

IMMIGRANT AND CONVERT BUDDHISTS IN AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism is thriving in America. Increasing numbers of Buddhist temples and meditation centers dot the American religious landscape, books on meditation and Buddhist philosophy line bookstore shelves, and numerous web pages offer everything from internet Buddhist communities to opportunities to talk to a monk online. Over 50,000 people heard the Dalai Lama speak when he visited New York in 1999 and public figures such as Jerry Brown and Tina Turner are practicing Buddhists. Americans' religious and spiritual curiosity coupled with the dramatic increase in immigration from Buddhist countries after 1965 is largely responsible for the explosion in Buddhist centers and practices in the past thirty years. This explosion is described in several recent academic studies that focus on the history of Asian religions in America, the sangha or Buddhist community in America, and the range of Buddhist traditions in the United States (Prebish 1999; Seager 1999; Tweed & Prothero 1999; Williams and Queen 1999; Prebish & Tanaka 1998). Recent sociological research emphasizes the importance of religion in new immigrant communities and investigates how these communities contribute socially and culturally to religious pluralism in the United States (Ebaugh & Chafetz 2000).

The relationship between immigrant and convert Buddhists has been a significant question in American Buddhist practice and study since the tradition arrived on American shores in the 19th century (Tweed 1992). As increasing numbers of Buddhist immigrants arrived in the United States after 1965 and more non-immigrants began to learn about Buddhist traditions and philosophies, the question has taken on renewed importance. While recent studies assert that the gap between immigrants and converts is the predominant feature of Buddhism in America, little research has systematically compared what immigrant and convert Buddhists believe, how they act out those beliefs in the world, and how they understand each other and current issues of the day (Prebish 1999; Seager 1999). The disjunction between research about immigrant Buddhists and convert Buddhists follows from early research in which convert Buddhists were described using the language of new religious movements and immigrant Buddhists were largely excluded from study. Recent research, particularly about immigrant Buddhist groups, is beginning to overcome this

dualism, but many questions, especially about immigrant and convert Buddhist women, remain to be answered (Numbrich 1996).

In this dissertation, I will investigate what immigrant and convert Buddhists in America believe and how they act out those beliefs in the world. Theoretically, the Buddhist experience in the United States is fascinating because it provides the opportunity to investigate how two ethnically and socially distinct communities find meaning in the same religious tradition and act on that meaning in their daily lives. Building on Berger and Luckman's (1966) early work and Wuthnow's (1984) more recent work, I aim in this project to describe and analyze how immigrants and convert Buddhists construct, maintain, modify, and act on the same religious tradition on American shores. I am interested in their actions not just inside of temples and meditation centers but in daily life, particularly in the public sphere. I also hope to add to existing theoretical literature about women and religion in the United States by analyzing how immigrant and convert women have or have not "feminized" Buddhism in the United States through their very different re-imaginings of the tradition.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The project is organized around four main research questions:

1. Who is practicing Buddhism in the United States today? Where are these people practicing and, to the extent possible, how have the numbers of people practicing changed over time? While data about individual practitioners has not been collected, and is difficult to gather because of challenges in determining who is a Buddhist, data about temples, meditation centers, and Buddhist organizations is available and will be used to approximate the answer to this question. The number of groups in the Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, and non-denominational or "Buddhayana" traditions will also be examined and change over time documented.
2. What do immigrant and convert Buddhists in the United States believe about Buddhism and how do they practice? While religious practices at temples and meditation centers are one part of this question, I will also investigate how immigrants and converts incorporate their religious practices into their daily lives.
3. How do immigrant and convert Buddhists understand the place or role of women in their tradition? What do they understand Buddhism to say about women? How are women involved in their temples and meditation centers? How should women be involved in these organizations?
4. How do immigrant and convert Buddhists act on their religious beliefs in the public sphere? What do they understand the Buddhist tradition to say about public life? How are they involved, or not involved, in public life as a result of their religious beliefs and practices? Specific questions about Vice President Gore and the Hsi Lai Temple controversy, American foreign policy towards China and other regions in Asia, or about Engaged Buddhism may be asked to gather more specific information.

METHODS

I will use a range of research methods and sources to address the research questions proposed. Historical information and the limited demographic information available about Buddhist practitioners in the United States will be drawn from existing data and secondary literature as well as from the Census of Religious Bodies (1906, 1916, 1926, 1936), the *Historical Statistics of the United States* (1975), the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*, and the *World Christian Encyclopedia*. Relevant information from Gallup and other public opinion polls will also be used to describe the changes in public interest in Buddhism and select Buddhist practices in the United States overall, and *Tricycle* magazine and other Buddhist publications will be examined for general background information.

Information about Buddhist temples and meditation centers will also be collected from existing sources and will likely be merged with census data to map and analyze the locations of Buddhist organizations outlined in the first research question. Data about meditation centers will be collected from the 1988 and 1998 editions of Don Morreale's *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America*. This information will be supplemented by the lists of Buddhists organizations available in *Religious Bodies in the United States: A Directory* (1982) and the *Encyclopedia of American Religions 4th edition* (1993), and from information about immigrant temples in the United States available on the web. Internet research will be a central component of this project particularly through DharmaNet and other Buddhist Internet networks.

Following Clifford Geertz's examples of "thick description," I will collect the majority of data for this project ethnographically through participant observation in temples and meditation centers and through in-depth interviews with immigrant and convert Buddhists. Following the ethnographic examples of Lynn Davidman (*Tradition in a Rootless World*, 1991), Nancy Ammerman (*Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in a Modern World*, 1987) and Mary Jo Neitz (*Charisma and Community: A Study of Religious Commitment Within the Charismatic Renewal*, 1987), I aim to describe and analyze how Buddhism looks in the United States from within the immigrant and convert worlds. This ethnographic data will be used to address research questions two, three, and four.

The plurality of Buddhist traditions and practices in the United States makes it impossible for the organizations and individuals selected for intensive study to be representative of the whole. Researchers do not yet know what the whole of Buddhist practice organizationally or individually looks like in the United

States, though they do know that it is internally diverse. First generation Buddhist immigrants who arrived after 1965 and first generation converts will be the focus of study because they are the two populations most responsible for the explosive growth in Buddhism in the United States in the past thirty years. Because of its history in the U.S. and its relative popularity among convert Buddhists, the Theravada tradition will be the initial focus of research, though groups from an additional branch of Buddhism may be added to the project later if the mapping and early field work suggest it would add substantially to the overall project.

Immigrants will be contacted through the Mongkoltepmunee Temple in Bensalem, Pennsylvania. This is a large temple serving primarily Thai though also some Sri Lankan immigrants in the Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York areas. Three monks are in residence at this temple and approximately 100 people visit the temple weekly. Two hundred or more immigrant Buddhists may visit the temple on a Full Moon day or other Buddhist holiday. Several non-immigrant Buddhist converts attend this temple and they will also be interviewed.

The majority of convert Buddhists will be located through Theravada and Vipassana meditation centers in the Philadelphia area. Vipassana meditation developed out of the Theravada tradition making these converts an ideal group to compare with Theravada immigrants (Fronsdel 1998). Many who practice Vipassana meditation do not consider themselves Buddhist, and I will be careful in my selection to identify and interview only those who self identify as Buddhist and who have been involved with the practice for more than one year. While this approach is not foolproof and does not thoroughly respond to concerns about who is Buddhist raised in the literature, it promises to identify people who have made both a personal and organizational commitment to Buddhism (Tweed 1999; Nattier 1998). Immigrants who are involved with Vipassana meditation will also be interviewed although the numbers will likely be small. While the initial convert identification strategy will weed out “nightstand Buddhists” or people just dabbling in the tradition, I also plan to interview between 20 and 30 dabblers in the later stages of this research for comparative purposes. These dabblers will be identified through groups at the Philadelphia Buddhist Association and perhaps through “Buddhist Seekers” groups at Unitarian Churches.

I will participate regularly in activities at the temple, monastery, and meditation groups and will keep detailed field notes about my observations. In-depth interviews will be conducted with approximately

30 immigrant and 30 convert Buddhists identified and located as described above. An equal number of men and women will be interviewed in each group. Semi-structured open-ended interviews will be used to gather information about general religious beliefs and practices, attitudes about women and Buddhism, and attitudes about what Buddhism teaches about involvement in the public sphere. I will first gather information about respondents' religious backgrounds and changes in their religious beliefs and practices since they were young. Questions will include:

For immigrants:

- When did you come to the United States and why did you decide to immigrate?
- How often did you go to the temple when you lived in Thailand? When did you go?
- How did you learn about Buddhism as you grew up?
- Did you practice any other religious traditions besides or in addition to Buddhism before you came to the U.S.?
- Have you participated in other religious traditions in addition to Buddhism since you arrived in the U.S.?

For converts:

- How did you learn about religion as a child?
- In what religious tradition were you raised and what other religions have you practiced?
- How did you come to be interested in Buddhism?
- How have you learned about Buddhism?
- Do you believe in other religions or participate in other religious traditions in addition to Buddhism?

To gather information about immigrants' and converts' current religious beliefs I will ask questions such as:

- If you were explaining Buddhism to someone who knew little about the tradition, what would you say are Buddhism's central teachings?
- How would you explain the figure of Buddha?
- Do you believe in karma? rebirth? the four noble truths?
- Have you ever taken the five precepts?
- Have you ever been on any types of religious or meditation retreats?

Information about immigrants' and converts' religious practices will be gleaned from questions like:

- In your day to day life, how do you practice your religion? Do you meditate? chant? have a Buddhist shrine in your home?
- How often do you come to the temple / meditation center and what do you do there? Which of your activities at the temple do you consider religious and which are not religious?
- Why are you involved in this temple / meditation center rather than just practicing on your own?

Information about what Buddhism teaches about women and how women are or should be involved in temples and meditation centers will be collected from questions to include the following:

- What did the Buddha teach about women?
- What does Buddhism teach about women now? How is this different in the United States and in Thailand (South Asia)?

- How are you involved with your temple or meditation center? Do you prepare food for the monks / teachers? Clean for the monks / teachers? Manage finances or sit on a committee? Lead gatherings? Teach religious or language classes to children? Participate regularly in other activities?
- How are men and women involved in your temple / meditation center in similar and different ways?
- How you think women and men should be involved in your temple or meditation center?

Information about how immigrant and convert Buddhists apply their religious beliefs in the public sphere will also be gathered through open-ended questions to include:

- How do Buddhist teachings influence your behaviors in the family and workplace?
- Outside of work and the temple / meditation center, are you involved in other community groups, sports teams, neighborhood activities? How do you behave differently in these situations than do non-Buddhists?
- How would an ideal Buddhist behave in American society in general? Do you try to be an ideal Buddhist?
- Do you think about Buddhist teachings or consult monks or meditation teachers when you think about how to vote? When you think about public issues like taxes, the behavior of politicians or issues in local government?
- Do you have an opinion about the controversy over Vice President Gore and the Democratic National Committee receiving donations from Hsi Lai temple in California?

Due to the length and detail of these questions, I will meet with some respondents several times during my months of interviewing.

PRELIMINARY/ BACKGROUND RESEARCH

I have prepared for the proposed research academically, through travel and study in a Buddhist country, and through several months of preliminary field research in Buddhist communities in the Philadelphia area. I majored in religion in the honors program as an undergraduate at Swarthmore College and began to prepare for this dissertation there through course work and honors seminars that focused on religion in America but were also comparative with Buddhism as a primary area of study. My interest in Buddhism in America was further developed at Princeton through preparation for a General Examination in the sociology of religion with Prof. Robert Wuthnow and through my ongoing involvement with the Center for the Study of Religion and more recent involvement with the Buddhist Studies workshop. My commitment to the academic study of gender was further enhanced at Princeton through preparation for a General Examination in the sociology of gender with Prof. Sara Curran and through my experience precepting two gender related undergraduate courses.

I was awarded a Fulbright fellowship during the 1998-99 academic year to conduct research in Sri Lanka and was granted a leave of absence from the Graduate School to accept this fellowship from January to September 1999. I conducted an independent study course while in Sri Lanka based on Swarthmore College Professor Don Swearer's honors seminar syllabus "Buddhism and Society in South Asia." It was

through my participation in celebrations at temples, monasteries, and meditation centers across the island and in my conversations with Buddhists of all backgrounds that the proposed research questions began to crystallize in my mind. My host family in Sri Lanka also held meditation classes and gatherings in their home providing me with the ideal opportunity to learn more about Buddhism outside of temples. These experiences in Sri Lanka and several weeks of travel in Thailand and India motivated me to combine my longstanding interest in religion in America with my experience in South Asia through a dissertation that investigates how immigrant and converts in the United States practice and understand Buddhism.

Since my return from Sri Lanka in September 1999, I have begun to make contacts with immigrant and convert Buddhists in the Philadelphia area. I conducted several preliminary field visits to Mongkoltepmunee Temple in Bensalem, Pennsylvania and in January 2000 the Abbot gave me permission to conduct the proposed research at the temple. I have plans to visit both the Lao temple in North Philadelphia and the Cambodian temple in South Philadelphia in the coming months. I have also been in contact with the Philadelphia Buddhist Association and with several smaller Buddhist centers in the Philadelphia area and will finalize plans about which groups I will draw upon in contacting convert Buddhists by June 2000. I am also finalizing plans and applying for grants to pursue intensive Thai language study at the University of Pennsylvania's Language Center this summer and during the next academic year. While all of the immigrants at the Thai temple speak English, some proficiency in Thai will be necessary if I am to understand much of the informal conversation and activity at the temple. In addition to my Thai language study, I also plan to hire a Thai speaking research assistant to assist me with language and cultural issues.

Methodologically, I am well trained in ethnographic research methods. I completed a field methods course at Swarthmore College and was awarded a grant to conduct ethnographic research in San Francisco and Philadelphia for my undergraduate sociology & anthropology honors thesis, "God's Rainbow Families of Faith: Reconciling Congregations Bridging Gay and Straight Communities." I completed a qualitative research methods course at Princeton University and participated in the Anthropology Department's Mellon Seminar during the summer of 1998.

PROPOSED TIMELINE

Time Period	Activity
March – April 2000	Continue background / preliminary field research
May 2000	Complete General Examination in the Sociology Department.
June 2000	Make final decisions about field sites
June 2000-July 2000	Intensive Thai language study at the University of Pennsylvania's Language Center
August 2000	Develop and pre-test interview guide. Begin to collect and organize data for the mapping component of the dissertation (research question one).
September 2000 – June 2001	Enter the field: Conduct interviews and transcribe audio tapes of interviews. Participate regularly in activities at the temple and meditation center. Complete mapping and conduct ecological analysis of the location of Buddhist organizations in the United States. Continue classes in Thai language at the University of Pennsylvania,
July 2001 – August 2001	Code interview transcripts and begin analysis
September 2001 – May 2002	Draft and revise dissertation. Conduct any necessary follow-up interviews.

EARLY HYPOTHESES

Little existing research specifically describes the religious beliefs of immigrant and convert Buddhists. Coleman found that the majority of converts in his study believed in karma and rebirth, but he did not gather information about immigrants' religious beliefs (1999). I suspect that immigrant and convert Buddhists will share a few core beliefs about suffering, samsara, and karma but that they will describe these beliefs differently and will act on them in their religious gatherings and daily lives in diverse ways. Prebish (1999) and Seager (1999) describe immigrant Buddhists as ritual bound in their religious practices and converts as focused almost exclusively on meditation or occasionally chanting. I expect to confirm this finding. I also expect to find converts incorporating their religious beliefs more deliberately in their daily lives and in the public sphere through meditation, reading relevant literature, etc. I suspect that immigrants, on the other hand, incorporate Buddhism into their daily lives through the less deliberate, more mundane activities of daily life.

Gender will likely be at the center of the story to emerge from this research in two important ways. First, little research has examined how immigrants' and converts' religious beliefs and practices differ by gender. Convert women are actively re-imagining the Buddhist tradition in the United States to be more gender egalitarian than it has been in Asia, and I will investigate the process by which this is occurring (Boucher 1997; Dresser 1996; Tsomo 1995; Boucher 1984). Immigrant women have been largely left out of conversations about Buddhism and gender in the west, and it is my contention that they too are recreating the tradition in this new context. Buddhist traditions lag behind Christian and Jewish traditions in the United States in the speed with which they have addressed gender issues, and I aim in this project to understand how and why this is the case. I expect to find converts, especially female converts, actively avoiding the patriarchal components of Buddhism as practiced in South Asia. I expect to find immigrants more aware of gender issues in the history of Buddhism and more involved with the tradition in different ways than were their mothers and grandmothers in South Asia. I further expect convert women to be involved with Buddhist traditions because of their personal grapplings with issues of faith. Immigrant women will likely be involved not primarily out of their own religious questioning but as a continuation of the work many of them do for their families around language and cultural maintenance issues through the temple.

In addition to its empirical importance, gender is significant as a theoretical lens that will magnify and bring into sharper focus many of the commonalties and differences between the immigrant and convert communities in the United States. The ways in which each group has addressed gender and included women in their practice and organizations will likely further clarify the diverse ways Buddhism is being interpreted and acted on in the United States.

Research about religion and politics in the United States suggests that religious beliefs and organizations do influence some individuals' behaviors in the public sphere (Layman 1997; Reichley 1996; Leinesch 1993). Limited research suggests that Buddhists in the United States are more likely to be registered to vote as Democrats than as Republicans, but little research examines how immigrant or convert Buddhists think about public issues and apply their religious faith in the public sphere (Kosmin 1990). Motivated by the ideas of Thich Nhat Hanh and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Buddhist temples and meditation groups are increasingly devoting attention to social action in the world, but it is not clear how

these temples and groups or the individuals who comprise them are acting out their ideas individually or collectively in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and broader communities (Kotler 1996). I suspect that both immigrants and converts have ideas about what Buddhism teaches regarding life in the public sphere and that both groups are more locally than nationally focused. I expect immigrant temples to emphasize more direct involvement with people in their communities and meditation centers to express concern about social justice issues more generally defined. I expect both groups to explain their involvement in the world with reference to *dana* or the Buddhist concept of generosity but to understand what that concept means very differently.

SUMMARY

This dissertation will fill a significant hole in existing empirical work about Buddhism in America by systematically comparing the religious beliefs and practices of immigrant and convert Buddhists generally and with specific reference to gender issues and action in the public sphere. Theoretically, the study will further work in the sociology of religion and culture by investigating how two socially and ethnically distinct groups are finding meaning in the same religious tradition and acting on that meaning in the United States. It will also further theoretical work about women and religion by investigating how and why a tradition is “feminized” by groups of practitioners and theoretical work about the relationship between non western religious practitioners and public issues in the United States. This project will be of interest to sociologists of religion, culture, and immigration as well as to those interested in religions, particularly non-western religions, in the United States.

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