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TRADITION AND CHANGE: TWO BUDDHISMS IN THE BIBLE BELT SHARING
COMMON GROUND THROUGH ADAPTATION

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Philosophy & Religion
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Jonathan Spence

December 2014

TRADITION AND CHANGE: TWO BUDDHISMS IN THE BIBLE BELT SHARING
COMMON GROUND THROUGH ADAPTATION

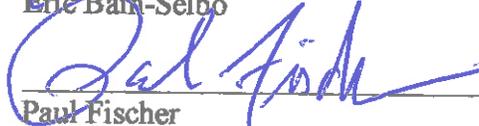
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TRADITION AND CHANGE: TWO BUDDHISMS IN THE BIBLE BELT SHARING
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Jonathan Spence

December 2014

78 Pages

Directed by: Jeffrey Samuels, Eric Bain-Selbo, and Paul Fischer

Department of Philosophy & Religion

Western Kentucky University

This thesis examines how some American and Burmese forms of Buddhism in the Bible Belt today share common ground through a process of adaptation. Exploring tradition and change, I reveal how change often requires adaptation. Utilizing ethnographic research conducted in south central Kentucky and middle Tennessee, I argue that some Burmese and American forms of Buddhism in the Bible Belt experience change through three aspects of adaptation. These consist of reduction, syncretism, and preservation. I explore these three aspects through interviews and observations of immigrant Burmese Buddhist monks and American Buddhist meditation leaders. In doing so, I also examine the various ways in which the southern American landscapes affect change within traditional Burmese Buddhism through a process of Americanization. As a result of Theravada Buddhism's relocation, change in Buddhism can also be seen in the American form, which is believed by many to be becoming its own unique school of Buddhism. This can be found occurring in the regions of south central Kentucky and middle Tennessee.

Preservation of tradition, an element of adaptation to Americanization, is a theme that frequently arose during my time spent at immigrant Burmese Buddhist temples and through interviews conducted with two ethnic Burmese Buddhist monks. The tendency

to reduce Buddhism to a tradition of meditation was, on the other hand, a theme that came up in my conversations with two American meditation leaders. Their tendency to syncretize several schools of Buddhism is also explored. Being that the Buddhist subjects interviewed for this ethnography reside in the Bible Belt, their thoughts on Christianity and their interactions with Christians has also been included.

Introduction

Being raised in the Bible Belt, I learned at a very early age that the Baptist “born again” expression of Christianity was undisputable. It was the only way to salvation, and it must never be questioned, challenged, or changed. Being a highly conservative form of Christianity, the church of my youth promoted a “hellfire and brimstone” type message. This message was ever prevailing at church and at home. I grew up believing that if I were not a “born again” Christian when I died, I would certainly spend an eternity in Hell. I trust that many people raised in the Bible Belt feel the same. What’s more, this message is often passed on from Southern Christians to their progeny. Sometimes, this system of beliefs is not fully accepted by the next generation and some become attracted to Buddhism.

Many Americans now subscribe to the Buddhist faith, and as it turns out, white Americans in the Bible Belt have adopted the religion as well. Until recently, the American interpretation of Buddhism has never been of great concern to me. As a matter of fact, American Buddhism was never something that I studied. As a student of religious studies focused on Asia, my interest has always been Theravada Buddhism, but not necessarily the form practiced by white Americans. Having lived and studied in Thailand, it has since been Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism that has most engaged my interest.

Upon leaving Thailand and returning to Bowling Green, Kentucky, my interest in Southeast Asian Buddhism continued. I soon learned of an immigrant Burmese Buddhist temple in town. My interest turned to the ethnic Burmese Buddhism practiced in Bowling Green. I spent some time at this temple, and the more I discussed Buddhism

with the residing monk, the more I began to realize the subtle changes occurring in how a Burmese Buddhist monk lives in the Bible Belt. I learned of the changes brought on by being in America, and how Americanization can be an issue with the Burmese Buddhist monks now residing here. Also, the white American interest in Buddhism continued to be a topic of discussion between the Burmese Buddhist monk and myself.

My objective is to show how some forms of Burmese and American Buddhisms, coexisting in the Bible Belt today, experience change through three aspects of adaptation. These adaptations consist of reduction, syncretism, and preservation. Since Burmese Theravada Buddhism has been uprooted from Southeast Asia and replanted in the American South, adaptation in the form of “preservation” can be found in how ethnic Burmese Buddhist monks confront Americanization and how they have had to adjust their lifestyles to remain loyal to their monastic code. The other two changes involve white Americans. They are referred to as just “American” from here on. The American Buddhist practice of “reduction” means that Theravada has been reduced to focus on primarily one aspect of the tradition, namely meditation. The third change, or adaptation, is the American tendency for “syncretism.” This is when several schools of Buddhism are incorporated into one system. This American form can possess both reduction and syncretism. Many believe that this is becoming its own unique school of “American Buddhism.” Being that this project is based in the Bible Belt, it certainly includes the Christian presence, a presence found throughout both Buddhisms. I present the Christian element from the Burmese monk and American Buddhist perspectives.

At the outset of this project, my primary focus was concerned with immigrant Burmese Theravada Buddhism and any changes that may have occurred in that tradition as a result of its relocation to the southern region of the United States. However, the American interest in Buddhism is hard to ignore. While conducting textual research on Buddhism in America and in the American South, American Buddhism again came to my attention. I became convinced that this is an area of study that warrants further exploration. In a search for American Buddhists, I expanded my study to include Nashville, Tennessee. In doing so, I met another ethnic Burmese Buddhist monk. This monk teaches meditation to Americans. I was intrigued that an ethnic Burmese Buddhist monk was teaching Americans how to meditate.

While I have always been aware of American Buddhists, I never considered the disparity between them and the Burmese immigrant laity in the areas of this study. The Burmese laity do not seem to practice meditation as much as the Americans. To delve further into this, I located two American Buddhists who lead regular meditation groups in Nashville and Bowling Green. My investigation into American Buddhism reveals an almost entirely different system. While based on tradition, it has become somewhat different. It occurred to me that change in the tradition of Theravada Buddhism is change within change itself, meaning that Buddhism is a dynamic system of beliefs, which seems to remain in a constant state of change and adaptation. I find it significant that immigrant Burmese monks, and American Buddhists, because of the enormous amount of change involved, share a common ground in adaptation. I also discovered a difference between the Americans who identify themselves as “Buddhists” and those who are simply interested in the health benefits of Buddhist meditation.

Method

This project is an ethnography. While not using their real names, the majority of this thesis consists of one-on-one interviews conducted with two Burmese Buddhist monks and two American meditation leaders. I chose not to include interviews with the Burmese laity, or with American members of meditation groups; any references made to these individuals came about through my observations while attending Burmese Buddhist temples and American Buddhist meditation groups.

The historiographical approach is applied to examine traditional Theravada Buddhism, such as its canonical language (its use today displays a link to tradition). Also, I look at Buddhism's ability to spread and adapt, meaning that the religion's history of expansion and change in Southeast Asia could, perhaps, shed some light on the changes occurring within the tradition now in America and practiced by American Buddhists. Utilizing interviews, I explore how two Burmese Buddhist monks live in the Bible Belt, and how they have had to make adaptations to Americanization. This method is also applied to the two American Buddhist meditation leaders of this study.

This study includes observations made at an ethnic Burmese Buddhist temple and an American Buddhist meditation group, both of which are located in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Also, it involves an American Buddhist meditation center and a Burmese Buddhist temple in Nashville, Tennessee. Intriguingly, the Nashville temple consists of a Burmese Buddhist monk and American meditators. This displays the two Buddhisms of this study coexisting in the same locale.

This project focuses on two Buddhisms in the Bible Belt today. While they are not the only two schools of Buddhism to be found in the area, I concentrate on the ethnic

Burmese and American forms that are being practiced by four congregations. Since these forms involve tradition and change, I find it appropriate to ask, “Does change in the traditional school of Buddhism give rise to the American form?” And, “Does adaptation in tradition occur with immigrant Buddhism because it is now in America?” In an attempt to answer these questions, I conducted interviews with two Burmese Buddhist monks and two American Buddhist meditation leaders residing in the Bible Belt today.

The American interpretation of Theravada Buddhism is not always clear. While having some link to tradition, they often adapt Buddhism by reducing the religion to make it applicable to today’s stressful American lifestyles, such as the prioritizing of the practice of meditation. Since both of my American subjects identify as “Buddhist,” they share some common traits with the two Burmese monks of this study. For example, every subject of this study places a great significance on the practice of meditation. And, they all have something to say about Christians.

While I do not necessarily focus on Burmese Buddhist ritual, I have observed their practice of Pali chanting and their reverence for Buddhist festivals. The Burmese laity’s reverence for Buddhist festivals also marks a contrast in the priorities that they and the Americans have placed on certain Buddhist practices, specifically the practice of meditation. I observed this to be a clear display of reductionism. While the local Burmese and American congregations can be found at the temple together during Buddhist festivals, Americans were meditating inside the temple while the Burmese were outside preparing for the day’s festivities.¹ This would indicate that the American

¹ I observed this at the Nashville temple during a Kathina festival. This is an annual Theravada practice where the Burmese laity offer new robes to the monks. Being a Southeast Asian Theravada tradition, it takes place at the end of the rainy season.

interest in Buddhism is primarily meditation; however, it also plays a significant role in the adaptation of the Burmese Buddhist monks of this study.

The American attraction to Buddhism seems to be the practice of meditation. A part of this project focuses on that. Every subject of this study agrees on the importance of the practice. But, it seems to be the Americans who have made it the foundation of their religion, or have made it a significant part of their lives. Because of the value placed on meditation, I have included a section on this practice. Concerning Theravada Buddhist ritual, Pali chants are practiced by every Burmese interviewed and some of the Americans, but the American priority placed on meditation is certainly evident.

I examine the popularity of Buddhist meditation through textual research, observations, and interviews. I have found, as a result of this project, an unexpected commonality expressed by my subjects on meditation's benefit to mental health. So, I explore that facet of the practice as well. And, perhaps an important underlying theme here is how the Americans' use of meditation for its ability to treat stress and depression could be a starting point for beginning American meditators to becoming Buddhists.

Because this study concerns the Bible Belt, and while not presented from a Christian perspective, I do show how my subjects have found themselves involved in a number of Christian related situations. I examine the role that Christians play, such as their interest in practicing meditation. Another aspect deals with the Christian curiosity about Buddhism, a religion that is considered atheistic. I also explore some Buddhist thoughts on relationships with Christians and the fact that American Buddhists are often raised as Christians. Additionally, I compare and contrast my work to those few who have conducted research in this field, notably Paul David Numrich, Jeff Wilson, Wendy

Cadge, and others. For the most part, I quote these scholars rather than paraphrase them. This, I hope, will lend to the effect that these authors are conducting dialogue with one another. I feel this is more effective than putting forth my interpretation of their discourses. Clearly, this project covers a lot of ground. Perhaps this is necessary to reveal just some of the dynamics involved in Theravada Buddhism.

Organization of this Project

This project is organized into four chapters. I believe this will show Theravada Buddhism's ability to adapt by examining tradition and change. In doing so, I am confident that the themes regarding the three aspects of adaptation will become evident. In chapter one I examine the origins of Buddhism in America and the conception of "American Buddhism." The lack of scholarly attention to this field of study is addressed. I also examine the early spread of Buddhism, the significance of the Pali language in preserving tradition, and how it all relates to its rather recent arrival to the Bible Belt.

Chapter two introduces the Burmese and American subjects of this study. I speak with a Burmese monk and an American meditation leader in Bowling Green. Also, I have discussions with a Burmese monk and an American meditation leader in Nashville. We go in depth on the practice of Buddhist meditation. This reveals reduction on the Americans' part. But, the importance of meditation is something shared by all four of these Buddhists. I compare and contrast these two Buddhisms currently thriving in the Bible Belt.

Chapter three displays change by preservation. This chapter explores how immigrant Burmese Buddhist monks choose to preserve tradition while adapting to Americanization. Adaptation to Americanization can be seen in several ways. I examine

how they have had to make adjustments to their monastic code in ways of dress, food, and transportation. The second generation of Burmese born in America is also a focus in this chapter. Additionally, I look at how a Burmese Buddhist monk interacts with his Bible Belt neighbors.

Chapter four explores the role of Christians. Every Buddhist subject of this study has something to say about Christians. Some of them say quite a bit more than others. Both the American and Burmese Buddhists presented here have had experiences with them. The conclusion shows that through preservation, reduction, and syncretism, the Buddha's "Middle Way" can be found in all of it.

Chapter 1: Buddhism in America

Buddhism in America seems to be in a persistent state of growth. As Charles Prebish states, “There can be little doubt that both the practice and study of Buddhism in North America have grown enormously in the last quarter century.”² According to James Coleman, “Just a century and a half ago, Buddhism was virtually unknown in the West except to a few travelers and intellectuals.”³ Wendy Cadge expands on this by stating, “Buddhism has been in the United States since the nineteenth century, but the branch called Theravada was not introduced institutionally and permanently established until 1966.”⁴ Thus, “Since the 1960’s,” according to Gil Fronsdal, “the Theravada tradition has slowly but surely found a home in North America.”⁵

There are reasons behind such growth. Cadge tells us how “changes in immigration laws in 1965 and the increased interest of native-born Americans led to particularly dramatic growth in the number of Theravada Buddhist practitioners in the United States.”⁶ Prebish adds, “Fueled by a dramatic increase in ethnic Asian American Buddhist communities since the 1965 change in U.S. immigration laws and the continued expansion of the various Euro-American Buddhist communities, this growth has resulted in several million Buddhist practitioners now residing in North America.”⁷ As ethnographer Paul David Numrich describes, “Ethnic-Asian or immigrant Theravada Buddhism... represents a post-1965 phenomenon. The passage of the Immigration Act in

² Charles S. Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (California: University of California Press, 1999), vii.

³ James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

⁴ Wendy Cadge, *Heartwood: The First Generations of Theravada Buddhism in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 19.

⁵ Gil Fronsdal, “Theravada: The Path of Insight,” in *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America*, ed. Don Morreale, (Boston, Shambhala Publications, Inc. 1998), 3.

⁶ Cadge, 19-20.

⁷ Prebish, vii.

that year contributed to a reversal of Asian exclusion measures by the U.S. government dating back to 1882.”⁸ Furthermore, Fronsdal states, “Today there are over one hundred million Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The three most influential Theravada countries are Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, and it is from these countries that the tradition has come to the West.”⁹ According to Numrich, “...prolonged political and ethnic turmoil in Asia has provided an important ‘push’ factor bringing these groups to America.”¹⁰ Hence, “the 1965 Immigration Act created the major ‘pull’ for Asians to come to America.”¹¹ But, what exactly is the Euro-American relationship with Buddhism?

American Buddhism

While most scholars do not agree on what exactly defines “American Buddhism,” ethnographer Jeff Wilson states, “What we think of as ‘American Buddhism’ is largely the Buddhism of California, the urban Northeast, Hawaii, or less often, the Chicago area.”¹² In other words, American Buddhism could be defined by the area in which it is located. This is what Wilson refers to as being “regional phenomena...with somewhat different characteristics and experiences.”¹³ Wilson is adamant that the Buddhism found in the South is just as American as any other Buddhism in the country.¹⁴ But, how did American Buddhism happen?

⁸ Paul David Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples*, (Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996), xvii.

⁹ Fronsdal, 3.

¹⁰ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in a New World*, xix.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jeff Wilson, *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 9.

¹³ Ibid, 11.

¹⁴ Ibid.

This thesis explores the idea that American Buddhism could become its own unique school of Buddhism. Richard Hughes Seager tells us that American Buddhism is an American convert creation that began “in and around the 1960s counterculture,” developed throughout the succeeding decades of “innovations,” which “gave rise to uniquely American forms of Buddhism that could claim normative status and be understood as the wave of the future.”¹⁵ American Buddhism is, according to Numrich, a “predominantly Euro-American, lay-oriented, meditation-centered new religious movement which includes some Theravada groups.”¹⁶ The fact that American Buddhists are converts is significant to this project.

Numrich emphasizes how “Americans have converted to Theravada Buddhism from other religions or worldviews, and their understandings and expressions of Theravada Buddhism tend to be philosophical and meditative rather than ritualistic.”¹⁷ The American Buddhists interviewed in this study strongly promote meditation, and they often employ Buddhist philosophical readings after their group sessions. Syncretism is applied here. These readings come from all schools of Buddhism. I find this syncretism to be a product of the American Buddhist upbringing. One of my American subjects harbors resentment toward his Christian upbringing. My other American subject was raised with very little religion. This, I believe, results in a susceptibility to embrace a plethora of Buddhist beliefs and practices. Concerning American Buddhists, syncretism is a consistent theme throughout this study. Herein lies one level of change.

¹⁵ Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 235.

¹⁶ Paul David Numrich, “Theravada Buddhism in America: Prospects for the Sangha,” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, eds. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (California: University of California Press, 1998), 149.

¹⁷ Paul David Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 64.

The levels of change described in this study are represented in what Jan Nattier refers to as the “two Buddhisms, the Buddhism of Asian Americans [or, in my experience, the immigrant Burmese], on the one hand, and that of European Americans (sometimes labeled ‘White Buddhism’) on the other.”¹⁸ Or, perhaps even better said, concerning these “two Buddhisms,” Fronsdal writes,

Together they represent the two divergent and distinct forms that Theravada Buddhism has taken on this continent, namely, the monastic tradition of Southeast Asian immigrant groups on the one hand, and on the other the lay-centered *vipassana* [meditation] movement made up mostly of Americans of European descent. The former tend to be fairly conservative, replicating in America the various forms of Buddhism found in their native countries. The latter take a more liberal and experimental approach in adapting the tradition to its lay-based American setting.¹⁹

“[A]dapt[ing] the tradition to its lay-based American setting” is a theme that is evident throughout this thesis. However, my research reveals a lack of scholarly attention in this field of study.

Literary Review

Perhaps, Buddhism in America merits more academic curiosity. Numrich’s *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples* notes the lack of scholarly attention given to the ethnic-Asian Theravada form of Buddhism present in America. In 1996 he stated, “I know of no systematic study of immigrant Theravada Buddhist temples in the United States prior to my own work.”²⁰ Two years later Jan Nattier’s “Who is Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America,” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, reveals, “The study of Buddhism in

¹⁸ Jan Nattier, “Who is Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America,” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, 188.

¹⁹ Fronsdal, 3.

²⁰ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, xxi.

North America is still in its infancy.”²¹ Additionally, Nattier relates how “North America is a relative newcomer to the field of Buddhist Studies,” while maintaining that Buddhism in America “has seemed too new, too immature, and often too unorthodox to warrant serious scholarly attention.”²² Nattier points out that “Buddhism in this hemisphere is only now, at the very end of the twentieth century, beginning to be recognized as a legitimate subject of study.”²³ While “Buddhism in this hemisphere” is the broad scope of this study, is it the same as it was so many years ago? Cadge states in her 2005 publication *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America*, that the “growing interest in Buddhism, particularly since 1990 has led some people to describe the 1990s as something of a ‘Buddhism boom.’”²⁴

Pertaining to more recent times, and the area of my study, Buddhism in the American South lacks even more scholarly attention. The scholarly interest in America’s Buddhism that Nattier refers to has just recently been applied to the American South. The most recent text is ethnographer Jeff Wilson’s 2012 publication, *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South*. In this text, Wilson states, “Buddhism anywhere in the South has been neglected by researchers.”²⁵ While Wilson’s research is, as he puts it, “a first direct attempt at such work,”²⁶ the author concedes that no “major studies focused on Buddhism have ever been conducted in the southern states.”²⁷ I hope to contribute to this field of study. The reality of Buddhism thriving in the Bible Belt is exciting. Critical here is Buddhism’s ability to change and adapt.

²¹ Nattier, 183.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Cadge, 6.

²⁵ Wilson, 155.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 20.

A History of Change and the Pali Language

Buddhism is especially intriguing when it is viewed as a process. It is a dynamic system of beliefs that, like all things in Buddhist thought, remains in a constant state of transition. Perhaps, it could be compared to a tree. At the trunk, or base, you have the established accepted original tradition that over time grows and branches out in many different directions. No two branches are exactly the same yet they all stem from the same trunk, or original tradition, thus creating new traditions. Over the past two and a half millennia, Theravada Buddhism has grown and spread in this way. But, what exactly is Theravada Buddhism?

Theravada Buddhism, or the “Way of the Elders” school of Buddhism, is believed to be the oldest form of Buddhism in existence today. Scholar Roger Jackson writes, “The question of just what ‘Theravada’ is, however, is far from simple to answer, unless one locates the tradition solely in the Pali canon and its commentaries.”²⁸ Because Pali is referred to several times throughout this writing, perhaps a brief explanation of the language is appropriate here.

A specialist in Pali, James Gair writes how “Pali is fundamentally a language of Buddhism, in that virtually all texts in it are Buddhist in nature.”²⁹ He notes how “Pali is thus the canonical and liturgical language of Buddhists in countries such as Burma, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand..., and is thus that Theravada Buddhism has

²⁸ Roger R. Jackson, “A Tantric Echo In Sinhalese Theravada? Pirit ritual, the book of Paritta and the Jinapanjaraya” in the *Journal of Rare Buddhist Texts Research Project*, (1994), 122.

²⁹ James W. Gair, and W.S. Karunatilake, *A New Course in Reading Pali: Entering the Word of the Buddha* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2009), xvii.

sometimes been referred to as ‘Pali Buddhism.’”³⁰ Essentially, Pali is the language of the Buddha. Or, as Bhikkhu Bodhi states, “closely related to the language (or, more likely, the various regional dialects) that the Buddha himself spoke.”³¹ Why this is important to the present discussion is that the use of the Pali language during Buddhist gatherings would strongly indicate a direct connection to Theravada’s ancient tradition, and hence, the Buddha. This, I will address later. But, how did the ancient tradition of Theravada find its way to lands far removed from its place of origin? Perhaps, this enquiry could best be examined by first looking at events that took place shortly after the Buddha’s earthly demise. The results of these events would later display the religion’s ability to spread, change, and adapt.

The Early Spread of Buddhism to the Modern Day Bible Belt

After the historic Buddha’s earthly passing, which is generally believed to have been around 486 B.C.E., the followers of the Buddha conducted three important councils. The third council was especially significant to the early spread of Buddhism, because, as Gair notes, “the canon as we know it was essentially completed and formalized....”³² Subsequently, the religion expanded. Bodhi explains how “Theravada... spread to Southeast Asia and in later centuries became dominant throughout the region.”³³ It is the Southeast Asian form of Buddhism that is featured in this study, specifically, ethnic Burmese Theravada Buddhism.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., *In the Buddha’s Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 9.

³² Gair, xix.

³³ Bodhi, 9.

Addressing the geographical spread of Buddhism, Prebish writes how “Buddhism continues to develop into a truly global religion.”³⁴ This growth is certainly visible in the United States where, according to Rick Fields, it “has proliferated wildly.”³⁵ After all, notes Numrich, “Buddhism may be the most successful of the Asian religions among non-Asians in the west.”³⁶ The result is non-Asian forms of Buddhism. Relating to the areas of my study, Wilson states, “... Buddhism is indeed on the rise... in the South.”³⁷ For the most part, the area of my study is not an exception to this growth. It should be noted that three out of the four subjects interviewed for this project have stated their need for larger facilities due to their growing congregations. In addition, Wilson contends that while “Buddhist groups are more common in the South than they used to be, Buddhism has been very slow to grow in this part of the country, which is characterized by a strong evangelical Protestant public culture.”³⁸ How immigrant Burmese and American Buddhists can thrive in this environment is one of the main focuses of this study.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, “H.L. Mencken coined the term ‘Bible Belt’ in the 1920s, referring to areas of the United States dominated by Protestant orthodoxy, strict morality, and belief in the literal interpretation of the Bible.”³⁹ Additionally, “the use of the term coincided with the rising perception in American culture of the South and Midwest as areas of religious intensity and even primitiveness.”⁴⁰ Charles Reagan Wilson maintains that while Mencken “left the

³⁴ Prebish, ix.

³⁵ Rick Fields, “Divided Dharma: White Buddhists, Ethnic Buddhists, and Racism,” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, 196.

³⁶ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 116.

³⁷ Wilson, 40.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Samuel S. Hill, Charles H. Lippy, Charles Reagan Wilson, eds. *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2005), 117.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

impression that he referred to a special geographical section, perhaps the equivalent of the corn belt, cotton belt, or citrus fruit belt,” he was actually indicating “that rural section of the South whose populace was composed of pious folk who expressed their type of religiousness by earnest praying, hymn singing, Bible study, and proselytizing.”⁴¹ According to scholar Jon F. Sensbach, “Evangelicalism helped shape the emergence of the modern South,”⁴² and that shape still holds true today. Lippy explains how “...the perception of the South [as being] the Bible Belt endures.”⁴³ Wilson claims this perception is not entirely speculative, stating, that there “is a perception that the South is more conservative, traditional, Christian, and, frankly, more prejudiced, than many other parts of the country. While this can very easily be overstated, these perceptions are not completely groundless, and even if they were, the stereotype itself has clear effect.”⁴⁴ Therefore, it seems feasible to contemplate how other religions thrive in such an environment, ethnic Burmese and American Buddhism, for instance.

The primary theme of this study is rooted in the apparent and inevitable change that occurs within Buddhism when it is replanted in new soil. There is change involved in the immigrant Burmese tradition, especially for the dynamic tendencies of the ethnic Burmese Buddhist monks of this study who seem just as suited for adaptation as the

⁴¹ Charles Reagan Wilson, “Bible Belt,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, eds. Samuel S. Hill and Charles H. Lippy (Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1974), 117.

⁴² Jon F. Sensbach, “Before the Bible Belt: Indians, Africans, and the New Synthesis of Eighteenth-Century Southern Religious History,” in *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture*, eds. Beth Barton Schweiger, and Donald G. Mathews (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 20.

⁴³ Charles H. Lippy, “From Angels to Zen: Religion and Culture in the Contemporary South,” in *Religion in the Contemporary South: Changes Continuities, and Contexts*, eds. Corrie E. Norman and Don S. Armentrout (Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 123.

⁴⁴ Wilson, 29.

religion itself. The Theravada practiced by Americans also encompasses change, but on different levels. Apparently, this occurs when Buddhism is exposed to the American culture.

The effects of change on Theravada Buddhism can be seen when the religion is planted in new soil, and America is no exception. While my findings show adaptations as a result of Americanization, immigrant Burmese Buddhism, I am inclined to believe, has already experienced change by being shaped in Southeast Asia centuries ago. While, it is firmly entwined within the ancient Southeast Asian Buddhist paradigm, the tradition has been adopted by natives and is becoming its own established tradition. It would certainly seem that when the natives of a land, the land where the newly arrived Buddhist religion is placed, integrate their indigenous beliefs and practices into this new tradition, a new Buddhist system takes shape. In today's American context, rather than incorporating preexistent concepts into this belief system, it would appear as though a process of reductionism is occurring. The religion is being condensed to its practice of meditation in order to suit the modern American framework. However, there is much more to this. Not only is Buddhist meditation attracting American non-Buddhists, the Americans who identify as Buddhists often syncretize Buddhist concepts and meditation practices.

Americans seem to have a tendency for "syncretism." They incorporate various schools of Buddhism to fulfill their needs for meditation and philosophy. This, of course, is enacted in order to meet the demands of their lifestyle. This syncretism illustrates how the natives of a land adopt Buddhism and shape it in a way that fulfills their needs. This was the case when Theravada arrived in Southeast Asia centuries ago, and just as then,

with the tradition now in America, changes still occur. One must consider when elements from an ancient tradition are considered secondary, meaning that if elements of a tradition are deemed unnecessary by American Buddhists. Is that still a Theravada tradition? Does something reduced become something else? Is this the case with American Buddhism? Perhaps, it is. Or, perhaps, it becomes a composite of both, a syncretistic form of Buddhism known as “American Buddhism.” In the American Buddhist sense, it would appear that the Theravada now on American soil, and adopted by Americans, is certainly the product of change. American Buddhism is following the same paradigm displayed in Southeast Asia. In other words, Theravada Buddhism is changing to the point of becoming its own system of American Theravada. This is precisely what happened when Buddhism was introduced to Southeast Asia.

When Buddhism found its way to Southeast Asia, it adapted to the already existent beliefs of the natives; thus, in time becoming Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism. In America, and especially in the Bible Belt region of the United States, is it possible that traditional Theravada Buddhism can be compatible with the indigenous beliefs of Southern Americans? For instance, can a religion that rejects the notion of an all-mighty creator God find a home in the Bible Belt? Surprisingly, it would appear so.

With American Buddhism, and this cannot be stressed enough, what seems to be happening is adaptation and change by a process of reduction, meaning that some old practices are taken out rather than putting new ones in. Also, by creating a sort of syncretistic system, which comprises practices taken from more than one Buddhist tradition, an American form of Buddhism can be the result. However, one must also be aware of the Americanization occurring at the ethnic immigrant Theravada temples now

on U.S. soil. While attempting to preserve tradition, these monks must also make adaptations to their ancient institution in order to thrive in a new environment and culture. Together, these two factions of Theravada coexist in the Bible Belt. They represent the two Buddhisms and three aspects of change due to adaptation.

The traditional ethnic form of Burmese Buddhism now on American soil is experiencing Americanization and the resulting adaptations. The American form of Theravada also involves levels of change; reducing the tradition to meditation is seemingly typical for Americans. While considered to be nonessential or secondary by the Americans of this study, traditional Theravada elements, such as Pali chanting, are not entirely absent. The American interpretation of Buddhism sometimes includes Pali. However, it does not seem to be a fixed part of their belief system. My work on this project led me to become more aware of today's continuous developments concerning the various American systems of Buddhism collectively known as "American Buddhism." I believe that this shows how change and adaptation occurs at a much higher rate when the religion is on new ground. But, if that religion is already established, the relocated tradition can retain the breadth built throughout the centuries. The immigrant Burmese Buddhist's insistence on maintaining tradition could be the direct result of Theravada already having adapted to the change of relocation centuries ago. Nevertheless, immigrant Burmese Buddhism in the United States is still subject to Americanization, and Americanization, despite the amount, is still change, and change requires adaptation. I learned of this at the Burmese temples in Nashville and Bowling Green.

Chapter 2: Bible Belt Buddhism

Some Burmese immigrants have found a new home in Bowling Green, and Theravada Buddhism has come with them. Numrich says that “Asian Theravada Buddhists in America have sought to establish old world religio-cultural practices and institutions in their new homeland.”⁴⁵ The Burmese immigrant and refugee community’s need for a temple is great, and they succeeded in establishing one in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

In a 2010 news article addressing the opening of a Burmese Buddhist monastery in Bowling Green, reporter Lacey Steele notes, “For about three years, many refugees have sought a temple, and now they finally have one.” And, “In Bowling Green, there are hundreds of people from Burma, known more recently as Myanmar, so the International Burmese Monks Organization thought it was an important place to open a temple.”⁴⁶ Therefore, the presence of an ethnic Burmese Theravada “bhikkhu” or monk at such a temple was a necessity.

According to Numrich, “a native bhikkhu-sangha [community of monks] is prerequisite to the perpetuation of Theravada Buddhism in any country.”⁴⁷ With the exception of visiting monks, the Burmese monasteries of this study house only one monk, or bhikkhu, at a time rather than a bhikkhu-sangha. This coincides with Numrich’s assertion that “In America, an immigrant Theravada Buddhist temple may house only one

⁴⁵ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 80.

⁴⁶ Lacey Steele, “Buddhist Monastery Opens in Bowling Green,” *wbko.com*, January 2, 2010, <http://www.wbko.com/news/headlines/80517882.html>

⁴⁷ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 46.

monk, or it may house monks only irregularly.”⁴⁸ The residing monk and founder of the Bowling Green Monastery is the Venerable Ashin Raju.

Venerable Ashin Raju and Ashin Nakaji: Two Burmese Monks in the Bible Belt

Raju is a forty-one-year-old Burmese native and Theravada Buddhist monk.

Originally from Mandalay City, Raju was ordained as a bhikkhu at the age of twenty after spending eleven years in a Burmese Buddhist school. When asked why he chose to go forth, he attributed his decision to his Buddhist devotion and upbringing stating, “We are a family of Buddhism. We are very strong in Buddhism.” Raju emphasized his family’s great interest in the promotion and study of Buddhism when he stated, “The study [of Buddhism] is very interesting, so we go through Buddhist schools and Buddhist higher level schools, step by step, step by step. It is here we find happiness. We belong to living Buddhism.”

Bhikkhu Raju, who in 2009 founded the first Burmese Buddhist temple in Bowling Green, has devoted his life to the study, teaching, and promotion of Theravada Buddhism. After thirteen years of studying Pali and Buddhist philosophy, Raju attained the credentials needed to promote Buddhist philosophy in Burma. Before coming to America, he spent the previous ten years of his life at various universities in India studying Sanskrit and Buddhist/Indian Comparative Philosophy. Raju’s lengthy and impressive academic career illustrates Seager’s observation that there is a modern tendency to encourage bhikkhus to attend institutions of higher education.⁴⁹ Upon completing his studies in India, he came to the United States in 2005.

⁴⁸ Ibid., xxi.

⁴⁹ Seager, 136.

The Venerable Ashin Nakaji, abbot of a Buddhist Temple in Nashville, is a forty-six-year-old Burmese Theravada Buddhist monk. His life growing up in Burma was very similar to that of Raju's. They both had a traditional Burmese Buddhist male upbringing. Like Raju, Nakaji attributes his Buddhist beliefs to his family. Nakaji related how he comes from an all Buddhist family. He stated, "We don't have any other religion in our village or in our area; so, we are all Buddhists. My parents and grandparents all follow the Buddhist way." Nakaji spoke of how it is a Burmese tradition for parents to request that their male children become a novice monk, and how "they send their children to a Buddhist monastery to study." At nine years of age, Nakaji became a novice Buddhist monk. In Burma, it is a tradition that young males take up the robes temporarily. For instance, he would take up the robes for only a few months at a time before he would disrobe and go back to school. Nakaji's grandfather greatly influenced his decision to take full ordination when Nakaji was thirty years old. He recalls his eighty-five-year-old grandfather saying to him, "I wish to see you happy before I die." Nakaji stated, "From this time on, I stayed at the monastery."

Also similar to Raju, is Nakaji's extended level of education, which includes a Master's degree earned in Burma, the certification to teach Buddhism in Burma, and a Doctorate in Literature was obtained after studying in India. Nakaji stated, "In this way I became a monk. In the beginning, I had no intention of becoming a monk. But, because of my parents and our tradition, I study the Buddhist teachings, and I am happy."

Going into this project, I was not aware that the two Burmese subjects of this study, a monk in Bowling Green and a monk in Nashville, were longtime friends who had met years earlier while studying in India. It was, in fact, Raju and the International

Burmese Monks Organization who invited Nakaji to come to the southern region of the United States. Nakaji was assigned a temple in Nashville. While both monks were raised in Burma, and after having met in college, they now reside in the Bible Belt. Their situations in the southern region of the U.S. are similar; however, they do have significant differences. Raju is the abbot of a Theravada Buddhist temple in Bowling Green with a Burmese congregation and supported by the local Burmese community. Nakaji is the Burmese abbot of a Theravada Buddhist temple in Nashville with a Burmese and American parallel congregation. Nakaji is supported by both.

The following interviews were conducted independently of one another. They took place at different times and in two different areas of the Bible Belt. While the two Burmese subjects were never in the same room with me at the same time, I present their interviews as though they were. Since this project also deals with American Buddhist meditation leaders, I present their interviews in the same fashion. At times, I present them as if all four were in the same room at the same time, similar to a panel discussion.

As previously mentioned, one of the two Buddhisms explored in this project involves two immigrant Burmese Buddhist monks. Their congregations consist of Burmese refugees. It is because of the Burmese refugees residing in Bowling Green that Raju decided to come to this region of the U.S. The bhikkhu informed me that “there are many Burmese refugees here, a lot of Buddhism.” According to Seager, “Roughly 40 percent of Theravada Buddhists arrived in the United States as refugees.”⁵⁰ Perhaps, another element of adaptation, an element that I have not encountered in my textual research, is the issue of language barriers concerning some Burmese immigrants. While these immigrants are Burmese, they do not speak the same dialect as Raju. This was

⁵⁰ Ibid., 139.

never an issue in Mandalay. However, now being in America, the language of some Burmese immigrants in Bowling Green can be challenging to Raju. The bhikkhu stated,

It is very difficult [for refugees] to stay in the United States. First, language is a problem. Burmese refugees only know their ethnic groups and language. I am Burmese and I don't know their ethnic language. This is very difficult. I can work as a translator for the Burmese but many ethnic Burmans don't speak Burmese. They speak a different language. So, this is very difficult for me.

The language barrier experienced by Raju in Bowling Green is one element of adaptation. It represents one part of how religion, language, and culture tend to coalesce when there is an effort put forth to preserve an ancient tradition now on American soil. In other words, the ethnic Burmese settlement in Bowling Green has, in some ways, forced the Burmese community to come to one single understanding regarding adaptation. While sharing a common religion, they must also share in a new culture, an American culture that they all must accept. This is Americanization at its most rudimentary level. This is where I believe the desire to preserve tradition is at its strongest. Thus, the deviations of language within the community is an obstacle that must be overcome. This can be very aggravating for the monk. While this aspect represents adaptation, it is not key to this study. I offer it to emphasize some of Raju's challenges since his decision to come to Bowling Green, which was in great part due to the growing number of Burmese in the area.

Regarding his move to the area, Raju said, "Burmese people belong to Buddhism and they needed a Buddhist temple. They need a Buddhist monk to live in Kentucky for Burmese culture, tradition, and for celebrations such as Burmese New Year. Every festival needs a Buddhist monk, a leader in Buddhism." Buddhist festivals hold a significant amount of importance to the Burmese now in America. Preservation of

tradition can certainly be seen in the Burmese zeal for the observation of Theravada Buddhist holidays. In my experience with the ethnic temples of this study, I must agree with Numrich's assessment that "the annual religious festivals generate much more activity at the temples."⁵¹ Like Raju, Nakaji spoke of being invited to this region because of the need for a Burmese Buddhist monk to officiate festivals and rituals for the Burmese refugees and immigrants now residing in Nashville. Also, in Nashville, I meet a number of American Buddhists.

My Experience with "American Buddhism"

At a popular meditation center in Nashville, I learned of one American interpretation of Buddhism. The center's website reveals change through syncretism. For instance, the site states how they are "an integrative Buddhist meditation and study group that draws from the wisdom traditions of Zen, Vipassana, and Tibetan." It should be noted how the center was "founded in 2006 by meditation teacher [Susan] who wished to offer a contemporary Buddhist sangha [in this sense, sangha means a group of American Buddhists] that also maintains its roots in traditional teachings and practices." Susan strives to maintain some elements of tradition. To establish a basic understanding of the meditation center, I have included the following passage taken from the center's website:

[The center] is at the forefront of Western Buddhism, where we have access to all of the great dharma traditions that were once segregated by geography in the East. Our practice is not wedded to the cultural forms of Buddhism, but instead emphasizes the foundational approaches that free the mind from suffering and awaken the heart to compassion. Each of the three traditions [Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan] offer teachings and practices such as loving-kindness, compassion and mindfulness, that can help us realize true freedom in our own lives. In the late 90's [Susan] began practicing in the Theravada tradition.... [Susan] began teaching in

⁵¹ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 17.

2005 and received dharma transmission... in 2010 in the Thai Forest lineage of Ajhan Chah and Jack Kornfield.... She regularly leads daylong and residential meditation retreats.

Susan and Joe: Two American Buddhists in the Bible Belt

Susan is a fifty-seven-year-old white female who moved to Nashville with her family when she was thirteen. It was shortly after that that the young Susan first learned of Buddhism through a Zen class offered in her high school. Concerning this initial exposure to Buddhism, she recalled how she “started reading about it and it really spoke to me. I was going through a tough time. My mom died of cancer. My father died shortly thereafter. So, some of the teachings on impermanence really appealed to me, and that little [Zen] course just spoke to me so deeply that I just kind of knew.” As far as her religious identity at the time, she described how she had a clean slate, which she found beneficial to the absorption of Buddhist teachings. She explained how “the minute I discovered Buddhism it was like it spoke to me so deeply that I knew.”

A small meditation group comprising eight to twelve American adults can be found meeting twice weekly at the local Unitarian Universalist church in Bowling Green. The group’s Wednesday evening and Sunday morning meetings consist of thirty minutes of silent, seated meditation, followed by a reading, or a short discussion concerning the Buddhist literature they are studying that week. Sometimes vipassana meditation is verbally guided by the group’s leader and co-founder, Joe.

Joe is a sixty-six-year-old white male. Originally from Texas, he moved to Bowling Green after his wife got a job teaching at Western Kentucky University about ten years ago. Joe works as a drug and alcohol recovery therapist and identifies himself as a primarily Theravadin Buddhist. Joe has been leading the group in meditation and

study for seven years now. Having first discovered Buddhism years ago while being stationed in Japan during his enlistment in the U.S. Army, Joe's first exposure to Buddhism, like Susan, was through Zen, a tradition found within the school of Mahayana Buddhism, which is the predominate school in Japan.

In regard to his introduction to Zen Buddhism, Joe recalled, "I was just curious. It was one of the religions there, and I just read about it. So, it was curiosity at first." Joe spoke of how he studied quite often during his time in Japan. "I had been reading," he added, "when one [Buddhist] teacher, one time, described me as a 'bed table Buddhist.' This is when you put your book on the bed table, and that is about it." I asked Joe, if vipassana/Theravada was something that he had read about before starting regular meditation practice. "Not particularly," he replied. While he learned of Zen in Japan, he related how "most of what was in the West at that time was Zen." A contributing factor to the practice of syncretism by the two Americans of this study could be the limited access to Buddhist writings. Because of the availability of Zen at that time, Susan's and Joe's first exposure to Buddhism came via that tradition. However, both American Buddhist meditation leaders did not take to practicing meditation right away. Susan explained how when she first became Buddhist,

I didn't really start meditating. At fifteen I was a bit young to really seriously get into meditation and at that point there wasn't the resources that there are now. So, it took me some time. I was in my early thirties when I really committed to meditation. But, it was always there. I always knew at some point I would get into it. It made sense to me philosophically, psychologically, and intellectually. But, I wasn't ready to really practice yet.

According to the Nashville center's website, "[Susan] began her meditation practice in the late eighties in the Zen Buddhist tradition, studying closely with two

Rinzai Zen Masters and attending numerous mediation retreats.” Eventually Susan switched from Zen Buddhism to Theravada, and she began practicing vipassana, or insight meditation, more frequently than Zen. She revealed how vipassana “seemed like a better fit for me.” Joe added, “I think that for some people it is a really good fit.” If what I have observed at the Nashville center is any indication, Theravada’s vipassana meditation is a good fit for many.

Meditation’s Popularity in America

Being a witness to the American desire to meditate and the popularity of the practice, I mentioned to Susan how I had never been to her center when the meditation hall was not full [with American meditators]. She replied that, “we have seen a big surge in attendance recently. We are looking for a new space.” Just as Raju and Nakaji are soon to reveal, Susan stated, “We need a bigger room.” I asked if she could speculate on why there is a surge of interest. “No,” she said. “I have heard other groups experiencing it to different degrees, but I don’t have the slightest idea. I have been around sanghas for quite a few years now, and I have seen the ups and downs, but I really don’t know. I have never been able to answer that question. It is a mystery.” It must be noted at this point that many of the American meditators that attend Susan’s weekly meditation sessions do not identify as Buddhist. This a theme that will appear throughout this study.

Pertaining to this latest surge of interest, Joe attributed it to recent discoveries that emphasize the mental health values of Buddhist meditation. He spoke of how therapists have promoted the healing aspects of the practice: “they just steadily began teaching other people how to do it and they taught other medical providers on how to do it. So, you just get this seed and it keeps going and once you got that, other people begin to look

at it.” Joe has seen other times when the American zeal for meditation was at a high point. Concerning this matter, Joe said,

We’ll see if it’s a fad. It’s been through the country before. It has had a couple of earlier waves of interest. It has come through and people got interested in it, then it petered out. So, we’ll see if this takes any better. I don’t think it appeals to everybody. It is not a quick fix. It takes commitment. It takes effort, and it is not loud and extroverted. This country is very extroverted. If you are not extroverted, you want to be extroverted, and it’s not that.

The significance of meditation to this project cannot be stressed enough. While many Americans certainly find it to be important to their Buddhist practice and worldview, the Burmese monks featured in this study regularly meditate, and they also place a great significance on the practice. However, the ethnic Burmese lay temple members, according to my observations, do not necessarily place the practice at the forefront of their religiosity. This concurs with the findings of Numrich, which reveal how “[M]editation is not a major component of temple-centered religious activities for the immigrant congregations....”⁵² Joe agreed with this when he stated, “In the West we are doing this differently. In Asia, most Buddhists don’t meditate. In this country, in the West, most Buddhists do meditate. So, [Asians] are working with the monastery system. The householder... may or may not meditate.” This displays the tradition and change that exists in these two Buddhisms. Present in the Bible Belt today are ethnic ritual practitioners and American meditators.

The subjects interviewed in this study meditate on a daily basis and often more than once. Raju and Nakaji meditate twice daily. Susan meditates at least 30 minutes each day and usually first thing in the morning. Also, of course, she meditates when she

⁵² Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 82.

is leading her sessions at the center, and occasionally she “will sit in the evening if [she] has the time. Dusk is a really nice time to sit,” she said. Joe prefers to meditate first thing in the morning as well. He said, “I get up at 4 a.m. to meditate and study. It eases me into the day, and it gives me ritual.” Both Susan and Joe have spaces in their homes set aside specifically for the practice of meditation. While Joe has “just an area with a cushion,” Susan has a small room “that is designated for meditation.”

It should be noted that every subject interviewed in this study teaches meditation on a regular basis. Susan is a professional and certified meditation instructor. Joe teaches the practice to his patients and also to those who attend his meditation groups. Raju teaches meditation to the Burmese children of his temple, while Nakaji’s instruction fulfills his American congregation’s need to meditate. The importance placed on meditation by the subjects of this study is certainly apparent. But, for the two Americans of this study, meditation is paramount to their religiousness. With so much emphasis being placed on the practice, perhaps a few words about Theravada Buddhist meditation would be appropriate.

Ajahn Chah, a Thai Theravada Buddhist monk and teacher from the forest tradition, a tradition that places a great significance on the practice of meditation, reveals how “there is nothing greater than the Buddha’s teachings on concentration and insight meditation.... If you have a clear understanding of them, it will bring about unwavering peace in your hearts.”⁵³ Being that there certainly seems to be something to concentration and insight meditations, also known as *samatha* and *vipassana*, what can be said about this from the Western standpoint?

⁵³ Ajahn Chah, *Being Dharma: The Essence of the Buddha’s Teachings*, trans, Paul Brieter (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2001), 86.

Paramanda, a Western convert Theravada Buddhist and chairman of the San Francisco Buddhist Center, offers excellent detail on the practice of *vipassana* or insight meditation when he states,

The term ‘insight’ is used in a particular way within the Buddhist tradition. It does not refer to psychological insights, or the sudden feeling that we have gained a clearer understanding of something. Insight in Buddhism means a fundamental shift in the way that we view ourselves and the world around us. It is not merely an intellectual understanding, however profound, but rather a turning about, as it is said, in the very depths of our being.

If we apply this general truth to ourselves, it means that we begin more and more to give up ideas about ourselves as fixed and separate, as having some essential and unchanging core, and begin to experience ourselves as a means of connection, as part of the whole flow of being. Clearly it is very difficult to articulate the nature of such insight, because it is beyond the range of normal human experience. The only knowledge we can have of it is direct experience.⁵⁴

Similarly, Joe related how insight meditation is a verifiable experience. He said, “You don’t have to take anything on faith.” In other words, through meditation one can perceive their existence in the here and now and not rely on an entity that is external and separate. This practice has gained popularity with Bible Belt Americans.

Curious if Raju, abbot of the Bowling Green temple, has ever led American meditation groups, he replied, “I would like to, but I don’t have the place right now. My house [temple] is very small. I need a bigger room.” Raju is certainly aware of the American interest in meditation. For instance, he stated, “Next time, I will try an American only Buddhist class. But, I need a nice place because this is a small room. I will try to later.” Upon completion of the newer and much larger temple, he plans on leading meditation groups for interested Americans in Bowling Green.

⁵⁴ Paramananda, *A Practical Guide to Buddhist Meditation* (New York: Fall River Press, 2000), 145-146.

Nakaji does lead meditation groups for interested Americans in Nashville. Noting an observation made at Nakaji's temple, I commented to him how meditation seems to be a key practice in his temple for his American congregation. I asked the monk why he thought Americans are so attracted to meditation. He replied, "Actually, you can say not only Americans. Nowadays, it is all over the world. Not only in America, but people everywhere are interested in meditation to train their minds. Americans are interested because they have depression." This brings up the theme of Americans who do not identify as Buddhist, but they are still adamant about practicing meditation. Nakaji has revealed a topic about which everyone interviewed in this study is resolute. That is the idea that the practice of Buddhist meditation can ease the symptoms of stress and depression. This is important because it displays a reason for Americans to start thinking about Buddhism.

Stress, Depression, and Meditation

An important finding of this study is that the American search for relief from stress and depression can act as a gateway to Buddhism. The medicinal benefits of meditation were first revealed to me by Nakaji. Concerning depression, stress, and meditation, the monk said,

Sometimes you can take a tablet of medicine. But, instead of taking medicine for your greed attachments and depression, if you understand clearly the way of practice, such as how to keep your mind quiet and peaceful, you can practice meditation. Also, scientists have explained that meditation practice is very useful for the person who has stress and depression, or if you feel loneliness. Scientists have proven that meditation is very important. So, in this way, if you practice meditation you will see how many benefits you can get.

Susan reveals how stress reduction draws many Americans to the practice of Buddhist meditation. This is a significant point of this study. Many Americans wish to meditate,

and often they do not identify as Buddhist. According to my sources, Buddhist meditation in the Bible Belt seems to be founded on the fact that Americans are over-stressed and depressed. Why does Susan feel that Americans are so attracted to the practice of Buddhist meditation? She explained,

I think a lot of it, or part of it, is that we have such busy lifestyles. There is so much pressure in the West to do and to achieve. I think people get really overloaded with all of that. How much can a person take before they stop and begin to slow down enough to look at their lives and to do more than to be stuck constantly in a state of distraction and diversion from life? I think people start to realize this. They know they have got to do something. I think a lot of people are attracted to slowing down and taking a look at their mind. A lot of people come to me saying that they are stressed. They can't handle the amount of stress in their life. I think with a lot of people that is a starting point.

This starting point is where an American may begin to contemplate Buddhism. Initially, they did not identify as Buddhist; however, through persistent practice, they may start to embrace the teachings of the Buddha. In this way, they eventually become a Buddhist, an American Buddhist.

Joe spoke of a personal experience, which displays meditation's ability to treat depression and perhaps bring an American to Buddhism. Joe recalled how,

About 4 years ago, my wife was diagnosed with stage four cervical cancer. She was diagnosed in September, and she died on April 17th. So, we went through the chemo and radiation. That's when she finally sat and started meditating. She said to me at one point, "I think the reason you learned how to do this was to get us through this."

Joe continued by adding,

What I found was, it is an amazing way to learn to be present and to not get lost in the grief, to not get lost in the unfairness. But, you can notice when it arises in the body, to notice what the emotions are and watch what they do. Then, you can let them go where they go and come back to the present. So, what I think it does is, it helps you to be present, amazingly present! It just cools your jets.

Susan said, “There is so much right now in all the literature about stress reduction and depression, and it can do all those things. That is where I started. I was depressed. I had been clinically depressed for many years. The sitting practice helped me to get over it in the course of a year or two. So, it is powerful in that way.” This quality found in meditation could be alluring to the point of bringing Americans to the realization of the Buddha’s teachings, thus spawning an American Buddhist.

Susan related how some people use meditation as a relief from the stress and depression in their lives; other people are looking for something deeper. She said that they “are looking to free their mind from clinging and grasping.” She continued by stating that “it helps for someone to escape the web of the endless cycle of feeling that something isn’t right, or, this moment isn’t right. After that, they kind of make peace with their lives.” She added more about the results of Buddhist meditation by revealing how,

Over time, there is just more clarity of mind. There is more empathy, more compassion, and more of a sense of interconnectedness with other people. You start with yourself. I think a lot of people start with their selves and they just want to have a calmer mind. They are able to deal with stress and have a calmer mind. Then, it goes into a lot more than that. I think that empathy, the feeling of interconnection, and the desire to help others in a deeper way also comes out of the practice. So, I think it just covers a lot of ground....

Curious as to how the American subjects of this study validate their zeal for meditation as being Buddhist, I asked them how meditation relates to the teachings of the Buddha. Joe said, “The meditation really informs the writing. It just really doesn’t make sense without the meditation.” Susan replied by stating,

If you look at what the Buddha’s teachings were all about, he taught meditation and awakening through meditation. For me, it is essential to see the mind, to be still enough to remove all of our distractions so we can

actually see our mind and to cultivate clarity through that kind of awareness. That is an essential thing. It's not the only thing. I think that some people can make the mistake of thinking it is the only thing. But, I think to have a full practice and to move toward awakening is an essential part of it. It certainly has been for me.

With so much emphasis placed on the practice of Buddhist meditation, which apparently defines the American Buddhist, I sought to understand exactly what kind of Buddhism Susan and Joe adhere to, and just how different it is from the immigrant Burmese.

According to Seager, there are “Buddhist immigrant groups... [who] have begun the process of retaining , adjusting, and abandoning elements of their received traditions as a part of the adaptation to this country.”⁵⁵ It would appear as though both American and ethnic Burmese Buddhists are “abandoning elements” of Theravada Buddhism.

While Raju and Nakaji seem, to the best of their ability, to strive to preserve tradition in Bowling Green and Nashville, and though they must, through necessity, become Americanized on some level, they do not seem the least bit interested in “abandoning” any traditional Theravada elements. If anything, Raju, for instance, wishes to increase them. Concerning American Buddhists, the idea of tradition is not so easy to define.

Tradition and American Buddhists

Susan reveals the American tendency for syncretism. When I asked her about what school of Buddhism she personally adhered to, she replied, “It is a mix. It really is. I am a hybrid. Because of my initial Zen training, I identify very closely to the Mahayana approach, the direct approach into emptiness and no self. I also appreciate the *vipassana* tradition of examining all aspects of the body, the mind, and the breath. So, I appreciate both.” While Susan prefers to integrate various traditions into her beliefs, which creates a syncretistic system, Joe seems to prefer the core teachings of Theravada.

⁵⁵ Seager, 236-237.

While Joe's group discusses Buddhist readings from all schools of Buddhism after meditating, he described his preference for Theravada by stating that "what really attracted me to the tradition was it is so bare bones. At least, the way it is practiced here in the U.S., it is really bare bones." Susan finds value in all three major schools of Buddhism. Concerning Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan traditions, she stated, "For me, I just bring those things together. I identify with those traditions." She continued to add how "most of my students, and the people who come here, probably have a stronger identification with the Theravada tradition because it gives more training and instruction. Unless you are really drawn to Zen, most people want more of a pathway." Additionally, Joe said: "When you're talking about the instruction, and when it applies to meditation, it is the same thing. It's paying attention. It's noting how the body and the mind react and then working with it. So, I am not finding much of a difference. I like Theravada because it is bare bones and that is it. It really fits well with psychology." On this matter, Raju related how "American people are interested in Buddhism because of meditation, Buddhist psychology, and philosophy." There is, however, much more to be said from Raju, or rather, from both Burmese monks included in this study.

Two Burmese monks, Two Temples in the Bible Belt

The immigrant and refugee congregations led by the two Burmese monks of this study, with the exception of the laity's American born children, are, to borrow a term from Numrich, "more 'Asians-in-America' than 'Asian Americans.'"⁵⁶ If one were to refer to the form of Buddhism practiced at these temples as being "Asian American Buddhism," it would not be completely inaccurate. However, what I have observed at these temples should be more precisely termed traditional "Burmese Theravada

⁵⁶ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 80.

Buddhism,” Buddhism brought to the United States by immigrants and refugees who then transplanted the religion in the Bible Belt.

Through observations at these temples, and through discussions with the Burmese monks in Bowling Green and Nashville, there would appear to be an interesting blend of both traditional Burmese and American Buddhism. As previously mentioned, Raju wishes to someday have meditation sessions designed for American meditators in Bowling Green. This is precisely what Nakaji does at his temple in Nashville. The Burmese bhikkhu conducts weekly meditation sessions geared towards the American desire to meditate.

The Chicago and Los Angeles temples of Numrich’s study “prefer to import foreign monks for the role they play in transmitting traditional Asian Theravada in an American context.”⁵⁷ The Bowling Green abbot Raju acknowledges the American interest in meditation. Thus, the very fact that he is thinking about it makes it a form of American Buddhism. His plans to offer meditation sessions for Americans in Bowling Green would also promote the traditional Theravada form that he grew up with in Burma. What I have come to understand during the conducting of this study is, that while both Raju and Nakaji adhere to traditional Theravada Buddhism, they are both very aware of the need for American adaptation. However, it is Nakaji who, in addition to his Burmese parishioners, caters to his American congregation’s desire to meditate. Nakaji recalled, “The first time I came here [to the temple in Nashville] I saw many meditators, especially Americans.” Enthusiastically, he added, that “they come and practice. That is what made an impression.” The American zeal for meditation greatly influenced his decision

⁵⁷ Ibid., 45.

to stay and teach at the Nashville temple. He stated, “We can practice and work together.”

While Raju is the founding monk of the Bowling Green temple, Nakaji has worked to build his already existing parallel congregation. There have been other Burmese abbots at the Nashville monastery before Nakaji. The bhikkhu explained, “Normally, a monk does not want to live here. There can be many problems. At this monastery, there have been eight or ten Burmese monks. They get bored here and don’t want to stay. So, they left.” I asked him if they would rather be in Burma. The monk replied that “sometimes they move to other states. Sometimes they go back to Burma.” Nakaji revealed the difficulty of being a Buddhist monk in Nashville when he stated, “You see, the whole day I am alone.” It should be noted that Nakaji’s only companion, a live-in Burmese male attendant, whom I will discuss later, works full time at a local factory. Therefore, to occupy his time, while being alone at the temple, Nakaji said, “I practice the Dharma. I pay homage to the Buddha. And, every day I work on giving Dharma talks.” It would appear as though it could be very challenging for a Burmese monk to live so far away from the Buddhist country of Burma. I was curious about how the two Burmese Buddhist monks of this study fare at living in the Bible Belt and how they keep their precepts, which were originally put forth by the Buddha.

Chapter 3: Burmese Monks in the Bible Belt

Of the three aspects of adaptation, it is clear that Raju seeks to preserve tradition. “Burma belongs to Theravada Buddhism,” he said. Raju strives to establish a native Burmese institution with pure services. He wants “morning, evening, twenty four hours of services.” He aspires to establish this in Bowling Green in maybe the next two or three years. He excitedly declared to “make it possible, to make it like in Burma!” Raju would even like to have a traditional Burmese type structure erected. However, he said “it is difficult to build a Burmese style temple here because of city hall and permits.” Nevertheless, despite Raju’s loyalty to traditional Burmese Theravada Buddhism, and out of necessity, the monk adheres to certain elements of Americanization, which results in some adaptations to the Vinaya, the monastic code that both he and Nakaji became accustomed to while living as monks in Burma.

The Vinaya

How does a Burmese Buddhist monk maintain his monastic vows in the Bible Belt? Mohan Wijayaratna states, “Monastic life required that specific practices regarding clothes and lodging, money and food, solitude and inner progress should be observed; this implies, on one hand, training and initiation, and on the other hand, a set of regulations.”⁵⁸ The Buddha’s monastic code, or Vinaya, consists of 227 rules for monks.

Wijayaratna writes:

We have had ample evidence of the fact that the Vinaya rules were not simply designed to create a propitious atmosphere for a life free from defilements; they also laid stress on health and comfort, and insisted on the observance of proper social customs inside the Community. They

⁵⁸ Mohan Wijayaratna, *Buddhist Monastic Life: According to the Texts of the Theravada Tradition*, trans. Claude Grangier and Steven Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 137.

regulated every daily act of the monks, their way of eating, of walking, of dressing, etc., down to small details of behavior.⁵⁹

Numrich adds, “Since the Vinaya defines the bhikku-sangha, we will want to know how Theravada monks now fare in following the Vinaya in America.”⁶⁰ While Numrich’s research of bhikku-sanghas, or community of monks, in America consists primarily of Los Angeles and Chicago, Wilson argues that these regions are “not some sort of truly representative phenomenon that adequately accounts for Buddhist practice in every region of the country.”⁶¹ Therefore, I seek to ascertain how the Burmese monks Raju and Nakaji “fare in following the Vinaya” in the Bible Belt, and can a southern American Buddhist monk be successful in doing so?

Numrich states, “As some observers point out, the monastic lifestyle simply goes against the grain of mainstream American culture. In contrast to Asian Buddhist countries, monasticism is not portrayed as a viable option in this society much less as a spiritual ideal.”⁶² Pertaining to this matter, I asked Nakaji if a southern American monk could live by the Vinaya in the Bible Belt. He replied,

Why not? Suppose you want to learn what the way is for a monk and what is not. This is not really difficult in America. What is really important is the tradition of the Buddha’s teaching. We grow up in different kinds of culture. But, if you can learn like some American monks, like Bhikkhu Bodhi, and other American monks, you can live well. But, the problem is, if you are really careful about the Vinaya, you need a society who can support you and whom you have to teach.

Both Raju and Nakaji agree that the Bible Belt region is hardly as favorable to the monastic lifestyle as is Burma. Both monks grew up in Buddhist monasteries and

⁵⁹ Ibid., 121.

⁶⁰ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 46.

⁶¹ Wilson, 11.

⁶² Numrich in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, 150.

schools in a Buddhist country. They are both accustomed to living by the Vinaya, and Burma, according to Raju, is a Buddhist environment conducive to doing so. Hence, as previously noted, being a Buddhist there, according to Raju, “is very easy because [Burma] belongs to Buddhism. Here [the Bible Belt] it is different, sometimes difficult.” Nakaji added that “what is different in Burma is that the monk doesn’t have to do anything. The monk only has two duties, to study the Buddhist scripture and practice meditation. But, to practice meditation means that you can teach meditation and give Dharma talks. But, you don’t have to do any business like here.” He continued to express how “living here, it is not easy to follow the Buddhist Vinaya exactly.” While he follows it as much as possible, he revealed how he cannot live by the Vinaya entirely because he does not always have an attendant, someone who greatly aids the monk in keeping his precepts.

Comparing Burma to Bowling Green further, Raju illustrated the “big difference” by recollecting his former routine of alms rounds that were taken “by every monk at 8 a.m.” Wijayaratna explains the concept of alms rounds by stating how “monks... were only allowed to eat what they had been given. They were not to provide themselves with food. Even if they chanced upon some food, they were not allowed to eat it.... They had two ways of obtaining food: they could beg from house to house, or be invited to eat by lay followers.”⁶³ Nakaji mentioned the support provided by the Buddhist laity in Burma when he referred to alms rounds as supplying “whatever I needed.”

Comparing the Bible Belt to Burma, Nakaji explained how “In Burma, though it is not a rich country, they know how to support a monk. You don’t worry about paying

⁶³ Wijayaratna, 58.

the electricity or something like that. That's why I can keep the Vinaya [in Burma] because, the surrounding people are all Buddhist.” Also, Raju spoke of the many Buddhists in Burma that visit the temple “every day, not just on Sunday, but every day.” Raju described the landscape as being advantageous to the monastic way of life. He fondly recalled how Burma “has a lot of golden stupas-pagodas. Every time you go into a pagoda you take meditation, walking meditation, or sitting meditation. It is not like that here.” Being that the cities of Bowling Green and Nashville are hardly as conducive to the Theravadin monastic lifestyle as is Burma, both Raju and Nakaji must make compromises and accept adjustments to the Vinaya.

Vinaya Adaptations

In his study of immigrant Theravada Buddhist temples, Numrich explains how monks “have special problems as they attempt to follow an ancient Asian Buddhist discipline in a modern Western non-Buddhist country.”⁶⁴ As a result, Numrich adds, “the Vinaya has undergone adaptation or modification.”⁶⁵ Vinaya adaptation is a rather controversial issue amongst Buddhists residing in America today. On one side of the debate, according to Numrich, are those who are “against any tampering with the Vinaya at all.”⁶⁶ It is believed by some that to “change the Vinaya is to change the bhikkusangha’s identity,” and “by cutting up the Vinaya, the monks would be ‘dismembering’ the Buddha, since the Buddha had appointed the Vinaya as teacher after his physical

⁶⁴ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 46.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Numrich in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, 156.

death.”⁶⁷ Others fear that the act of ignoring minor rules could escalate into the non-recognition of major rules until the Vinaya is no more.⁶⁸

On the other side of the debate, Prebish writes of American Buddhists who advocate a “new Vinaya...for the modern world.”⁶⁹ Surprisingly, according to Numrich, it is the “ethnic Asian monks in America, not American convert monks, [who] are behind the push to modify the Vinaya to suit the American context.”⁷⁰ Conversely, however, Numrich also explains: “For some American Buddhists, in fact, Theravada monasticism epitomizes those aspects of traditional Asian Buddhism that should be abandoned in the construction of a new, nonhierarchical, nonauthoritarian, and nonsexist Western vehicle of the Buddha’s teachings.”⁷¹

Concerning a new and more modern American Vinaya, Nakaji seemed to be somewhat opposed to the idea. He stated that “monks in a Western country, because of their cultures, are different. If you become a monk, Western or Asian, it does not matter, you have to keep the Buddha’s rules and regulations. It is not like since you are now living in America you don’t care about the Vinaya. You must follow it! If you do not... it is hard to explain, but you are not really a monk.” Quite possibly, the debate over this issue will continue indefinitely. Most importantly perhaps, is the Buddha’s approval of modifying the Vinaya.

Wijayaratna tells us that the canonical Buddhist texts recount how the Buddha allowed his disciples to modify minor rules with the agreement of the community.⁷²

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Prebish, 245.

⁷⁰ Numrich in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, 156.

⁷¹ Ibid., 150.

⁷² Wijayaratna, 143.

Unfortunately, however, the monks of the first Buddhist council, according to Wijayaratna, “were not able to decide which of the rules constituted these ‘minor rules’ referred to by the Buddha.”⁷³ Numrich says that as a result of the inability to differentiate minor rules from major ones, “the [Theravada] tradition has been very conservative ever since.”⁷⁴ There is no doubt that Raju and Nakaji are conservative in the Theravada Buddhist sense; nevertheless, minor adaptations, or adjustments to the Vinaya, have been put into practice at both monasteries. One must keep in mind that the particular adjustments made are not unique to these temples. They have been put into practice throughout the “United States where Vinaya adaptation has occurred.”⁷⁵ Discreetly, perhaps, is the change to the Theravada tradition occurring at the immigrant temples in the Bible Belt. This can be seen in the adaptations made to the Vinaya once Theravada Buddhism has been relocated to a new territory.

Changes to the Theravada tradition can be seen in elements of the monk’s everyday affairs such as dress. Wijayaratna writes, “The clothes worn by monks... are one of the most important symbols of the religious life.”⁷⁶ Furthermore, he adds, “Rules and advice concerning the Buddhist monk’s dress expressed and reinforced the spirit of detachment from material values.”⁷⁷ This can be seen in the simple dress of a Theravada Buddhist monk’s triple robe, or kathina-civara. However, at times, the kathina-civara must be altered or added to. For instance, within the climate of any given region in the United States, a Theravada monk is now permitted to adjust his attire as needed.

Virtually every temple in America has permitted their monks to wear additional garments

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 51.

⁷⁵ Numrich in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, 158.

⁷⁶ Wijayaratna, 32.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 41.

over and/or under their traditional triple robes in cold weather. The extra garments are dyed to match the color of the bhikkhu's robes. Wilson states, "We can look to a number of factors in our analyses of regional impacts on Buddhism. One is climate and terrain. Theravada monks in the northern states cannot go about with bare feet and head, one shoulder uncovered, and just the traditional thin robes as they often might in Southeast Asia."⁷⁸ On warmer days, I have seen Raju cloaked only in the traditional, Vinaya approved, triple robe. On most occasions, as does Nakaji, he dons ochre colored t-shirts under his saffron robes. Seager describes the "permitted adjustments in dress" in America when he states, "...bhikkhus now wear thermal underwear beneath their robes, knit caps, heavy sweaters, and socks with sandals in winter, usually dyed the traditional ochre of the Theravada sangha."⁷⁹ Likewise, when the weather turns cold in Kentucky, Raju will wear additional garments such as "socks, coats, and hats of the same color [as his robes], and sometimes he wears gloves of the same color."

Beside the issue of cold weather, according to Numrich, the wearing of robes in public can often be problematic for the monk who sometimes experiences American prejudices.⁸⁰ Numrich cites Yogavacara Rahula as the source when referring to the trials of the triple robed monk outside the monastery. "Often mistaken for 'Hare Krishna' adherents, Theravada monks have endured 'cat calls or rude comments, and in rare cases [have been] assaulted by religious bigots' while out in public."⁸¹ Raju denied ever being assaulted or harassed in any way when he visits the city, but he laughingly spoke of the common occurrence of people's greetings in passing. "People say, 'Hi Buddha. Or, Hi

⁷⁸ Wilson, 28.

⁷⁹ Seager, 141.

⁸⁰ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 47.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Dalai Lama.” He enthusiastically stated how “They recognize Buddhism.” Similar to a temple in Illinois where Seager tells of the locals “mistaking the temple, with its monks in robes and sandals, for an Asian kung-fu training center,”⁸² Raju is sometimes “mistaken for a Shaolin kung-fu monk.” Interestingly, he mentioned not a single negative experience resulting from being robed in the city of Bowling Green. The same can be said for Nakaji in Nashville.

While Nakaji and Raju no longer beg for alms as they had in Burma, the monks certainly comply with the Vinaya with respect to its stipulations concerning the consumption of food. Though very similar, there is a moderate level of variance between the Theravada temples of Numrich’s study and the monasteries of this study concerning a monk’s involvement with food. Numrich describes how “the first of two [meals] allowed under the Vinaya is prepared and served by lay people.”⁸³ This practice can be seen taking place in both of the Burmese temples of this study. For instance, Raju explained how “a different Burmese family brings food and cooks every day.” Nakaji said his attendant or *kappiya* regularly performs this task. Both Raju and Nakaji eat only twice a day and never after midday. When the two monks of this study were in Burma, where alms rounds are the norm, keeping their precept of not storing/cooking food was never an issue. However, in the American context this regulation had to be adapted. For instance, Numrich points out that “if no lay people come to the temple that day, the monks will prepare the meal themselves.”⁸⁴ When asked if he ever cooks for himself, Raju laughingly replied, “I don’t cook.” Nakaji chose to go into more detail on this matter.

⁸² Seager, 141.

⁸³ Numich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 16.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

While different local Burmese families prepare Raju's meals, Nakaji relies on his live-in Burmese male attendant.

Nakaji stressed the importance of having an attendant or *kappiya* when it comes to keeping his precepts. Pertaining to the bhikkhu's meals, there are important duties the *kappiya* performs. One is that he is there to formally offer the food to Nakaji. According to the Vinaya, "Monks must not eat food which they have not received from someone else's hands. If a monk does eat food which he has not received from someone else's hands, he commits an offense in the *Pacittiya* category."⁸⁵ Nakaji said that, "to eat without being offered first, you get a small offence. This you can confess to another monk." Nevertheless, Nakaji currently has a single male Burmese attendant who offers him meals, and though he works all day, it is better than having no attendant at all. Unfortunately, there are not always *kappiyas* available.

Nakaji explained how "mostly in the United States, there are few attendants to stay in a monastery. Some have requested to stay, but it is not easy in a monastery because they are boring." Therefore, if Nakaji does not have an attendant to accept the food after midday, anyone who donates past this time must place it in the refrigerator. Nakaji is supported by fourteen donors who will give two weeks' worth of groceries at one time. It is the *kappiya's* duty to formally offer it to the monk the following morning. Nakaji stated, "At 6:00 A.M. my attendant wakes up and offers tea and whatever he cooks. In this way, I keep to my precepts. Otherwise, I have to do it myself." Keeping to their precepts, as previously mentioned, the monks' of this study never eat after midday.

⁸⁵ Wijyaratna, 58.

Numrich mentions the issue of some monks choosing to eat after midday because some feel that “relations with American laity may suffer severe limitations if monks cannot take advantage of such evening interaction.”⁸⁶ When I asked Raju if there was ever a time that he would eat after midday, he responded, “No. In the evenings, I take only juice, Coke, or Pepsi.” Nakaji described how he is not allowed to even accept food if given to him after midday. He explained how “some people who have food will bring it here and store it in the fridge. They can then offer it in the morning or daytime, or the *kappiya*, who lives here, offers it to me. The rest, whatever I don’t finish, he takes care of. In this way, I can keep to my precepts as much as I can. But, I cannot say I can keep them one hundred percent.” Nakaji and Raju acknowledged the need for Vinaya adaptation in America. Adaptation can also be seen in their views on transportation.

Pertaining to transportation, Numrich reveals how “except in cases of illness, the Theravada texts take a dim view of monks even riding in a vehicle.”⁸⁷ He adds how the “Vinaya prohibition is disabling even if interpreted as allowing laity to chauffeur monks to their destinations. Very little of consequence can be found within walking distance of either temple in [Numrich’s] study.”⁸⁸ Asking Raju how he gets around the city of Bowling Green, he answered, “Here is a small town, a small city, and transportation is very difficult.” He contrasted the access to reliable transportation in Bowling Green to New York City where he lived for four years. The monk explained how “In New York City it is very easy with trains and subways.” The Bowling Green monastery, being located deep within a large residential neighborhood, means that one would have to walk for quite some time just to escape the subdivision. Seagar quotes the difficulty of one

⁸⁶ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 48.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Theravada monk in Los Angeles who laments, “I needed to drive, as Los Angeles is virtually uninhabitable if you can’t get around and certainly it makes a monk useless if he cannot reach his community.”⁸⁹

Unlike the Chicago and Los Angeles monks of Numrich’s study, Raju does not drive. The Bowling Green and Nashville monasteries do not own automobiles. Raju does manage to get around when his temple duties require him to. It is the responsibility of the temple’s laity to drive the monk when he is in need of transportation. However, Nakaji has not ruled out the possibility that he may one day drive. The bhikkhu stated,

To drive all over the states of America, a monk can drive himself. Driving, in itself, is not breaking any rules or regulations. If you don’t have any intention to kill, you don’t have any problems. You can drive. But racing, that’s a no. When you follow the rules and regulations you can still have an accident. That is why I don’t want to. But, now I am in a situation. I cannot say that he [the *kappiya*] will live here for many months. What he cannot do, I can do myself. That is why I need to study driving.

For now, it is the *kappiya*’s duty to tend to Nakaji’s transportation needs. For instance, Nakaji revealed how sometimes his donors are not free to get supplies to the temple. “So,” he said, “the *kappiya* has a car, and he will go get the food and bring it here, which is not an easy job.” Also, the *kappiya* sees to it that Nakaji gets to where he needs to go. Since Nakaji’s attendant works a full time job outside of the temple, he is not always available. Once again, Nakaji compared this dilemma to the ease of being a monk in Burma by stating,

If I needed to go here and there, I had many Burmese devotees to drive for me. In Burma, I don’t need to buy anything or worry about something like that. But, here that is not possible. Here [the *kappiya*] can do it for me. But, he can only do it in his spare time. So, I cannot ask every time. You see the situation? When he is asleep, I cannot ask for anything. But, if he is free, like on the weekend, and he sleeps well on Sunday, then on

⁸⁹ Seager, 140.

Monday morning I can request if he can take care of this for me, or, if he can drive for me. If I want to go to the bank, or if I want to go do something, I can go with him.

Pertaining to the Vinaya, Seager writes, “Vinaya regulations are central to practice, but are modified when necessary.”⁹⁰ On this matter, Nakaji stated,

In Burma, if I need to go any place, I can ask you. That’s how I can keep the Vinaya. Because, the surrounding people are all Buddhist. They understand the way to help. That’s why here, I am not so lucky. If I need to go here and there, if I need to use a car to pay money or do something, these are not major rules and regulations. These are minor. But, if you can keep both major and minor rules, it is better for your life. But, sometimes those small rules and regulations, you may break.

Modification to the Vinaya certainly displays an element of adaptation in the Theravada tradition once it has been relocated to the American South. Adaptation can also be seen in how the Burmese deal with the second generation being raised on American soil.

Second Generation Burmese

In accordance with the findings of other researchers such as Numrich, the Americanization of the Burmese second generation is an issue in this study as well. Numrich “detected a certain amount of second-generation disaffection from immigrant culture and religion at both temples in [his] study, another familiar theme in the Americanization of immigrant groups.”⁹¹ To the Asian immigrant community and temple, the significance of providing their children with a traditional Buddhist upbringing is substantial. Numrich would agree by stating, “The immigrant generation at Wat Dhammaram places a high priority on passing along traditional culture and religion to its

⁹⁰ Seager, 152.

⁹¹ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 141.

children.”⁹² That the children receive a proper Burmese Buddhist education is also extremely important to Raju, Nakaji, and the Burmese families who attend their temples.

“In America,” writes Numrich, “even though immigrant children may be born into an ethnic community, they are not born with an inherent religious identity. This they ultimately must choose for themselves, voluntarily, which at least partially explains the concern for children’s religious programming.”⁹³ Asking Raju about how important it is that the younger generation, the Burmese children born in America, know and understand Buddhism and Burmese culture, he replied, “Burmese children don’t know Burmese culture because they are born in America. So, the first importance is Burmese culture.” Raju believes that learning Burmese culture “is needed for Burmese language.”

Interestingly, he places the learning of Burmese culture before learning the language. Apparently, learning the culture is a means to learning the language. “Language is very important,” he added. “For example, when coming to the United States, they need English language to know American history and American culture. It is the same like this.” The monk continued by stating that “only Burmese people come here on Sunday. Burmese are the majority at this temple. Some need Burmese language because they are born in the United States. They cannot speak the Burmese language; so, we translate Burmese teachings.”

I asked Raju if he thought that American culture affects the Burmese children of the temple in any negative ways. He answered, “Yes. American culture is very dangerous. I see it here. Television and the internet are everywhere.” Pertaining to this topic, Nakaji added,

⁹² Ibid., 97.

⁹³ Ibid., 143.

Nowadays, here [in America], as far as I know, there is much sensual desire. You want to buy. You want to do. You can switch on the internet and everything will arrive at your house or home. You have American dreams. You want to own a house and have properties. But, you want to get more and more. That is the nature of human desire. Not only Americans, but other people too. Once born as a human, and being that we have greed attachment, based on that attachment we consider how to get things.

Passionate about this topic, Raju discussed how “this generation [of Burmese] needs to know Burmese culture. Burmese culture is respect. It is respect to teachers, respect to parents, and also parents supporting their children, and then the children taking care of their parents. That is over! In America, eighteen and over is freedom. My country is not like that.” I asked if the kids left home when they turned eighteen in Burma. Raju replied, “It is a different culture, this eighteen years and up. My country is not like that. You take care of your parents.” Furthermore, he noted the tradition of the entire family living together in Burma as one unit. He related how in America, “Monday through Friday parents go to their jobs, and they cannot be home for their children. In our country the grandmother and grandfather all live in one house. Here it is different.” Significant here is how the next generation of Burmese are being raised in America.

As Seager explains, “A second and in many cases a third generation is on the rise whose attitude toward tradition will largely determine the shape of immigrant Buddhism in the twenty-first century. Asian immigration remains open, however, which means that a first generation is being constantly replenished.”⁹⁴ Seager adds, “As children and grandchildren became thoroughly Anglicized and Americanized, the process of translating Theravada traditions into American forms began in earnest, with the establishment of after-school programs, Buddhist summer camps, and Sunday dharma

⁹⁴ Seager, 237.

schools.”⁹⁵ This is precisely what Raju does. To the best of his ability, he combats the Americanization of the second generation Burmese at his temple. He does this through education. Raju adamantly insisted that “education is very important.” Hence, a Burmese Buddhist education is what every child at his temple receives.

While the Bowling Green temple offers weekly Sunday school for Burmese children, Raju also proudly spoke of his summer school program. The monk explained how “for one month, three days a week, we have summer classes for the [Burmese] Buddhist young.” I asked Raju what was involved in summer school. He explained how the children are given a “Buddhist education. They learn Buddhist philosophy, Pali, Burmese tradition, and language. They also learn meditation to get straight in their minds.” Similarly, the temples of Numrich’s study “[have] Sunday school and ethnic language classes for the children....”⁹⁶ However, Raju explains that in the children’s Sunday school, he often must speak in English. He pointed out that “some children born in the U.S. don’t know Burmese, and so I talk in English.” Raju speaks in English for the American born Burmese children who attend the temple on Sundays. The adult Burmese in Bowling Green also meet on Sundays. This could be another element of Americanization. Since they gather at a house/temple located in a residential area, there are often issues with the neighbors.

How do Buddhists in the American South fare with their neighbors? Numrich’s study yielded some unfortunate data about certain problems that one of the immigrant Theravada Buddhist temples of his research had with the locals’ narrow-mindedness and even criminal acts directed toward the temple. He explains incidents perpetrated by

⁹⁵ Ibid., 139.

⁹⁶ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 17.

teenagers who “drive their cars across [the temple] yard,” and how “the...Sheriff’s Department describes cases of theft and property damage, and many more incidents of vandalism and harassment go unreported.”⁹⁷ Curious if Raju had experienced similar misfortunes at his temple, I asked if he had any problems with vandalism, theft, or anything of that nature. Raju answered, “I don’t have a problem here because we are peace makers.”

Expecting to uncover some variety of delinquency directed toward the Bowling Green temple, it was fortunate that I did not. The temple has had no such experiences. There is, however, one issue that Raju speaks of at length that involves the neighbors and the temple’s limited parking space. He explained,

We have some problems when we have major programs and ceremonies. We don’t have much of a parking lot. It is small. I negotiate to apologize in this area [for the many vehicles parked up and down the neighborhood’s street]. The first time was very difficult. The neighbors didn’t know. So, I had to make them understand. But, this puts me in a position, because we are from Asia and are different. Our country is all Buddhist with the same culture and same religion. There, it is no problem. Here, it is a different religion, different culture, and a different history. So, the first time was very difficult.

Saying more about the relationship with his non-Buddhist neighbors, the monk stated, “There is no problem. It is a peace process.” Raju goes to his neighbors two or three days before to explain that there will be a major ceremony held at the temple. Although he has never faced any outright acts of racism, intolerance can still be found. For instance, one individual commented on a website concerning the Bowling Green temple, “They make it sound like it’s a holy building for every religion ... come and pray to the many gods, wonderful. The world is in bad shape.”⁹⁸ I don’t think Raju has seen the

⁹⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁹⁸ <http://www.topix.com/forum/city/bowling-green-ky/TBRI7JQ9QL9DI9>

comments on this website; however, they display the mentality that many non-Buddhists in the Bible Belt possess pertaining to the Burmese and Buddhism. For the most part, I believe it is simply a lack of understanding the religion and a prejudice that stems from the typical Christian Bible Belt upbringing. Fortunately, for the Chicago temple of Numrich's study, "relations between the temple and the neighborhood have steadily improved over the years."⁹⁹ The Bowling Green temple, like Numrich says about his temple, "has shown itself to be a good neighbor...."¹⁰⁰ However, as Raju pointed out, "this [temple] is only temporary.

Raju explained how his Burmese Buddhist congregation is growing, and as a result, he is looking for a larger complex than the small suburban home that is the temple today. Being a provisional structure, Raju insists that "we will change this." Wanting to build a Burmese type structure in Bowling Green, Raju explained the struggle. He laughingly spoke of the difficulty of such an undertaking in the United States when he remarked, "it's a lot of paper work." Nevertheless, he is excited about the possibility of conducting Buddhist classes for Americans only, but not before he has a more accommodating structure.

⁹⁹ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 4: Interactions with Christians in the Bible Belt

I could not enter into a project concerning the Bible Belt without examining the place of Christians and Christianity. As Wilson reports, “A further regional influence on Buddhism is the local culture and religion. This is significant... in the South. It manifests in many ways, but above all it is especially defined by Buddhism’s relationship with Christianity.”¹⁰¹ While Christian animosity and conversion efforts directed towards Buddhists are not an overt issue for my Buddhist subjects, this would appear to be contrary to some of the other ethnographic findings presented in this study.

One of Wilson’s American Buddhist subjects explains how “we would get people denouncing us. Every so often you get paranoid feelings. Christians come through and put flyers on the buildings. That’s happened.”¹⁰² Incidentally, Numrich speaks of one American Buddhist convert who wrote and published a Buddhist “tract for [Theravada] Thai Buddhists to hand back to Christian door-to-door evangelists.”¹⁰³ Also, one particular member of Wilson’s temple “got a really strange invitation to the Baptist Mission Board to come and speak with them. They wanted to know what the weaknesses of our path were so that they could train missionaries to convert Buddhists to Christianity.”¹⁰⁴ Not surprisingly, Wilson’s Southern American Buddhist subjects “minimize their public presence and avoid any possible conflict with non-Buddhists;” thus, they perceive themselves as being “a small religious minority in a sea of conservative, potentially hostile evangelical Christianity.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Wilson, 158.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 110.

¹⁰⁴ Wilson, 159.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 158.

One must keep in mind how the upbringings of American Buddhists could contribute to their fear of “potentially hostile evangelical [Christians].” Numrich’s study reveals case after case of American converts who grew up Christian, became disillusioned with the faith, discovered *vipassana* meditation, and then found a home in Theravada Buddhism. For instance, Numrich relates how, “Well over 80 percent of the American converts surveyed have practiced other religions, mostly Christianity and Judaism. The interviewees [profiled]...grew up in at least nominally religious contexts, several of a conservative, even fundamentalist, nature. These converts exhibit a generally critical attitude, including a certain amount of residual bitterness toward the religious backgrounds they left behind.”¹⁰⁶ To an extent, this could be said about the American Buddhist subjects of this study.

My Bowling Green American Buddhist subject, Joe, spoke of his Presbyterian upbringing: “My father’s side was evangelical and reform, which is a Dutch reform church. I had an aunt and uncle that were way up in the hierarchy of that church. I grew up in church, but it just didn’t ever really make a whole lot of sense.” Numrich relates a similar case history of one of his American convert Buddhists who “was raised an ‘orthodox Lutheran’... but eventually found many things in the Christian faith that his mind could not reconcile....”¹⁰⁷

Somewhat contradicting the majority of American Buddhist upbringings, Susan’s childhood was, as she described, “being without religion.” However, Susan had some early involvement with church, which could be considered, like Numrich mentioned, as being nominal. She went to church periodically. Susan recollected how “sporadically we

¹⁰⁶ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 117.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 110.

would go to the Unitarian church. My father was totally non-religious and had no affiliation. But, my mom wanted me to have some community or something.”

I asked both of my American subjects how they feel today about their religious upbringings. In other words, what are their feelings toward that religion today? Joe had the most to say. Like Numrich has found, he too displays “a generally critical attitude, including a certain amount of residual bitterness toward the religious [background] he left behind.” Joe stated,

When I look at a lot of the evangelicals, it looks like a scam. As I look at the theatre they put on, it really looks like a scam to me. But, I also know that the people believe. A lot of people don't question it and don't know the history of the church, and they don't know a lot. Many people are really surprised that there has been more than just the King James Bible. So, I try not to argue with them. If it works for them, it works for them. I use [Buddhism] at work. I don't tell people I'm doing it. But yes, I do it at work. If they ask, I tell them I am a Buddhist, or a Unitarian, whichever one seems to fit. Both of them take explanation. My coworkers know, but the staff doesn't.

The “staff” that Joe is referring to are those that work at the drug and alcohol rehabilitation center, but are not therapists.

I asked Joe what he thought about Christians. He responded, “It is really hard not to be Christian in this area. Most of the people who come through here are pretty much fundamentalist. Their idea of spirituality is praying and reading the Bible.” I asked if he had any relationships with Christians, or if he has had many experiences with them that he could share, either good or bad. “At work,” he replied. “It's not that I keep my beliefs to myself, but I don't hit them in the face with it. If they ask questions about it, I will tell them. When it comes to meditation, I suggest that they try it.”

The Unitarian Church

As previously mentioned, Joe's meditation group gathers at a Unitarian Universalist Church. It is certainly apparent that this church has ties to American Buddhism. Susan also has experience with American Buddhism at a Unitarian Church. She stated,

I have Buddhist friends that go to the Unitarian Church, and they love it. They have told me that Unitarians are very Buddhist friendly, and that there is some connection there. I don't know personally, because I don't go anymore. When [my meditation center] started, we would put up posters. Quite a few people who practiced at the Unitarian Church would come and sit with us. So, there is certainly an openness and an interest in exploring. I would say it is certainly one of the more Buddhist friendly groups out there.

Wanting to know more about this Unitarian-Buddhist connection, I asked Joe about it.

He replied, "Universalist Unitarians welcome anybody that is doing an honest search for whatever it is they are searching for. There are Buddhists, Catholics, Atheists, a Wiccan or two, and even a couple of Pagans. It is a place for these people to hang out. Yes, they are Buddhist friendly." But, what about the American Buddhist relationship with non-Buddhists?

I asked Susan if she had any relationships with non-Buddhists, or if the center had any good or bad experiences with Christians in the area. "I haven't had any trouble," she replied. "Of course," she added, "we don't go out and be blatant. There is no big issue that I am aware of." I asked if any Christians came there to meditate. "I am sure they do," she responded. The topic of Christian meditators will be addressed in the following section of this project, which looks at the relationship that the Buddhists of this study have with Christians.

Burmese Buddhist Monks and Christians

Asking Raju about what it was like to be a Buddhist monk in Bowling Green, a town with many Christians, the monk replied, “In our country [Burma], it is very easy to be a Buddhist because there is a lot of Buddhism. Kentucky is Christian people, it is very strong. We seek a peace process.” I then inquired about this “peace process,” and Raju stated, “Yes, there is a peace process that I try to promote. There are Islamists, Buddhists, and Christians, three religions in this area. We have discussions about the peace process. We are interested in human beings and how we can create peace all together.” Raju desires “to live in harmony like a family, like brothers and sisters, then we have a peace process. I see a lot of Christians and Islamists fighting. There are politics in religion. We don’t need it being this complex. Religion is religion and politics are politics. There is a difference. There is a peace process I try to promote.”

Pertaining to other religions, Nakaji added, “I do have relationships with other religions but not that often. When they want to know about Buddhism or the practice of meditation, I teach without expectation of whether they want to convert or not. I never persuade them.” Additionally, Raju stated,

Bowling Green has very educated people. It is very interesting and a good place for me. I see some people, and they already know Buddhism. Some people see discovery in each other. So, by listening, we all get something, every religion. So, that is a good position for me. American people and the peace process. They understand it already. Buddhism is non-violence. We respect every religion. But, it is hard to promote the peace process to human beings who can’t see both sides. You see only one side when you should see both sides everywhere in religion. It is not good to see only one way. We need to see two ways.

While Christians and other non-Buddhists do visit the Burmese temples of this study, Raju described the various reasons for their interest in his temple by stating that

“when we have had talks on comparative religion at the temple, some Christian people came to hear.” Also, he spoke of some local non-Buddhists whose primary interest in the temple is language. The bhikkhu stated, “Christians and Muslims come here and are progressing in our language. They are religious, and they study the Burmese language.”

Referring to Christians, Nakaji said, “Church groups come by sometimes. They have questions about Buddhism such as, ‘How did Buddhism begin? What idea does Buddhism teach about God? What happens to people when they die?’” Nakaji will teach anyone who is interested regardless of religious affiliation. “The Buddha,” according to Nakaji, “never said ‘If you are Buddhist I can teach you.’ He didn’t persuade like that. That is why the Buddha explained to all his disciples that this is the right path, and this is the wrong path. This is wholesome, and this is unwholesome. This is the way to the beautification of your mind.” Pertaining specifically to the Christian inquiry about God, there is much to be said on this matter.

Buddhism and the Idea of God

About Nakaji’s Christian visitors’ inquiry into the Buddhist idea of God, it should be noted that the Abrahamic concept of an all-mighty creator God is nonexistent within the Buddhist religion. Asanga Tilakaratna writes, “no Buddhist tradition... has ever incorporated into its system the belief in a God who is creator and savior.”¹⁰⁸ Also, “the belief in his creation and salvation of the world does not find a place in Buddhism.”¹⁰⁹ Tilakaratna goes on to explain how the Pali canon contains “many statements clearly

¹⁰⁸ Asanga Tilakaratna, “Buddhist Non-Theism: Theory and Application” in *Approaching the Dhamma: Buddhist Texts and Practices in South and Southeast Asia*, eds. Anne M. Blackburn and Jeffrey Samuels (Washington: Pariyatti Publishing, 2003), 125.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

denying the existence of God.”¹¹⁰ He states how “the Buddha criticizes [the creationist] view as causing inactivity and lack of moral responsibility and initiative.”¹¹¹

Furthermore, he reveals how “The world is without protection; there is no over-lord there.”¹¹² Raju and Nakaji have much to say on this topic.

Raju stated, “There are issues with the Christian religion, such as everything is created. They owe their lives to God. They believe, yet they are doing nothing. In Buddhism this is not so.” Nakaji added, “Buddha is not God. He is not a messenger of God or a prophet. The Buddha was a human being, but he was not an ordinary human being. He was an extraordinary human being. Buddhists believe in the human capacity. But, it is not like an agency of God. We rely on the Buddha as a teacher, but not like he is a savior or a god.” Nakaji and Raju continued by explaining their Buddhist belief in self-reliance.

Nakaji asserted that “in Buddhism, we believe in karma. We rely on ourselves. We do not rely on other people.” Raju expanded on this by explaining how a spiritual entity cannot save you. It is entirely up to you. In other words, it is only yourself who can guide you to a spiritual place, and it requires diligence more so than religion. He asked, “Who creates your light? My light, I created. If I eat and sleep and don’t study, it is hard to process light. That is doing nothing. That is an example. Religion is not important. How does it promote right mindsets? That is very important.” Additionally, Nakaji stated, “In Buddhism, we can only talk to you about the way, what is right and what is wrong. But, you yourself must walk the way. That is very hard. If you practice Buddhism, you can get a peaceful mind with dispassion and with no doubt.” Raju

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 129.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 130.

¹¹² Ibid.

continued by stating, “Religion is nothing. Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism are nothing. How do we make peace? How do we make our lives like a family? Everybody’s human nature is where it is really found. Everybody comes into suffering, sorrow, and emotion.....” Nakaji had much to say about Christians.

As previously mentioned, Christians come to Nakaji’s temple with questions.

One such question concerns the afterlife. On this topic, Nakaji said,

“You must believe me! If you believe me you can go to heaven. If you do not believe me, I can put you in hell!” The Buddha never explained it like that. According to the Buddha’s teachings, we believe in rebirth. But, not like how other religions believe. Because of karmic energy, we believe in rebirth. It is not like in Hinduism or other religions. Whatever good deeds we do, we receive that benefit in the present moment or in the future. This also applies to the bad deeds that we do, whether done in the present moment, or in the past. According to Buddhism, when you pass away, because of our good or bad karma, you connect to other existences. How do we link to rebirth? Everybody arises and passes away, all the time changing, arising, changing, and passing away. With every moment you are passing away, just like every breath arises and passes away. Sometimes, it is very difficult to understand that about Buddhism. Our bodies pass away. Our minds pass away. But, our karmic efforts don’t stop. It is very interesting about karma. It is action and reaction. We believe in rebirth. But, every second we have new things arise and old ones pass away. That is why, according to Buddhism, moment to moment you die. But, this is according to your karma and your actions. In this way, you pass away. Without the past existence you cannot be born into a new existence. But, it is not like a soul. Karmic effort is karmic energy.

Pertaining to Christians, I asked Nakaji if a Christian could follow the Buddhist path and still be a Christian. He responded by stating that if you are a “Buddhist, or whoever wants to practice the Buddha’s teachings, it doesn’t matter if you are American, Burmese, or Indian, it doesn’t matter. You have to follow it. That is his way. Whether you are Buddhist, non-Buddhist, or if you believe in other religions, it does not matter!” On this note, American Buddhist Susan spoke of an Episcopal priest student of hers who combines Theravada Buddhist practices with her Christian faith. She stated how the

priest “does a significant amount of [Theravada meditation] work. She, in a lot of ways, brings that into her life and her sermons. She does it in ways that won’t throw people off. She is really combining a lot of it. She is able to do it without feeling there is a conflict.”

According to Nakaji, you cannot be both Buddhist and Christian. The bhikkhu insisted,

If you are a Christian and want to practice meditation, it doesn’t matter. You can practice! But, according to religions, you must choose one. Why do you want to choose two? If you believe in Christianity, you have to believe. If you believe in Buddhism, you have to believe. Don’t mix it up! Regarding the purification of the mind, if you want to practice meditation, any religion can practice it. There is no need to change anything.

Adding to this discussion, Susan stated, “Some people just don’t identify from a religious standpoint. They see [Buddhism] as more of a practice, a way of life, and a philosophy. I think it has to do with personal temperament and orientation. It’s okay in either case. If they are doing the practice and living the tenets of the teachings then whether they call themselves Buddhist or not, is not really important.” Joe noted that “from a Buddhist perspective, I don’t think it makes a whole lot of difference. If you are trying to hold up the precepts, you are a Buddhist.” Furthermore, Nakaji stated,

It doesn’t matter if you are Christian, Muslim, or Hindu, if you follow the five precepts, if you practice meditation, if you know the way of practice, then whether you declare Buddhist or non-Buddhist, it doesn’t matter. You can still make some kind of achievement. The most important thing is that you must learn theory and you must practice. Then, you can understand clearly. Human beings have a right to choose which religion they like. Whether you like Christian theory and practice, or Buddhism, or other religions, it’s your right as a human being. Our Buddhist religion cannot impose anything. For the Buddha’s teachings, if you want to practice meditation, if you want to beautify your mind, there is no need to regard any religion. But, if you want to choose a religion, why do you want to choose a religion? Why do people believe in religion? Because we have some fear.

I asked Susan if it was safe to say that everyone who comes to her meditation groups do not identify as Buddhist. “Yes. Absolutely,” she replied. I then asked if the majority of Americans who meditate there are non-Buddhists. “I think so,” she answered. “A lot of people have not formed an opinion. Many people that come here are trying it out and don’t have a label for themselves. In other words they are exploring, and are interested in Buddhism.” For instance, Susan revealed how “there are a lot of secular mindfulness practices now that anybody can do. But, I think that the people who come here, even if they don’t identify as Buddhist, they have an attraction to, and have an appreciation for Buddhist teachings. Over time, some of it may stick and they begin to identify as Buddhists.” Nevertheless, the two Buddhisms that I have encountered in the Bible Belt today involve a measure of interfaith activity.

Interfaith

Numrich quotes Joseph L. Blau as stating, “interfaith or multifaith activity... [is] so much more of a commonplace in America than anywhere else in the world [and] might well be called the most characteristically American of all American practices.”¹¹³ In this sense, Bowling Green’s Burmese monk Raju’s fondness for ecumenism could be the most American thing about him. Ethnographer Wilson believes, “The strong Christian presence in the public life of [the South] discourages many Buddhists from discussing their religion with non-Buddhists.”¹¹⁴ Unlike the subjects of Wilson’s study, Raju feels that his relationship with Christians has been positive. The Bible Belt culture of Bowling Green has not lessened Raju’s desire to have dialogue with the area’s Christians, rather, it has seemingly increased it. While Wilson suggests that American convert Buddhists in

¹¹³ Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 55.

¹¹⁴ Wilson, 40.

the South are the targets of Christian conversion efforts, my study indicates an American Christian reaction toward ethnic Asian Buddhists to be more an effort to learn and understand Theravada Buddhism. However, this can be seen in the reverse as well.

Raju's interest in the Christian religion became apparent when he informed me that he "needed to better understand Christianity." He continued by stating, "I need a pastor to ask questions to. I need to understand the very religious. I need the Christian religion. I want to go to a church, to a pastor, to someone to ask questions to. I don't need to misunderstand this because American people are very strong religious." When I asked Raju if he was familiar with the term "Bible Belt," he said that he had read something about it online, and the monk stated, "I acknowledge that Christians are very serious sometimes." It is the "very serious" and "strong religious" Christian types that the subjects of this study have had experiences with. For the most part, what happens is just dialogue, but, what about the relationship between traditional Burmese and American Buddhists?

Traditional Burmese and American Buddhism Coalesce

In the temples of Numrich's study, the author writes how the "American-convert congregation follows a very different religious itinerary and possesses a very different religious perspective from that of its parallel Asian-immigrant congregation."¹¹⁵ He also reveals how "Americans meditate during ethnic chanting."¹¹⁶ As mentioned in the introduction, I experienced something similar to this in Nashville with Americans meditating inside the temple while the Burmese were outside preparing for a festival. However, while Burmese rituals such as Pali chanting are most certainly practiced by

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 108.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 12

Raju's and Nakaji's congregations, it is also practiced at the American meditation center in Nashville.

There is a significantly greater amount of importance placed on the practice of Pali chanting by the ethnic Burmese of this study. But, with the exception of what Nakaji does with his American congregation, one American Buddhist presented here has not necessarily made it a priority at her group meetings. Knowing that Susan leads chants in Pali, and referring to the center's website as stating how the center "maintains its roots in traditional teachings and practices," I inquired about the importance that she places on Pali chanting. She replied by stating, "That's not vital, and some people are turned off by it, and some people like it. Some people think it is a little too religious." Concerning the use of Pali chanting, Susan added how she is "perfectly comfortable using English or Pali." She elaborated on this by stating,

To me the words don't matter. What matters is that we are doing something together. It's a practice that we do together. If it's done from the heart then we are in the experience of the moment. But, as far as keeping the teachings rooted, that is important to me. It's rooted in what the Buddha taught. We are not a secular mindfulness group that has lost those ties to Buddhism. I feel it's important to maintain that lineage because that is where it came from.

I asked Susan how important the Pali chanting tradition was to her. She revealed her interest in the practice. However, she also related how she was less interested in the "cultural forms of the tradition, but the teachings and the roots of the teachings are important." I then told Susan how the meditation group in Bowling Green did not chant at all. She responded, "Yes, and that is fine. I think a lot of groups don't chant. A lot of Theravada groups don't chant, such as the ones that are not rooted in the Burmese tradition. I think whatever feels right to a group is fine." About this matter, I asked Joe if

he ever led chants in his groups. He replied, “No, I just don’t have a great singing voice. I just don’t know chants and haven’t done them. We could if we had a recording or something. I wouldn’t have anyone that could do them.” It would appear to me that the Americans’ interpretation of the Buddhist tradition, such as can be seen in the priority of their practices is similar, yet also very different from the Burmese at times. But, can this be regarded as its own unique school of Buddhism?

A Unique School of Buddhism

Seager notes how “there are so many forms of Buddhism and so many different roads to Americanization that it is too early to announce the emergence of a distinct form that can be said to be typically American.”¹¹⁷ I asked Susan if she felt that American Buddhism is or can become its own unique school of Buddhism. She replied, “I think it will. It will naturally evolve. It will have to.” In accordance to one major theme of this project, Susan articulated how she thinks “a part of what has kept Buddhism alive all these years is its adaptability to different cultures. So, yes, I think it is already evolving.” Having much more to say on this topic, Susan stated,

We may not know where it is going to go, or how long it will take. But, I think that here in the West, there is significance in all the information that we have here. We have access to all the teachings. At one time the teachings were segregated by culture. So, in Japan you would have Zen, in Burma you would have Theravada, and, in Tibet, of course, there is Tibetan Buddhism. Here we have a whole smorgasbord of things. But, there has got to be a way to make it work where it is not just you pick a little here and there. I think the fact that we have so much access means that it gives us opportunities to develop our own form of Buddhism. We can determine which traditions to let go of, and, which ones to hold on to. I think it will evolve over time. I don’t know where that is going to go exactly. But, I think it will evolve.

¹¹⁷ Seager, xiii.

Asking Joe if he considered what he practiced with his group to be a form of American Buddhism, he replied, “I have no idea. Define American Buddhism, and I will tell you if it is or not.” I then inquired if what he felt that Americans now practiced could become its own unique school of American Buddhism. “I think it’s too early to tell,” he said.

Once again the theme of adaptability is mentioned when Joe said, “Historically what has happened is every time Buddhism has gone into a particular area or culture it has transformed itself. It takes on those aspects of the culture that works with it.”

Concerning an American form of Buddhism, he stated “...we as a culture, we will just have to see. Because, I think it is way too early to know. When I started this ten years ago, the word mindful, you didn’t hear it! And now, it is all over the place. I don’t know if people much know what they’re talking about, but it’s here.” I would have to agree with Joe. It is here!

Conclusion

James William Coleman writes, “Everything changes. This fundamental fact lies at the marrow of Buddhist realization, and throughout its 2,500-year history, Buddhism itself has certainly lived up to this dictum.”¹¹⁸ Buddhism changes over time, especially when it is relocated. Scholar Chris Park articulates how “beliefs and practices can change through time particularly when a religion is planted in a new area. Cultural assimilation can include the absorption of indigenous beliefs and practices into the newly arrived (usually universalist) religion, which can thus evolve regional variants reflecting their unique cultural settings.”¹¹⁹ Pertaining to the religion of Burmese immigrants and their new home in America, it is primarily Theravada Buddhism that they brought with them, and as Buddhism always does, it changes. As previously mentioned, Theravada Buddhism underwent change following its planting in Southeast Asia. That same form of Buddhism has experienced change with its entrance into North America. Buddhism’s ability to adapt can be seen throughout its history.

Every subject featured in this study displayed the adaptability of Buddhism. But, what I also found to be held in common was the adherence to the teachings of the Buddha. During the time I shared with both Raju and Nakaji, it was not the traditional Theravada rituals, such as Pali chanting that was most emphasized, it was simply living by the Buddha’s teachings. Knowing how to live in this way comes from Buddhism’s ability to adapt. The Americans of this study have a tendency to syncretize, but like Joe said, “It is all the same.” Perhaps, Raju and Nakaji syncretize as well with the

¹¹⁸ James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

¹¹⁹ Chris Park, *Sacred Worlds: an introduction to Geography and Religion* (London: Routledge Publishing, 1994), 128.

Americanization of Burmese Buddhism. Joe, Nakaji, Susan, and Raju, all seem to meet in the middle when it comes to the adaptation of Buddhism. In Buddhist thought, this is the “Middle Way.” In my observations, the Buddhists of this study are living their lives by the teachings of the Buddha, and they would all agree that the way to properly do this is through persistent diligence in the practice of Buddhism, and this can be found through adaptation. This point can be agreed on by all the subjects interviewed. It shows change and tradition coalescing to meet at one point. Actually, there is no label for this. It is just three aspects of adaptation to Americanization. This is what has been addressed in this writing. Reductionism, preservation, and syncretism can all be thought of as just Buddhism, a Bible Belt Buddhism that includes both Burmese and Americans.

Visible in the new forms of Buddhism practiced by Americans in the Bible Belt today is Theravada’s ability to change and adapt. This is a trait Buddhism has always possessed. The American adoption of Theravada seems to coincide with Buddhism’s history of change and adaptation. Change and adaptation occurs at a much higher rate when the religion is on new ground. But, if that religion is already established, the relocated tradition can retain the breadth built throughout the centuries. The immigrant Burmese Buddhist monks of this study, while dealing with Americanization, try in earnest to preserve their tradition. This could be a direct result of Burmese Theravada Buddhism already having adapted to the change of relocation centuries ago. In other words, the tradition has become so well established in Southeast Asia that the tradition has simply been relocated. Nevertheless, immigrant Burmese Buddhism in the United States is still subject to Americanization, and Americanization, despite the amount, is still change.

Change is certainly to be discovered when one thoroughly explores Buddhism. Impermanence and the constant state of change are fundamental Buddhist tenets. The Burmese monks of this study deal with the changes presented by Americanization on a daily basis. While these changes are not necessarily evident to the American, to the Burmese monk, they are very profound. What can be inferred about a relocated religion? What can be said about the natives who subscribe to such a faith? Am I presenting the beginnings of a brand new religion, or am I just displaying an age-old paradigm? Will ethnic Burmese Buddhism remain preserved within an ancient tradition, or will it too become subject to reduction? When a religion is relocated, change often begins with the leader. If the leader accepts change, the congregation usually follows. Perhaps, this can be seen with Nakaji and Raju and their willingness to cater to an American congregation who primarily seek to meditate.

While my American subjects and Wilson's believe that Southern American Buddhism will become its own unique school of Buddhism, there are some differences in our findings that deal with resistance. For instance, Wilson spoke of American Buddhists being subjected to Christian harassment and conversion efforts. My study did not find that. This would also apply to Numrich's ethnography, which revealed immigrant Buddhists being harassed. Once again, my immigrant subjects said no such thing. As a matter of fact, their dealings with Christians display more of a curiosity. This can be seen in both the Christian curiosity about Burmese Buddhism, and as Raju mentioned, his curiosity about Christianity. Additionally, what I did not find in my textual research, as much as in the interviews of my subjects, was the non-Buddhist American attraction to meditation. In my time with American meditation groups, I discovered that most do not

identify as Buddhists. They practice meditation to alleviate the symptoms of stress and depression.

My findings show how there is change occurring within the Burmese Buddhism now on Southern American soil. Burmese Buddhism has been subject to change through Americanization. As miniscule as it may seem, the Burmese Buddhist monks of this study have had to change practically every element of their lives in an attempt to live and thrive in the Bible Belt. Similar to Numrich's study, I too have found that virtually every aspect of their lives have been subject to change. From the way they dress, to the way they get around, even the way they are allowed to eat, they do so for their traditional Burmese religion and culture to survive in the Bible Belt, and to possibly preserve their ancient tradition to the best of their ability.

I conclude by expressing my awe of traditional Theravada Buddhism's ability to expand, adapt, and grow. I ask once again, is change inevitable when Theravada Buddhism meets new ground? Can this possibly be seen taking place with the ethnic Burmese Buddhist monks of this study? Is the American interpretation of Buddhism a product of change because of the fact that Theravada Buddhism is now on American soil? Is Theravada Buddhism going through the same process of change in the Bible Belt as it did upon its entry into Southeast Asia? I am inclined to believe that the Americanization now prevalent in the ethnic Burmese Buddhist institutions of this study reveals change in tradition, and this change reveals Buddhism's ability to adjust, thus showing change through adaptation. This change through adaptation is also the fundamental change that has been prevalent since the conception of Buddhism over 2500 years ago. The

traditional ethnic form of Buddhism is experiencing change now on American soil, and the Americans have built a tradition based on that traditional ethnic form.

I have discovered more from this project than expected. For instance, the ethnic Burmese Buddhism of this study, while adamantly staying true to tradition, is seemingly becoming something we might call American. Perhaps, you could say their practice of preservation is becoming reduction. If the ethnic Burmese are practicing reduction, could that possibly mean that they too are now syncretizing. This would be saying that the ethnic traditional form of Theravada Buddhism has now adapted through Americanization. It has been reduced to prioritize meditation to suit the Americans, and has now become a composite of their own ethnic-American Burmese Theravada Buddhism. It is extremely exciting to think that the traditional Burmese and the Americans could eventually meet in the middle and become a form of Buddhism that represents tradition and change. Is not tradition and change what Theravada Buddhism is all about?

Sometimes vigorously retaining ancient tradition, and sometimes changing into multiple various new forms and traditions, Buddhism's resilience and ability to grow can be seen throughout its history. While it has now taken root in some regions of America, such as the South, there is good reason to believe that it will continue to grow and flourish in all parts of North America for many more years to come. Perhaps, it may even more completely mesh with the immigrant Southeast Asian forms. What I hope to have demonstrated here is that there is a middle way. It is apparent to me that the Buddha's "Middle Way" is certainly present here. In other words, adaptation is a common ground for both of the two Buddhisms of this study, and I believe it will

continue to expand. This project shows the popularity and of Theravada Buddhism. If nothing else it has demonstrated the American and Burmese need for adaptation. It is certainly conceivable that American Buddhism will eventually evolve into something more than a few white Americans sitting in meditation. It will become something that both traditional ethnic Buddhists and Americans both share. Perhaps, all of this will be seen happening in an area dominated by Christians, an area known as the Bible Belt.

A Future Research Suggestion

A large part of this project explored the Christian curiosity and interest in Buddhism, most particularly, in Buddhist meditation. Nakaji spoke at length of his experiences with Christian visitors to his temple. He revealed their curiosity in Buddhism by explaining their questions and how he answered them. Susan discussed her involvement with Christians and about her acquaintance with the Episcopal priest student of hers who combines Theravada practices with Christian faith. She stated how the priest “does a significant amount of [Theravada meditation] work. She brings that into her life, and even into her sermons in ways that won’t throw people off. She is combining it. She is able to do it without feeling there is a conflict.” Therefore, I believe research could be conducted in the area of Christian/Buddhism syncretism. The idea that these two religions could be intertwined is intriguing, and this could possibly be transpiring in the Bible Belt.

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