

American Habits and Fresh Baked Bread

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*It's a fantastic experiment that we're all engaged in,
bringing the dharma to the West.
--Jack Kornfield*

American Dharma

Buddhism is a traveling tradition. Over its 2500 years, it has migrated throughout Asia, planting seeds, putting down roots, and establishing culturally distinct versions of itself. Today, in 2012, one of the most vast and complex Buddhist landscapes can be found in the United States. Since the 19th century, the discourses of Buddhadharma have circulated in select circles, but over the past 40 years, Buddhism has firmly taken root as large, thriving sanghas have established themselves and made their presence felt in American society. Between the so-called heritage Buddhist communities and convert communities, there are now several million Americans who call themselves Buddhist. For those of us who have been actively engaged in establishing and sustaining an American sangha, it is easy to wonder: what will American Buddhism look like in the future? What is it that we're giving birth to? Is there such a thing as an American Buddhist tradition emerging in the world and are there any clues in our midst about the nature of a future American Buddhism?

These are questions that have intrigued practitioners and scholars of Western Buddhism for decades. In his book *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture*, Stephen Batchelor describes attending the 1992 Congress of the European Buddhist Union. Amidst the intermingling of old and new forms, one of the more memorable speeches (for Batchelor) was given by the Tibetan Nyingma master Sogyal Rinpoche, who “sees the strength of Buddhism lying in its diversity and believes there is no hurry to create a Western form. For if we practice sincerely, the ‘blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas’ will lead us to a synthesis of the traditions all in good time” (373).

While this view might be perplexing and/or enticing to different audiences, the development of Buddhadharma in the West, and particularly in the United States, has kept practitioners guessing and assessing. In 2001, the online companion to the American Public Broadcasting System's television program *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* asked several prominent scholars of religion to comment on the status of Buddhism in America in the new millennium. As each scholar weighed in on issues such as disparities between immigrant and convert Buddhist communities, the (possibly erroneous) view of Buddhism by many Americans as a secular self-help movement, and the shifts in practices and priorities that most Buddhist sanghas experience between the first and second generations of their establishment, a question seemed to hover on the peripheries

of these statements. What would American Buddhism look like in the future? This tradition, or more accurately, this set of traditions, is still very much in the process of fully emerging on the American landscape. But it has announced itself clearly and firmly enough that there is no doubt that there will be an American Buddhism in the 22nd century. And what will it look like? Donald K. Swearer of Swarthmore College offered one response: “The diversity of Buddhist expressions in America in particular, and the West more generally, is a unique chapter in the history of Buddhism. Buddhist sectarianism and its development in different cultural traditions are nothing new, so in a sense, we’re witnessing a new version of an old story. How this diversity will sort itself out in the coming decades remains to be seen” (“The Direction of Buddhism in America Today”).

Diversity and synthesis. Heritage and convert communities. The dharma as doctrine and the dharma as embodied wisdom. These are some of the contrasting elements up for grabs in the great American Buddhist experiment. And what of the American component in this equation? How will the dharma take root in the last remaining superpower? Will the dharma be co-opted as it is interpellated into American hegemony? Is it possible that American culture will be interpellated into the views of interdependence, emptiness, and Buddha Nature?

This paper will explore the current landscape of American Buddhadharma as it seeks out clues about its future. In particular, I ask how the emerging traditions of American Buddhisms might act as powerful antidotes to the entrenched American habits of consumerism and individualism. If traditional Buddhism is ready for a challenge, the United States is ready to offer it. Ours is arguably the most distracted, materialist, and pervasively aggressive culture in the history of the world. We are numb to horrors and sensitive to our own complaints. To aid in my exploration, I look at the work of Robert Bellah and fellow researchers on late-20th century individualism and religion as well as theories on the evolution of religion to explore this landscape of American dharma. Using this theoretical work as a lens through which to examine American religious praxis, I argue that the Buddhadharma practiced in the United States is both true to its Asian roots and at the same time offers a distinctly Western register. An oft-cited analogy for dharma shared by numerous American sanghas is that dharma should be like fresh-baked bread rather than a story about bread. The dharma or dharmas that emerge from my research are direct, breathing, alive; ultimately, I argue, the only versions of Buddhism that could possibly make an impact in 21st century America must bear the aroma of fresh-baked bread.

The Habits of American Individualism

The relationship between American individualism and religious praxis was the subject of one of the most widely-discussed works of late-20th century scholarship on religion. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and colleagues examine the roots of American individualism and look to the early generations of American society to try to find its source. Drawing upon the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, they chart the potential for individualism embedded in the earliest generations:

Tocqueville described the mores—which he on occasion called the “habits of the heart”—of the American people and showed how they helped to form American

character. He singled out family life, our religious traditions, and our participation in local politics as helping to create the kind of person who could sustain a connection to a wider political community and thus ultimately support the maintenance of free institutions. He also warned that some aspects of our character—what he was one of the first to call “individualism”—might eventually isolate Americans one from another and thereby undermine the conditions of freedom (xlii).

These habits, or practices of American individualism, seem predicated on a slightly mistaken understanding of good citizenship. As the authors write, “We believe that much of the thinking about the self of educated Americans, thinking that has become almost hegemonic in our universities and much of the middle class, is based on inadequate social science, impoverished philosophy, and vacuous theology” (84). As problematic as these habits of radical individualism are, they are now and have been for many generations entrenched in the American mythos.

As the researchers look at individual and collective beliefs and practices, they wonder aloud how the dangerous elements of individualism could be turned around, how, in other words, a more collectively focused America—which they believe was present in America’s past—might be reclaimed. They acknowledge that “a return to traditional forms would be to return to intolerable discrimination and oppression. The question, then, is whether the older civic and biblical traditions have the capacity to reformulate themselves while simultaneously remaining faithful to their own deepest insights” (144).

Looking back to 1985, when the book was first published—albeit with the glorious hindsight of an additional generation—we might note that the authors overlooked something important. In their idealized longing for a return to a Christian American past that could regain communitarian roots while avoiding societal structures such as slavery or sectarian divisiveness, the authors were not looking at new traditions in their midst. By 1985, American Buddhhadharma had already established a flourishing array of communities, practices, and traditions. And, importantly for their work on the dangers of individualism, all lineages of Buddhism are organized around a view and set of practices designed to dissolve a solid sense of self and to cultivate the power of working in community.

Ten years after the publication of *Habits of the Heart*, the authors revisited their work and took stock of America in the mid-1990s. They concluded, sadly, that the concerns raised in 1985 were even more pronounced. “American individualism,” they write in an Introduction to the updated edition in 1996, “demands personal effort and stimulates great energy to achieve, yet it provides little encouragement for nurturance, taking a sink-or-swim approach to moral development as well as to economic success. It admires toughness and strength and fears softness and weakness” (viii).

If mainstream middle class America was even more prone to individualism and selfishness in 1996, what was the state of American Buddhhadharma by that time? It had come fully of age. Numerous sanghas that were still in early developmental stages in the 1980s were now healthy and large. Several of the major teachers, who had introduced Buddhism in America in the 1970s, had died and passed on a mantle of teaching duties and leadership to senior students, many of them American. A few of the largest sanghas had weathered scandals and trauma that initially reduced their membership and then

recovered stronger and more clearly defined than ever. If American practitioners of mainstream religions were struggling with crises of the heart in the 1980s and 90s, American Buddhists were spending that time in community, building retreat centers, stupas, prison dharma outreach programs, and other engaged Buddhist programs.

There is quite possibly a direct connection between the concerns that drove *Habits of the Heart* and the movement toward American Buddhism. For many Americans, the era of the 1980s into the 1990s was a moral vacuum. There were few galvanizing movements or issues in this post-everything era (post-feminist, post-hippy, post-cold war, post-irony, post-modern). It was the era of the yuppie, the Wall Street insider, and the dot-com millionaire. American idealists needed a new direction and Buddhist teachers showed up to offer it. And unlike the Beat generation of the 1960s, in which Buddhism was often perceived as a cultural style to try on or an exotic escape from Americana, American Buddhism in the 80s and 90s brought the dharma right smack into the middle of our own back yards and living rooms. The message became: stay home, sit, make friends with yourself, clean up your own mess. This was not our freaky uncles' dharma. This was down-home, get to work, smell your own sweat dharma.

But what was and is the nature of that dharma? What emerged during this time and how did it make such an impact on Americans? One approach to this question is to look at a model on the evolution of religion. In his 1999 essay "The Widening Gyre: Religion, Culture and Evolution," evolutionary psychologist Merlin Donald offers his theoretical model of the emergence of religion amongst the earliest human societies. In order for religion to emerge, he argues, two developments had to happen. First, humans needed to practice mimesis, or the act of "observing a behavior and mimicking it, acting it out." Second, humans needed to develop speech; thus they "incorporated mimetic ritual under a more powerful system of narrative thinking, which produced 'mythic' cultures." In his 2008 essay "The R Word," Robert Bellah extends Donald's theory by arguing that an additional developmental stage allowed religion to deepen into a more sophisticated, flourishing state. This stage, "the emergence of theoretic culture, the capacity for objective critical reasoning," is relatively recent in human evolution (the first evidence, says Bellah, is the first millennium B.C.E.).

Ontogeny Recapitulates Phylogeny

This three-part model of the evolution of religion offers intriguing tendrils of possibility about the nature of religion and religious practice in human experience. It also offers a surprising model for the experience of contemporary dharma. I argue that in the case of American Buddhadharma, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny—to borrow from the evolutionary theory that each individual's development follows the same sequence of stages first established in ancestral development.

Americans come to Buddhism seeking a way out of the nightmare of samsara. But what do they experience at their local dharma center? Intuitive thinking would say that they would receive a series of discourses on the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, karma, or some other useful doctrine. But what most Americans receive, first and foremost, is a mimesis-level transmission that allows them to connect directly with Buddhadharma. Indeed, in many sanghas, new practitioners are led through a process by which they learn mimetically to sit, walk and (sometimes) chant.

Merlin Donald writes, “Two of the most distinctive mimetic abilities are re-enacting what we observe, and engaging in role-playing games. Mimesis is a whole-body skill, unique to human beings, whereby we can use our entire bodies as expressive devices” (2). The actions of entering the sacred space of a shrine room, bowing, and taking a meditation posture are simultaneously completely natural human functions and powerful dharma transmissions. For Americans, to do these things in company with fellow practitioners is a revolutionary act that begins the process of rewiring the mechanics of individualism.

Even the very language of meditation instruction is tailored to the mimetic moment. Just enough information is provided. The important thing is the act itself. Modification can come later. At the 1997 Buddhism in America conference, Japanese Zen teacher Issho Fujita described the essence of basic or initial zazen instruction: “If I tried to give a detailed instruction, it would make many, many pages because if I check out all the parts of the body, I have to say something. Eyes, facial expression, shoulder, and so on. It’s kind of endless. But I can make it shorter, one sentence. ‘Sit upright’” (124-25). Every American sangha has its version of “Sit upright.”

The second stage of this model—language—happens at some point subsequent to the transmission through mimesis. This is when a new practitioner learns the discourse of his or her community. This includes traditional Buddhist doctrine as well as the narratives and myths of the sangha’s particular lineage. For the past thirty years, the publishing industry of Western dharma has produced thousands of books aimed directly at the Western student. Books and talks address the speed, aggression, materialism, and selfishness of modern Western life. Students take classes and memorize lists of traditional Buddhist terms. They also learn to speak in very personal and colloquial terms about dharma.

Interestingly, many Americans try and fail to become Buddhists by jumping straight into the literature. They buy and read books and hope that somehow, magically, they will transform from reader to meditator. Inevitably, they recognize that they need to practice and thus seek out live meditation instruction. In my own experience as a meditation teacher, I have met many dozens of such people, who spend months or years reading about the dharma before they surrender to the realization that they need to practice meditation in order to truly apprehend the dharma.

The final phase, the era of theorizing, can take the form of complex integration, critique and complaint or, these days, a re-framing of dharma through a scientific lens. The process of integration allows for students to consider how dharma fits into the larger schema of their lives. This includes how we explain or translate our Buddhist identities to family and friends and how we organize our physical lives around Buddhist principles. The stage of complaint and interrogating difficulties possibly does not happen to every American Buddhist, but it has happened to every American Buddhist that I have ever known. This stage is the sign that the dharma honeymoon is over and often heralds the beginning of a richer, more mature dharma life. It is potentially an extraordinarily helpful process of looking at habitual patterns and escape hatches. It often takes the practitioner through a portal to the next developmental stage on one’s path. It can also be a catalyst for change—out of Buddhism, to another sangha, or another Buddhist teacher.

The relatively recent focus on finding scientific explanations for meditation, while seeming to have little to do with an individual dharma path, has a great deal to do with an

individual's perception of dharma. This re-framing of Buddhism could actually be viewed as staying quite true to Buddhism's roots as a tradition of investigation. It is yet another way for Westerners to make sense of meditation. Korean Zen teacher Mu Soeng compared Buddhism with quantum physics: "My hope is to present both quantum physics and Buddhism as two self-investigations through which each one of us has a certain perspective and where you can continue your own investigation into the nature of reality" (24).

As an American practitioner cycles through these three developmental phases, he or she always comes back to the primacy of mimesis. The power of the direct hit of dharma that we receive in our initial transmission haunts us on our path, and the transition into language and then theory are transitions into more sophisticated ways of making sense of mimesis, but always in the context of experiencing the raw immediacy of mimesis over and over again.

To understand how mimesis works within different sanghas, I examine three of the most prominent Buddhist communities in the United States, representing Theravadan, Mahayana, and Vajrayana roots—the Insight Meditation Society, Thich Nhat Hanh's lay students, and the Shambhala community—and observe specifically how new practitioners are introduced to the dharma and how they progress into a Buddhist identity. I also look at the distinct ways that each community utilizes non-verbal signs to identify their sangha and initiate mimesis-stage dharma transmission.

Insight Meditation Society

The Insight Meditation Society is the largest American organization based in the Theravadan Buddhist tradition. It is also likely the most internally diverse sangha in the United States; it does not hold one direct Theravadan lineage and its teachers have studied in many countries under many practice protocols. According to Jack Kornfield, one of the Society's founders, its diversity holds its strength:

The Buddha is often described as the master of many skillful means. Gradual and sudden, outer and inner, form and emptiness were all aspects of his teaching. A wise teacher, and a wise center, needs to offer a whole range of skillful practices, because people come along at different stages of their inner development, with different temperaments, and with different sets of problems. If we limit ourselves to one technique, it will only serve certain people and it won't be helpful to others (36).

While this diversity might not seem to adhere to true mimesis-level transmission, I would argue that in a strange way, it does. Visiting an IMS retreat center or group is an encounter with a very gentle species of confidence. The senior teachers have been steeped in years of practice with Theravadan masters such as Mahasi Sayadaw, Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa, and U Ba Khin, and that practice shines through. The teachers of IMS turn their years of meditation and study towards the facilitation of practice for new meditators.

The meditation instruction given by a teacher such as Joseph Goldstein privileges simplicity and softness. He gently guides the practitioner through posture and object of

meditation grounded in an unobstructed present moment. “Stay in the simplicity of hearing, not naming the sound or trying to figure out what’s making it. Simply hearing.”

In the midst of such gentleness, an IMS retreat is known for the discipline that all cultivate. No talking for ten days. Periods of increased exertion on concentration. Hours of practice each day. And one special feature that has been adopted by other sanghas because it so effectively brings meditators into their bodies: the guided body scan. Starting at the head and slowly moving one’s awareness down, inch by inch, to the feet, the body scan revolutionized Western dharma. By the 1990s, most convert sanghas had adopted some version of it.

Community of Mindful Living

The Community of Mindful Living is the lay practitioner branch of Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh’s sangha. It and the Unified Buddhist Church—the monastic branch of the sangha—hold several mimesis-level characteristics widely familiar to many American Buddhists.

The first is softness. There is an overarching sense of softness that comes through in the students of Thich Nhat Hanh. There is softness in their speech, in their movements, and in their energy. At a weekly sangha gathering in Boulder, Colorado, people are welcomed with a soft hello and invited to help set up the space in soft tones. Group leader Brian Kimmel reports that at retreats, the sangha will stop someone and invite them to slow down their walk or their speech. When asked about the view towards softness, Kimmel speculates that it might partially come as a way of mimicking the teacher, who speaks and moves in a slow, deliberate manner. But as with other mimesis-level markers, the softness acts as a dharma transmission. It is part of the powerful training that this community engages in to stop habitual patterns.

A new practitioner might begin by performing the softness in an awkward verbal ballet, a trying on of a new tone of voice. But she is also connecting with the power of cutting her habitual way of speaking. Over time, as she continues to sit and settle her mind, she will likely let go of the imitation-level softness as she cultivates a more intimate embodiment of the speech of her community.

Softness meets precision in the mindfulness practice of shamatha, which is translated by Thich Nhat Hanh as “stopping.” In shamatha, practitioners are stopping their habitual patterns; they are stopping the speed that gives rise to aggression. While the idea of stopping is quite precise, the initial instruction for shamatha is surprisingly fluid and open ended. New meditators are asked to “find the posture that works for your body.” Eyes can be open or closed, as the meditator chooses. The idea, according to the instruction, is to find a way to settle, to connect with one’s body and breathing and stay there. Later, reports Kimmel, further modification and adjustment is given to one’s instruction on posture. But at the initial level, the soft approach leads.

Brian Kimmel describes the energy of a sangha together as like “a flock.” The group dynamic takes on a life and energy of its own, as it moves together in walking meditation, or chants and sings together. Kimmel says that during a retreat, the group is everything; even in the midst of one’s very personal dharma work, this work is done in the context of the flock. That sense of the flock is available to the new member of the group. It is felt at the beginning of a session, when a leader begins an opening chant and then the group joins him. It is felt in the practice of the stopping gong or mindfulness

bell. A gong is sounded from time to time and everyone stops what he or she is doing to settle into the present moment. As with other practice, this is simultaneously intensely private and personal and shared with the collective.

For dharma-oriented Americans who have not experienced Thich Nhat Hanh live as a teacher or visited one of his practice groups, probably the most familiar marker of his teaching and sangha is his calligraphy. After several decades teaching in the west, Thich Nhat Hanh is easily seen through his calligraphy, which is an immediate form of dharma transmission. The calligraphy is simple and straightforward. The style is consistent and idiosyncratic, always recognizable as one of his. It consists of either single words or phrases conveying a dharmic message, usually in the form of instruction or suggestion. The simplicity of the words mirrors the simplicity of the brushwork. Some examples of popular calligraphies are “breathe” and “smile.” Some convey the pith version of a more complex dharma teaching, such as “Peace is every step,” which communicates that our relationship with peace can be cultivated in our practice, one step after another, that our practice off the cushion can be as powerful as practice on the cushion. For those who have seen him teach, seeing the calligraphy can bring us instantly back to our experience of the teacher. For those who have not seen him teach, the calligraphy can act as a kind of surrogate teacher. Even as a print, it holds the power of a dharma transmission.

Shambhala

The mimesis-level transmission begins as soon as one steps into the building. When a new meditator enters any Shambhala Center, whether that center is located in Paris, New York, or London, there are certain features that unmistakably communicate the visual culture—the awake space—of the Shambhala community. This is particularly true when one enters the shrine room. Every Shambhala shrine room contains certain items and elements that have been designed and positioned to offer a gateway to wakefulness to anyone who enters. At the heart of the room sits the shrine, which features the bold traditional Tibetan colors of red and gold. Encased above or near the shrine are the traditional complete sutras of Shakyamuni Buddha, wrapped in their multi-colored cloths. In addition, every shrine has a rupa (statue), usually of one of the Tibetan versions of a Buddha, such as Vajradhara, a crystal ball, and other implements of Tibetan Buddhist practice. Above the shrine hangs a thangka and photographs of the teachers Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche (the founder of the Shambhala community) and his son (and current leader of the community) Sakyong Mipham, Rinpoche.

The Shambhala Center in Boulder, Colorado was the first city center established in the Shambhala mandala. It occupies a large, historical building in downtown Boulder and is one of the largest and most impressive centers. Nonetheless, stylistically, it is representative of the Shambhala aesthetic, which was informed by the Dharma Arts taught by Chögyam Trungpa. As a visitor climbs the stairs from the ground floor to the second floor, a window ledge on the stairwell landing offers a mental pause. The ledge has been transformed into a version of a Japanese tokonoma, space in which sacred art has been placed to both complete and open up an environment to the sacred. This ledge always features an ikebana arrangement. Every week a new arrangement is created, using local, in-season flowers and branches. The arrangement can have the effect of stopping the mind of anyone climbing the stairs to the upper meditation rooms.

Ikebana arrangements are found at strategic locations throughout the center. When the building is fully in use, with multiple programs throughout, there are usually between five and seven elaborate arrangements on the three main floors. During a very special program, for example during the celebration of Tibetan New Year, a large installation might mark the entryway to the main shrine room, which occupies the top floor of the building.

The building operates with a traditional Tibetan Mandala Principle, which is a three-dimensional representation of enlightened mind. First-time visitors often feel a pull inward and upward toward the third-floor shrine room. Each floor has been painted with colors designed to enhance their purpose and decorated with calligraphies and photographs intended to arrest discursive mind and open the heart. The employees and senior teachers of the center also contribute to the Mandala Principle by conveying the warmth and confidence characteristic of Shambhala's emphasis on enlightened society.

As with the previous sanghas, meditation instruction in the Shambhala community prioritizes simple, clear guidance towards relaxing the body and settling the mind. The initial instruction is somewhat more complex than the other two, but it is still straightforward and to the point. Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche said that people experience Buddha Nature the first time they sit. By the time a new meditator has made it upstairs in the Boulder Shambhala Center, he or she has already received several hits of mimesis-level transmission.

Common Ground and Hybrid American Dharma

Although each of the three sanghas described above hold distinct views quite divergent from one another, they each prioritize and privilege the practice of sitting meditation. A new meditator is given initiation into the community by being given meditation instruction, which is an important gateway to each sangha's path. As Brian Kimmel noted and as is true in all three sanghas, practitioners over time will receive increasingly in-depth and nuanced modifications to the instruction of mindfulness practice. But in the very early stages, just sitting, a "just do it" approach allows the new meditator a first taste of his or her Buddha Nature. The simplicity of stepping out of the habitual speediness of everyday life, along with other mimesis-level markers of the sangha, offer a powerful transmission into openness and non-conceptuality.

Indeed, the non-conceptual possibly has greater presence without the discursive overlay of dense doctrine, rules, or instructions. There is less mental clutter to hold onto and manipulate. In the midst of such openness, the role of sangha, one of the most powerful conduits to the collective, can resonate for new practitioners. This might happen in the form of a conversation during a tea break, or gentle posture correction during sitting, or question and answer after a talk. It happens in myriad ways the way it has happened for 2500 years, as sangha has shared and born witness to each other's aspirations, challenges, breakdowns, and breakthroughs. It is in these moments that interconnectedness becomes real.

One element of interconnectedness that marks one of the unique registers of American dharma is the hybrid influences across sanghas. Everybody borrows best practices from one another. Each of the three sanghas that I examined uses practices from the other two traditions. All use the guided body scan introduced by the Theravadan

communities. All use the mindfulness bell innovated by Thich Nhat Hanh. And all teach the traditional Tibetan compassion practice of tonglen.

Hybridity is further found amongst the teachers of the three sanghas. All three sanghas feature senior teachers that have trained outside their primary tradition. This sharing and cross-pollination reflects the dramatic access that Americans have to dharma teachers and teachings. Anyone with a computer can spend hours every day listening to talks and meditation instruction from some of the most powerful Buddhist teachers living today. Moreover, individuals who can get to a major city have a chance to see many of today's great teachers live. These common features collectively mark an important shift in how Buddhism is received and experienced by new practitioners today as compared with 50 years ago. It is an embarrassment of riches which has given rise to a generation of Americans who have seen more dharma talks, and met more meditation masters, than arguably any other culture at any other time in history. But does that mean that America is more enlightened?

The Shoppers, The Swappers, The Stoppers

What has been the impact of so much dharma circulating throughout the United States? I believe that this era, this century, will have a profound and lasting impact on the future, but we are still in the process of determining the nature of that future. We have the potential to become proof that the dharma can dismantle the powerful forces of American individualism and materialism. The future of American dharma will undoubtedly be based on our ability to shepherd new meditators into mimesis-level transmission, into a steady practice, and through that tenuous stage of theorizing and complaint.

Based on my observation as a meditation instructor and dharma teacher in the Shambhala community for the past ten years, I see three developmental stages that dharma practitioners go through as they move along their path. I call these stages Shopping, Swapping and Stopping. These categories need not be chronological, and they are often recursive. An individual might find herself in the shopping stage for several years, then pass over swapping and go to stopping, and then find herself back at shopping.

The Shoppers

The shoppers are curious about or interested in Buddhism but they are not interested in committing to anything. In some cases, they go to lots of talks given by name-brand teachers and do a lot of introductory-level programs. They are dharma window shoppers. Even if they repeatedly hear teachers talk about the importance of committing to one path and going as deeply as they can on that path, the shoppers are easily seduced or distracted. In some cases, they see themselves as still looking for that one best path or "their" teacher and they do not want to commit to something before they are sure. In other cases, they are serial monogamists who have tried to commit to different sanghas over the years, and thus have several past relationships of months or years-long connection before they became disenchanted, bored, or otherwise disengaged. One of the most common elements with shoppers is that the actual practice of meditation is challenging to sustain. They like the idea of meditation and often recognize the value of practice, but they are not able to establish a regular practice.

The Swappers

The swappers are people who do commit to a sangha for a period of time and then switch to a different sangha. Some swappers switch once and then settle into their new sangha. Some swappers switch several times. Unlike the shoppers, swappers do commit. Sometimes they are with their first sangha for many years before the switch; in other cases, their first sangha relationship is much shorter. Likewise, there is variety in how they feel about their first sangha. They might feel that it was a worthy sangha and their personal dharma needs moved into a new direction. Conversely, they might leave a sangha with serious doubts about its credibility and even invest much time in denigrating the previous sangha.

The Stoppers

The stoppers are those individuals who acknowledge that, even when they might still want to shop or swap, they have made a lifelong commitment to a serious dharma path. They have stopped shopping for a shinier version of dharma, they have stopped kidding themselves that they can negotiate a way to use dharma to feed samsara, and they have committed to working on stopping their habitual patterns. The stopping stage is informed by true renunciation. At this stage, there is a maturity about the difficulty and inevitable disappointments on such a serious path. The novelty and romance have worn off and the practitioner is left with his mind and his practice. It is a lonely moment but also terribly exciting and opens up a world of fellow lonely, serious practitioners. The deepest significance of sangha comes through at the stopping stage.

As noted in the discussion on hybridity above, many practitioners with a committed, mature practice do still choose to either leave one sangha and join another or to add a second sangha affiliation to their path. Within the Shambhala community, at least two of the senior teachers, known as acharyas, have current relationships with Zen teachers. Such hybrid affiliation is not necessarily problematic, nor does it indicate that American Buddhists have no understanding or appreciation for lineage or the different views between the various yantras.

In some respects, the hybridity of American Buddhist dharma is deeply informed by the tradition of American individualism. It is our individualism that leads us to dharma and meditation, our sense that a solitary journey towards happiness is possible. Americans feel free, authorized, and entitled to join and quit any sangha at will. Nonetheless, something happens along that path from shopping to stopping. A true dharma path requires an intimate relationship with sangha. Eventually, all progression on that path happens because of sangha, in the company of sangha, and witnessed by sangha.

What is interesting about the phenomenon of hybridity is that we are forced to let go of even the sectarian tendency towards pride of sangha when we have such in-depth contacts with other Buddhist groups. Even if I never shop around or contemplate a swap, chances are good that I have dharma brothers and sisters who have been or currently are connected with another sangha, which might even be in another yana. This is tremendously helpful in avoiding a sense of superiority. During his lifetime, Chögyam Trungpa worked with teachers from across the spectrum of Buddhism. His students sometimes came to him from other sanghas and some of his students went to other

sanghas. He is credited with insisting that Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield become dharma teachers. He developed a plan with Suzuki Roshi to start a retreat center to serve both of their sanghas. Unfortunately, this plan did not have time to come to fruition before Suzuki Roshi died of cancer. Still, years after his death, Suzuki Roshi's photo hung over many Shambhala Center shrines. The senior students of these two teachers will always feel a special connection between their two sanghas. Hybridity invites the dissolving of sectarian boundaries. It is one of the most potent lessons in Buddhadharma and one of the strongest in dismantling individualism.

Final Reflections

It would be easy to assume that only the Stoppers have truly benefitted from Buddhadharma, that the Shoppers and the Swappers are just more American consumers doing what Americans do best: appropriating selfishly. But all traditions of Buddhism posit that seeds get planted and ripen at unpredictable times. It is impossible for me to say that the upper middle class Boulder housewife who has roamed the storefront of Buddhism for seven years, looking for the candy fix that will make her feel lovable, pretty, and popular won't wake up tomorrow with a taste of renunciation in her mouth. The powerful influence of mimesis plants dharmic seeds in thousands of mindstreams every day in America. Some of these seeds will sprout in this lifetime. Perhaps more in the next.

In 1997, Peter Matthiessen wrote that, for American Buddhists, "the Dharma is being left in our hands now. I think we are going to make a shift toward a less hierarchical practice with less finery. This has always been true, that any reformation movement simplifies things again to get back toward what the original teaching was. The Japanese teachers, to their great credit, wanted us to do that. They always encouraged us to form our own Zen, to not be so dependent on them" (397). As American Buddhism continues to mature, American teachers will undoubtedly make new marks and create new traditions specific to the new needs. It is a terrifying and exhilarating prospect.

Still, it is comforting to be reminded that, as Merlin Donald writes, "Our spirituality still rests firmly on a mimetic core, and this remains emotionally the most satisfying aspect of religion" (4). Seeing that American Buddhadharma is so steeped in practices of mimesis, seeing strong sanghas forging their own unique culture and training the next generation of teachers, it is possible to reflect on the ways that American Buddhadharma uses its particular registers to examine and dissolve overt and insidious forms of individualism and materialism.

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