



Dharma Notes

March 4, 2010

“Witnessing the Beginning: The Birth of American Buddhism”

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Key Points

• Though Buddhism has been present in the United States for over 100 years now, only in the last decade has it embodied a uniquely “American” character that is distinct from its Asian parents. The rapid process of cultural assimilation of Buddhism in the West in general and the States specifically is due to the availability of communication technologies previously unavailable to Asian Buddhists during the development of Asian Buddhism in the medieval period. Just as each major Buddhist tradition has key “cultural commitments” that make it unique to its own place and time, American Buddhism is now starting to exhibit uniquely American cultural commitments. These commitments identify American Buddhism as an integral part of a larger category of “Western Buddhism,” which includes contemporary Buddhism as it is evolving in the United States and Western Europe.

• There are 10 key cultural commitments (see, *The 10 Commitments of American Buddhism*, below) which are evident when we examine the emerging American Buddhist centers and their teachings, including the *Center for Pragmatic Buddhism* (CPB) and Pragmatic Buddhism. Though there is a tendency to think of these 10 cultural commitments as “universal” in scope, they are still cultural orientations that must be respected as such. In the future, changes within society will require changes, additions, and deletions of certain commitments in order to meet new circumstances and demands of daily living.

Communication Technology & The Birth of American Buddhism

The seeds of American Buddhism were planted over 100 years ago when American and Western European travelers encountered the strange, yet intriguing peoples and practices of Asian Buddhism. If we study Buddhist history, we see that it has historically taken many centuries and an enormous investment of energy for a unique cultural expression of Buddhism to take root in a new culture. This organic process occurs slowly *unless*, as we are now seeing in the 21st century, there is a means of rapid propagation of information and key cultural commitments that engender an unprecedented level of openness. These two aspects allow engineers of American Buddhist traditions to appreciate both foreign and indigenous elements of their Buddhist practice and embrace *whatever works best for the current place and time* (think pragmatism!). Today, an appreciation for pluralism means that multiple world-views are equally privileged (as opposed to fundamentalism which privileges one world-view or “Truth” over all others). This commitment to pluralism allows us to draw from the best of what is available. With unsurpassed communication technologies such as cellular phones, the Internet, and video conferencing to name a few, the organic development of 21st century American Buddhism is occurring at a rapid pace relative to the development of Asian Buddhism, which occurred at a time when such communication technologies were not available and there was no commitment to pluralism. Due largely to the rapid dissemination of information through

communication technologies *coupled with* key cultural commitments as described in the next section—which acts like a cultural “fertilizer”—uniquely American Buddhist traditions have begun to grow and develop in record time over the last 10 years.

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The 10 Commitments of American Buddhism & The Future of Cultural Change

There are 10 key “cultural commitments” I would like to highlight which are embraced by the first indigenous generation of American Buddhist centers. The 10 cultural commitments of American Buddhism are: **1)** secularism, pragmatism, cultural normalcy, and comparative philosophy, **2)** Early (“*Nikayan*”) Buddhism and mindfulness meditation, **3)** science, especially neuroscience and psychology, **4)** naturalism, **5)** humanism, social engagement and pluralism, **6)** environmentalism and sustainability, **7)** meritocratic governance and leadership, **8)** egalitarianism and equal opportunity, **9)** integration of Western educational methods and an adherence to training gradualism, and **10)** the teacher-student relationship. Loyalty to these commitments opens up, rapidly, the possibility for genuine change and the adoption of indigenous (American) cultural elements into the traditional Asian forms of Buddhism, allowing for a true integration and synthesis, as is seen in the practice of Pragmatic Buddhism here at CPB.

One thing we have to remind ourselves in order to prevent cultural hubris is that even the contemporary commitments to secularism, naturalism, and science (among others) *is* a cultural orientation itself, and it will, like all things, change and evolve. Each time our predecessors announced the end of science, new discoveries were found, and each time they announced the end of history, novel technologies radically changed the function of human society and the kinds of real-life problems we had to solve. We must remember that even contemporary American Buddhism is not developing into the “final” edition. It is yet just another edition that is suited for our current place and time, but that is no more permanent and timeless than the individuals who practice it.

Finally, just as Western Buddhism is evolving because of communication technologies and contemporary cultural commitments, the face of traditional Asian Buddhism itself will be (and already is) deeply influenced by the face of the contemporary world. Ours is a deeply interconnected and interdependent global reality now. East and West are necessarily *linked*. Traditional forms of Buddhism will, over the course of the 21st century, evolve a new face as well due to the new issues raised by 21st century living in an increasingly connected global society.

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