological goal, *nirvana*. Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama writes that the same principle can be achieved without using the technical terms. The implicit promise here is that Buddhism does not constitute a threat to the ardently monotheistic Abrahamic traditions. Whether this is theologically or philosophically true is of no concern here, and there are undoubtedly members of these traditions who vehemently disagree with the Dalai Lama on this point. There are others, however, who do allow for Buddhist practices within the framework of their own religions. Perhaps the most famous example of such a person is Sylvia Boorstein, whose bestselling *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist* describes how she reconciled being a “faithful Jew and a passionate Buddhist.”\(^7^4\) Boorstein is a salient example of the difficulties of categorizing American Buddhists.

Besides those who already practice a religion, the Dalai Lama also invites non-religious people to practice Buddhism. In the subsection entitled “Being Wisely Selfish,” the Dalai Lama explains that compassion can increase one's happiness even if one's

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\(^7^3\) Dalai Lama, *How to Practice*, 107.

motivations are selfish. Simply by treating others with kindness, one ensures that others will react with kindness. On the other hand, if one treats others with anger, they will respond accordingly.\textsuperscript{75} His logical reasoning appeals to a non-religious or even anti-religious audience because there is nothing particularly “religious” about the notion that kindness begets kindness. The Dalai Lama goes on to write that it his “earnest request is that you practice love and kindness whether you believe in a religion or not.”\textsuperscript{76} Once more the scholar of American Buddhist is faced with a question: Is there anything particularly Buddhist about the Dalai Lama's words? If a person who is altogether anti-religion begins practicing loving kindness because of the Dalai Lama's words, does he or she somehow affect American Buddhism?

The notion that someone from Middle America could read this guidebook and take these vows complicates the scholarly understanding of who “counts” as Buddhist. Even within a Buddhist framework, there is precedent for taking the vows without adepts present; the “initiate” can take the vows with “all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas” as witnesses.\textsuperscript{77} Therefore, although these self-initiated aspirants are not necessarily robed, shaven-headed males, they cannot be dismissed outright. They may never join an official group, but their inner devotion may never waver. Helen Baroni, in her unpublished book \textit{Love, Roshi}, discusses precisely this type of Buddhist, whom she calls “solo practitioners.”\textsuperscript{78} These Americans practiced Buddhism without a teacher or a community of fellow practitioners. We know of their existence because they wrote to Robert Aitken for advice. It is not difficult to imagine otherwise turning to the Dalai Lama’s books for

\textsuperscript{75} Dalai Lama, \textit{How to Practice}, 80-81.
\textsuperscript{76} Dalai Lama, \textit{How to Practice}, 83.
\textsuperscript{77} Peter Harvey, \textit{An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 127.
\textsuperscript{78} Helen Baroni, \textit{Love, Roshi} (unpublished manuscript).
similar advice. Even if a practitioner spends a limited amount of time engaging with Buddhism, he or she still has an impact on Buddhism in America.

The issue becomes even more complicated when one considers those who chose to take the Dalai Lama's “modified” path, in which one simply aims for the happiness of others, instead of bodhisattva-ness per se. For example, if a Catholic priest reads this book, aspires to “bring about happiness for all beings” and enacts this in his daily life, should he also be counted as an American Buddhist? Finally, what about those readers who do not take the vows, who do not claim to be Buddhist, but whose world views shift because of this book? It is very easy to imagine a person reading How to Practice and giving up meat, being nicer to his or her partner, or using meditational breathing to mitigate stressful situations. If these aspects of Buddhist practice are divorced from their Buddhist roots, can the practitioner still be considered Buddhist? Such theoretical questions lead us into deep water. Although it is important to raise the questions now, I shall postpone discussing them in greater detail until the final chapter. In this way, we can discuss theoretical challenges posed by all of our authors.

The Dalai Lama on Conversion

Two books give us the Dalai Lama's own stance on religious conversion. The first, Freedom in Exile, is an autobiography written in 1990. In this book, he tells his life story beginning with birth and ending with the establishment of a Tibetan government in exile and a worldwide campaign for Tibetan autonomy. This book focuses largely on the mundane (as opposed to sacred) aspects of the Dalai Lama's life. My Spiritual Journey, on the other hand, details the Dalai Lama's spiritual path, beginning with birth and ending with his current religious views. Sofia Stril-Rever, another of the Dalai Lama's
translators, compiled this book from the Dalai Lama's reflections, book, Dharma talks, and public speeches. Unlike Howard Cutler, co-author of *The Art of Happiness*, Sofia Stril-Rever rarely inserts her own voice, and when she does, it is as an aside. These books offer, in his own words, the Dalai Lama's understanding of religious conversion.

The most striking element of his stance on conversion is that he *discourages* it. In the section of *My Spiritual Journey* entitled “Transforming Oneself,” he writes, “I am sharing with you my experience of life, based on Buddhist teaching and practice, without any desire to propagate Buddhism or make new followers.”79 Once more, the truth of the Dalai Lama's assertion is not at issue. Instead, we must wonder how his readers interpret this statement. Similarly, the following excerpt makes it even clearer that the Dalai Lama is opposed to conversion:

“[i]t is preferable to keep to our original spiritual traditions. That is a much surer path. I am always a little doubtful when I teach Buddhism in a country like France, which is mostly Christian and Catholic, for I am convinced that it is always more satisfying to deepen and preserve the religion of one's ancestors. It is not necessary to become a Buddhist when you are a Westerner.”80

The operative phrase is, “It is not necessary *to become* a Buddhist when you are a Westerner.” To understand this, one must first understand that the Dalai Lama himself takes a very syncretic approach to spirituality. In *Freedom in Exile*, he describes himself as taking “teachings from as many different traditions as possible.”81 This approach means that one does not need to *become* a Buddhist to practice Buddhism.

To further negate the need for conversion to Buddhism, the Dalai Lama draws the

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80 Dalai Lama, *Spiritual Journey*, 81.
now-familiar distinction between “spiritual” and “religious.” In brief, he argues that, although major world traditions may disagree about the “philosophical and metaphysical views,” they are all connected by “daily spiritual practice.” Spiritual practice causes “inner transformation of our stream of consciousness, which will make us better, more devout people.”

Therefore there is no reason to get involved with sectarian delineations, only to enact spiritual practice. Encouraging readers to forgo formal conversion and simply adopt different practices paints a new picture of potential American Buddhists. These men and women are uninterested in ascribing to any particular religion – perhaps uninterested in religion altogether – and focus solely on their “spirituality.”

**Buddhism and Science**

It speaks to the prevalence of this theme that two vastly different books share the title *Buddhism and Science*. One is a compendium of essays that take an emic approach to connecting Buddhism and science, with contributions such as “Emptiness and Quantum Theory” and “Lucid Dreaming and the Yoga of the Dream State: A Psychophysiological Perspective.” The other is an etic, critical approach to understanding the two hundred year argument that Buddhism and science are compatible. The Dalai Lama is the most famous living Buddhist teacher to emphasize the compatibility between Buddhism and science. In several of his books, especially the two biographical books and another, *The Universe in a Single Atom*, the Dalai Lama expounds several themes that have recurred

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82 Dalai Lama, *Spiritual Journey*, 81.
85 For the sake of ease, I use the umbrella term “science.” In reality, the Dalai Lama relies on a combination of popular science, empiricism, and specific fields within natural sciences.
throughout the history of the Buddhism-science dialogue.\textsuperscript{86} For the sake of brevity, I will discuss only one of these themes; namely, that science and Buddhism are a complimentary pair. The Dalai Lama’s evidence for this argument is twofold. First, science and Buddhism share much in common. Second, science needs religion as a safeguard against unchecked advancement.

By drawing parallels between Buddhism and science, the Dalai Lama shows that Buddhism is a “reasonable” religion. Both Buddhism and science question “the notion of the absolute, whether it presents itself as a transcendent being, an eternal, unchanging principle, such as the soul, or as a fundamental substratum of reality. Buddhism and science prefer to take into account the evolution and emergence of the cosmos and of life, in terms of...the natural law of causality.”\textsuperscript{87} The sentiment that both science and Buddhism question the notion of a “transcendent being,” e.g. a god, is also present in Universe in a Single Atom, albeit in a more extreme form. In this book, the Dalai Lama more boldly asserts that neither Buddhism nor science can accept the idea of a creator without proof.\textsuperscript{88} These statements are footholds for skeptical readers to get more involved with Buddhism. The Dalai Lama presents a spirituality that requires no belief in the divine, or in unseen forces beyond that which readers themselves can observe. Indeed, the Dalai Lama claims empiricism is another commonality between Buddhism and science.

Emphasizing Buddhism’s reliance on empiricism makes it appealing because it makes Buddhism seem an adaptable, reasonable spiritual practice. According to the Dalai Lama, there are three sources of knowledge in Buddhism: experience, reason and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{86} The Dalai Lama, The Universe in a Single Atom (New York: Broadway Books, 2005).
  \item \textsuperscript{87} Dalai Lama, My Spiritual Journey, 121.
  \item \textsuperscript{88} Dalai Lama, Universe, 85.
\end{itemize}
testimony. Experience is the most important of the three, which means that experience takes precedence over scriptural authority.\textsuperscript{89} There is a striking example in \textit{Universe in a Single Atom} in which the Dalai Lama argues that, in light of recent astronomical discoveries, Abhidharma’s cosmology should be thrown out.\textsuperscript{90} The Dalai Lama’s readiness to reject teachings from his own tradition gives Buddhism the appearance of adaptability, thereby making it more appealing to Americans who seek to forge their own spiritual path.

The Dalai Lama also argues that science needs religion. This is an innovative viewpoint because, since the Age of Reason, there has been the belief that science will ultimately render religion obsolete. One of his primary arguments in \textit{The Universe in a Single Atom} is that there are certain types of questions that science simply cannot answer, such as What is the meaning of life? and How should one live? Grappling with these questions, the Dalai Lama argues, is crucial to our mental well-being. Additionally, science needs ethical boundaries. The Dalai Lama uses the example of atomic energy. He writes that, scientifically speaking, the nuclear bomb was a tremendous achievement. Ethically speaking, however, it was an aberration.\textsuperscript{91} The Dalai Lama uses “ethics” instead of religion in order to take “religion” out of his argument. He writes: “I am not advocating for a fusion between religious ethics and scientific research. I am referring rather to what I call 'secular ethics,' which includes the key ethical principles such as compassion, tolerance, kindness, and the responsible use of science and power.”\textsuperscript{92} He argues that these ethical principles transcend religious and cultural boundaries because of

\textsuperscript{89} Dalai Lama, \textit{Universe}, 121.
\textsuperscript{90} Dalai Lama, \textit{Universe}, 80.
\textsuperscript{91} Dalai Lama, \textit{My Spiritual Journey}, 124.
\textsuperscript{92} Dalai Lama, \textit{My Spiritual Journey}, 125
humanity’s interconnectedness.93

The compatibility between Buddhism and science has been a longstanding aspect of American Buddhist rhetoric. King traces this to the coincidence of Buddhism’s entry to America and the 1859 publication of *Origin of the Species*. Buddhism, King argues, was quickly placed in the science versus religion dispute as a scientific tradition. For those who rejected religion in favor of science, Buddhism became superior to Christianity. Buddhist teachers quickly drew parallels with scientific advancements of the day to gain credibility.94 Although the Dalai Lama writes over a hundred years after *Origin of the Species*, he, like his predecessors, points out the similarities between science and Buddhism in order to gain credibility. In effect, this blurs the lines between science and religion, making it possible for people to adhere to Buddhist principles or practices for scientific, as opposed to religious reasons. As Donald Lopez Jr. points out, the Dalai Lama’s marriage of Buddhism and science “seems to describe a new Buddhism,” but is actually a continuation of traditional Buddhist philosophy.95 While the similarities between the Dalai Lama’s presentation of Buddhism and traditional Buddhist metaphysics may be apparent to scholars learned in Buddhist scripture, one must bear in mind that, for the average American audience, the Dalai Lama *does* present a new Buddhism.

**Conclusion**

The Dalai Lama's writings reveal that, at least in theory, American Buddhism can be extremely variable. By downplaying the religiousness of Buddhism, the Dalai Lama leaves room for several different understandings of Buddhism. For instance, Buddhism

94 King, *Orientalism*, 151.
can be understood and even practiced as a self-help or self-actualization method. Dr. Howard Cutler, co-author of *The Art of Happiness*, relies upon the Lama's most foundational teachings without mentioning their Buddhist roots. Instead, he justifies the Dalai Lama's teaching with scientific studies. Cutler's organized the book so that it could be a practical guide to living. The interested reader could therefore adopt the lifestyle and mental attitudes, but not claim to be Buddhist. *How to Practice* demonstrates the inclusivity of Buddhist practice. The Dalai Lama encourages non-religious, anti-religious and religious alike to adopt Buddhist practices, thus blurring the line between Buddhist and non-Buddhist. *Freedom in Exile* and *My Spiritual Journey* compound this problem by attempting to dissuade potential converts to Buddhism. The Dalai Lama instead argues that one should remain within one's own tradition, but perhaps borrow aspects from others when needed. Finally, the marriage of Buddhism and science means that even the most rational-minded anti-religious person can find some attractive elements of Buddhist practice, thereby creating the possibility of a non-religious religion.

The Dalai Lama's smorgasbord approach to spirituality is characteristic of the New Age movement. For New Agers, there is no contradiction in practicing crystal healing, Tarot cards, astrology and yoga. Some of those who engage in New Age practices also practice a mainline tradition, such as Christianity or Judaism. In one survey, for example, 73% of Catholics report having at least one “supernatural” belief or experience, which may include a belief in reincarnation, practicing yoga, visiting a psychic, etc. In fact, the flexibility with which the Dalai Lama describes Buddhist practice bolsters its appeal. In some circles of American spirituality, there is a strong

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rejection of religious exclusivity or the idea that one tradition has a monopoly on truth. The Dalai Lama's acceptance and validation of all religious traditions makes him stand out amongst other religious leaders, especially for those looking for just that kind of “spiritual, but not religious” message, those who consider themselves a particular religion but are interested in Buddhist ideas, and even those who are opposed to religion on the whole. Unlike D.T. Suzuki, who primarily appealed to counter-culturalists, the Dalai Lama’s appeal extends to mainstream American culture.

In recent decades, science and religion have begun to combine in the form of UFO cults and science-based new religious movements. The Raelians, Heaven's Gate, and Scientology are three of the most famous examples of just such movements. The implication is not that Buddhism is a UFO cult or a new religious movement, but that the Dalai Lama draws upon the same source of legitimation as these movements – science. As James Lewis points out, science is a powerful source of legitimation, upon which the three New Religious Movements named above, and a host of others, draw successfully.97 It is therefore reasonable to conclude that similar members of the American population would be drawn to Buddhism as a source of spiritual guidance and practice.

With these things in mind, it is easier to see how Buddhism fits into the New Age movement. The main implication of this is that it is much more difficult to classify American Buddhists, since they are likely to employ a variety of whole practices from a variety of traditions into their daily lives. They are also much more like to take an entrepreneurial approach to spirituality, building their own unique religion from bits and pieces of others.

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Chapter III

S.N. Goenka and Syncretic Spirituality

Introduction and Methodology

Unlike the other Buddhist teachers in this study, S.N. Goenka's impact on American Buddhism cannot be measured by number of books printed. Rather, one must turn first to the lives he has affected through his intensive, ten-day meditation courses. Since leaving Burma in the late 1960s, S.N. Goenka has spread Burmese vipassana, or insight meditation, around the world. In American alone, there are about 13 affiliates with dedicated retreat centers, with another dozen or so affiliates who borrow spaces in which to hold retreats. Those who do not flee the course – a somewhat common occurrence after participants learn they must adhere to the five precepts – will sit nearly 100 hours of meditation, watch over 12 hours of Goenka's recorded dhamma discourses, and listen to between three and five hours of instructions and chanting.

This chapter focuses on the content and delivery of Goenka's dhamma discourses, which are shown on videocassettes or DVDs to the meditators every evening. Goenka's discourses are the first introduction to Buddhism for many of the participants. The discourses cover a tremendous amount of material, exposing course participants – called students – to the Buddha's hagiography and Buddhist cosmology, soteriology, and ethics; in addition, Goenka uses anecdotes, both factual and fictional, and metaphors to help

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98 S.N. Goenka has published a very small number of books, but they are extremely hard to find. More significantly, he has published several articles with *Tricycle* magazine, which I will reference later in this chapter.
99 A list of the affiliates and locations in the United States can be found at this website: http://www.dhamma.org/en/bycountry/na/. One retreat center had no courses scheduled so it was not included in the total count. The others have many courses scheduled, some even stretching into 2012. The majority are 10-day courses, though there are also three-day courses for children, teens, and adults, 30 and 45-day courses. The number of participants in a 10-day course is variable, depending upon the size of the facility. For example, the center in North Fork, California handle roughly 60 participants at a time, with courses scheduled almost back to back throughout the year.
explain the principles behind vipassana. Goenka does not organize this material in a logical progression. Instead, he designs each discourse to help with the students' meditation practice; as a result, students cannot completely understand vipassana practice until the final day of the course or perhaps later, after reflection. This chapter will take the discourses as a whole in order to show that Goenka's vipassana practice and teachings give individuals key Buddhist concepts with which to create their own spirituality. Like the Dalai Lama, however, Goenka does not explicitly link his teachings to Buddhism.

The chapter is broken into two sections reflecting the inherent paradox in Goenka's discourses. On the one hand, Goenka elevates vipassana above religious practice by claiming that vipassana is results oriented, practical and scientific, while portraying other religions as hypocritical, sectarian, and ultimately harmful. On the other, Goenka heavily relies on religious authority as a source of both legitimation and motivation for practicing vipassana, giving students a thorough background in the religiousness of the practice. We conclude by discussing implications for American Buddhism, namely multifarious ways Goenka allows students to interact with Buddhism.

*The Format of a Ten-day Retreat*

The course begins on the evening of day zero, at which point students take refuge in the Three Jewels, repeating after Goenka as he recites the words in *Pali*. The new students agree to abide by the five precepts: no killing, lying, stealing, sexual misconduct or intoxicating substances. The old students agree to three additional precepts: no meals taken after noon, no bodily adornments, and no luxurious sleeping accommodations. Goenka then instructs the meditators in anapana, or breath-awareness, and the students go to bed. For the first three days, the students practice anapana. On the fourth day,
Goenka instructs them on the method of *Vipassana*, which they practice for the remaining days. On the tenth day, the ban on speech is lifted, and the students practice *metta*, or loving-kindness meditation. Each day, the students meditate for ten hours, rising at four in the morning and sleeping at nine-thirty at night. Every evening, before the last meditation session, Goenka, via videotape or DVD, delivers a *dhamma* talk.

The students are necessarily a self-selecting population. First, not everyone can or will sacrifice ten days of their lives to sit quietly for hours at a time. Second, students have to be willing to experiment with a different religious practice. Some students take the course because they are undergoing a period of stress and are seeking some kind of relief. Others are on dedicated spiritual journeys, and a retreat is simply one of many stops. Thus, the student population is a mix of professionals, recent graduates, and modern hippies. It is also reasonable to assume that Goenka's audience during the course is predisposed to be sympathetic; indeed, in the two courses I attended, this was the case. The discourse recordings that *vipassana* centers come from a course administered in the early 1990s, when Goenka was in his mid 60s. At that time, he had an undeniably cherubic appearance and was a dynamic speaker. He jokes often in the discourses, and much of what I quote or paraphrase loses its softness when it is written down. It is important to note that Goenka's criticisms of other religions do not come off – during the discourses, at least – as vitriolic or even particularly harsh.

**No Dogma, No Blind Faith**

A central theme to Goenka's discourses is that *vipassana* drastically differs from other religious practices. He supports this argument with examples from several world

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100 I attended a retreat in the summer of 2008 and the spring of 2009, both at a dedicated *vipassana* center in North Fork, California, whose website can be found here: http://www.dhamma.org/en/schedules/schmahavana.shtml.
religions, primarily drawing from Christianity and Hinduism. Goenka deliberately chooses aspects of these religions that he can contrast with the practice of *vipassana*. There are several examples of such comparisons, this section focuses on two of the most detailed. Firstly, Goenka argues that other religions mistakenly rely on divine intervention as a source of miraculous help in difficult situations. Secondly, the devotion with which people cling to their traditions is fraught with spiritual peril. *Vipassana* is an antidote for these problems.

At times, Goenka gently pokes fun at religious traditions that try to circumvent the laws of nature with appeals to the divine. He quips that prayer is akin to a man kneeling on a riverbank crying, “Oh! Other shore, please come over here!” Putting prayer in such black and white terms indeed makes it seem absurd, and Goenka's humorous imitation of the man whining at the riverbank makes the example even funnier, so the audience, both the meditators on the recording and those watching the recording, laughs. Goenka quickly moves on to his point: Just as it is impossible for the other bank to come to the man, so too is it impossible for salvation to come to the person who merely begs for it.\(^{101}\) Asking an invisible power for forgiveness after erring is equally futile. Forgiveness does not undo the damage, nor does it prevent the person from erring again, which is what often happens.\(^{102}\) Thus, the common tendency for religious people to wish for the impossible makes them impractical.

Blind faith is a more harmful downside to religious practice. Blind faith arises when a religious community's elders try to discourage younger community members from questioning the status quo. In order to keep the young ones in line, the elders invoke

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\(^{101}\) This story can be heard on Day 1, 32:00.
\(^{102}\) Day 8, 20:30
either the fear of hell or the promise of heaven. They describe, often quite vividly, the tortures that await those who fall away and the pleasures that await those who remain faithful. When the initiates fully embrace the faith of the elders, the initiates feel intellectually superior. All others faiths are “wrong,” but the initiate is confident that he or she has found the one true faith, thus puffing up his or her ego. Goenka describes this behavior with his favorite phrase for such occasions: Madness. Blind faith shuts down one's reasoning faculties, alienates the believer from others and causes a false sense of superiority. These things serve only to increase suffering and ignorance. Believing in something blindly, without exercising reason, is living with colored glasses on. One becomes attached to the way one sees the world, which is of course filtered through the glasses. In order to see reality clearly, one must take off the glasses and move beyond the lens of one's tradition. Goenka goes on to point out that faith – blind or no – is oftentimes imperfect.

To illustrate this point, he tells the story of a bhkati practitioner. The woman was on the verge of ceasing vipassana for fear that it would force her to give up her bhkati. Goenka asked the woman if she made promissory offerings to her god, promising to make offerings of sweets or five rupees once the god has performed some favor for her. The woman answered affirmatively. Because the woman was unwilling to make her offerings before the promise was fulfilled, Goenka told her that she did not even have five rupees worth of faith in her god. Her bhakti was impure. Along a similar vein, Goenka questions those who claim to be devotees of certain gods – his examples are Ram and Jesus – but exhibit none of the qualities of those gods. Goenka tells an anecdote of a

103 Goenka describes these scenarios on day three, 16:30. As usual, he makes several jokes and the audience laughs along with him.
Ram devotee who was envious of his own brother, which is antithetical to Ram's behavior towards his brother. After describing this man, Goenka jokes that, if Ram exists, he must be in heaven crying because his followers have devalued his name so much. Similarly, it is foolish to think that Jesus, the son of God, needs testimonials from people. What kind of god would be so egocentric, Goenka asks. Only a god of our own making. Love is God, Goenka says, Truth is God, Compassion is God, Purity is God. With these examples, Goenka seeks to demonstrate that religious practice is often corrupt. Either believers claim to have faith and do not, they claim to follow a certain god and do not, or they worship a god of their own creation.

All three Buddhist teachers thus far have compared their religion with other religions. What separates S.N. Goenka is his audience. It takes far more commitment to sign up for a ten-day retreat than it does to buy a book. As mentioned above, Goenka's audience is necessarily self-selecting. The average participant is unlikely to fit into the categories Goenka describes, most of them being “seekers” as opposed to strong devotees. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that students would not fall into some of the categories Goenka mentions, such a the dogmatic, blindly faithful religious. It is also reasonable to assume that, if they do not dogmatically ascribe to a religion, students are predisposed to agree with Goenka on these points. In sum, Goenka does not seek to talk anyone out of his or her beliefs. Instead, he uses these examples of other religious practices as a way to demonstrate the practicality of vipassana.

Goenka claims that vipassana is a practical tool that treats the roots of life’s problems, whereas other religions merely treat the symptoms. For example, those religious who ask forgiveness for their transgressions are doomed to err continually.

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104 These stories can be heard on day seven, 15:30-125
because they are unaware that their flaws lie deep within their own minds.\textsuperscript{105} Several times during the discourses, Goenka stresses that the technique, one of his euphemisms for \textit{vipassana}, reveals the deepest roots of impurities and eradicates them. This idea leads to one of Goenka's most vivid metaphors: \textit{Vipassana} is a deep, surgical operation of the mind. The technique cuts straight to the root level, the so-called subconscious, drains the pus, that is accumulated reaction patterns, and eradicates the root of the impurities.\textsuperscript{106}

Medicalizing the practice and goal of \textit{vipassana} removes it from the realm of the religious, putting it in stark contrast with dubious appeals to the divine. Besides surgery for the mind, Goenka calls \textit{vipassana} the art of living and science of the mind.\textsuperscript{107}

Together, these metaphors offer scientific, rational legitimation of \textit{vipassana} reminiscent of the Dalai Lama's linking science and Buddhism.

Using science, reason and medicine as a form of legitimation allow the practitioner to interpret his or her actions as something other than religious. In the case of \textit{vipassana}, Goenka makes the practice seem to be self-directed psychotherapy. Popular psychology has been a source of American non-traditional spirituality since at least the 1840s, when the Transcendentalists and esoteric spiritual traditions, such as the mesmerists, began infusing religious psychology into some of their writings.\textsuperscript{108} Goenka's metaphors would therefore appeal to those who are attracted to the type of self-help spirituality found in books such as \textit{The Road Less Traveled},\textsuperscript{109} \textit{The Power of Positive}

\textsuperscript{105} Day 8, 20:30
\textsuperscript{106} This metaphor is given in full on day one, 51:00-55:00. It can also be found on day three, 5:40 and day seven, 1:03:45. It is mentioned in passing on a few other occasions, but not in enough detail to note.
\textsuperscript{107} Day six, 35:25
\textsuperscript{108} Fuller, \textit{Spiritual but not Religious}, 144-6
Medical metaphors have the secondary advantage of giving vipassana credibility to those outside of the New Age, who may tend to be more cynical of popular self-actualization methods. Instead of making fantastic claims about “invisible beings” who will help one out of his or her predicaments, Goenka promises a method to help one bootstrap one's way out of trouble. Individual empowerment, self-reliance, and an active, personal quest for perfection are themes that particular appeal to American audiences, and Goenka stresses them throughout the discourses.¹¹²

To emphasize the individual's importance, Goenka tells a story from the Buddha's life. A young boy, recently orphaned, approached the Buddha and asked him to perform “a rite or a ritual” to ensure his father's soul rises to heaven. Goenka often uses the phrase “rite or ritual” to distinguish vipassana practice from other religions; rites and rituals become synonymous with frivolous religious activity. Buddha took compassion on the boy and told him to fill two pots, one with butter, the other with rocks. Buddha then told the boy to throw them in a river and then smash them open with a stick. The boy did so and the butter rose to the surface and the rocks stayed on the bottom. The Buddha told the boy to ask the butter to sink to the bottom, and the rocks to float to the top. The boy asked Buddha if he were serious, since these things were impossible, they ran contrary to the law of nature. The Buddha asked the boy how he could expect to change the law of nature as it pertained to his father, but not the rocks and butter. The law of nature dictates

¹¹¹ Jack Canfield's Chicken Soup for the Soul series has nearly 300 titles to date, nearly 200 of which are in print as of 2011. There are other Chicken Soup for the Soul products, such as pet foods, greeting cards, games, clothing and strollers. See: http://www.chickensoup.com/cs.asp?cid=about or the main page: http://www.chickensoup.com/ for more.
¹¹² Albanese's America, Religions and America contains an excellent discussion of the growth and importance of individualism in America, see particularly 419-422
that if the father performed good actions, his soul will rise. If not, his soul will sink.\textsuperscript{113} Not only does this reinforce the importance of the individual in \textit{vipassana} practice, but also it points out the absurdity of trying to avoid the logical consequences of one's actions by appealing to the divine with sacrifices, prayer, “rites or rituals.” Explained in this way, \textit{vipassana} is simple logic, and other religions are closer to magic.

Goenka frequently explains that \textit{vipassana} helps one to live in accordance with the universal, unavoidable law of nature. He therefore uses several euphemisms for the practice of \textit{vipassana} so he need not call it a religious practice. Sometimes, he refers to it as the “art of living.”\textsuperscript{114} In another instance, \textit{vipassana} is “pure science of mind and matter.”\textsuperscript{115} In fact, \textit{vipassana} is entirely separate from “organized religion, dogmas, and cults” because it is non-sectarian. The law of nature is universal; therefore, the \textit{dhamma} must be universal. The moment it becomes sectarian, it loses its essence.\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Vipassana}, a term Goenka use almost synonymously with \textit{dhamma}, is therefore a universal practice.

On the first day, Goenka jokes that there is no such thing as “Christian anger” or “Jewish anger;” anger is anger, just as misery is misery. If the malady – suffering, misery – is universal, then the remedy must also be universal.\textsuperscript{117} The universality of the \textit{dhamma} makes it applicable to other religious practices. In fact, Goenka's response to the member of the \textit{bhakti} cult mentioned above was that \textit{vipassana} would make her \textit{bhakti} stronger.\textsuperscript{118} At one point, Goenka combines \textit{vipassana}’s stress on the individual with its ability to aid in the practice of other religions. “There is no one to open the gates [of heaven] for you.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{113} This story can be heard in day four’s discourse, between 40:00-44:00.
\item\textsuperscript{114} Day 1, 43:30 and 48:50, Day 3, 5:40.
\item\textsuperscript{115} Day Six, 35:25-36:30.
\item\textsuperscript{116} Day ten, 4:30.
\item\textsuperscript{117} Day 1, 20:20.
\item\textsuperscript{118} Day 7, 15:30.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
You have to knock at the door, and the door will open for you. Knock on the door of the kingdom of heaven within, the *brahmanic* plane within, the *nibbanic* plane within.\textsuperscript{119} Although Goenka turns the Protestant Christian understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven on its head, since “the gates of heaven” *must* be opened by a higher power, he nevertheless appeals to a popular understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven as an internal state.

Seeing the Kingdom of Heaven as a psychological state began as early as the Transcendental writers and has seen several permutations throughout the last century. The writings of Reverend Norman Vincent Peale are particularly salient to Goenka’s marriage of *vipassana* and medicine. Goenka's words echo one of Peale's main themes: The Kingdom of God is within us and accessible through our subconscious.\textsuperscript{120} Because Goenka likens *vipassana* to psychology, one can easily see how Peale’s theology and *vipassana* can interweave. It is also significant that Peale’s theology offers an alternative understanding of the Kingdom of God, the Christian paradise, to mass audiences. In the case of American Buddhism, the reinterpretation of the Kingdom of God as a psychological state opens a gap in Christian teaching: If the Kingdom of God is a psychological state, how can one achieve it? Buddhist teachers such as the Dalai Lama and S.N. Goenka offer practices that fill this gap by offering a practical means of achieving the goal. The goal, of course, can be interpreted however the practitioner chooses. *Vipassana* can bring him or her towards the Buddhist goal of *nirvana*, the Christian Kingdom of God, or an entirely secular goal of self-actualization. A final example will summarize Goenka’s presentation of *vipassana* as a practical tool not only

\textsuperscript{119} Day 5, 3:10.
\textsuperscript{120} Fuller, *Spiritual*, 147.
for living, but also for reaching the final goal.

On the final day of the meditation course, Goenka tells the following story, paraphrased here:

Once, brilliant albeit immature young professor was traveling by ship. The professor befriended an old sailor, who went to the professor’s cabin every night to hear the professor speak about his areas of expertise. One evening the professor asked, “Old man, have you ever studied geology?” The old sailor had no education, so he had to admit that he had not studied geology. The professor scolds the old man for his ignorance, saying that the sailor has wasted a quarter of his life. The next evening, the professor asks the sailor if he has studied oceanology. The poor sailor was again forced to admit that not only had he never studied oceanology, but he had no idea what it was. The professor scolded the sailor again, this time saying that the sailor wasted half of his life. A third day, the professor asked the old sailor if he had studied meteorology. The old man sadly admits his ignorance yet again, only to be told he has wasted three-quarters of his life. On the fourth day, it was the sailor’s turn. He ran to the professor’s room crying, “Professor, sir! Have you studied swimmology?” The professor, perplexed, asked, “what is swimmology?” “Can you swim sir?” The professor said that he cannot swim. “Oh, how sad! You have wasted your whole life. There is a shipwreck; those who swim will reach the shore, those who can't will surely die!”

This story summarizes one of Goenka's key points throughout the dialogues: Dhamma – the teaching as it manifests itself in the technique of vipassana – is a practical tool. Life is an ocean of misery, and only this technique can help one come out of it. Goenka’s use of “other shore” at the end of the story comes from the tradition Buddhist euphemism for nirvana. Goenka does not explicitly link nirvana to this story, however, so once more the listener is free to interpret the story however he or she wishes and to apply it to his or her

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121 Day 11, 16:00-21:00.
122 Goenka ends nearly every lecture with these words, “Come out of your misery. May you experience real peace, real harmony.”
life accordingly.

A final note should summarize the practical implications of Goenka’s universal dharma. In response to Goenka’s Fall 2002 *Tricycle* article “Finding Sense in Sensation,” Nancy McCagney – retired faculty member of Department of Philosophy at the University of Delaware and current visiting scholar in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara – writes that “Goenka’s followers deny that they are Buddhists and that they are doing any sort of religious practice. They claim to be nonsectarian and nonreligious … Numbers of us scholars are dubious about why the ‘Goenka-ists’ do not recognize their Buddhist heritage and affiliation. Perhaps this letter will elicit an explanatory response.”¹²³ In fact, *Tricycle* did print a response. Although it came from an Indian man, his views are representative of Goenka’s students worldwide:

Acharya [teacher] Goenka teaches nothing but the Buddha’s teaching. However, he doesn’t use the word Buddhism to describe what he teaches.

He understands that the word Buddhism is convenient, and some of those who use it don’t use it in a sectarian sense. He understands that. Still, Acharya Goenka avoids using this word, as it does have a sectarian connotation for most people. Every follower of the Buddha’s teaching knows that it is not sectarian. The Buddha never referred to his followers as Baudhha (Buddhists). He called them dhammim, dhammiko, etc. (meaning “dhamma practitioner”). Acharya Goenka highlights the nonsectarian, universal nature of dhamma, thereby inviting people from different religions to “come and see”—to give a trial to the meditation technique taught by the Buddha. [emphasis mine]¹²⁴

This student’s sentiments show that Goenka’s methods are indeed effective, and students

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¹²³ *Tricycle*, vol. 12, no. 2, “Letters to the Editor.”
¹²⁴ *Tricycle*, vol. 12, no. 2, “Letters to the Editor.”
leave the course with a firm belief that he teaches a non-sectarian, universal technique.

Although both Goenka and his students stress the universality of the technique, it is rooted in Buddhism, as Nancy McCagney pointed out above. The next section examines the various ways that vipassana’s Buddhist roots can be integrated into the American religious identity.

**Contextualizing Vipassana**

Most students attending one of Goenka’s ten-day retreats do not realize that the course is based on traditional Buddhist principles, and those principles guide every action the student will take. In the discourses, Goenka explains why the course is organized the way it and how the technique relates to Buddhism. Although he does encourage listeners to take vipassana out of its Buddhist context, Goenka also gives students a thorough background in Buddhist philosophy, thus allowing students to synthesize Buddhist principles into their own religious views. This section examines three Buddhist concepts that Goenka explains throughout the course: Buddhist soteriology, the Four Noble Truths, and the Buddhist cosmology.

As one might expect, nirvana is the overall goal of Goenka’s ten-day course. He does not reveal to the students until the final day, however, that the entire course is designed to bring students closer to the other shore. On the tenth day, Goenka explains that in order to reach nirvana, one must fulfill the Ten Perfections, or pāramī. In brief, the pāramī, as Goenka orders them, are: 1) Renunciation, 2) Morality, 3) Efforts, 4) Wisdom, 5) Tolerance, 6) Experienced truth, 7) Strong determination, 8) Loving-kindness, 9) Equanimity, and 10) Donations.\(^{125}\) Without knowing it, students spend the

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\(^{125}\) Day 10, 46:45.
course working on these perfections. Upon entering the course, students sever ties with
the outside world and live as monks and nuns, including taking and upholding the five
precepts. Students meditate every day, guided by Goenka's discourses and assistant
teachers, in order to experience dhamma – the universal law of nature – individually, and
learn to face suffering with equanimity. Halfway through the course, Goenka introduces
adhitthana meditations – meditations of “strong determination” in which the student
makes no intentional motion for a full hour. On the last day of the course, Goenka teaches
metta, or loving-kindness meditation. Finally, at the end of the course, the meditator has a
chance to donate, or volunteer as a server for the next course. Goenka tells the students
that each course is an opportunity to further the Ten Perfections. Whether the students
adopt this soteriology as their own is entirely variable. Some may adopt it for a time,
others may reject it at first but slowly grow to embrace it. It is also easy to see how,
theoretically, the Ten Perfections can be combined with other religious beliefs, such as
the Kingdom of Heaven, moksha (Hindu liberation), or even Scientology’s state of being
“Clear.”

One aspect of the Ten Perfections that may present difficulties for some listeners
is reincarnation. Goenka explains that the Ten Perfections take hundreds or even
thousands of lifetimes to complete. Earlier in the course, however, on day five, Goenka
explains reincarnation in logical, almost scientific way. Students hearing this would not
be struck by the metaphysical nature of Goenka’s explanation; instead, it seems a logical
progression of everything they have learned in the course up until that point. On the other
hand, reincarnation may already be part of some participant’s spiritual identity.
Reincarnation has become firmly embedded in the New Age movement; indeed, in the
American spiritual landscape on the whole. According to a recent Pew Forum of over 4,000 adults, about 24% of mainline Protestants and 25% of Catholics believe that human beings are “reborn into this world again and again.” Twenty-four percent of the population on the whole believes in reincarnation.\[^{126}\] Thus, incorporating the metaphysics driving the Ten Perfections into the American spiritual identity may not be as hard as one would suppose. Goenka makes reincarnation seem rational to even a cynical audience, and a significant portion of the American population already accepts it.

Goenka universalizes the Four Noble Truths in order to give the practice broad appeal. By the fifth day of the course, the students are practicing true \textit{vipassana} and have begun the \textit{adhitthana} sittings. This is most likely why Goenka introduces the First Noble Truth at this point. Goenka alludes to the First Noble Truth in every discourse; for example, one of the phrases Goenka uses most often is, “Come out of your misery.” But, Goenka does not explain that “misery” refers to the Four Noble Truths until the fifth day of the course.\[^{127}\] During that discourse, he explains that \textit{vipassana} helps the meditator realize that misery is inescapable, and an important step in the practice of \textit{vipassana} is learning to observe misery objectively. That misery is inescapable is a universal truth, but when one can observe misery objectively, the universal truth of misery becomes a Noble Truth.\[^{128}\] Goenka stresses the universality of the First Noble Truth and parleys that universality into the Fourth Noble Truth, the Eightfold Path.

If one accepts the First Noble Truth, no metaphysical aspect of practicing

\[^{126}\] The full survey and its fascinating results can be found here: \url{http://pewforum.org/Other-Beliefs-and-Practices/Many-Americans-Mix-Multiple-Faiths.aspx}. The survey is the source for a \textit{New York Times} article entitled “Remembrance of Past Lives,” from August 27 2010 \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/fashion/29PastLives.html?_r=1&amp;pagewanted=1}, which was in turn discussed in a \textit{Tricycle} blog post, which can be found here: \url{http://www.tricycle.com/p/2236}.

\[^{127}\] Goenka translates \textit{dukkha} as “misery.”

\[^{128}\] Day five, 8:50-9:50.
vipassana is necessary. The only aspects of the practice that are necessary are morality, concentration, and wisdom – sīla, samādhi, and paññā – the three divisions of the Eightfold Path. No person or religious tradition ever disagrees with morality, concentration, and wisdom, Goenka says, “but in theory, at times, some difficulties arise. So whatever you heard these ten days, if any one of you find a certain aspect of the theory unacceptable, doesn't matter – leave it aside.” Goenka is very clear on this point; as long as sīla, samādhi, and paññā remain intact, any other aspect of the practice can be abandoned.

This flexibility with the “theoretical” aspects of dhamma and a strong emphasis on its practice create interesting possibilities for individual religiosity. We have already seen the possibility of using Buddhism as a means to strengthen one's other religious practice or as a type of self-actualization exercise. Now we can see that Goenka explains the religious foundations of vipassana in great detail, thus affording students the opportunity to borrow these aspects of Buddhism and assemble them into their own spirituality.

**Conclusion**

Both the Dalai Lama and S.N. Goenka teach Buddhist principles in a way that allows, and even encourages, Americans to integrate them into their own daily life. Whereas the Dalai Lama generally encourages American to adopt Buddhist spirituality outside of a religious context, Goenka offers students the metaphysical reasoning behind vipassana practice. This allows them to integrate Buddhist metaphysics into their own, unique spiritualities.

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129 Day eleven, 15:45.
130 Day 11, 12:00-16:00
Chapter IV

Toward a New Understanding of Individual Spirituality

Introduction

Since the beginning of religious studies as an academic field, scholars have used permutations of the word “to convert” to describe individual religious change. As time passes, and our understanding of individual religious identity grows ever more complex, it behooves us to reexamine this fundamental term. The purpose of this chapter is to reexamine the scholarly use of the term “to convert,” and to propose an entirely different way of describing the phenomenon of individual religious change. Much has been published on conversion, and a good deal of effort has been devoted to reconciling its problematic elements. With this analysis, I hope to show that trying to apply “conversion” to modern, American religiosity is bound to fail. As a result, instead of attempting to forcefully rework a definition of conversion, I will abandon the term altogether. By escaping the theoretical confines of the word, we can explore the phenomenon it seeks to describe.

This chapter begins with a summary of the problematic elements of the term conversion. Next, it briefly traces the history of the scholarly usage of the term, which will help illuminate the need for a change in terminology. Finally, I propose a new way of speaking about shifting religious affiliations, and apply this to the information gleaned in the previous chapters. Because American Buddhism is an excellent example of the newest, most complex trends in American religion, I focus the discussion on American Buddhists, and how scholars can speak of their changing religious identities.
Problems with Conversion

The etymology of the term “conversion” reveals that, from its earliest use, the term has been linked to Christianity and is largely inappropriate for modern, scholarly usage. The English word “to convert” comes from the Latin convertere, which means “to turn about, turn in character or nature, transform.” Convertere was the Latin translation of two Greek words: epistrophe, “turning around,” and metanoia, “repentance” or “turning around.” These words are both found in the Greek New Testament, and seem to have been merged into convertere for the Vulgate Bible. Both words can be either intransitive or transitive, and their emphasis is on inner transformation.¹³¹ There is only one verse in Vulgate Bible in which convertere is used to mean switching from one religion to another: “for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned [conversi] to God from idols to serve the living and true God...” (Thessalonians 1:9, NIV).¹³² In the rest of the Vulgate New Testament, convertere is used primarily to symbolize repenting from a sinful way of life and returning to the true path, akin to the Greek metanoia. Even as far back as its Latin roots, “to convert” did not, for the most part, refer to changing religions altogether. Instead, it symbolized a return to righteousness.

As the term “to convert” moved into the English language, its meaning came to imply both “abandoning another religious tradition and adopting Christianity” and

¹³¹ Mircea Eliade and Charles J. Adams, The Encyclopedia of Religion (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 73. While most of Rambo’s information is entirely correct, he writes that to convert comes from the Latin verb convertire, which is incorrect. He also offers no other etymological background of the word, focusing instead of the phenomenon of conversion. As I argue in this paper, such lack of awareness about the term conversion makes understanding the phenomenon difficult.
“returning to righteousness.” The word seems to have first been used in English in
*Cursor Mundi*, a 14th century English poem. In reference an event in the early Christian
church, the anonymous author writes that, although the apostles were put in prison, many
men and their wives – presumably 1st century Jews – came to be baptized and “par was
converted thousand fiue (there was converted thousand five).” In this case, it seems that
the author was implying that these people were turning away from their wickedness and
accepting the truth, i.e. that Jesus was the Messiah. Later occurrences of “to convert”
implies switching religions entirely, most notably from Judaism to Christianity. The
modern definition for “to convert” is: “To cause to turn to and embrace a (specified)
religious faith, usually implying that the turning is to truth from error or ignorance.
(Without qualification, usually = ‘to convert to Christianity’.)” Thus we can see that, in
modern terms, the word conversion implies both a change of religious affiliations and a
turning from error, ignorance, wickedness, etc.

From this, we can see that “to convert” is inherently vague, and therefore of
questionable usefulness for scholars of American religion. “Conversion” is especially
problematic when one considers that American spirituality grows increasingly syncretic.
It is therefore more and more difficult to speak of changing one’s religious identity as a
linear process. Instead, Americans gather elements from various religions and combine
them into an ever-changing spirituality. Using a term that contains an inherent value

133 The word itself is found in *Cursor Mundi (The Cursor o the World): A Northumbrian Poem of the XIVth
electronic text can be found here: [http://openlibrary.org/books/OL14002532M/Cursor_mundi](http://openlibrary.org/books/OL14002532M/Cursor_mundi). In context:
“Bot mani turnd þar and turuud, / To baptim tak þam-seluen buud, þat quot o men and quot o wive, þar
was converted thousand fiue” (Lines 19123-191235). The term “converted” only appears in the Cotton
version of the text.


135 For a discussion of American syncretism, see Albanese *America, Religion and Religions*, 319.
judgment (i.e., the “convert” was previously in error, but has since reformed) subtly colors the way we understand the process of religious change. Interestingly, most dictionary entries for the religious meaning of “to convert” list its transitive definition first. This includes not only standard dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster, but also the Oxford English Dictionary. The transitive use of the term adds another problematic element. “To convert someone” invokes specter of the word’s Colonial past, the “convert” is an object unable to decide his or her own religious affiliation. Instead, the “convert” has conversion done to him or her. Of course, aside from its transitive usage, the term can also be used to describe the act of changing religious affiliation of one's own volition, and this is the view that pervades modern scholarship on the subject. Although volitional change more accurately reflects modern, American spirituality, the word “conversion” is still, at its core, vague.

The phenomenon the word conversion seeks to describe is dynamic and complex, and the word itself cannot convey these qualities. Lewis Rambo’s entry on “conversion” in the first edition of the Encyclopedia of Religion reflects the inadequacy of the word: Conversion is “a dynamic, multifaceted process of change,” either abrupt or gradual. 136 As Rambo himself points out in the second edition of the Encyclopedia, “What changes? Who changes? How does one change? How much change is necessary for the change to be considered conversion? What is authentic conversion?” 137 To these I would add: What constitutes religious change? Who decides which conversions “count” – the scholars, the practitioner, or members of the tradition? Must the change be permanent? Must the change be total? Such questions complicate even the most straightforward conversion

137 Encyclopedia of Religion, 73.
scenarios. For example, shifting between two exclusive religious traditions – such as Judaism and Islam – seems to warrant use of the term. Even though the shift may be strictly from one tradition to another, with no other external influences, there are still many questions one must ask about the conversion process.

To return to Rambo's question, what changes? Is it the person's worldview, membership in the official organization, internal belief, outward practice, or some combination thereof? What if a spouse outwardly converts to Islam for the sake of his or her Muslim partner, but internally remains a devout Buddhist? Or, if a person reads the Dalai Lama's *Way to a Meaningful Life* and decides to stop eating meat and start meditating, but does not consciously label him or herself a Tibetan Buddhist. From a scholarly perspective, at what point is one an official “convert?” Is it a scholar’s role to determine the authenticity of a “conversion?” As these examples demonstrate, we cannot accept the tradition's own conversion ritual as the sole marker of individual religious change. In some cases, there is no outward sign of conversion, although there may be significant internal change. In other cases, there may be visible, external change but little by way of internal change. Thus, “conversion” cannot be used as a descriptive tool because the word oversimplifies the process of individual religious change. To summarize thus far, the main failings of the word “to convert” are: 1) it implies that one moves *from* a single tradition *to* another at a *specific point in time*, 2) it is rooted in vagueness, 3) it has colonialist connotations that are difficult, if not impossible, to eliminate, and 4) it is inherently biased towards the Abrahamic traditions.

Stepping outside of the Abrahamic traditions sheds a different light on the weaknesses of the term “to convert.” A Chinese person would not “convert” to
Confucianism. Confucianism is simply one influence on his or her religious life, as might be Daoism, Buddhism and various aspects of popular religion. If one wishes to emphasize one tradition more than the others, one simply does so. Likewise, in Japan the idea of conversion would have almost no meaning. There are no Shinto conversion rituals of which I am aware, nor are there Hindu conversion rituals or Hawaiian conversion rituals. In some senses, one can say that within these cases, religion is simply a way of describing various motivations and concerns in one's life at a specific time. In terms of world Buddhism, “[i]t is not clear that the Tibetans, the Sinhalese or the Chinese conceived of themselves as ‘Buddhists’ before they were labeled so by Westerners,” further complicating the notion that one can “convert” to Buddhism. The counterargument can be made that all of these examples are ethnic, or indigenous, and therefore they are far from American sensibilities. In fact, recent scholarly work has shown that American spirituality may be more similar to these cases than one expects.

Recent changes in the American spiritual landscape have made it more and more difficult to easily talk about shifting religious affiliations. In Spiritual, But Not Religious, Robert Fuller argues that around 40 percent of Americans are “unchurched,” that is, have no connection with an organized religion. Nevertheless, some 90 percent of Americans believe in “some kind of Higher Power.” When religion moves out of the public sphere and into the private, discussing it becomes much more difficult. This is especially the case with conversion, because American men and women now feel more confident than ever in constructing their own religious identities. The infamous case of Sheila well illustrates this point. In an interview with sociologists, Sheila identified herself as

138 King, Orientalism, 144.
139 Fuller, Spiritual, 1.
believing in God, but not as a churchgoer. She called her faith “Sheilaism,” and this term has become somewhat synonymous with individual religiosity. As Fuller notes, some scholars warn that Sheilaism makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to talk about religiosity because Sheila “differentiate[d] between religious concepts and identified those concepts that most closely connected with her life.” In essence, Sheila, and all other Americans like her, compiled different aspects of various religions into a personal religious system. When individual religious identity is understood in this way, it becomes impossible to use conversion to describe American unchurched spirituality.

The growth of “unchurched spirituality” has tremendous impact on the way scholars view Buddhism in America. If one applies the limited term conversion to Buddhism in America, one may only find those people who have officially joined a Buddhist group, or claim to be Buddhist. As with any other religious organizations, non-members may be far more devout than members, and those who claim to be part of a tradition may have little affiliation with it other than by name. With this in mind, it will be helpful to examine how the word conversion has come to describe such a specific phenomenon and what scholars of American Buddhism have done to circumvent the problems stemming from the narrowness of the word.

State of the Field

In the previous section, I asserted that, for a variety of reasons, the term conversion is inappropriate for American Buddhism. One may even stretch those arguments to say that conversion is a poor term for any tradition, but I shall limit it to American Buddhism. To

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141 Fuller, Spiritual, 159.
142 Fuller, Spiritual, 162.
better understand why we must abandon the term “to convert” when speaking of American Buddhism, it will help to understand how the term, and the concept attached to it, came to be.

Scholars often use “conversion” to describe a permanent religious change that occurs at a fixed moment in time. This understanding of conversion most likely spawned from dramatic conversion stories of important Christian figures. The conversion stories of Paul the Apostle and Augustine of Hippo are the most prominent examples. According to Christian tradition, Paul vehemently persecuted early followers of Jesus (Gal 1:13-14) and even participated in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:57-8:3). Then, while traveling to Damascus to further harass the followers of Jesus, a light from heaven flashed and Paul fell to the ground. Jesus's voice rang out and commanded Paul to continue to Damascus and await further instruction (Acts 9:3-9). After this experience, Paul became the most prolific evangelist of all the early Christians and was largely responsible for important elements of Christian doctrine.

The conversion story of Augustine of Hippo is similarly dramatic. In his *Confessions*, he writes at great length about his life of sin and his struggle with Christianity. Throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine describes a tension between his current lifestyle and the Christian faith, until eight books into the story, he has a dramatic “conversion” experience. On the day of this experience, he was struggling particularly violently. He writes: “For I felt I was still the captive of my sins, and in my misery I kept crying 'How long shall I go on saying “tomorrow, tomorrow”? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?'”  

While he lay on the ground, weeping, he heard a voice repeating the words “Take it and read, take it and read,” which he took

as a sign to read from the Christian scripture. Augustine does not directly say the voice he heard was divine, and the passage is ambiguous enough to be interpreted as divine intervention or mundane coincidence. He picked up the Letters of Paul and read a few sentences. Immediately, he writes, “I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.” These stories share several key similarities. Both Paul and Augustine made a dramatic shift from their previous lifestyle to their new lifestyle, although Augustine's conversion was prefaced by a long process of grappling with Christianity. Both conversion experiences can be pinpointed to a single moment in time, and represent a lifelong change. Finally, both conversion experiences could be seen as resulting from divine grace. In Paul's case, there is little ambiguity since he attributed his conversion to a direct encounter with Jesus. Augustine's story is ambiguous, but his later readers could easily assume the voice he heard was divine. Echoes of these examples of sudden, total transformation can be seen in some of the most foundational scholarship in religious studies.

Some of the earliest and most influential scholars to touch on conversion were William James and Edwin Diller Starbuck, whose exclusive focus on Christianity has had lasting impact on conversion studies. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James devotes an entire lecture to conversion. He begins by laying out a general understanding of conversion, which he writes is the process “by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.”

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144 Augustine, *Confessions*, 178.
Much like Augustine himself, whose case James cites, James takes a retroactive view of conversion. One's former life is seen as “consciously wrong,” and the act of converting makes one “consciously right.” The underlying assumption is that religion (read: Christianity) was always lurking in the background of the convert's life, waiting to become the dominant force. Indeed James's definition of conversion, which occurs several pages later, shows that this is the case: “To say that a man is 'converted' means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy.”\(^{146}\) Besides the underlying Christian bias, James's definition also fails in that it assumes that all conversion is a total life change, permanently affecting the very core of a person's being.\(^{147}\)

There are several objections to this definition of conversion specific to American Buddhism. First, an American Buddhist's practice may not be as all consuming as James makes conversion sound. The American Buddhist practitioner may chant every morning and look forward to a favorable rebirth but not consider his or her religion as the center of his or her consciousness. Moreover, the idea that American Buddhism, indeed any religion, will always be a permanent part of the practitioner’s life is fallacy. Finally, in James’s definition of conversion it is unclear whether conversion is a change in belief, a change in practice, or a change in both. It is interesting to note than in both Augustine’s experience and in James’s definition there is in implicit assumption that one was already partially “converted,” at least in the sense that one already “believes” in the doctrines. The act of “converting,” then, is the decision to align one’s actions to those beliefs.

\(^{146}\) James, \textit{Varieties}, 183.  
\(^{147}\) James, \textit{Varieties}, 183.
Edwin Starbuck, a contemporary of William James, conducted an empirical study into the “the growth of religious consciousness.” The study is broken up into two parts: the first consists of religious growth inspired by conversion, and the second consists of religious growth not inspired by conversion. Starbuck's research is entirely focused on conversion in a Christian context. The questionnaire Starbuck used has the same fundamental assumption that James made, namely that Christianity was always present in an individual's life, waiting to become the dominant tradition. One group of questions, for example, asked “[w]hat were the chief temptations of your youth? How were they felt, and how did you strive to resist? What errors and struggles have you had with (a)lying and other dishonesty, (b) wrong appetites for foods and drinks, (c) vita sexualis; what relation have you noticed between this and moral and religious experiences? (d) laziness, selfishness, jealousy, etc?” There is a striking similarity between these questions and the lives and Paul and Augustine, and there is also a clear overlap with the Seven Deadly Sins; specifically, gluttony, lust, sloth, and envy. The latter questions simply trace the stereotypical Christian conversion, so I will not go into detail describing them. Suffice it to say that the questions in Starbuck's survey predispose his study to reinforce Christian notions of conversion. Thus, the psychological theories of conversion he postulates are inherently inapplicable to non-Christian traditions. Given that Starbuck’s research was conducted over a century ago, it is no surprise that he did not take Buddhism and non-Abrahamic religions into account. Unfortunately, however, his methodology still has an impact today.

Although their work was groundbreaking, James and Starbuck lay a faulty

foundation for later academic study of conversion. James and Starbuck’s tendency to treat conversion as an exclusively Christian phenomenon, and examine only Christian cases of conversion, has colored religious scholarship for the past one hundred years. Anyone seeking a broader understanding of individual religiosity must account for other religious influences.

Rambo's *Understanding Religious Conversion* is one of the most modern and in-depth treatments of conversion. Instead of invigorating the field of conversion studies by re-examining its very foundations, Rambo's study simply repeats the errors of James and Starbuck. Although Rambo recognizes the great versatility of the word conversion, he settles on the following definition: “*Conversion* means turning from and to new religious groups, ways of life, systems of belief, and modes of relating to a deity or the nature of reality.” According to Rambo, the type of change conversion entails is largely shaped by the people or religions involved in the change. Rambo prefers this inherent ambiguity, believing it helps scholars understand religious pluralism. A more specialized definition of the word should be limited to specific traditions. Contrary to Rambo's assertion, flexibility in the word's definition does not necessarily help scholars capture the phenomenon. Indeed, using the word “conversion” obscures the phenomenon, largely due to its inherent Abrahamic bias. Perhaps because of the difficulty of applying “conversion” to non-Abrahamic religions, nearly every example in Rambo’s study came from within Christianity. Additionally, Rambo's fundamental assumption that conversion is from one thing and to another blinds his study of religiosity to non-Abrahamic traditions. This gap necessarily limits the usefulness of Rambo's study in terms of

150 Rambo, *Conversion*, 3.
American Buddhism, and it also highlights the dangers of using inaccurate terminology.

The most recent scholar to deal with conversion in a meaningful way is Henri Gooren. Although Gooren's “Towards a New Model of Conversion Careers” is an admirable attempt to propose a new model of conversion, he falls into the same traps as his predecessors. Gooren draws on fieldwork from Latin America, an advance in that it broadens the scope of conversion studies, which has hitherto been limited to the United States and Western Europe. However, his fieldwork was limited to Roman Catholicism, Pentecostalism, and Mormonism – all Christian traditions. As long as those who study conversion stay within the Abrahamic traditions, the theoretical failings of the word will never stand out. Gooren argues that older conversion models, such as that of Stark and Lofland fail to take into account globalization and religious pluralism.\(^{151}\) Gooren's initial premise is good; older models are far too limited and exclusivist still to be relevant. However, Gooren's arguments are ultimately compromised by his assumptions about why people convert. Namely, he asserts that people convert due to crises or turning points, and that potential converts are predisposed to view the world in religious terms.\(^{152}\) Interestingly, these ideas come from the same antiquated literature that Gooren is seeking to correct. The notion that converts experienced some kind of crises or turning point originates from relative-deprivation theory, which scholars have largely rejected.\(^{153}\) Within the context of this study, crises and turning points are not good means of evaluating conversion because nearly everyone experiences crises and turning points relatively frequently. Finally, as Lorne Dawson points out, although many converts were

\(^{151}\) Henri Gooren, “Towards a New Model of Conversion Careers: The Impact of Personality and Situational Factors” *Exchange*. Volume 34, number 2, pp. 149-166, 152.

\(^{152}\) Gooren, *Towards a New Model*, 158.

\(^{153}\) In short, the relative-deprivation theory states that people join cults because they are somehow deprived, whether it be of social, mental, or emotional skills.
seekers before their conversion, being a seeker is not a necessary element of conversion. Moreover, in some cases, seekership is more common amongst non-joiners than joiners.\textsuperscript{154}

Gooren’s proposed model of conversion, which he calls a person's conversion career, ultimately reinforces the problems inherent in the word “conversion.” Gooren seeks to incorporate the dynamism of the conversion process by outlining a set of parameters that researchers can use during fieldwork to verify that an “actual conversion has taken place.”\textsuperscript{155} While I fully agree that current models of conversion do not account for increasing globalization and pluralism, Gooren's proposed model is not a solution. Unsurprisingly, since he draws primarily on Abrahamic traditions for his understanding of conversion, his model reflects an Abrahamic model of conversion. He defines conversion as “a radical personal change of life and worldview, and a commitment to a new church.”\textsuperscript{156} The key problem with this definition is obvious: Some people do not commit to a “church” when they convert. Aside from the problematic assumption that all converts join a Christian community (a church), some people convert themselves and never join an official group. Thus, Gooren takes what Thomas Luckmann calls an “operational shortcut” by associating “church” with “religion.”\textsuperscript{157} Assuming that conversion is limited to those who join a church excludes those who consider themselves “spiritual, but not religious,” or who claim a specific religion but choose not to affiliate with a specific organization. Finally, it is questionable that a scholar’s place is to

\textsuperscript{155} Gooren \textit{Towards a New Model}, 153.
\textsuperscript{156} Gooren, \textit{Towards a New Model}, 157.
determine whether an “actual conversion” has taken place, if an “actual conversion” is indeed possible at all. While Gooren's conversion careers model may fit some instances of conversion, it ultimately reinforces the Judeo-Christian centrist that I am seeking to correct.

Conversion also poses unique problems in terms of American religions, which several scholars have attempted to reconcile. Thomas Tweed summarizes the difficulties of applying the term “conversion” to American Buddhism. In the first place, discerning who has and has not converted to Buddhism is a challenging task. One could argue that anyone who has taken refuge in the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha), performed Buddhist rituals, or accepts the validity of the Four Noble Truths and follows the Eightfold Path, is a Buddhist. But, Tweed asserts, such a view “constructs an essentialized notion of the tradition, imagining the religion as static, isolated, and unified...It fails to acknowledge that traditions change.”

Despite Tweed's seemingly obvious points, scholars (even Tweed himself) must apply the term “conversion” to shifting religious identities, perhaps because there is no alternative. Frequent change is especially prevalent in American Buddhism, since it is still new. As I demonstrated above, anyone reading a Dalai Lama monograph can “convert” her- or himself by taking the Bodhisattva vows and taking up daily meditational practice. A Vipassana meditator may never claim Buddhism as his or her religion, but maintain a Theravadan outlook on life and practice meditation with all the intensity of a Southeast Asian monk or nun. In short, the qualifications for a “real Buddhist” have always been complex, and become more so every day.

Tweed also describes the complexity of religious identity, which further complicates the discussion of American Buddhist converts. According to Tweed, there are several types of religious identity. One might have a compartmentalized religious identity, such as those found in Japan, where marriage was the realm of Shintoism, and death the realm of Buddhism. One may also draw fluidly from several traditions, as in China. Another possibility is multiple religious identities, such as Jewish Buddhists in America or Voodoo Christians in Haiti. Finally, even for the so-called “convert” religious identity is unclear. Conversion is never total – elements of the previous tradition always remain, shape one's outlook and inform one's decisions.\textsuperscript{159} The question of who is a Buddhist coupled with the subtleties of religious identity further demonstrate the difficulties of applying the dualistic notion of “conversion” to the processes that non-ethnic American Buddhists undergo.\textsuperscript{160}

In an effort to transcend the dualistic “converted” and “unconverted,” several scholars of American Buddhism have attempted to adapt Stark and Bainbridge's cult model. In this model, there are three levels of cult. The audience cult is composed of people who often attend events and read the publications of particular religious movements, but never make a strong commitment to a group.\textsuperscript{161} The client cult participant seeks “personal adjustment.”\textsuperscript{162} Finally, a “cult movement” is characterized by exclusivity (in that a participant may not join another cult movement) and the attempt to

\textsuperscript{159} Western Dharma, 18-9.
\textsuperscript{160} In current scholarship, there are two categories for American Buddhists: Converts and Ethnic. Ethnic Buddhists are those who were born into Buddhism in their home country, or their children. Convert Buddhists are everyone else.
\textsuperscript{162} Stark and Bainbridge, Future of Religion, 28.
serve all the religious needs of the convert.¹⁶³

Jan Nattier, in her essay “Who Is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America,” uses Stark and Bainbridge as a tool for discussing affiliation with American Buddhism.¹⁶⁴ In applying the Stark and Bainbridge model to American Buddhism, Nattier notes that although it does offer more nuance than the simple “Buddhist” or “Not Buddhist” binary, some changes need to be made. The first problem she notes is that the model is meant to be applied to religious organizations, not individuals. This presents a problem in terms of American Buddhism because different Buddhist organizations may have not only those who fit the definition of “cult movement,” but also those who fit the definition of “client cult” or even “audience cult.” Nattier’s solution is simple: Apply the model to the individual, instead of the organization. Nattier’s second criticism of the Stark and Bainbridge model is that the term “cult movement” does not accurately delineate between entirely new religious movements – such as the Latter-day Saints – and traditions that are simply new to America – such as Hinduism. Her solution is to label the latter “transplant” traditions.¹⁶⁵ Nattier is correct in seeking a more accurate model with which to describe American Buddhism; however, even with her amendments, the Stark and Bainbridge model is still too clumsy to accurately describe American spirituality in general, and especially American Buddhism.

B. Allan Wallace also uses Stark and Bainbridge to create a spectrum of Buddhist practice.¹⁶⁶ The first category of American Buddhists are “members of an audience for Buddhist teachings, who may participate occasionally in Buddhist meditation retreats,

¹⁶³ “The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice” in Westward Dharma, 29.
¹⁶⁵ Prebish and Baumann, Westward Dharma, 187.
¹⁶⁶ Prebish and Baumann, Westward Dharma.
initiations, or other group practice.” This type of American Buddhist is similar, if not identical, to what Tweed has labeled a “night-stand Buddhists.” Wallace's second category refers to those who enter into a student-teacher relationship, such as an American taking a Tibetan Buddhist lama. The final category Wallace proposes is the self-conscious convert. In this case, Wallace had to adapt Stark and Bainbridge's third category because American Buddhists do not necessarily abandon other religious pursuits.

Stark and Bainbridge's model cannot be adapted successfully to American Buddhism because it leaves out too many types of American Buddhists. The most substantial problem with the Stark and Bainbridge model is that it implies that all religious movements are all on a linear progress towards “cult movement,” the most advanced form of new religion. Even Nattier's revised model still implies an individual's progression towards the ultimate goal of “genuine conversion.” Again, one must question who can actually determine “genuine conversion.” Additionally, as Wallace noted, Buddhism does not demand exclusive membership, further complicating the understanding of conversion. Beyond that, the model makes no mention of those who affiliate with multiple cult movements, or a cult movement and another religious tradition. The model does mention, however, that members of client cults, particularly personal adjustment client cults, include people with dual religious identities. Nevertheless, this classification is problematic because it can be interpreted as implying that all American Buddhist groups are personal adjustment client cults, instead of fully formed religious movements. The Stark and Bainbridge model also fails to describe the

167 Wallace's categories can be found in “Spectrum of Buddhist Practice,” Westward Dharma, 34.
168 Prebish and Baumann, Westward Dharma, 186.
169 Stark and Bainbridge, Future of Religion, 29.
solo practitioner accurately. According to their model, the solo practitioner would be an audience cult member because he or she interacts with the tradition primarily through media and lectures and has not joined a particular community.\textsuperscript{170} The problem is that Stark and Bainbridge argue that an audience cult member is too open-minded to make a “strong commitment to any complete system of thought.”\textsuperscript{171} While this may or may not be the case for religious seekers on the whole, it is especially not the case for the solo practitioner of American Buddhism, who may read Buddhist scripture and meditate for hours a day but have no access to a formal Buddhist group. Finally, although the Stark and Bainbridge model may shed new light on types of American Buddhists, it does not help explain the process of becoming an American Buddhist. Therefore, even with Nattier's extensive adjustments, the Stark and Bainbridge model is not useful for describing affiliation with American Buddhism.

\textit{Toward a New Understanding}

In order to better account for the demographics of Buddhism in America, a more fluid way of describing religious affiliation must be found. Any non-linear way of speaking about individual religious change will be complicated, and may eliminate the simple categories of “converted” and “not-converted.” By adding nuance to our understanding of individual religiosity, we will find that Buddhism in America aids our understanding of American religion in general.

The first aspect of individual religiosity one must understand is the individual. Instead of speaking of the person as a whole, we should limit ourselves to a single aspect of the self. We shall tentatively call this the \textit{religious identity}. The religious identity is the

\textsuperscript{170} “Solo practitioners” are described in Helen Baroni’s \textit{Love Roshi}, unpublished. A solo practitioner practices Buddhism in isolation, without a group or even a teacher.

\textsuperscript{171} Stark and Bainbridge, \textit{Future of Religion}, 28.
aspect of the self that has to do with *religion*. For the sake of this essay, let us apply Clifford Geertz's definition of religion – which is primarily focused on society and culture – to the individual: *Religion is a set of symbols that establish powerful, long-lasting moods and motivations*. Something becomes subjectively *religious* when an individual allows it to influence his or her life. Otherwise, that thing will never influence a person's moods or motivations. Objectively, a copy of the *Lotus Sutra* can be labeled religious because millions of people regard it as such. For one who has no connection to it, however, the *Lotus Sutra* is simply a book.

Geertz’s definition of religion asserts that religion establishes long-lasting moods and motivations. It is important to note that this does not imply a monolithic mood or motivation, nor does it imply static moods and motivations. The religious identity is constantly in flux because it is constantly bombarded by new potential influences. This is especially true in the digital age, when the internet has allowed an unprecedented flow of knowledge and exchange of ideas. Anyone inclined to research various religions can pull up millions of web pages in milliseconds.\(^\text{172}\) The average American family has several televisions, and popular media exposes audiences to countless new ideas. Scientific advancement continually calls religious traditions into question, causing Americans to rethink their religious identities. Equally important, American society is also changing. Since the Immigration Act of 1965, Americans have encountered more and different religions than ever before.\(^\text{173}\) As Americans meet and interact with people of various religions, Americans get exposed to new sets of religious symbols, which have the

\(^{172}\) A simple Google search of “Buddhism” yields “About 16,600,000 results (0.24 seconds)”

potential to create long-lasting moods and motivations.

By focusing on religious identity and its fluidity, we can create a new, subtler way of describing individual religiosity. In *Crossing and Dwelling*, Thomas Tweed adds a caveat to his definition of religion, stating that any such definition necessarily implies a trope or metaphor.\footnote{174}{Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 42.} Metaphors, in turn, shape the reader's understanding of the subject at hand.\footnote{175}{Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 46.} Thus, when Stark and Bainbridge refer to the “religious marketplace,” they unintentionally – or perhaps intentionally – invoke a multitude of associations, many of them negative.\footnote{176}{For example, see Stark and Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*.} For example, the religious marketplace could be where religion is reduced to a commodity, where religion is purchased to fulfill a specific function, or where thieves and charlatans try to swindle innocent victims. Due to this inherent danger of the metaphor, Tweed took great care in choosing an appropriate one for *Crossing and Dwelling*. During the course of conceptualizing and writing this essay, I have found that speaking of religious identity is equally fraught with potentially misleading or biasing metaphors. Therefore, before I present the metaphor I eventually chose, I will explain how I conceived of it. In this way, my own thought processes and potential biases will be transparent.

The primary motivation for this new way of describing religious change came from a passage in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*. His definition of power in this text struck me as vivid, three-dimensional and quite visual:

> It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relationships immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through

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175 Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 46.

176 For example, see Stark and Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*.
ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies...Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.177

As I conceived this chapter, I realized that Foucault's definition of power, with minor alterations, could easily apply to religious change.

Firstly, Foucault's definition of power could perhaps be applied to any aspect of human life, so it is necessary to limit this discussion to religious change. Second, instead of religious power, we should speak of religious influence. Religious power potentially invokes supernatural, charismatic, or worldly authority. Moreover, power may easily imply force. Influence, on the other hand, lends itself to subjective choice. A person grants a religious tradition or idea influence over him or her. Influence also leaves the question of time unanswered; an influence may be temporary or permanent as the case may be. Influence implies a relationship either among people, people and ideas, or people and institutions. As all of these things interact, they exert influence on one another that "transforms, strengthens, or reverses them." These interactions form a system that is constantly in flux and in which every aspect of that system influences the others in some way. Thus, religious influence forms the same kind of dynamic systems as Foucault's power systems.

Both systems – the Foucaultian power systems and the religious-influence

systems – can be visualized as astral systems: Different physical bodies moving and interacting, forming a system that may appear stable, but constantly fluctuates. Influence holds religious people, ideas, and thoughts in particular systems just as gravity holds planets, stars, and debris in particular systems. It is difficult to conceptualize just how religious ideas influence people, but it is much easier to see how the moon's gravity affects the Earth, or how Jupiter's gravity affects a passing comet. Therefore, when discussing religious identities, it is helpful to imagine them as though various influences were astral bodies, each having its own gravity (influence) and each interacting with the others in unique ways. Understanding influence as similar to gravity has the added benefit of making influence – normally a vague term – more concrete.

Application

We can use this new lexicon to test the findings from the previous chapters. Let us begin with a famous Christian thinker who had regular contact with the subject of the first chapter. Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was a Trappist monk whose books, Seven Storey Mountain and Seeds of Contemplation had tremendous impact on American spirituality. Although Catholicism was the primary influence on Merton's religious life, he did have meaningful interactions with Buddhism. He was mainly interested in how Zen and Christian contemplation overlapped. During the course of his life, he participated in dialogues with major Buddhist figures, such as D.T. Suzuki, the Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Thiền monk and widely read author. Although Merton would certainly not have labeled himself a Buddhist “convert,” it is clear that Buddhism had some impact on his life and his story has had a significant impact on the history of Buddhism in America. Before applying the new model of religious affiliation, let us
briefly examine Merton’s engagement with Buddhism.

In a recent article in the *Journal of Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Christopher Pramuk discusses a formative time in Merton’s spiritual life, in which he grappled with the Sophia tradition Russian Orthodox Church.\(^{178}\) Although Pramuk’s argument occasionally echoes some Orientalist sentiments, the article is nevertheless helpful in understanding Merton’s interaction with Zen. Pramuk points out that Merton began corresponding with D.T. Suzuki precisely at the time Merton became infatuated with sophiology. Pramuk goes on to draw connections between Merton’s dialogue with Suzuki and Merton’s investigation into the Sophia tradition; the result is a persuasive argument that Suzuki’s unique, experiential Zen helped Merton understand how God, through Sophia/Christ, can be present in one’s daily life.

Merton’s interaction with Suzuki and his ideas about Zen shed new light on Merton’s spiritual identity. Of course one would not call Merton a convert to Buddhism, since he was entirely devoted to Christianity. Nevertheless, Buddhism informed his Christianity, at least in part. Merton may therefore fall into the category of “sympathizer” or “night-stand Buddhist,” but these labels fail to convey the depth to which Buddhism affected his religious identity and the complexity of his interactions with Buddhism. Based on the information above, I would describe Thomas Merton as a devout Catholic whose religious trajectory was altered by two bodies: Zen and sophiology. The influence from these two systems brought Merton closer to themselves, thereby changing his theology. Of course, as simple Newtonian physics dictates, gravitational attraction is *mutual*. Indeed, this is the case with Thomas Merton; we continue to see ripples from his

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interaction with Zen. For example, a Louisiana priest’s response to the question, “What does being Buddhist mean to you?” echoes Merton’s own sentiments: “Being free—being given permission to be oneself. In the tradition of being unrestricted—to freely question and to find the answer in the question.”

Suzuki’s polemical stance on Christianity has also made an impact on American Buddhism, an impact that grows more apparent as more and more Americans become Christian apostates. This impact can be seen clearly on one website devoted to “encouraging de-converting and former Christians.” There, participants can share their “testimonials,” many of which involve Buddhism to some extent. For example, one man, identified only as Nathan, writes, “I went through an experimental phase [after renouncing Christianity]. I studied a plethora of books and websites about Buddhism, Wicca, and Satanism to name a few.” In this case, Christianity acted as a repelling force, pushing this man towards other, decidedly non-Christian, religions. He chose to group Buddhism with Wicca and Satanism, demonstrating that he locates Buddhism within the New Age category of new religious movements. While Buddhism may not have had a lasting impact on Nathan’s life, Buddhism is nevertheless a part of his religious identity insofar as it represents what he is not – that is to say, Christian. If one were to picture Nathan’s religious identity as a system, Christianity would be represented by a repelling force, and everything non-Christian an attracting force. Among the non-Christian ideas, Buddhism, Wicca, and Satanism have had some influence on Nathan’s religious identity. He did not convert to these religions, but they are important to his

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179 Tricycle, vol. 1, no. 1. For further examples of Catholicism and Zen, see American Catholicism and the Appeal of Zen Buddhism, master’s thesis, 2010.
180 http://new.exchristian.net/
181 “I had chosen to side with Mr. Satan,” a testimonial found here: http://new.exchristian.net/2010/12/i-had-chosen-to-side-with-mr-satan.html
religious identity. The testimonial also demonstrates Suzuki’s successful appeals to the American esoteric tradition. Nathan, along with thousands of other Americans, identifies Buddhism with the New Age, which grew out of the esoteric traditions of Suzuki’s time.

Another woman, pseudonym “Open-Minded in the South,” writes that after her psychologist advised her to leave her church, “[she] began truly searching and [she] came across this website along with others and read about Buddhism and other ancient religions. What [she] found was astonishing to say the least.”¹⁸² Once again, Christianity repels this person, pushing her towards other religions. In this case, she links Buddhism to other “ancient religions,” which resonates with many of the Orientalist and essentialist themes Suzuki invokes. Additionally, Buddhism seems to have resounded with this woman more than Nathan, having made at least some lasting impression. We can use the proposed model to describe the nature of her religious identity. At the time of writing, the author has two opposing forces in her life, Christianity and Buddhism. Christianity repelled her, setting her on a trajectory away from itself, at which point she came across Buddhist ideas (among others), which further altered her trajectory. I cannot say more because she does not give more information.¹⁸³

In the coming years, it will be useful to examine this kind of anti-Christian American Buddhism in greater detail. One must wonder how many Americans echo the sentiments of Nathan, “Open-minded in the South,” or Christopher Funkhouser, who responded to *Tricycle*’s “What does being Buddhist meant to you?” section with two testimonies.¹⁸²

¹⁸³ There are other testimonials, which go into greater detail. For example, “An Eastern Question,” found here: http://new.exchristian.net/2010/07/eastern-question.html, describes a person’s spiritual journey from Methodism to Tibetan Buddhism, via several major world traditions such as Judaism and Hinduism. His spiritual identity would be far more complicated to map, since each major tradition with which he interacted would be yet another influencing factor in his identity. Thus, visualizing his system would involve many “planets” and “asteroids,” all affecting his beliefs and practices.
simple words: “Not Protestant.”\textsuperscript{184}

Next, let us examine some cases in which the Dalai Lama or S.N. Goenka’s teachings – or similar teachings – seem to have influenced Americans. Both teachers emphasize the universality of the \textit{dharma}, and its transcendence of religious boundaries. This idea carries well with Americans. One resident of Hawai‘i writes, that Buddhism is “pretty simple, really. Isn’t it? It’s not a matter of being Buddhist or Christian or whatever. It’s practicing kindess [sic] and goodness to others, and not harming others. That’s really the true nature of any spirituial [sic] practice.”\textsuperscript{185} Another person wrote, “God and Buddhannature [sic] are the same thing.”\textsuperscript{186} These answers put the question of “conversion” in sharpest relief. These respondents may or may not call themselves Buddhist – which, incidentally, challenges the argument that a Buddhist is anyone who claims to be – but one cannot deny that Buddhism is a part of their religious identity.

Others responded to the \textit{Tricycle} with similar emphases. One man collected answers from his circle of friends, two of which are relevant: “Not staking a claim of being a Buddhist but rather simply being a Buddha-Dharma sympathizer.” And “Nonsectarian appreciation and attempted application of the teachings learned thus far.”\textsuperscript{187} Notice that both of these responses eschew formal identification with Buddhism, and they indicate no Buddhist activities. Because these elements are lacking, should they not “count” as Buddhists? Again we can draw a parallel to astral imagery. When Pluto was declassified as a “planet,” it did not vanish from our solar system. It is still there,

\textsuperscript{184} \textit{Tricycle}, vol. 1, no. 3. \\
\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Tricycle}, vol. 5, no. 4. Out of respect to the original author and to \textit{Tricycle} magazine, I should note that the errors in these quotations seems most likely the result of an error in scanning, not the author’s or publisher’s mistakes. \\
\textsuperscript{186} \textit{Tricycle}, vol. 5, no. 4. \\
\textsuperscript{187} \textit{Tricycle}, vol. 1, no. 3.
orbiting at exactly the same rate and at exactly the same distance as it was before.

Similarly, although these respondents do not call themselves Buddhist, Buddhism is still a part of their identities. Despite their hesitance to label themselves Buddhist, they nevertheless respond to *Tricycle*. Thus they have some interaction with, and therefore influence on, American Buddhism, and scholars should take note.

There are other ways for American to interact with Buddhism without officially labeling themselves Buddhist. One possibility is for one to be a “cognitive Buddhist,” that is, a person whose engagement with Buddhism is strictly on the intellectual level. One professor of religious studies writes,

“\text{In my own case, I have never been affiliated with a Buddhist sangha in any official sense nor lived for an extended time at a monastery (shorts stays, though), and have never declared a formal allegiance. But my mental life is very firmly Buddhist; in some ways, I think, my lack of formal Buddhist group membership has made me somewhat more unapologetically Buddhist than many Buddhologists.}”\textsuperscript{188}

The professor states that his “mental life” is “firmly Buddhist,” and this creates interesting possibilities for American Buddhism. The professor’s words breathe life to the hypotheses put forth in the preceding chapters. Because a cognitive Buddhist’s level of engagement is impossible to measure except by survey, which is often very inaccurate, cognitive Buddhists often fall through the cracks of traditional American Buddhist scholarship. The proposed model accounts for these Buddhists by clearly stating that Buddhism is a strong and abiding presence in this person’s religious identity, even though he or she does not affiliate formally with Buddhism or engage in Buddhist activities.

\textsuperscript{188} This quotation comes from a private conversation with a Buddhologist who wishes to remain anonymous.
Conclusion

The current terminology for changing religious affiliation is inapplicable to American Buddhism for a variety of reasons. Besides the Christian inherent bias in the term “to convert,” it is also too narrow, limiting a person’s religious identity to a before and after snapshot. In order to better explore American Buddhism and the American Buddhist population, I abandoned this term and adopted a more fluid way of speaking about religious change, reliant on physical science.

By applying this family of metaphors to the cases presented in the previous chapter, I have made it clear that there is no one American Buddhist “convert.” Although using these metaphors has drawbacks – it is complicated and sometimes verbose, for example – applying them to American Buddhism has nevertheless yielded beneficial results. I have demonstrated not only that there are a multitude of American Buddhists, some of which being “cognitive Buddhist,” unaffiliated Buddhists, and adjunct Buddhists, but also that these Buddhists have an impact on American Buddhism on the whole.

As Americans engage with Buddhism in these multifarious ways, they contribute to Buddhism’s reputation in the United States. This occurs not only through word of mouth, but also through the countless internet forums on Buddhism, popular culture, and published books. Richard Hayes, author of *Land of No Buddha*, describes himself as “Buddhist, albeit a rather Socratic one.”189 Stephen Batchelor’s *Buddhism Without Beliefs* strips Buddhism down to barebones practice, in some ways regurgitating the Dalai

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Lama’s own universalist teachings. Psychotherapist and practicing Buddhist Harvey B. Aronson wrote *Buddhist Practice on Western Ground* to examine the similarities and difference between Buddhist philosophy and psychology. There are many others, all responding to whichever aspects of Buddhism they find most appealing. Many echo the teachings of D.T. Suzuki, the Dalai Lama, or S.N. Goenka.

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