



THE INFLUENCES OF BUDDHISM ON THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF AMERICANS

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism has a very solid position in American society to satisfy the spiritual needs of the people of this country. There have been mutual influences in the development process between Buddhism and American culture, resulting in the creation of a difference between Buddhism in America compared to Buddhism in Asian countries. This shows that Buddhism is also greatly influenced by the culture and lives of American society to change to suit the lifestyle here. At the same time, Buddhism also has positive impacts on the spiritual life of Americans, helping them find balance, tranquillity, and peace in every present moment like demonstrating America as a country that loves peace and freedom when many immigrants are looking to this country.



KEYWORDS: Buddhism; American culture; Buddhism in the U.S.; Buddhism in Asian countries; intellectuals.

1. INTRODUCTION

As we know, the Buddha was not a social reformer, he was a teacher, but a society that wants to reform and develop still needs to apply his teachings - the one who spoke up for the abolition of the class system, promoting human rights when America was not yet born on the world map. Buddhism still develops in the light of understanding, and science also proves that the teachings of the Buddha from more than 25 centuries ago are true and help practitioners calm in the quiet of the mind. The United States is still splendid in the light of civilized electric lights and bustle in the hustle of a liberal and free-living environment, but this country is a place where many famous scientists gather with achievements contributing to the development of humanity. That is why the Dalai Lama used to say "I have not come to the West to have a few more Buddhist followers, but simply to share the experience of the wisdom that Buddhism has developed over many centuries"¹. So, how will the teachings of Buddha influence the people of that civilized country to create a leading country in the world, America, bringing democracy to people?

The scope of the article is to analyze and answer the questions raised. The author does not praise Buddhism because Buddhism itself has been an adaptation to humanity for more than 25

¹ Jean Francois Revel & Matthieu Ricard, *The Monk and the Philosopher: A Father and Son Discuss the Meaning of Life*, New York: Schocken Books, 1999, p. 148.

centuries, otherwise, it would have eliminated itself from human belief. At the same time, the article does not aim to praise America, because this country itself is a development that the world bows to acknowledge. What will be the effects when the swan has reached the lake shore? That is the content the author needs to present to clarify Buddhism in the heart of the United States.

2. THE INFLUENCES OF BUDDHISM ON THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Henry David Thoreau (1871 – 1862) was the first person to introduce Buddhism to the American people by translating the Lotus Sutra. He must have been heavily inspired by Buddhist teachings to be able to carry out such a translation work while remaining a Christian. After reading the work *L'Introduction à l'Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* by Eugene Burnouf published in Paris in 1844, he translated it into English with the message about the Lotus Sutra "All people are Buddhas". He considered the Buddha's teachings as the ultimate truth that listeners can reach the complete cessation of all suffering, follow the best path to achieve Buddhahood, and become a Buddha. In addition, he was also a serious meditation practitioner and lived a lifestyle no different from that of a monk. He abandoned a life of luxury, secluded himself in nature, and sought enlightenment. His philosophical views were also developed in accordance with the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism:

- Most people are inclined towards despair. It means life is suffering.
- The origin of our despair is linked to the luxuries and illusions. In other words, the origin of suffering is attachment.
- We can be liberated from those attachments. It means the cessation of suffering is attainable.
- It can be achieved by letting go of attachments, returning to nature, and leading to a simple life of contemplation, virtue, truth-seeking, and meditation.

That is how an intellectual is inspired by Buddhism; they do not consider it a religion but rather a practice that produces results. In 1866, four years after Henry David Thoreau's death, John Weiss wrote about him as follows: "*Thoreau's calm countenance has no trace of desire or dissatisfaction; emotions and feelings due to external influences do not disturb or erode it. He lives like a priest of Buddha who expects to arrive at the summit of a life of contemplation*"². Buddhism has helped them return to inner peace and realize that "all people are Buddhas", simplify life, no longer be entangled with the surrounding things and return to hiding in nature. An American philosopher accepted Buddhism as accepting a truth, not because of the mystery of religion or the judgment of theocracy.

It was Henry David Thoreau who began to receive the influence of Buddhism through literature and felt a profound source of wisdom through the teachings of the Master more than 2500 years ago. Buddhism still develops in Asian countries despite the ups and downs due to historical fluctuations, but that is what created a movement to return to the Eastern Sun by Westerners to learn about a philosophy of humanity. An American scholar named Peebles happened to visit Sri Lanka on the occasion of a public debate taking place in Panadura between a young Venerable named Mohottiwatte Gunananda and the Christian missionaries. As a result, Venerable Mohottiwatte Gunananda won. After that, J. M. Peebles recorded this debate in full and published a book *Buddhism and Christianity Face to Face* in the United States with an introduction in 1878 detailing the process of the discussion.

Henry Steel Olcott (1832 – 1907), a native of the United States, a former farmer, and retired colonel of the US Army during the Civil War, accidentally read the work on the debate in Sri Lanka. In 1875, he and Madame Blavatsky founded the Buddhist Theosophical Society in New York. After reading Peebles' book, H.S. Olcott and Madame Blavatsky came over to Sri Lanka in 1880, where they converted to Buddhism and gained first-hand knowledge of the Buddha's teachings. This was the first time the Sri Lankan Sangha had ordained European and American Buddhists in front of the emotional witness of the Buddhist community here. H.S. Olcott considered the Buddha an Enlightened Being, not a God, not a religion that believed in theocracy and was governed by theocracy. It was his point of view that made other religions reconsider the teachings they were propagating.

² Raymon Adams, Thoreau at Harvard: Some Unpublished Records, *The New England Quarterly*, Mar. 1940, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Mar. 1940), p. 25.

Especially, the American Buddhist Olcott was also the one who created the Buddhist flag based on the five colors of the Buddha's halo. This proves that H. S. Olcott was tireless on the path of developing Buddhism, raising the flag of liberation to all five continents. Buddhism is no longer limited to the beliefs of East Asians, but it is also the place that Europeans and Americans turn to later. He once shared: *"If Buddhism contained a single dogma that we were compelled to accept, we would not have taken the pansil nor remained Buddhists ten minutes"*³. That is, if Buddhism contained an arbitrary dogma that forced us to accept, we would not have taken the Three Refuges and Five Precepts and followed Buddhism for ten minutes. He also added that *"Our Buddhism was founded by the Buddha Shakyamuni, is the religion of wisdom (Wisdom Religion), the soul of all world-faiths (world-faiths)"*⁴. If H. S. Olcott was the first American to take the Three Refuges in Sri Lanka and also the one who continued to lay a solid foundation for Buddhism in the United States, then who was the first Native American to take the Three Refuges right in the land of the New World? It is an interesting question for researchers who are studying the influence of Buddhism on the people of the Land of the Statue of Liberty.

A literary genius I would like to mention is Edwin Arnold (1832 - 1904), who used to worship Eastern religions. He loved to study philosophy, journalism, archaeology, etc. Especially, he was deeply influenced by Buddhism since childhood. With a poetic soul and a natural talent for linguistics (knowing at least 19 languages), this helped him a lot in his later literary career. Arnold soon marked a turning point in his spiritual life through the collection of poems "The Light of Asia" in 1879. Perhaps Buddhism at that time was still too strange to Europeans and Americans because Buddhist scriptures in English and European languages were still scarce. The work was so valuable that many intellectuals conveyed it in literature and films or set it to music through poetry. In 1879, the King of Thailand also wrote a letter of thanks and praise for his contribution to the spread of Buddhism through the work "Light of Asia", the King awarded him a "White Elephant" medal. Through this, we can see that Edwin Arnold knew his strengths, using his pen and ingenuity to create a strong magnetic field, and spread it through his immortal works, especially the poetry collection "Light of Asia". The resounding work is likened to a flash of lightning, a streak of light across the border, illuminating the path of Buddhism in this land. When mentioning it, people always praise and acknowledge his contribution to Buddhism. We know that at the time of the second half of the 19th century, Buddhism was still too strange to Europeans and Americans, so the poem "Light of Asia" was a precious Dharma gift that greatly contributed to the spread of Buddhism in Western countries.

The next one, Paul Carus (1852 - 1919), the son of a Protestant pastor, was one of the people who successfully organized the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 - an important event that marked the turning point of Buddhism in America. The results of the Congress attracted much attention from intellectuals and other social classes about the practical practices and teachings of the Buddha that helped them face and solve difficulties in life. Paul Carus discovered the relationship between science and religion and introduced Eastern traditions and ideas to the West. He was also an important figure in bringing Buddhism to the Western people, building a religious friendship with the Japanese Master Soyen Shaku, enthusiastically sponsoring the translation work of Master Suzuki, and sponsoring Anagarika Dharmapala to the United States to propagate the Dharma for many years.

For Paul Carus, Buddhism is the right path to spiritual development, a religion based on reason, experimentation, and science. In 1894, Carus composed "The Gospel of Buddha" with the aim of proving the value of Buddhism in meeting the spiritual needs of Westerners. This is a work that has been translated into many languages such as Japanese, Chinese, German, French, Spanish, etc. In the preface, he affirmed that *"The Gospel of Buddha will help Buddhists and Christians to penetrate the spirit of their faith, to see its full height, length and breadth"*⁵. He skillfully used Christian forms familiar to Westerners to convey the philosophy and method of Buddhist practice. In the last chapter of this famous work, he

³ Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott*, Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 96.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Paul Carus, *The Gospel of Buddha*, Chicago and London: The Opening Court Publishing Company, 1915.

praised all the Buddhas (The Praise of All the Buddhas) because “*All the Buddhas teach the same truth. They point out the path to those who go astray*”, “*All the Buddhas are one in essence, which is omnipresent in all modes of being, sanctifying the bonds that tie all souls together, and we rest in its bliss as our final refuge*”.⁶

The event of 1893 with the World Parliament of Religions opened up in Paul Carus an intellectual light about Buddhism, shattering the assumptions about the inherent theocratic nature of a religion that people often cling to. Paul Carus used all his intelligence and capacity to develop Buddhism in the United States because that religion “shows the way for those who have lost their way”, it is a religion of science and Buddha is the pioneer of the ideology of freedom and democracy, protecting human rights, responding to people’s prayers for a peaceful and developed country. Likewise, not only Paul Carus was influenced by this congress, but even a Jewish American had to kneel and ask to take refuge in Buddha - Dharma - Sangha right after the congress ended.

As Anagarika Dharmapala gracefully walked, dominating the hall with his own confidence, spreading to the world about a religion that had existed for more than 25 centuries, the auditorium seemed to be filled with his resounding voice. It was a religion of love and understanding, of peace, freedom, and equality without class. When the wound from a long-lasting pain could no longer be endured, when moral principles were attacked, the Buddha emerged. As if he could not wait any longer, on the last day of the convention, Charles T. Strauss, a Jewish businessman in New York, knelt before Dharmapala and asked to receive the Three Refuges and Five Precepts, and this was also the first American Buddhist to take refuge in his native country.

According to *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844 - 1912* by Thomas A. Tweed, in fact, before the events of 1893, many intellectuals considered themselves Buddhists even though no formal ordination ceremony had taken place. For example, E. D. Root, who described himself as an “American Buddhist”, wrote a poem about the life of the Buddha in 1880. Then, around 1884, Philangi Dasa (Herman C. Vetterling, 1849 - 1931) claimed to be a disciple of the Buddha, and he published the Buddhist journal “The Buddhist Ray” four years later, in 1888. Not only that, Ernest Francisco Fenolosa (1851 - 1903) and William Sturgis Bigelow (1850 - 1926) lived in Japan for a while and took refuge on September 21, 1885.⁷

Buddhism had a positive influence on intellectuals in the early years of its introduction. So, does Buddhism in the 21st century in America still influence people in the digital age?

According to the Plum Village website (langmai.org), Lawrence Rockefeller, the top billionaire in New York State, solved his loneliness and suffering in fame after reading pages of *Peace is Every Step* by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. Next, Bill Ford, the car king, came to the Zen monastery (a branch of Plum Village) in Boston to study for a day and a night. He said that he had read the book *Miracle of Mindfulness* 32 times. Whenever he had difficulties in his business, he had to find this book to read to overcome sadness and fear. Furthermore, Carlos Marsh, an architect and leader of 20 Buddhist meditators at a retreat center in Cambridge, feels like the most changed and happiest person after reading *Awakening the Buddha Within* by Surya Das.

Since the mid-1990s, there have been Hollywood films about Buddhism such as *Little Buddha*, *Kundun*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Enlightenment Guaranteed*, etc. It has not yet to mention a whole host of other films with Buddhist themes such as *Star Wars* and *Matrix*. Even the film industry has many famous Hollywood stars practicing Buddhism such as Tina Turner, Orlando Bloom, Richard Gere, Steven Seagal, Keanu Reeves, Patti Smith, etc.

Former President Barack Obama - the president who is always honored and admired by the world, in a personal interview with YouTube representative Ingrid Nilsen at the White House on January 15, 2016, he revealed that among the treasures he often carries with him is a small Buddha statue of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, given by a Zen master a few years earlier. In addition, he met

⁶ Ibid, p. 254-55.

⁷ Thomas A. Tweed, “*The American Encounter With Buddhism 1844 - 1912*”, *‘Shall We All Become Buddhist?’*, Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992, p. 40

with His Holiness the Dalai Lama twice at the White House and once met with Venerable Pema Chodron - who received the "Global Bhiksuni" award for her contributions to promoting, protecting, and preserving Tibetan Buddhism. Barack Obama was the first president to issue a decision to celebrate Buddha's birthday at the White House, demonstrating Buddha's teachings on peace. The Buddha statue was worshiped for the first time in the White House, and recognized by the world community and peace activists. The former President shared: *"One day, I will no longer be in the White House, I will no longer be present in this Oval Office, but the Buddha is someone who can exist forever, he will be an image of uprightness, transparency, and non-discrimination for all of us."*

Before President Barack Obama, President Bill Clinton took refuge in the Three Jewels, became a vegetarian, and practiced meditation. According to a news report on *thebuddhism.net*, former US President Bill Clinton invited a Buddhist monk to personally instruct him in meditation. In addition, former President Bush and his wife respectfully honored the 80th birthday of His Holiness the Dalai Lama at the George W. Bush Presidential Center, Dallas, Texas, USA on July 1, 2015.

Buddhism continues to contribute to the development of education in the United States, thereby, the influence of Buddhism on the people of this country became more widespread when the Buddhist Studies department was added in universities, such as the University of California, University of Washington, Won Institute of Graduate Studies, Graduate Theological Union, University of the West, etc. Thus, Buddhism has officially appeared in the United States of America. The influence of Buddhism on the lives of the American people is because Buddhism itself contains elements of peace and freedom, promoting democracy, and protecting human rights. Buddhism does not come through war, does not spread through hatred, and does not exist through prayer. On the contrary, Buddhism is a practice and has results, at the same time, war and violence have never been present on the path of propagating Buddhism as it has been proven in history.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF BUDDHISM IN THE UNITED STATES

There are many Buddhist traditions in America, such as Hinayana, Mahayana, Vajrayana, Pure Land, Japanese Zen, Chinese Zen, Tibetan Tantric, etc. All these traditions develop naturally, in parallel, without competition, without causing conflicts of doctrine and worldly interests as one has seen in some other religions. American Buddhists can therefore choose different sects and traditions, to suit their instincts and spiritual tendencies.

In addition to the Sangha and the laity, which are the two main groups in Asian Buddhist countries, there is a third group of Buddhists, who are half lay, half monks. They still have jobs like everyone else, and even maintain their family's religious traditions, but they have a very diligent and serious Buddhist life by practicing meditation or going to Buddhist centers to learn and understand Buddhism. This is also easy to understand because many American Buddhists do not pay attention to the religious, sacred, or spiritual aspects of Buddhism, but only pay attention to the practical aspects of practice, the techniques of meditation, Zen meditation, leading a healthy vegetarian life (vegetarianism, avoiding killing), or consider Buddhism as a method to cure mental illnesses. Many American intellectuals only pay attention to Buddhism as a science of psychology and human spirituality. Therefore, many Americans who follow Buddhism do not see anything contradictory to their traditional beliefs. This partly explains the appeal and success of Buddhism in America.

The organizational structure and practice of American Buddhism are different from Buddhism in Asian countries. The relationship between teacher and student, master and disciple is more "democratized" by the American spirit of respect for freedom and equality. The atmosphere of practice at Buddhist centers is very comfortable, different from the solemn atmosphere at Asian temples. Especially, the contribution of women to the propagation and development of Buddhism is remarkable.

4. COMMENTS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF BUDDHISM IN THE UNITED STATES

It can be said that Buddhism in the United States has its own characteristics compared to Buddhism in Asia, less mythological, more democratic, deeply social, focusing on meditation practice. Especially, compared to other countries, the form of propagating Buddhism is mainly Buddhists, they

are interested in practical life and Buddhist enlightenment through the saying “The path to enlightenment, the path to liberation” so that they can be self-reliant in their practice.

The light of Buddhism shines in the mind of each person by many ways of practice, such as meditating, and listening to the Dharma even for just five short minutes while working, driving, etc. The belief in the teachings and enlightenment has permeated, they are aware of the worth of the benefits that Buddhism provides, and they wish to contribute to building the house of Buddhism to last and develop forever.

Buddhism does not recognize any creeds that its adherents are supposed to embrace without question. Instead, the Buddha proclaimed certain fundamental principles and truths, which he encouraged his disciples to verify for themselves. One of the classic epithets of the Dhamma is “come and see” which refers to empirical verification of the Dhamma. If Buddhism is a religion that only has faith through hearing but does not see to practice and have peace in the present, and happiness in the future, then can it exist for thousands of years?

All those who either previously did not follow any religion or followed a religion, once understood the Buddha’s teachings in their language, they immediately recognized the value of Buddhism and knew how to use a language that was appropriate to the times. They have absorbed the spirit of spreading the Dharma very well as taught by the Buddha. The Buddha taught that the language must be used according to the local language but must still ensure the accuracy of the meaning and must not be distorted. The most taboo thing is to translate the Buddha’s teachings into the language of non-Buddhism. Through the above teachings of the Buddha, we can see that the appropriateness of the Buddhist teachings is aimed at the highest, most absolute goal that anyone can learn and understand. The teachings are not rigid in language because the ultimate liberation is towards selflessness, but if there is no so-called concept, it will make the listener confused and doubtful about what the Buddha taught. Therefore, the most important thing at first is a clear concept, a suitable language but without confusion. That is why *“Do not insist on local terminology and do not override normal usage”*.⁸

Americans do not have the habit of being complicated, they need practicality, brevity, carefulness, and time, so for them, the way of practicing is simple and practical, not attached to appearances. They understand the doctrine through the saying *“Light your own torch and go”* so they are very diligent in practicing to transform themselves. The Buddha taught: *“I am a Buddha who has attained enlightenment, you are Buddhas who will attain enlightenment”*. There is no longer any distinction when sentient beings practice together and move toward liberation through diligence.

CONCLUSION

The encounter between Buddhism and the United States has helped this country solve the problem of suicide in the souls of people who feel lost and lonely in the face of the overwhelming technology forest and they find themselves in the depths of their consciousness. Buddhism has helped the native people here gently face difficulties and open up to themselves. Buddhism for Americans is no longer a religion, but a whole philosophical system of living fully in the present, an entire wisdom that helps people transform suffering, bringing them to the shore of peace and liberation, not by faith, or by the grace of any deity. Buddhism has helped followers of Christianity, Islam, or Protestantism find their own spiritual traditions, without forcing them to convert to Buddhism. That is why the Buddha’s teachings have become more alive in the West.

What catalyst has made Buddhism successful? In my opinion, the success of Buddhism in the United States and throughout the Western world lies in three aspects: The Buddha’s central teachings of compassion, tolerance, and rationality through which individuals apply and spiritually transform themselves beyond the fear and blind faith in ancient dogma and mythology.

Thus, Buddhism came to America and was accepted by intellectuals and its practice brought positive results to their lives. The swan came to the lake not so that people would praise it for its beauty but so that the water would be clearer and more beautiful when its reflection on the lake’s surface. That

⁸ *Majjhima Nikāya*, MN139: Araṇ avibhaṅ gasutta - The Analysis of Non-Conflict.

is why Buddhism has influenced the American people so much, demonstrating America as a country that loves peace and freedom when many immigrants are looking to this country.

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