

Teaching Dharma in the United States

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As a Buddhist monk who has traveled through the United States in conducting meditation retreats, giving lectures, and participating in discussions on meditation and other Buddhist topics, I see how such ideas are used every day and how they have brought many people closer to Buddhism.

Many Westerners have become disillusioned with the religions that they were brought up with and seek to find something that is less dogmatic and more encompassing. People have come closer to Buddhism because of their dissatisfaction of religious fundamentalists and their conservative, must-follow-without-questions attitude. Religious thoughts that have been built with fear cannot force people to stay with spiritual practice.

Buddhism has been accepted in non-Buddhist communities because of its applicability to general concerns. People who have come to know more about Buddhism feel that the Buddhist teachings provide another choice for spiritual needs and how it can help in their daily lives.

Many Americans focus on techniques that help them to find stillness and focus rather than esoteric, theology-like teachings. Buddhist values are also found in social movements – ecology, animal rights, peace, simplicity, harmony, and the natural environment.

Values are also important in smaller ways. Thanksgiving is a national holiday in the United States. Sometimes students are required to write about what they think about Thanksgiving. Some high school students came to our temple to ask what Buddhists think about the tradition and what Buddhists do during Thanksgiving.

I explained that parents, teachers, and everybody around us help our life daily. We thank them for their hard work and think about how it has improved everyone's lives. Some of those students returned to inform me that they received high marks in their papers and reports.

Mother's Day and Father's Day are also celebrated here. Many Buddhist temples and centers do various activities, such as exchanging gifts and eating together. Lectures are given to explain the importance of valuing their relationships and paying respects.

American-born Asians also celebrate these holidays while inviting their relatives and friends to participate. These gatherings are not just get-togethers or parties because during these gatherings, they may come to know more about Asian and Buddhist culture. The gatherings are also opportunities to exchange cultural values as well as religious ideas that are also a part of the culture.

A few months ago, I conducted a wedding ceremony for an American medical doctor who became a Buddhist four years ago. None of his or the prospective bride's relatives and friends who came to the wedding was Buddhist. Some of them were a little suspicious before the wedding ceremony had begun. They did not know what would happen in a wedding ceremony that would involve a Buddhist monk.

The day before the wedding, I sat with their parents and some of the other family members. We talked about traveling, food, and, of course, religious and cultural differences. There I had an opportunity to explain more about Buddhism because they continually asked more about what they had seen or heard about Buddhism. Some of them had read books and articles on Buddhism but never had a chance to talk about it.

Everybody felt very comfortable after the discussion because we had at home. After the wedding, they did not have any fear or suspicion. We became so friendly and

some of them asked openly, "How can I become a Buddhist?"

People have left their beliefs and have come closer to Buddhism because of their dissatisfaction of religious fundamentalists and their conservative, must-follow-without-questions attitude. Religious thoughts that have been built with fear cannot force people to stay with spiritual practice.

American Buddhism is emerging in Buddhist centers such as Shasta Abbey, Los Angeles Buddhist Union, and the International Buddhist Meditation Center. Ordained Sangha and ministers are doing their duties as Dharma teachers. These American-born teachers re-frame ancient Buddhist principles in contemporary Western terms. Their approach of non-missionary explanation and practice fits well with Americans who are search for a spiritual path that can explain simply the causes and effects of our activities, being responsible for our actions, and believe in consequences not because of fear but because they make sense.

Buddhist chaplains have brought Buddhism to prisons to teach self-control, social skills, and contemplative practice that have been supplemented by yoga, prayer, and study to benefit inmates and workers. For example, Buddhist practices such as meditation have reached the highest-security prison in Alabama where one-third of prisoners are imprisoned for life.

Every quarter, prisoners who have been chosen from a waiting list join the 10-day program to focus on meditating for 10 hours a day. Silence is a key characteristic; the first three days involve focusing on breathing techniques. Each day begins at 4 a.m. and ends at 9 p.m. The prisoners do not smoke, drink alcohol or drinks that have caffeine nor do they consume meat. Some prisoners have said that meditation and discussions have helped them find peace. Positive results have convinced the warden to continue the program.

One of our trained Sangha members visits prisons regularly to conduct chanting, meditation, and reading sessions. He was a police officer before he ordained as a Buddhist. Another Sangha member is regularly called by police departments in the Los Angeles area to conduct meetings and discussions. These are even more opportunities to introduce Buddhist teachings to non-Buddhist groups in various environments.

The Air Quality Management District is an organization that regulates the quality of air in much of Southern California. Earlier this year, I attend an award ceremony to perform an invocation to bless their work and cooperate with other religious leaders to inform the community of our perspectives on environmental-related issues. I have attended many such events for the past 30 years in the Los Angeles area, such as supervisors' meetings, city council meetings, and school graduations to perform similar duties.

In 1984, I was fortunate enough to serve on the Olympic Committee in Los Angeles as a Buddhist chaplain. Some athletes, trainers, and other staff members came to me before and after competitions to talk about their frustrations that came with the events, especially when some of them lost.

The media and findings of Western science have also spread awareness of the benefits of meditation and Buddhist teaching. Numerous articles on famous magazines such as *Time* and *Life*, programs on television channels such as *PBS*, *CNN*, and *BBC*, and ever-growing popularity of the Internet have brought this knowledge to the public and documented its contribution in developing further ideas.

In 1993, *Tricycle*, a Buddhist magazine, started "Change Your Mind Day" to welcome anyone to mediate without the formality of Buddhism. Several hundred people attended the first gathering, and the idea has been spread to many cities that are in the United States.

The outdoor event has invited teachers from different Buddhist traditions and continues to be held annually nearly two decades later; some locations have attendance in the thousands. Many people who attended came with their family members, co-workers, or friends. They were not afraid of going to the event because the participants did not focus on their personal beliefs, religious affiliations, conversion, etc. They were people who saw Buddhism as one. Our temple has also organized Change Your Mind Day events at public parks and cemeteries.

Once, a cancer patient was at a hospital. Her family members were looking for a Buddhist monk to come. When they called me, I went to the hospital to find that the patient was reading Buddhist scripture. I was told that she would also sometimes visit Buddhist centers even though her family was Jewish. We discussed Buddhism and some of her family members became interested in learning as they asked more about Buddhist teachings.

Buddhist monks whom I have known have also joined the effort to help others and go not only to prisons but also to juvenile detention centers to reach a varied audience. They de-emphasize many common practices of traditional rituals, chanting, devotional activities, merit-making, and doctrinal studies. Teachers do not emphasize particular doctrines, sectarian identification, lineage, etc. They do not try to convert people to Buddhism. Regardless of religious affiliation, they just offer teachings that minimize stress and think positively.

Many lay teachers and small groups meet all over the United States as a part of the Vipassana movement, which does not have much of a connection to Theravada or Mahayana Buddhist temples or centers. Practice classes and retreats are offered not only at temples, but also in hospitals, clinics, prisons, yoga centers, private homes, and in churches. In these classes or places, people do not talk about Buddhist philosophy in detail. Teachers or students call their practicing methods “stress reduction”, “pain management”, “body-scanning”, “self-awareness development”, etc. The popularity of mental development has spread from books to discs to the Internet.

Teachers present Buddhism as a meditation-centered teaching or a spiritual tradition more than Theravada or Mahayana Buddhist traditional / ritual / scholarly religion. The focus is on understanding of everyday challenges and freedom of one's current life rather than on one's next life. The main themes in practice are mindfulness, loving-kindness, ethics, and generosity.

Zen centers have had more success in a residential environment. Zen does not have as many rituals but has its own characteristics, such as koans (sayings) and tea ceremonies. That kind of environment has also brought many people more closely to Buddhism.

Buddhism is also being discovered at a variety of levels without it being labeled as Buddhism. There are those with other or no religious affiliations who use Buddhist concepts and practices more than typical Buddhists. For example, there are class discussions, study groups, and book clubs that meet at my temple and various homes from people of different backgrounds who share their experiences and opinions; some do not even claim to be Buddhist. They include nurses, juvenile detention officers, elder caretakers, social workers, teachers, government workers, musicians, and others as they talk about their personal problems and how Buddhist teachings have helped them in their professional and private lives.

Some class participants say that they are able to move forward with many difficulties or situations without developing negative thinking. At the moment of annoyance that is present by training our mind to view the world as good and positive thinking of Buddhists, teaching makes a big difference to their daily lives. These different

lifestyles are reminders of how Buddhism has been incorporated in busy American culture while not necessarily including the cultural and religious practices and beliefs of the immigrants who brought them.

These spiritual seekers need a meaningful explanation. Our trained Sangha and ministers fit with it. They can explain the meaning and value of life and offer spiritual practices that Western religions have not emphasized. They also offer experimental "do-it-yourself" practices to suit the freedom of self-effort to solve suffering or discomfort in different ways. They do not introduce just a new belief system or a new set of rules in the name of the Creator of the Universe. Rather than depending on an outside source of help, its emphasis on self-description and inward looking attracts educated people.

Some of them have said that the less-doctrinal and ritualistic approach has made them interested in being socially and ecologically engaged. They prefer to see the religious or spiritual practice as a way of enhancing the quality of their thoughts and actions. We do not ask people to spend much time at religious places; they are advised instead to practice wherever they are. One can practice patience while waiting in line at a bank, post office, clinic, etc. Willingness to listen and commitment to practice is encouraged.

The attitude of Buddhism to "come and see for yourself" has attracted many Westerners to explore its teachings. The informality and freedom of practice attracts people who are looking for a religion of spiritual practice. For non-religious people, there is the appeal of the emphasis on understanding and practice rather than rituals and praying. Whether Westerners are religious or not, they are attracted to Buddhism because of the teachings of mindfulness, responsibility, interdependence, the reality of cause and effect, and its care for all living beings.