How Buddhism Encountered the West.

The talk on February 3, 2021 focused on how Western imperialism, specifically the presence of the British Empire, affected Buddhism. The colonialists brought Christian missionary evangelism which sought ardently to convert the indigenous people to various Christian traditions. This prompted reactions from the already present Buddhist establishment, which, by historical report, was highly institutionalized and not very involved in promoting meditation training. Those renunciates who were dedicated to meditation practice were not interested in leaving an historical record, so it is hard to tell the extent they influenced the Buddhist population.

In the late 1800’s the Theosophical Society was formed and several of its members were significant in reuniting the various Buddhist schools in Asia and introducing Buddhism to the West: Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) and Henry Olcott (1832-1907). Ms. Blavatsky was an eccentric student of Eastern mysticism and author of several influential books about Tibetan mysticism and Henry Olcott was the president of the organization. Olcott played a primary role in promoting the interest of various Buddhist traditions. According to Wikipedia:

In 1880 Olcott began to build up the Buddhist Educational Movement in [Ceylon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ceylon). In 1880 there were only two schools in Ceylon managed by the Buddhists. Due to the efforts of Olcott the number rose to 205 schools and four colleges in 1907 ([Ananda College](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ananda_College) in Colombo, [Mahinda College](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahinda_College) in [Galle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galle), [Dharmaraja College](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dharmaraja_College) in [Kandy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kandy) and [Maliyadeva College](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maliyadeva_College) in [Kurunegala](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurunegala)). Thus began the great Buddhist revival in Ceylon. Olcott also represented the Buddhist cause to the British government, and found redress for the restrictions imposed against Buddhists, such as the prohibition of processions, Buddhist schools, the improved financial administration of temple properties, and so on.

Olcott united the sects of Ceylon in the Buddhist Section of the Theosophical Society (1880); the 12 sects of Japan into a Joint Committee for the promotion of Buddhism (1889); Burma, Siam, and Ceylon into a Convention of Southern Buddhists (1891); and finally Northern and Southern Buddhism through joint signatures to his *Fourteen Propositions of Buddhism* (1891).

Other significant Theosophists were Christmas Humphries (1901-1983), who introduced Buddhism to Great Britain, Annie Besant (1847-1933), a socialist and author who befriended Mohandas Gandhi and adopted Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986), who became world-famous as a spiritual teacher. Alan Watts (1915-1973) was an author, Episcopal priest and Buddhist teacher with significant influence among Westerners. Edward Conze (1904-1979) was an author and scholar regarding Buddhism. D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966) wrote extensively and taught Zen Buddhism. All of these individuals played a significant role introducing Buddhism to the West.

In 1893 the World Parliament of Religions convened in Chicago. The oriental participants represented China, Japan, Thailand and Ceylon (which later was renamed Sri Lanka).

THERAVADA:

Sri Lanka: In what was then called Ceylon, a Theosophical Buddhist named Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), played a significant role in revitalizing Buddhism and in the various attempts to free Ceylon from British Imperial rule.

Burma: In the previous talk, the influence of King Monkut (1804-1868) of Siam (now Thailand and parts of Southern Burma), who had been a devout Buddhist monk for 20 years before ascending the throne, revitalized Buddhism, largely to counter the influence of English colonialists. There was an important influence by the Theravadin monk Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923), who created a legacy of monks who developed the practice of vipassana, which was a radical departure from traditional Buddhism, which focused primarily on cultivating an ethical life and practicing generosity, along with supporting the monastic communities. A student of Ledi Sayadaw, Mingun Sayadaw (1868–1955), taught another Burmese monk named Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982), and he had a direct influence on two of my principal American teachers, Joseph Goldstein (b. 1944) and Sharon Salzberg (b. 1952), who, along with Jack Kornfield (b. 1945), founded the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre (bah-ree) Massachusetts in 1975.

In addition to Ledi Sayadaw , a lay teacher named Saya Thetgyi (1873–1945) began to teach a form of vipassana to anyone who would accept his teaching. Saya Thetgyi taught another lay person, U Ba Khin (1899-1971), who taught another principal teacher for me, S. N. Goenka (1924-2013). As mentioned in the previous notes, another teacher who was authorized by U Ba Khin, Ruth Denison (1922-2015), was the teacher for my first retreat at IMS in April, 1982. The system taught be them is termed *vedanupassana* (vey-duh-new-pah-sah-nah), more commonly known as *body sweep* meditation.

Another important teacher and author was Ayya Khema (1923-1997), a German-American woman, who was trained by different Sri Lankan monks and had a primary influence on Lee Brasington, another of my teachers, who confirmed my jhana experience many years ago.

Finally, I must mention Henepola Gunaratana (b. 1927), a Sri Lankan monk who has resided in the U.S. since 1968 and has been teaching and writing books that have had significant impact on American Buddhism. He was the primary teacher for one of my teachers, Matthew Flickstein.

If you are interested in reading an article I used to research this part of the notes, written by Eric Braun, a teacher of religious studies, here is the URL: <https://tricycle.org/magazine/meditation-en-masse/> .

MAHAYANA:

Zen: Shoyen Saku (1860-1919) was one of the teachers of D.T. Suzuki, who, in 1893, moved from Japan to Illinois and began to introduce Zen to a larger audience of Americans as a teacher and author. In 1959 Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971) moved to San Francisco to run a zendo there and was influential for the Beatniks who were congregating in the area, particularly Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), who influenced a Zen approach to life that was Americanized. American Zen teachers who were trained in Japan and had an influence on contemporary Zen in America include Phillip Kapleau (1912-2004), Robert Aitken (1917-2010), Bernie Glassman (1939-2018), founder of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, and Charlotte Joko Beck (1917-2011), an influential teacher and writer, among others.

Korean Seon (Zen): the most influential Korean immigrant to the U.S. was Seunsang (1927-2004), who significantly innovated traditional Seon teachings in ways that appeal to a Western population. His Kwan Um School of Zen has also influenced several significant American Theravadin teachers such as Larry Rosenberg and Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Chan: A primary teacher for the U.S. was Hsuan Hua (1918-1995), who fostered the creation of the *City of 10,000 Buddhas,* a major retreat center in California.

Tibetan Vajrayana: Tibet was isolated both geographically and politically for centuries, except for occasional intrusion by Chinese and Mongolian governments. The 20th century changed all that with the tremendous upheaval caused by two World Wars and the development of modern technologies. Anyone who has read the book or seen the movie “7 Years In Tibet” knows the fascination of Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, with modern technology, and the he has become the most well-known Tibetan, if not the most well-known Buddhist in history. The first Tibetan Lamas came to the U.S. in the 1950’s and trained a number of western practitioners and scholars such as Robert Thurman (b. 1941), Jeffrey Hopkins (b. 1940), Alexander Berzin (b. 1944) and Anne Klein (b. 1947). I recall at the end of my first 90-day retreat at IMS a dharma talk was given by Jeffery Miller (b. 1950), best known as Lama Surya Das. What I recall most vividly is how often and vigorously he laughed; apparently, this was just after he completed a 3-year retreat, and he was bubbling over with joy. Tibetan Buddhist training involves significant ritual practice, but at the core it emphasizes the interdependence of reality through what are called Dzogchen and Mahamudra practices.

Another quite famous Tibetan Buddhist was Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche (1939-1987), who was forced to flee Tibet with great hardship in 1959. He played a major role in introducing his form of teaching called the Shambala Training, which was intended to blend various Tibetan disciplines into ways that could be understood and adapted by Westerners. He created the Naropa Institute in Boulder, CO, which is now an accredited university.

The eminent British historian Arnold Toynbee is often quoted as having said, “The coming of Buddhism to the West may well prove to be the most important event of the twentieth century.” The attribution is uncertain, but he did have a great interest in Buddhism and his major professional focus was on the historical trends of civilization. The impact of Buddhism in the West can’t be fully appreciated for perhaps generations, but we can observe the significant congruencies between Buddhist psychology and understanding of how the mind works with the revelations about the dispersed and interconnected functions of the brain derived from contemporary neuroscience. Additionally, the various Buddhist traditions are now more accessible than in any time historically through the internet, and many contemporary Western Buddhist practitioners and teachers have been exposed to and trained in more than one tradition.

Buddhism informed my decision in 1985 to go to graduate school to become a psychotherapist and has been woven into the fabric of my practice from the beginning. There are multiple small Sanghas like the Orlando Insight Meditation Group around the U.S. and, I suspect, in other countries of the West. The social psychological impact of the introduction of Buddhist concepts and disciplines in non-religious ways, for education and social cohesion is unknown at this point, but the potential is there and there are *contemplative pedagogy* programs in various colleges and universities researching and teaching elementary and secondary school teachers how to integrate mindfulness practices into daily classroom routines in ways that don’t violate the separation of church and state. Research by these programs suggest that children benefit from age-appropriate training in mindfulness and compassion through increasing attention span and providing social conflict resolution skills.

The next talk will focus on how neuroscientific research originated and what is being discovered about mindfulness and compassion meditation concepts and training that promote good mental health. Following that, there will be a review of the various Theravadin and Tibetan concepts and practices I have studied and exposed to.