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Why Are We So Interested In Buddhism?

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Why Are We So Interested In Buddhism?

By

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Submitted in fulfillment

Of the requirements of

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ABSTRACT

VICTORIA LEACH

Why Are We So Interested in Buddhism? Department of Religious Studies, May 2013.

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This thesis was a qualitative look at the research performed on the emergence of Buddhism in American mainstream society and an identification of the categories of the New American Buddhist. The introduction is a critical look at the type of Buddhist practitioner including demographics and their personal history that introduced them to the Buddhist tradition, discovered by previous researchers. This also takes into account Buddhism in popular culture. Then to continue that research I employed my own methods, influenced greatly by phenomenology, to go out into the field to conduct my own qualitative study on local Buddhist groups to see if my experience corresponds to previous research. I collected data on demographics, religious history, experience with Buddhism, and societal impressions. The conclusion drawn from personal research was that the local groups did fit the mold of the historical and current-day American population's demographics, religious history, and societal impressions. What was different was the experience with Buddhism. Each individual had their own story to tell about how Buddhism entered their life, the personal nature of the interviews allowed me to fully understand each individual, which was crucial to understanding how Buddhism has made an impression in each of their lives.

The New American Buddhist

Religious traditions are susceptible to environmental influences; they are not immune to change or the impact of culture. Therefore whenever a specific tradition is transported from one place to another it is subject to modification. Buddhism coming to the United States is a perfect example of this. The trouble comes with defining this new type of Buddhism, and most importantly finding out who is subscribing to it:

A scholar's duty is to understand as much as possible about religion and culture. For that reason self-identification is the most useful standard for defining religious identity, and not only because it avoids the theoretical problem of essentialist approaches and includes the greatest range of characters. It also uncovers much about the status and meaning of the religion at that historical moment and in that cultural setting. (Tweed, 82)

In Thomas Tweed's interpretation, self-identification is the key to religious identity, but he also points out the significance of viewing a religious tradition in its history and culture. For a definition without context holds little worth. What is exclusively important here is the individual, and an individual's interpretation of his/her involvement in the Buddhist tradition. Unfortunately it is extremely hard to obtain quantitative data on exactly how many New American Buddhists there are because there are many categories in which these members might fall. One of the categories includes people who would not self-identify as a Buddhist but would attend retreats, read the texts, and engage in meditation. In this background section the categories, demographics, and characteristics of the New American Buddhists will be covered to give a sense of who these individuals are before diving into the analysis of the American Buddhist movement.

Following the boom of Buddhism to the United States after World War II, brought to us by soldiers coming back from overseas as well as by immigrants, there are now many categories

in which the New American Buddhist might fall into. Each of these categories can be found in one school of Buddhism, and in one Buddhist community:

1. New Asian American Buddhists (Arrived in the United States since 1960s: Vietnamese, Thai, Korean, Cambodian, Myanmar, Laotian, and Sri Lankan)
2. Old-line Asian American Buddhists (Those who were established before World War II: Chinese and Japanese descent).
3. Convert Buddhists whose main practice is meditation (Predominately Euro-Americans practicing Zen, Vipassana, and Tibetan traditions).
4. Convert Buddhism whose main practice is chanting (Soka Gakkai school). (Tanaka, 116)

The first category, the New Asian American Buddhists, have also been referred to as “Ethnic Buddhists” because they are immigrants who have brought Buddhism to America directly from their native Asian countries where Buddhism has been traditionally practiced (Gregory, 246).

The second category, Old-line Asian American Buddhists, refer to the Buddhists who were already in this country prior to the wave that Buddhism made after World War II. This population serves as a control group to show just how much Buddhism has grown in this country in just fifty years. The third group, Convert Buddhists with a focus on meditation, has also been called “Elite Buddhism,” a type of Buddhism that has appealed to middle class white Americans (Gregory, 246). It is this category that has exploded the Buddhist population in the United States and is responsible for the dramatic increase in membership. The fourth group, Convert Buddhism with a focus on chanting, has been seen as the “Evangelical Buddhism” who inspires the spreading of American Buddhism through evangelical methods (Gregory, 246). These four categories are the quantifiable populations of New American Buddhists. These are the people who consider themselves to be members of a particular Buddhist community. But there is a fifth category that is harder to quantify, the category of Nightstand Buddhists, also known as sympathizers:

Nightstand Buddhists derive their name from their practice of placing a Buddhist meditation book on the nightstand after reading it before they go to sleep. They get up the next morning and practice to the best of their ability the meditation they had read about the night before. Further, they may frequently attend lectures at the local university and visit a Buddhist center's webpage or participate in an online Buddhist discussion group. And if we were to visit them, we might find their homes decorated with Buddhist artifacts. (Tanaka 115)

These Nightstand Buddhists would not show up in any population data sets of the Buddhist communities here in the United States, because they would not self-identify as a Buddhist.

“According to Thomas Tweed, who coined the term Nightstand Buddhists, 'Sympathizers are those who have some sympathy for Buddhism but do not embrace it exclusively or fully. When asked, they would not identify themselves as Buddhists. They would say they are Methodists, or Jewish, or unaffiliated’” (Tanaka, 116). But it is impossible to discount this important population from the New American Buddhists. It is this final category of Buddhists in the United States that is the most intriguing, because you do not find these Nightstand or Sympathizers in any other tradition. So why is Buddhism unique in this way? Thomas Tweed has provided an example of this phenomenon:

It is important to know that in American culture at this particular moment, or at least in that middle-class (mostly white) suburban subculture, some folks want to claim Buddhist identity. Then we can begin to ask a series of questions, beginning with the most basic: why does she say she is a Buddhist? We might learn that it is fashionable in her circle to be Buddhist or that she wants to signal, to anyone who will listen, her dissent from the Christian church she visits on Sunday, a church she attends mostly because she feels compelled to raise her children in some faith and the local Buddhist center has no religious education (and joining there would invite too much ridicule from her extended family) (Tweed, 81).

The popularity of Buddhism goes without saying: there has been an outburst of Buddhist ideology in American popular culture. Using Tweed’s own method of defining religious identity, i.e., self-identification, this woman would be considered a Buddhist because she says she is. But there are other critics of Buddhism that would disagree with Tweed’s interpretation of this woman’s membership. Notto R. Thelle, a professor of theology at the University of Oslo,

provides a different perspective on this situation. As he points out, “‘Zen’ has entered our Western languages as a catchphrase for all that people dream of finding in the East: spontaneity, intuitive experience, a playful art of living. And Zen sells. Shops and book-cafes are given the name ‘Zen’... For most people, however, the superficial attraction to the East hardly affects their rather secular lifestyle, only adds some picturesque details” (Thelle, 73-4). Thelle would say that this woman is no more a Buddhist than the “Zen” café down the street, but if this person is not considered a part of the New American Buddhism, who is?

To answer the question of demographics we look to past research to get a sense of the New American Buddhist landscape. There was a major study done by James William Coleman that looked at seven Buddhist groups across the country. “The sample therefore has two groups that follow the Zen tradition, two groups that follow the Vipassana tradition, and two from the Vajrayana tradition. In addition, one more eclectic group was included that does not have an affiliation to any specific Buddhist tradition”(Coleman, 93). Coleman’s goal was to utilize influential groups that he would be able to use to make generalizations about the greater Buddhist population here in the United States. There was a lengthy questionnaire that was distributed to the members of these groups; “the total number of returned surveys was 359” (Coleman, 94). It is important to mention here that due to the nature of this survey, only people who would self-identify as Buddhist would respond, and therefore we have little knowledge to go on about the demographics of the Nightstand Buddhists. The first data analysis that was performed included the demography on the memberships:

Demographically, the members of these new Buddhist groups tend to be white, middle- and upper-middle-class people in their middle years, with a strong left/liberal leaning in their political views. One of the most striking characteristics of the respondents was their extremely high level of education. It would not seem unreasonable to conclude that these Buddhists constitute the most highly educated religious group in the United States. (Coleman, 98)

The general population of these New American Buddhists is somewhat surprising because it appears to be the more educated and middle-age people who are getting involved with Buddhism. This is significant because it shows that Buddhism is not just some passing fad. "This demographic indicator tells us something significant about the appeal of Buddhist practice, not so much to college-age people and twenty-somethings, but to people more mature and with plenty of experience in the turbulence of life and growth" (Eck, 202). When a more mature population has grasped a trend it tends to signify value in that trend, that there is something of usefulness in Buddhism that needs further inquiry and discovery.

The next aspect of the study, performed by James William Coleman, looked at the reasons why the members became involved with Buddhism in the first place. "Very few of the respondents were born into Buddhism, and several questions in the survey sought to explore the ways they first became involved in Buddhist practice. When asked directly about this, a majority reported that it was through reading a book. Hearing about Buddhism from friends was the only other commonly given response" (Coleman, 95). Finding out about Buddhism through the use of books and through word-of-mouth would supports the notion that it is the fact that Buddhism has entered popular culture that lead to the increase in membership. The study also served to zero in on the use of two other pathways to enter the practice of Buddhism. The use of psychedelic drugs and martial arts were the other two potential pathways. The reason Coleman asked about these two particular conduits is because of previous research that claimed that both martial arts and psychedelic drugs were common in meditation practice:

Sixty-three percent of the respondents said that they had taken a psychedelic drug – a much higher percentage than in the general population – and of those, half said that the use of psychedelic drugs had some role in attracting them to Buddhism. The martial arts, on the other hand, appears to be a less common route into Buddhist practice. While 34 percent of the respondents had practiced a martial art, two-thirds of those said it did not help attract

them to Buddhism. About half as many (12 percent) said Buddhism attracted them to the martial arts as the other way around (23 percent). (Coleman, 95-6)

Once Coleman discovered how these members became involved with Buddhism in the first place he wanted to look into the motivation that drove them into becoming involved and what kept them as active members. “The survey found the desire for spiritual fulfillment was by far the most important motivation among the respondents, followed by the attempt to deal with personal problems” (Coleman, 96). This finding dealing with motivation is supported with the theory of Alan Watts, an Episcopal priest who became a Zen practitioner, commented on by Diana Eck. "He was convinced that the new Western interest in Zen was not a passing fashion. He wrote, 'the deeper reason for this interest is that the viewpoint of Zen lies so close to the growing edge of Western thought.' He meant that we in the West were beginning to reach the limits of our fascination with the objects of the material world; we were beginning an inward turn" (Eck, 189-190). This turning inward is directly related to this motivation of spiritual fulfillment that Coleman discovered in his survey. Now that demography, pathway, and motivation of these New American Buddhists has been uncovered, we look to see what makes them different from other Buddhists around the world.

Something that is particularly interesting about this New American Buddhism is how it differs from the traditional Asian Buddhism. There are some unique characteristics that have appeared. “(1) It is primarily a lay movement, which (2) places a strong emphasis on meditation. It is (3) democratic, antiauthoritarian, and anti-hierarchical, and (4) it gives parity to women. It also (5) emphasizes social action and (6) welcomes Western psychology as helpful and useful” (Gregory, 248). These characteristics are very appealing to the average middle-class American, because they seem to emphasize similar traditionally American values. On the other hand, Diana Eck emphasizes that Buddhism is providing an outlet to escape from traditional American

values. "New American Buddhists find in Buddhism a way of rejecting materialist, indulgent, and dogmatic aspects of the American mainstream, including the religious traditions of Christian and Jewish life from which they have come" (Eck, 216). Personally, her interpretation appears to be a little skewed. The rejecting of materialism is understandable because most schools of Buddhism focus on the minimalist and the simplification of one's life, but 'indulgent' and 'dogmatic' are both terms that could be applied to Buddhism. In Buddhism one indulges in personal discovery by following the dogma (teachings) of Buddhist leaders. I find that Buddhism aligns quite well with the American mainstream and popular values, or is it that Buddhism is now being ingrained into popular culture?

Popular culture is usually seen as a passing fashion that may define a generation but does not have the capacity to make a lasting impression or a place in society long term. Buddhism has become ingrained in popular culture, so the question then is: does Buddhism have the stamina to continue to be a driving force in American Culture through the ages? There is no denying the fact that Buddhism has made an impression on today's popular culture. Upon typing in "Buddhist groups in my area" I came up with just shy of twenty groups within a five-mile radius of my location, Albany, NY. The question still remains if this new trend will stand the test of time, and a potentially new fad that may come around. Many scholars have posed this same question, but they see this type of questioning as detrimental to the study of Buddhism:

To a great degree, then, Buddhism may have been superficially absorbed by segments of American popular culture, and the problem of deciding what is 'serious' and what is a passing New Age fad may detract from the importance of the fact that at least a million Americans have indeed borrowed liberally from a wide variety of ancient Buddhist traditions, usually in a genuine effort to seek a new, more satisfying 'way of life'. (Storhoff & Whalen-Bridge, 3)

Storhoff focuses on the fact that it is not for us to define the seriousness of Buddhism in American culture, but we should be focusing on the quantity of individual lives that Buddhism

has directly affected. He argues that it is not the fact that Buddhism could very well be a passing fad; it is the fact that people are searching for “a new, more satisfying ‘way of life.’” As a point of contention, for the sake of argument, the Free Love movement of the late 1960s affected just as many people as Buddhism has, and that was a passing fad, as only a few groups still remain active in the United States. That was a movement that attracted people to it because they were searching for a new way of life. Could Buddhism be the new Free Love movement? The true test will come with time, but the best way to assess that in the present is to see the extent to which Buddhism has penetrated a variety of American institutions and how it functions in society.

The easiest way to get to know about Buddhism would be a simple Internet search. Now that the Internet is completely accessible to anyone and everyone it is now the fastest and effortless way to get, for the most part, credible information. A study was preformed by Ally Ostrowski, which looked at the demographics of the individuals accessing information on Buddhism from credible Buddhist websites. The goal was to be able to generalize the data to make assumptions about the general population who were interested in Buddhism enough to search it on the web. The theory was that this group of individuals survey would have the same demographics as people who were ascribing to Buddhism in American Culture. “Hypothesis 1: Caucasian Buddhists use the Internet for Buddhist community purposes more than non-white Buddhists in the United States... Hypothesis 2: The older a respondent is, the more likely they will be to visit Buddhist chat rooms” (Ostrowski, 96). The study obtained the following results:

Based on this study, the profile of those using the Internet to access information on Buddhism tented to be white (72%), raised as Catholics (27.2%) or Protestants (26.1%), and not members of a Buddhist temple or meditation center (74.5%). Respondents were evenly distributed between 23 and 40 years old and in locations throughout the United States... tended to [currently] affiliate with no religion (21.2%)... Gender of respondents was equally divided between male and female, and the education attained was predominantly above the college level. (Ostrowski, 97)

The results of the study were that Hypothesis 1 was proved, given that the vast majority of respondents were Caucasian, but Hypothesis 2 was disproved. A possible explanation for the young age of the respondents was the fact that the older generation may not look to the Internet to explore Buddhism, and that they were more likely to look into textual information. What is specifically interesting to acknowledge here is that the demographics match very closely what previously mentioned scholars had found to be the demographics of the New American Buddhist, convert Buddhists. It is this group of the American population that is most interested in Buddhism; they span the spectrum from converting to Buddhism to just performing a simple Internet search.

Now taking a drastic shift from the individuals who are interested in Buddhism, to the Buddhist professional. There are many monks and nuns who have dedicated their lives to the study, practice, and teachings of Buddhism. So where do these individuals come in to play in the New American Buddhist movement, and what do they think of these convert individuals? A qualitative study was performed by Courtney Bender and Wendy Cadge, which looked at the interaction and involvement with Buddhist nuns and Catholic nuns. This study was critical in not only suggesting how the Buddhist nun interprets Buddhism in popular culture, but how Catholicism has dealt with and interacted with the Buddhism ideology, which has entered the American mainstream. The study involved interviewing a number of Buddhist and Catholic nuns at a conference for interfaith dialogue. “Our analyses suggest not only that Catholic engagement with Buddhism is constructing and shaping Americans’ views of ‘Buddhism,’ but that these constructions develop together, as Buddhist and Catholic nuns come to understand their unique historical positions through imagining and engaging the other” (Bender & Cadge, 231). This is a unique study and provides a great insight to American involvement with Buddhism through

means of another religious tradition. The first question that all of the women were asked was about how they initially became involved with Buddhism:

Books, courses, specific teachers, and time spent in Asia were the main conduits through which both the Catholic and Buddhist women encountered and learned about the Buddhist tradition... Many Buddhist nuns traced their interest to their childhood or young adulthood while, the majority of Catholic nuns said that their interest in Buddhism arose after they were vowed... Buddhist nuns typically contacted visiting Asian-born Buddhist teachers. Catholic nuns, in contrast, often learned about Buddhism through contact with Catholic priests and religious laypeople who claimed an affiliation with both Buddhism and Catholicism, although several learned about Buddhism through travel or work in Asia. (Bender & Cadge, 233)

The information about how Buddhism first entered their lives is significant because it allows one to realize what was the result of American popular culture. The conduit to Buddhism that the Catholic nuns emphasized was through means of popular culture, like word-of-mouth and popular books such as “Zen and the art of...” (Fill in the blank). Their experience was furthered by contact with their religious laypersons whom were also interested in Buddhism. The Buddhist nuns took their interest up a notch with traveling to Asia to seek out Buddhist teachers there. The Catholic nuns were asked about what part of Buddhism they incorporated into their practice. “Several of the Catholic women religiously described such practices as ‘Christian Zen,’ a fusing of Christian teachings and symbols with the ‘form’ of Zen meditation” (Bender & Cadge, 234). This fusion of two separate religious traditions has become a popular trend for those who cling to the tradition they were raised in, but incorporate Buddhist practice and ideology in their lives. So does this make these nuns part Buddhist?

A number of the Catholic nuns also expressed concern about whether it is possible to borrow Buddhist meditative practice without also drawing in Buddhist teachings and philosophy... One of the sisters who practices Zen meditation hypothesized that one reason Buddhist traditions appeal to Catholics is that so few Catholics know much about their own philosophies. (Bender & Cadge, 238)

As shocking as that last sentence is, admitting that Catholics do not know much about their own philosophy, it has some worth to it. A lot of Catholic doctrine is dictated and not explained, while Buddhism goes out of its way to provide metaphors and situational evidence that can be applied easily to a practitioner's life. Going back to Thomas Tweed's assertion that it is self-identification that will determine someone's religious affiliation if this pseudo-Buddhism is what these Catholic nuns wish to identify as, then that is their prerogative. Pseudo-Buddhism would be in the same category as Nightstand Buddhists or Sympathizers. But what do the Buddhist nuns think of this type of picking and choosing? The Catholic nuns have chosen to view Buddhism as a "Form" to which they can use the Buddhist practices, and apply them, to their own teachings and philosophies. When questioned about it, one of the Buddhist nuns said the following:

Constructing Buddhism as Form and Philosophy: 'I'm somewhat concerned that in western countries, people may begin to just sort of take those bits and pieces that they find comfortable and sort of leave the rest of the tradition, where in my view, it's part of an organic whole,' she said. Practice without understanding the Buddha's teachings or considering the precepts that accompany these practices is missing the point. By understanding meditation forms as tools, these Buddhist nuns see the Catholic nuns participating in the very same American picking and choosing they often encounter among their students and are trying to overcome in their teachings about Buddhism as a holistic religious/philosophical tradition. (Bender & Cadge, 237)

The Buddhist nuns argued that taking the "Form" without the philosophy, does not actually understand Buddhism at all. It would be hard to separate the philosophy from Buddhism in its entirety, because in many Buddhist practices, such as meditation, the philosophy is already engrained in the practice itself. The sentiment that the Catholic nuns expressed is not uncommon to the general American population, most New American Buddhists engage in this act of taking one aspect of Buddhism and leaving the rest behind. But what does this mean for the New American Buddhism movement? Will all the new practitioners be this type of pseudo-Buddhist? The Buddhist nuns are more concerned with authenticity, without becoming exclusive:

Arguing that Buddhism is a tradition and not ‘just’ meditation highlights the degree to which such an idea has been present in American society, and is likewise embedded in various ‘meditation’ centers and classes, how-to books, and the rise of Christian and Jewish ‘Zen’ masters. It is important to note, therefore, that Buddhist nuns are forcefully engaged in constructing an ‘authentic’ Buddhism that will be viable in the United States and serve as a corrective to piecemeal appropriations. (Bender & Cadge, 243)

The significant aspect to acknowledge here is that monastic Buddhists represent the traditional path of Theravada Buddhism. In this form of Buddhism the monastic way of life is venerated and held as the highest standard of living, but this lifestyle is not possible for most Buddhists, which is why there are many other forms of Buddhism where the monastic way of life is not as emphasized. As much as these Buddhist nuns find the calling to create an “authentic Buddhism that will be viable in the United States” I am not sure if promoting a monastic lifestyle will have a long-lasting impact, or that it could correct the “piecemeal appropriations.” What is so bad about believing and practicing in an interfaith capacity?

There are many forms of Buddhism that have manifested in the United States, Richard Hughes Seager explored a large number of these specific sub sects in his book *Buddhism in America*. In his book he assesses the viability of prominent Buddhist sects including Zen, Nichiren Shoshu, Tibetan, and Theravada. Seager experiences similar findings to that of Bender and Cadge’s study in that the Buddhist teachers and monastic peoples here in the United States are looking to revitalize the Buddhist tradition to its original intention. “Like Protestant reformers, many American Buddhist teachers and leaders are engaged in fostering a repriminization movement, an effort to restore the religion to its original spirit before there was an institution or “ism,” in order to gain access to the vitality of the founder’s true teachings” (Seager, 61). This desire of the Buddhist leaders is almost identical to the sentiments of the Buddhist nuns portrayed in Bender and Cadge’s study. The question that Seager looks to answer is that of the ability for individual sects to be proliferated here in the United States.

Seager begins by looking at Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, which is also known as True Buddhism. This type of Buddhism started in Japan and focuses on the direct teachings of a disciple of the Buddha who traveled to Japan, Nichiren Daishonin. “The ultimate goals are the attainment of enlightenment by the individual and, through widely spreading true Buddhism, the establishment of a purified and peaceful world where all people can enjoy happy lives together” (<http://www.nst.org/>). This is the most evangelical form of Buddhism, as spreading the word is seen as one of “ultimate goals.” Seager views Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism as having a great chance of making a lasting impression on American society specifically because of the tenet of spreading the word, which leads to greater knowledge about this sect. “NSA’s (Nichiren Shoshu of America) effort to Americanize, however, encouraged a style of proselytizing that was a unique synthesis of shakubku (street solicitation), American patriotism, and value creation” (Seager, 100). When this form of Buddhism came to the United States there was an effort to tailor the presentation of their belief system to fit the American ideals. It is this alteration that lead to the spreading of Nichiren Shoshu of America. The unique tenet of proselytizing gives the NSA a step up, as none of the other form of Buddhism focus on this.

Although Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism would present their beliefs in a tailored way to American society, it remained true to their Japanese roots. Zen Buddhism, however, has almost customized the entirety of the practice to fit like a glove to the current American lifestyle. Zen also originated from Japan, but it has a very different set of beliefs than Nichiren Shoshu. “It teaches that all human beings have the Buddha-nature, or the potential to attain enlightenment, within them, but the Buddha-nature been clouded by ignorance. To overcome this ignorance, Zen rejects the study of scriptures, religious rites, devotional practices, and good works in favor of meditation leading to a sudden breakthrough of insight and awareness of ultimate reality”

(<http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/sects/zen.htm>). As Diana Eck pointed out in her critique of Zen Buddhism it is anti-doctrine and focuses on the practice of meditation only; because of this it has plasticity, the ability to be flexible and change easily to fit whichever culture or society it enters into. “The Americanization of Zen is often presented as a one-way street, a process of only reshaping a Japanese tradition to suit the tone and tenor of American society. Zen in the United States becomes more informal. It is Anglicized. It is democratized. It is tailored to the middle-class American lifestyle, with its focus on the workplace and nuclear family” (Seager, 133-4). The Buddhist nuns in Bender and Cadge’s study would say that this is going against the original nature and teachings of Zen, but this ability to change has allowed Zen to be a popularized version of Buddhism here in the United States. It appears that the ability to alter or present a belief system in an Americanized way is directly correlated to the success that sect will have in the United States.

Tibetan Buddhism has developed out of the exile of the Dalai Lama from Tibet. Due to the exile he has been able to visit the United States and develop a following here. There are some distinctive practices that separate this form of Buddhism from the others: “the status of the teacher or Lama, preoccupation with the relationship between life and death, important role of rituals and initiations, rich visual symbolism, elements of earlier Tibetan faiths, and mantras and meditation practice” (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/subdivisions/tibetan>).

Tibetan Buddhism is often associated with a more doctrinal based practice and an emphasis on the student-teacher relationship. Seager has a unique interpretation of the future of Tibetan Buddhism:

But the future of Tibetan Buddhism in this country depends on its lamas in exile and its American teachers, the dedication of their students, and, in large part, the future of Tibet... If Tibet becomes free once again, many lamas and other Tibetans in exile will no doubt be drawn home to build a new society. But even if that occurs, Tibetan Buddhism

will remain a permanent part of the American Buddhist landscape, with its uniquely rich and highly distinctive forms of philosophy and practice. (Seager, 157)

The fact that Seager has faith that Tibetan Buddhism will thrive if the Dalai Lama is allowed back to Tibet is encouraging to the continuation of this sect. Tibetan Buddhism is seen as the least tailored to the American culture, it remains very true to its Tibetan roots. The motivation for many followers is the Dalai Lama himself; he is a living model for them to emulate.

Even though Tibetan Buddhism is seen as very traditional, there is a sect of Buddhism that is the ultimate traditional sect, Theravada Buddhism. This sect of Buddhism values the monastic lifestyle and in fact sees that this lifestyle is the only way to attain enlightenment and liberation. The entire focus of the teaching in this form of Buddhism is the direct teachings of the Buddha, the Five Precepts that he taught. “The Five Precepts are to undertake the rule of training to: Refrain from harming living beings, refrain from taking that which is not freely given, refrain from sexual misconduct, refrain from wrong speech; such as lying, idle chatter, malicious gossip or harsh speech, and refrain from intoxicating drink and drugs which lead to carelessness” (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/subdivisions/theravada>). These precepts, and the other teachings of the Buddha, like the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path, are the central scriptures and doctrine that Theravada Buddhism teaches. Although this sect of Buddhism is filled with dogma Seager sees Theravada Buddhism as making a great impression in American Society:

Given its wide range of expressions, the Theravada tradition is in an excellent position to make long-term contributions to the formation of American Buddhism. Its unique strength rests in the many different avenues through which to approach Americanization – the extensive network of immigrant temples, the strong practice movement associated with IMS (Insight Meditation Society) and Spirit Rock, and the monastic-led institutions in between. (Seager, 179)

The influence of monastic teachers is seen as a strength in this context, the monastic community serves as a living example, much like the Dalai Lama does in Tibetan Buddhism. I personally would have thought that the Theravada tradition would be seen as too dogmatic and that would hinder its proliferation here in the United States, but Seager is suggesting otherwise. Upon my Internet search of local Buddhist groups in my community, the Theravada tradition was very well represented.

Whether individuals search for Buddhism on the Internet, through their religious affiliation, or seek out the various traditions already present here in the United States, the fact remains that many individuals are seeking. Buddhism is involved in popular culture and has become a part of the current American society, but the question is how long will this last, what is the permanent status of Buddhism in this country? Buddhism has certainly come a long way in this country; it has expanded to even the most remote parts of the United States and has made a lasting impression on American culture. "In the 1950s one might have mistaken the Beat Zen of the counterculture for a fad that would fade, but with each succeeding decade Buddhism has become more vibrant. Today Buddhism has given its own distinctive hues to the tapestry of American religious life" (Eck, 149). Buddhism has made an impact in religious and popular culture here in the United States. In any type of research it is important to know who the participants will be, what their background is, and what makes them tick. The empirical study performed by James William Coleman provides highly significant data in a quantitative sense; I am looking to perform a study in the qualitative sense, to discover how deeply Buddhism has affected these individuals. I wish to look more into their motivations and discover how Buddhism has altered their physical lives, and to what extent has Buddhism entering popular American culture had on their experience with Buddhism. Most importantly I want to discover

which of the categories of the New American Buddhists they would describe themselves as, but always keeping in mind Thomas Tweed's method of self-identification as the means of determining religious identity.

The Phenomenological Method to Religious Studies

When learning about how to study Religion one looks at the historical approach, the evolutionary approach, the philosophical approach, etc. Each of these approaches brings something unique to the study of Religion, but the one that resonated with me the most was the phenomenological approach to the study of religion. Phenomenology takes into account the believer's viewpoint when looking at a specific religious tradition. It is my unchanging belief that the practitioner's understanding of his or her own tradition is crucial to the overall consideration of a religious practice. It was therefore necessary for me to conduct my thesis research in such a way, utilizing the phenomenological approach. Many past theologians and students of Religion have used this approach, and there have been many methods proposed by people who would call themselves a phenomenologist. In my efforts to promote organization I have structured my analysis of these methods historically, beginning with the oldest method proposed and ending with the most recent. Each old dead white guy had his own brand/method of phenomenology.

Johann Heinrich Lambert (1728-1777) was the earliest phenomenologist and created Lamertian Phenomenology. "Phenomena are this method's objects-phenomena designating false aspects of any objects, any seeming-to-be-that-is-not-actually-so characteristic of sensations, perceptions, memories, imagining, concepts, passions, willings, and habits. This method's purpose is to separate mere appearance and error from truth" (Ryba, 259-260). The goal of Lamertian Phenomenology was to find the truth in all objects. For Lambert this was not just focused on Religion, but on all things. The search for what is actually real compelled Lambert to continue his research using the following method:

Six steps are necessary to this observational method: (i) set the percipients' perspectives on the object; (ii) subject the object to all variations observable from the fixed

perspectives; (iii) on the basis of step ‘(ii)’, subject the object to the discovered variations systematically; (iv) compare and collect the observed regularities and into a tableau; (v) relate the disharmonies to explain how differences in perspective result from relations between consciousness, physical alteration, and appearance; and (vi) distinguish false from true appearance on the basis of the preceding steps. (Ryba, 260)

One of the major themes in phenomenological methodology is this organization that Lambert describes. Placing information in a “tableau” of sorts is a very common way to organize all of the data one would collect. The hardest part would ultimately be step six “distinguish false from true appearance” though data may suggest pathways to doing this it is, ultimately, a subjective task. The main criticism of Lambertian Phenomenology would be the vagueness of the methodological steps and the fact that Lambert did not suggest a way to combat subjectivity.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was certainly a man of distinction in the world of philosophy, combining logic and human experience. Kantian Phenomenology was not very descriptive nor precise in its methods but because Kant was such a pivotal figure in the world of philosophy I believe it is important to know how he viewed phenomenology:

Phenomenology’s chief usefulness is establishing descriptions for subsequent determinative judgments. In phenomenology is a method for controlling the contents of understanding, then phenomenological descriptions only reveal objects’ possibly real qualities. Phenomena are not illusions... After categorical understanding (or explanation) has been accomplished, individual appearances are judged as true or illusory. (Ryba, 261)

Kant believed that if one were to use phenomenological study then one would reveal the true nature of objects. As in Lambertian Phenomenology, we can see that the methods are not very clear in aiding a future phenomenologist in pursuing this type of research. Again Kantian Phenomenology was not helpful in relinquishing this stressor of how to deal with the researchers subjectivity or bias.

John Robison (1739-1805) created Robinson Phenomenology. He stressed something new in his definition of phenomenology. “Here, phenomenology is the ‘complete or copious

narration of facts, properly selected, cleared of all unnecessary and extraneous circumstances, and accurately narrated.’ It yields practical results when it brings the adventitious field of human affairs into scientific order. But it cannot do so without the subsequent methodological steps of taxonomy and etiology” (Ryba, 262). The idea of having a system of taxonomy is extremely important in dealing with phenomenology, being able to classify all the data discovered throughout the research is extremely helpful when one sits down to process and analyze, to come up with significant and meaningful conclusions. Etiology is the study of causes, the examination of why such phenomena occurred. Data is meaningless without the context from which it came from. Both taxonomy and etiology get passed down as significant steps in the methodological framework of phenomenological research.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and Hegelian Phenomenology was one of the staple forms of phenomenology in the past, it was considered quite radical for its time. “Hegelian phenomena are radically subjective. Because Hegel equates Spirit with phenomena, anything in the world given to or as consciousness is a phenomenon. Unconstructed phenomena are radically unintelligible; they can, in some sense, but in what sense they cannot be described” (Ryba, 262). Hegel had this notion of concrete phenomena that originated from our consciousness, and “unintelligible” phenomena that could not be comprehended or described. Hegel believed that everything came from the Spirit and that every phenomenon was a representation of the Spirit. There was the methodology associated with discovering such phenomena:

The Hegelian dialectic, which figures as the central phenomenological technique in the Hegelian system, itself possesses three steps: (i) the differentiation of subjecthood from object-constituting consciousness, (ii) the differentiation of object-constituting consciousness into three contents: (a) the conceptualized object, (b) the object grasped as transcendental to consciousness, and (c) the judgment of correspondence between (a) and (b). Step (iii) is the result of the frustration of (a) and (b) not attaining identity, a

frustration that causes a redoubling of consciousness in such a way that the relation between subjecthood and object-constitution consciousness is reconfigured so that a new concept of the object and a new transcendental object is produced. (Ryba, 263)

The overreaching goal of this Hegelian dialectic was to unite the Spirit with phenomena, and Hegel believed that this could be obtained through this methodology. By separating ones consciousness from external reality, one would ultimately come to this union of Spirit with any object. Hegel made no effort to hide his subjectivity; his proposed methodology suggests that he expected everyone to make such a leap as to equate the Spirit with all phenomena.

Sir William Hamilton (1788-1856) founded Hamiltonian Phenomenology. Hamilton was significant because he was the first to reflect on this aspect of subjective research. But first he classified phenomena in a new way. “There, Hamilton divides the kinds of phenomena into three classes- cognitions, feelings, and conations- which roughly correspond to Lambert’s three classes of experience: the physical, the psychological, and the moral” (Ryba, 263). There is a connection here between Lambert and Hamilton in classification of phenomena but the way Hamilton analyzed his collected information is much different than the Lambertian approach.

“Hamiltonian phenomenology is a first branch of philosophy that treats mental phenomena reflectively, descriptively, and analytically as facts free of prejudices, preconditions, hypotheses, and explanations” (Ryba, 264). Hamiltonian Phenomenology was attempting the impossible, objectivity. Hamilton attempted to take phenomena at face value, and reported them as such. There are some significant drawbacks to this approach, mainly the loss of contextual support for the phenomena discovered. One of the major critiques of any phenomenological research is the lack of objectivity, that too much of the researcher is often found in the research.

William Whewell (1794-1866) and Whewellian Phenomenology attempted to make phenomenological study a part of the typical sciences as well as part of many trans-disciplinary

studies. Whewell found phenomenology so significant that he wanted this form of study to permeate every scientific sector possible. He created his own methodology in how to use phenomenology:

The initial methodological step is the explication of the governing motifs of a scientific domain. The second step- with which phenomenology is most narrowly associated- is the observation, decomposition, and measurement of complex facts or phenomena. Finally, the third step, the colligation of elementary facts by means of conceptions, involves taxonomy, etiology and theory. (Ryba, 265)

This was the most comprehensive methodology that had come across so far. Defining motifs prior to collecting data is a way to check one's own preconceptions and subjectivity. Here we can also acknowledge the passing down of taxonomy and etiology as methods, with a new emphasis on theory. Theory could come from analysis of scriptural texts or from personal theories held by practitioners or spiritual leaders of a specific tradition.

Cornelis P. Tiele (1830-1902) attempted to use phenomenology as a science, employing scientific methods to study Religion. "A true scientific study of religion will, therefore study all religions without prejudice, just as a scientist of language will study all languages without prejudice. 'Genuine science, seeks nothing but the truth' about religion to 'investigate and explain [religion]; it desires to know what religion is, and why we are religious'" (Strenski, 172). The basic goal of Tiele, as are most of his predecessors, was to discover the truth about Religion. What separated him from the rest of the pack is the desire to discover "why we are religious." In this search of a reason "why" he used science: "Science, here, possesses four features: (i) a domain with sufficient breadth, (ii) a unifying theme for the facts of that domain, (iii) an ordered system of these facts as the data for inferences, and (iv) fruitful results on the basis of (i), (ii), and (iii)" (Ryba, 272). This methodological system spoke more to organization than explicit steps to take when investigating Religion. There is nothing to tell a future phenomenologist how

to attain these “fruitful results.” As Tiele seemed to take a scientific mindset his study, he chose not to examine certain aspects of Religion. “Tiele has no intention to extend his understanding of the phenomena of this science to supernatural objects per se; religious phenomena are ‘historical-psychological, social and wholly human’ thematizations of the supernatural” (Ryba, 271). He did not wish to investigate aspects of the supernatural. In choosing to leave his huge feature out of his study he limited himself and his research. One of the major aspects of any Religion is the supernatural component; it would be leaving a whole section of a tradition blank and void of meaning if such an important quality as the Spirit or a deity was not investigated.

Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) although he was a phenomenologist, he chose to specifically research only one type of phenomenon, the numinous experience. Otto believed in this idea of a numinous, mysteriousness associated with something supernatural. This numinous was believed by Otto to be the cause of Religion and the overall reason why people are drawn to Religion in the first place:

Religion was autonomous because it sprang from something unique in our emotional life, from some special vision, feeling, sensibility- some experience- that was unlike any other and that was distinctly and appropriately religious.... This numinous experience was what we feel when we encounter what is holy or sacred- an experience that for Otto was an experience of something that was ‘wholly other.’ The numinous experience was, thus, a feeling of being in the presence of a ‘mysterium tremendum et fascinans’- a tremendously powerful, yet magnetizing, fascinating mystery. (Strenski, 182)

This numinous experience was the personal motivator for Otto as well as what drove his study in phenomenology. He believed that all religious practitioners had this numinous experience, and that this experience is what caused Religion to be created in the first place. “The referring of this felling numinous tremor to its object in the numen brings into relief a property of the later which plays an important part in our Holy Scriptures, and which has been the occasion of many difficulties, both to commentators and to theologians, from its puzzling and baffling nature”

(Otto, 15). The notion of the numinous and its existence being the cause of religion, one would only assume that this would be described in scriptures and doctrines. Otto emphasized the importance in researching written texts as well as talking with practitioners. He believed that these texts are past practitioners' experiences with the numinous, to understand something in the present you need to look to the past:

Phenomenologist of religion like Otto believe that we can get at this subjective experience by examining our own religious feelings, and then by seeing if we can recognize the same emotional states in the great religious texts of the world... We need to try to put ourselves into the mindset of the actors in the materials we are reading, as difficult as that may seem. Preserving one's neutrality in the process is critical, however. Thus, one should not confuse 'empathy' with 'sympathy,' the latter of which implies a favorable judgment about the phenomenon. (Strenski, 183)

Here Otto was promoting a method of looking at one's own religious beliefs and discovering a tradition that suits you best. He again was stressing the importance of going through scripture as further research. Although Otto so far appeared to be very subjective in his methodology, he focused on remaining neutral and empathetic without implying sympathy. Otto provided a clear method to the study of Religion through phenomenology and gave a unique view of phenomena to focus on with the idea of the numinous experience.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Husserlian Phenomenology was comprised of the more modern methods of phenomenology. He gave probably one of the most succinct approaches to religious phenomenology, with the clearest intentions:

Among Husserlian phenomenology's distinct purposes are: (i) the critique of the knowledge founding logic, (ii) the description of experience's grounding structures, (iii) the description of mind's role in the constitution of experience, (iv) the creation of 'a unified theory of science and knowledge', (v) the provision of a non-naturalistic group for worldhood, and (vi) the realization of a 'complete descriptive philosophy' (Ryba, 267).

These goals covered a lot of ground: logic, experience, consciousness, unification of science and knowledge, and a universal philosophy, that's quite a feat! Husserl believed that these goals

could be obtained through the phenomenological study of religion, via the following methods:

“They are: (i) epoche, (ii) phenomenological reduction, (iii) contemplative modalization, (iv)

essential reduction, and (v) transcendental reduction” (Ryba, 268). Epoche was described as

“bracketing” one’s belief in order to keep them from interfering with data collection or analysis.

Most phenomenological methodology combats the efforts of reductionism but in this method

there are not one but three methods of reduction:

The aim of phenomenological reduction is to reveal parts and wholes that comprise phenomena... This is the equivalent to saying that the relation between phenomenal parts and wholes is grounded and presented to consciousness is adequate, indubitable, distinct, and clear... The point of contemplative modalization is to ground the whole, first, with respect to internal parts and then with respect to external phenomena. (Ryba, 269)

Husserl gave great reverence to the notion of grounding ones beliefs and findings first in order to

understand it fully before continuing on in ones research. Husserl provided specific tools to use

in phenomenological research. There was no clear method in how to attain the specific goals set

out, but in using these techniques that are specifically phenomenological one can attempt to

arrive at answers.

Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950) had the clearest step-by-step methodology,

although I do not agree with his single-minded intentions, his methodological approach is the

best. The first important aspect to recognize is his view is his definition of phenomena. “Here,

the phenomenon appears inseparable from the person to whom it appears, but without object

modifying subject or visa versa... All phenomena may be disclosed according to a three-fold

sequence: (i) as mediating concealment, (ii) as gradual revelation, and (iii) iconic mediation of

essence. Each corresponds to a level of life: experience, understanding, and testimony” (Ryba,

275). This was the way he chose to classify phenomenon, as stages of life. In this way he

humanized phenomenon in to something that the general population could relate to. Van der

Leeuw had the most precise method, and one that I am particularly partial to and incorporated this method into my own:

Van der Leeuw's phenomenological method possesses six steps: (i) names are associated with phenomena; (ii) the phenomenon is imaginatively and sympathetically interpolated into consciousness; (iii) the phenomenon is focused on (bracketed) to the exclusion of others so that essential features may be observed; (iv) the regular structural relationships between phenomenon and a wider field of phenomena are clarified; (v) the logos/meaning of the phenomenon is distilled, and (vi) the disclosed structure is confronted with and corrected by other researchers, such as archeology and philosophy. (Ryba, 276)

This is the clearest that it gets! Step-by-step everything seems utterly attainable in Van der Leeuw's methodology. As much as I adore this methodology, in that it focuses on all the important aspects such as bracketing, classification, meaning, and further research, Van der Leeuw had a specific intention in mind for his personal phenomenological research of Religion. "His phenomenology of religion was his way of trying to encompass all this new information under the dogmatic umbrella of a new theology. Having done the preliminary phenomenological job, van der Leeuw felt that as a Christian theologian his ultimate role was to pass judgment on the value of various religious facts in order to put them to use in the service of Christian doctrinal theology" (Strenski, 187). It is hard to imagine that a single-minded man whose only purpose was to serve the Christian faith created such a straightforward method. This is reminder that the goal of the phenomenologist, whether it is to be a caretaker, critic, or undertaker, matters a lot in their research. The researchers intentions should always be taken into account when considering the validity of the results reported.

William Brede Kristensen (1867-1953) had a strong belief that the practitioners' viewpoint was the most important thing when analyzing a tradition. He believed that the purpose of phenomenology was to give an accurate account of a religious tradition through the eyes of a believer:

Phenomenology does not try to compare the religions with one another as large units, but it takes out of their historical setting the similar facts and phenomena which it encounters in different religions, bringing them together, and studies them in groups... The purpose of such a study is to become acquainted with the religious thought, idea or need which underlies the group of corresponding data... The comparative consideration of corresponding data often gives a deeper and more accurate insight than the consideration of each datum by itself, for consideration as a group, the data shed light upon one another. (Kristensen, 2)

The data to which Kristensen referred to is the in-depth interviews with practitioners, as a way to get a “real” sense of what a Religion is like. Kristensen was often chastised for reporting findings “because Kristensen simply ‘rubber stamps’ the viewpoint of believers as true and complete” (Strenski, 178). However, Kristensen did provide one very good piece of knowledge to promote the greater good for the phenomenological method, and that was how it compared to other methods. “Comparative religion fails, because it valorizes a religion; history or religion is objectively too distant; and philosophy or religion is focused on idealities” (Ryba, 274). These are the aspects of the other methods to the study of Religion that Kristensen found issue with, but he also recognized the trans-disciplinary aspect to the phenomenological method, and that it is an approach that borrows from other methods. “From comparative religion, religious phenomenology accepts some typological categories; from history of religion it accepts the empathetic method and historical facts; from philosophy it accepts the definition of religion’s essence” (Ryba, 274). This is further evidence that in order to have a great phenomenological method for studying Religion, you need to employ a host of methods and make it your own.

The most recent religious phenomenologist was Ninian Smart (1927-2001) who had a very unique and precise view on religion; in fact he created his own definition of religion. “For Smart, religion should be seen as a structured ‘whole’ made up of seven mutually interdependent or ‘dialectically’ related ‘dimensions’: myths, rituals, doctrines, ethics, social forms and organizations, emotions and experiences, and material or esthetic elements” (Strenski, 192). This

definition attempted to be all encompassing but it still left certain religions out; for example certain pagan traditions that have no specific doctrine, most Wicca's make up their own scripture to follow. Smart gave a methodology to the study of religion using phenomenology:

These methods include: first, the history of religions, focusing on the interrelationships between the dimensions within the specific religious tradition; second, historical-dialectical studies, focusing on the external aspect of historical development and particularly the dialectical relationship between religion and culture; third, phenomenological and structural studies, focusing on internal aspects, while also moving into a form of typological or morphological analysis; fourth, dialectical-phenomenological studies, which refers to those methodologies that analyze the phenomena of religion in terms of their wider social and psychological context. (Kunin, 133-4)

This was a pretty clear methodology, incorporating a historical approach, anthropological approach, typological approach, and phenomenological approach. The key term that signified Smart's methodology was 'dialectical phenomenology' which meant that he compared two seemingly opposite aspects and found similarities and relationships between them. Much like Tiele, Smart made a concession in all of his work. "By bracketing the Beyond we affirm a kind of methodological agnosticism, a way of approaching the phenomena of religious experience without any unnecessary slant, and trying to reveal the categories the believer uses rather than imposing our own categories on him" (Smart, 60). Smart purposefully did not enter the realm of the supernatural or divine in his research. He believed that it entertained too many subjective feelings and emotions into the conversation, and could possibly cloud both the researcher's and the practitioner's viewpoint. But Smart was not blinded by the possibility of objectivity; he fully accepted the subjective nature of the phenomenological method to the study of Religion.

In brief: the world around us is not neutral, but soaked in feelings. It may be that 'scientifically' sometimes we may wish to bracket out the feelings, to train ourselves at a kind of anaesthetic objectivity. But in ordinary life perception has its feelings as well as its information. Things, people, and events typically have their charges, and they are things and people of substance. (Smart, 68)

This is important to remember in doing any type of research. People whom you come in contact with in the field “are things and people of substance” such a fact should not be forgotten when enveloped in research. I will never be able to bracket my feelings entirely nor will objectivity be anywhere close to describing the results I discover.

Hans-Günter Heimbrock, Professor in Practical Theology and Religious Education at Goethe-University in Frankfurt, Germany, wrote about the phenomenological method of the study of Religion and discovered five techniques that characterize the phenomenological method. “One critical element of phenomenological research is perception... Such a perceptual experience awakens the researcher’s awareness of, and resonance, with, a specific atmosphere within a particular situation” (Heimbrock, 294-5). This is certainly one of the common themes across all of the phenomenologists that have been analyzed here, especially Smart, Hegel, Otto, Husserl, and Kristensen. “A second element in phenomenological research is the field. Proceeding with research in a life world perspective asks one to enter a situation in everyday life, or a field; it might even be a field of dreams or imagination” (Heimbrock, 295). The emphasis on field research is crucial to all of the phenomenological research, where will you find the practitioners if not in the field. “A third characteristic of phenomenological methods is self-reflection. The phenomenological emphasis is on subjectivity- the involvement of subjects in their own life worlds and in the fields that they are studying” (Heimbrock, 295). There are certainly specific men that have been discussed that value self-reflection more than others. Hegel was considered radically subjective, while Hamilton attempted to create an illusion of objectivity. “A fourth characteristic is interpretation... ‘Bracketing-out’ is a most problematic notion... This step of interpretation, in reality, will never be done without including information, logical conclusions, and other activities that do not rely on perception” (Heimbrock, 296). Smart

and Tiele focused on this point and decided to not discuss anything supernatural or divine in their research. The final point that Heimbrock made is in the general nature of the phenomenological method:

The final characteristic of phenomenological methods is its circular nature... In phenomenological inspired research, as in hermeneutics, there is no such fixed order of methodical steps. Instead, the practical elements I described above indicate points or segments on a circle; you have to return several times to previous points, expose yourself to new perceptions, get new 'ahas,' and continue your description in light of each new step and each return to an earlier step. (Heimbrock, 297)

No other phenomenologist had previously discussed this "circular nature" before, but it does make sense. Even though some phenomenologists give a step like process to the methodology, there is always this notion that you must return to your original preconceptions, this nature is kind of a self-check. The general overview of the phenomenological method gives rise to the fact that methods are not always perfect, especially in phenomenology, it is important to tailor your own methods to your research, keeping in mind all these important general techniques.

Now that all of the significant figures have been discussed, it is important to note that they have not been found without fault or critique. There are four major critiques of the phenomenological method, not specifically towards any one of the phenomenologists mentioned:

First is that phenomenology of religion in framing its object domain begins with an inadmissible a priori assumption of a sui generis domain, such as the Sacred or the Transcendent... The second critique is that religious phenomenology is an apologetics for the theology of its practitioners. According to this critique, the ideological assumptions of its practitioners contradict its valorization of objectivity... A third critique of religious phenomenology is that the goal of objectivity is a pipe dream as are all supposed methods of its delivery. (Ryba, 279-280)

I believe that Smart and Tiele chose to bracket out the supernatural from their methods in order to counteract this first critique. The way to get around the second critique would be to adopt Smart's "methodological agnosticism", where he was not a practitioner nor chose to be sympathetic to the plight of the practitioner. Otto made a similar distinction between using

empathy rather than sympathy. The third critique is valid; there is no way to be completely void of subjectivity using the phenomenological method, although certain methodologies, Hamiltonian Phenomenology, attempted this. The fourth critique: “For now, the practice of religious phenomenology within religious studies has entered a period of dormancy, but it is not on account of any critical wound” (Ryba, 284). There is no excuse for this critique, only that the phenomenological community should work on producing something!

In my own phenomenological method to the study of Religion, I will incorporate many of the techniques and steps used by past phenomenologists. From Lambert, I will obtain the purpose to separate out true from false phenomena; Kant, the belief that the phenomenological method will help reveal the true nature of phenomena; Robison, the techniques of taxonomy and etiology; Hegel, the caution that there is such a thing as being too subjective; Hamilton, the idealism of objectivity; Whewell, the acknowledgement that phenomenology is a science and should be treated as such; Tiele, the idea of bracketing out ones own beliefs; Otto, the ability to focus my research; Husserl, to clearly define my intentions and the phenomenological tools; Van Der Leeuw, the basic methodological steps; Kristensen, the value of the practitioner’s viewpoint; Smart, a definition of religion and to find value in the research participants and; Heimbrock the idea that I need to make my own method. My general conclusion from all of my research of past methodologies is that, as a researcher, I have the ability to pick and choose my own method, just as these previous phenomenologists have done. My methods will include aspects and techniques of all of the people that I have researched, but it will be a build-as-you-go process. I have a very general idea of what I want to accomplish and how I intend to do that, but I will not know how the methods will work until I get into the field for “it is a dynamic interactive space, where people will develop connections and discover multiple contexts” (Heimbrock, 295).

The Centers: The Diamond Way, Zen Mountain Monastery & Shambhala

THE DIAMOND WAY OF ALBANY

The first site that I visited was the Albany Diamond Way Buddhist Group. I came across this group through an Internet search, as they have a detailed website and links to the national/international organization of Diamond Way Buddhism. I made contact with the director of the group ‘G,’ over email. He seemed very excited to have me come experience the group and said that he knew of a few members who would not mind being interviewed for my research. We made the decision together that attending one of the regularly scheduled weekly meetings would be the best time for me to meet with the group.

Prior to the meeting I did some background research on the organization. Although there was not much information on the local chapter in Albany, there was some interesting information on Diamond Way Buddhism as a whole. The organization believes that the Buddha used the Diamond way to transmit information. “Where people had strong confidence in their own and others' Buddha nature, Buddha taught the Diamond Way (*Vajrayana*). Here, he manifested as forms of energy and light or directly transmitted his enlightened view as a flow of awareness. On this highest level, the aim is the complete development of mind, the spontaneous effortlessness of the Great Seal (*Mahamudra*)” (Diamond Way Buddhism USA). This method of enlightenment through direct transmission is the only way that you can attain the ultimate goal. The focus here is on the direct student-teacher relationship to receive the direct transmission. The website reads: “The Diamond Way opens the most skillful methods of the Buddha to the modern world. Using them one learns to experience the world from a rich and self-liberating viewpoint. Its meditations develop a deep inner richness and lead to non-fabrication and an unwavering mind. They help us to discover and finally unfold all our enlightened qualities for the benefit of

all beings as well as ourselves” (Diamond Way Buddhism USA). As most sects of Buddhism will tell you, theirs is the ultimate way to attain enlightenment, but the Diamond Way has a uniquely western aspect to it in that the founder Lama Ole Nydahl was given direct transmission from His Holiness the 16th Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje (1924 -1981) (Diamond Way Buddhism USA).

Lama Ole Nydahl is known as the 1st Western Lama because he was tasked by His Holiness the 16th Karmapa to bring Buddhism to the West. “Lama Ole Nydahl was born on the 19th March 1941 North of Copenhagen and grew up there. He studied Philosophy, English and German at the University of Copenhagen, and in the U.S.A, Tübingen and Munich” (Diamond Way Buddhism USA). He first came in contact with Buddhism in 1968 when he was on his honeymoon with his wife Hannah in Nepal. He then met His Holiness the 16th Karmapa in 1969 and received the direct transmission, which allowed him to share the teachings of Diamond Way Buddhism with the West. Since 1972 Lama Ole Nydahl and his wife have been spreading the teachings of the Diamond Way to the West, together they have founded over 600 Diamond Way Buddhist centers world wide. Since the 16th Karmapa’s death in 1981, Lama Ole follows His Holiness the 17th Karmapa Trinley Thaye Dorje. (Lama Ole Nydahl)

There has been research done on Diamond Way Buddhism, and specifically Lama Ole bringing this tradition to the West. This process has been far from smooth, and it is ripe with controversies. Burkhard Scherer from the Canterbury Christ Church University published a research article in the Journal of Global Buddhism in 2008. This paper explored the Diamond Way in its translation from the East to the West under the guiding force of Lama Ole. The research was preformed under the phenomenological method, similarly in the way that I conducted my research.

The author of this paper took a stance of both suspicion and of trust in order to appropriately look into both the Diamond Way and the life of Lama Ole. “This paper aims to open this area of study by employing a balanced approach between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of trust... acknowledging Nydahl as both charismatic and controversial figure within contemporary Buddhism” (Scherer, 18). There are definitely aspects of both this organization and its figurehead that were not shared in the website:

Verifiable elements in Nydahl’s biography include the following: his middle-class upbringing; his early interest in languages and philosophy; his Hippie years, drugs, drug dealing and boxing, while studying English, German and philosophy at Copenhagen University from 1960-1969; his marriage to Hannah Nydahl in 1968; their first journey to Nepal and the end of their drug dealing career in 1969 with four months in prison; Buddhist refuge and meeting the 16th Karmapa in 1969; and his final return to Copenhagen in 1972 and the founding of meditation groups, initially in Denmark and Germany. (Scherer, 24)

The aspects that I was most shocked to learn about were the drug usage/dealing years and the prison sentence. There has been a link tied between Buddhism, Hippies, and psychedelic drug use that has proliferated and shed a negative light on Buddhist practitioners. It surprises me that a founder of a widely known tradition fits that stereotype so well. Scherer stated in his article that Lama Ole was very open and honest about his past and discussed it frequently in his reflections in his many books. Although his reflections were co-authored, he is the primary writer and editor of all of his books. “Still, the core author team designates itself as ‘TCHO,’ comprised of **Ole Nydahl**, **Hannah Nydahl**, Nydahl’s Polish student **Tomek Lehnert**, and his [Nydahl] once long-term girlfriend **Cathrin Hartung**” (Scherer, 23). Lama Ole’s right hand is his long time friend, and once lover, Cathrin. She is the professional end of the organization, while Lama Ole is the spiritual leader. Her role was boosted after the death of Hannah Nydahl on April 1, 2007. Lama Ole’s past and present indiscretions are not the only critics that have been unveiled throughout the history of this organization:

(A) Nydahl's unconventional spiritual formulation and education outside the prescribed curriculum of three-year retreats. (B) His undeniable trust and devotion to the Sixteenth Karmapa (C) His function as a Buddhist teacher and protector of Western freedom. This addresses his legitimization narrative of himself as emanation of a Buddhist protector and his interpretation of Islam in particular as a key threat to Western freedom and human, especially women's rights. (Scherer, 35)

The first criticism expresses his unusual way of spreading the Diamond Way and how he received transmission from His Holiness the 16th Karmapa, which directly addressed the second point made. Lama Ole's devotion to the 16th Karmapa inhibits his ability to follow the current Karmapa; he has disagreed with the newer ideals set out by the current Karmapa. This final criticism looks at the cultural and religious scrutiny that he has shown other traditions, such as Islam. Buddhism has long since been a tradition where religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation has flourished and been a strict teaching, but Lama Ole has spoken out against other religious traditions.

The rate at which the Diamond Way has proliferated has been exponential in growth "As of August 2008, the organization of over 586 centers in fifty-five countries worldwide. An approximation of the number of Nydahl's adherents has to remain rather speculative, but the total of paying memberships in the different national organizations can be estimated conservatively at 15,000, with perhaps a total of 70,000 students in the grey areas between devoted followers and casual sympathizers" (Scherer, 25). For a religion that just came to the West in 1972, when Lama Ole left Nepal, it is astonishing how fast the growth has occurred and the popularity of this tradition. Lama Ole gives countless talks every year and sends many "Traveling Teachers" out to spread the practices of the Diamond Way. "Via a hermeneutics of suspicion, one could perceive a missionary drive here, as well as empire building and a discourse of power. Via a hermeneutics of trust, one could see a genuine endeavor to benefit others"

(Scherer, 27). There is a strict rhetoric in Buddhism of non-proselytizing, but then why is Lama Ole sending out teachers to spread the word?

The focus of Lama Ole and his teachings is to help the meld the Diamond Way with western values and beliefs. Since the Diamond Way is not a monastic tradition, it must be tailored to the lay practitioner lifestyle. There also appears to be a typical mold that these practitioners must fit into:

He [Nydahl] favors the lay practitioner who earns his/her own money, has a family and, while not avoiding the struggles of everyday life and human relationships, adopts the yogi view that expresses itself in their meditation practice, dharma work and dharma travel. The imperative of latency has been recently broadened to include the policy that all Diamond Way students of Nydahl who travel and teach in his centers ('Traveling Teachers') work for the dharma as volunteers, that is they have to sustain themselves and earn their livelihood independently of the *sangha*, usually through paid employment. (Scherer, 33)

Under the hermeneutics of suspicion one could speculate that the reason that Lama Ole desires individuals who are self-sustaining, financially independent, with families is so that they can donate money to the Diamond Way organization and that they can convert more individuals. To have a generation of children raised in this tradition, to be the continuation of the Diamond Way will be important when Lama Ole passes away. Although he is still alive today to continue his teachings, the big question remains of what will happen once he dies. "What will be crucial for the future for the future development of the Diamond Way is the problem of how the transmission will be continued after Nydahl's death" (Scherer, 40). There is currently no spiritual leader named who will take over in the event of the leader's death. This is still a very young organization, but it has gained immense support in just a few short decades. Evidence of its proliferation was evident in my visit with the Diamond Way Buddhist group in Albany.

I first pulled up to the address that G, the director of the group, had provided me. I checked and double-checked the address to make sure that it was correct because it appeared to

be a residential home that I was walking into. I rang the doorbell and was pleasantly greeted by G who was overly friendly as he invited me into his home. All along the stairway of the apartment there were pictures of the 16th and 17th Karmapa's and many pictures of Lama Ole and his wife Hannah. G graciously invited me into a large meditation space, with beautiful hardwood floors, and red and gold paint on the walls. He had converted his living room into a meditation hall. I was pleasantly surprised, and relieved; the meditation hall legitimized the group for me. I will admit that when I first walked onto the porch I was unsure of how genuine this group was, but the obvious time and money put into the space proved to me how dedicated they were to this organization. G brought me into the kitchen and offered me a cup of tea while we waited for the rest of the participants to join us. He started by asking me if I knew anything about the Diamond Way. I responded that I knew the basics but that I would love to hear his interpretation of what the Diamond Way was and the mission of the organization.

G gave me a basic introduction of the Diamond Way, which was pretty much the same as the description on the website. He described to the importance of Lama Ole, Hannah, and the influence of the His Holiness the 16th Karmapa. He expressed that their basic beliefs including yogic transmission versus the layperson transmission. He said that the basic practice consists of meditation, debates, and direct transmission from teacher to student. G also made it very clear that his center in Albany is responsible for hosting many retreats where a plethora of other practitioners come to observe different rituals or practices with them. I knew that he was attempting to justify the existence of this organization, because of its infancy. This group had been together since 2005. I asked G what he believed the difference was between the Diamond Way and the traditional Tibetan Buddhist sect, lead by the Dalai Lama. He thought about his response, and then replied hesitantly that the Dalai Lama just had it wrong. He expressed his

animosity towards the Dalai Lama for trying to control the spread of Diamond Way Buddhism in the West. He made it clear that the Dalai Lama, or his teachings, did not influence the Diamond Way practice. Three women Y, V, and S then joined us in the kitchen and entered into our discussion on the specific qualities of Buddhism.

All four members of the Diamond Way Buddhist group of Albany were of Russian descent. They had all emigrated from Russia and were now naturalized citizens. I learned that Y was the wife of G, and the S was the ex-wife of G. This relationship seemed strikingly similar to that of Lama Ole himself with this wife on one arm and the business end of the organization, an ex-lover, on the other arm. Perhaps G is emulating his spiritual leader and pursuing a similar relationship with the women in his life. V was unrelated to the other members of the group but she seemed to know all of them in a very personal way. G declared that we should move into the meditation room to continue talking in a more comfortable area. We all sat in a meditative posture and I began by asking them all a very basic question, How did you first come to learn about Diamond Way Buddhism?

Y was the first one to answer. She described her first experience with Buddhism to be through her friends in Russia. She was attracted to the meditational practices that could help her organize her thoughts. She had held a very stressful editorial position in a major paper and organization was a key element in that job. She said that meditation was the major reason why she stuck with the Diamond Way, rather than other religious traditions. She had also had the opportunity to see Lama Ole and Hannah speak at a conference back in Russia, and she was immediately drawn to him and his teachings. Ever since then she has been a practitioner. I am sure that her marriage to G has only strengthened her commitment to the Diamond Way.

V stated that she had been spiritual for years and had actually experimented with all different traditions such as Islam, Christianity, and different sects within Buddhism, including Zen. She had not been raised in a set tradition as a child, so once she entered adolescence she began her search for a tradition that would suit her personality and lifestyle. I asked her specifically what she found to be unfavorable with Zen Buddhism. She responded saying that it was too monastic, too strict, but she had enjoyed the meditations, which is what led her to the Diamond Way. The aspect of the Diamond Way that she enjoyed the most was that she was allowed to continue questioning through the debates and that she was able to continue to pursue her spirituality in this tradition. She expressed a fear of being tied down to one tradition, and that the Diamond Way let her continue to explore new things.

G said that when he still lived in Russia he met this man with an ethereal quality to him; he said that he just had this quality to him, this light, this presence that was impossible to ignore. This individual actually introduced G to Lama Ole, and G was just dumbfounded by him. G expressed that he had a similar background to Lama Ole, now he was not explicit in what that exactly meant, but one can assume that Hippie years and drugs were most likely involved in G's past. He found that his similarities with Lama Ole confirmed that the Diamond Way was the right path for him. G had been a long-term seeker and had also experimented with other traditions such as Hinduism and the Hare Krishna's. The aspect of the Diamond Way that G admires the most is the practice of the mandala. He also expressed that the Diamond Way brings out the most beautiful and beneficial qualities that an individual can express such as compassion, wisdom, fearlessness, and awareness. He admitted that he had received direct transmission from Lama Ole, and although he did not claim to be fully enlightened he did believe that he has the potential to actualize and realize the full transmission that he was given.

S was the last to answer, and the most hesitant. Her voice was almost a whisper when she described her experience with the Diamond Way. She had experimented with Hinduism as well, but found that it was too restrictive and repressive for women. She was married to G when they discovered the Diamond Way together when they attended a talk given by Lama Ole. Before she went into this talk she went through the thought process that if she disagreed with anything that the speaker said then she would leave and that would be the end of that, but she could not disagree with anything the Lama Ole said. She expressed that she has never doubted the Diamond way and that is why she converted and why she is an active practitioner to this day.

G had initially mentioned, in the introduction he gave me to the Diamond Way, that this meditation center held retreats. The one retreat that the group brought up was the meditation on Conscious Dying. In the research article by Scherer, this practice was mentioned that: “Nydahl also transmits the practice of ‘Conscious Dying’ or *Phowa* in its entirety in the traditional way, sung in Tibetan” (Scherer, 37). So as this one transmission has been kept in the traditional style as it is practiced in Tibet, I was especially interested in hearing more about it. The group was very enthusiastic in their description of this four-hour long meditation on dying. They said that if you were successful you would actually leave your body and that there would be a physical sign that you had accomplished this task. The physical sign was blood at the top of your head. G then chimed in that with intense practice/meditation and the more transmissions you receive the greater your abilities are to experience these physical signs. He also described the possibility of gaining powers or extra-capabilities with increased practice of the Diamond Way.

After I had discussed the personal histories of each of the participants it was time to engage in their practice. We started with a guided meditation that G lead. The meditation was a described as a typical Diamond Way meditation where you envision different colored lights

entering your body at specific points. This is supposed to draw attention to those specific parts of your body and draw out different levels of your awareness. The meditation was accompanied by chanting which was described as a way of giving thanks to Lama Ole as well as the 16th and 17th Karmapa's. The whole practice was rather short, I believe that it is because I was taking up so much of their time with the questions that I had for them. I dealt with the logistical aspects of my research after we had concluded the practice for the night. Each member of the group signed a consent form, giving permission for me to use their stories here in my research. Overall I was impressed with the Diamond Way of Albany, but I was left skeptical about the organization as a whole.

Lama Ole appears to be a very suspicious character, and I am puzzled in the amount of support he has gained with such an eclectic background. There have been assertions that Diamond Way Buddhism is in some way a cult-like organization. In any case it has gained intense notoriety in a very short amount of time. It has extended from Nepal all the way to little Albany, NY. There are hundreds of groups just like the one I visited all around the world, some with thousands of followers. The commonality between all the members of the organization was that they had personal contact with Lama Ole and found that his teachings were truthful and gave meaning to their lives, so much so that they were all willing to convert to the Diamond Way to continue to practice these teachings outside of their home country. They helped to carry the Diamond Way from Russia to the United States, furthering the impact and the westernization of this tradition. My questions for this organization are as follows: paying membership seems to be an important aspect of this organization, as it is for any religious tradition, but if the money is not going to the "Traveling Teachers" where is it going? Also I am left with a similar question as the researcher Scherer: what will happen when Lama Ole passes away? Who will carry on the

spiritual aspect of Diamond Way Buddhism? And if there is a chosen spiritual leader will the direct transmission come from Lama Ole or from Tibetan Lamas such as the 17th Karmapa? With all of the direct/indirect transmissions occurring how far from the actual teaching are people getting? At what point does westernization transform a tradition into something else entirely?

THE ZEN MOUNTAIN MONASTERY

The second site that I visited was the Zen Mountain Monastery in Woodstock, NY. I had originally heard about this facility from my father who is a long time visitor and contributor. He has been visiting ZMM since I was in high school, attending many of the weeklong and weekend retreats. I had missed the opportunity to visit this center with one of my classes at Union College, but I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to visit the center on my own. I first made contact with the center through their training coordinator. Together we decided that the weekend retreat entitled: **The Missing Ingredient Contemplation in Higher Education**, would be the most appropriate to attend. At this retreat they expected a group including both students and professors, which would give me a broad perspective in my research. Prior to my weekend away I did some background research on this organization.

The Zen Mountain Monastery was founded in 1980 by John Daido Looi Roshi and has been servicing the Mountains and Rivers Order of Zen Buddhism. In an appeal for donations for a new building the founder wrote: “No one sat down at a drawing board and conceived of Zen Mountain Monastery. It evolved as needs arose. In the same way, every subsequent development of this Monastery and its related organizations — the Zen Center of New York City, Dharma Communications, the affiliate sitting groups, the National Buddhist Prison Sangha, Zen Environmental Studies Institute, Zen Kids and Zen Teens, and the National Buddhist Archives — was a response to the imperative of a particular time, place and circumstance” (Zen Mountain

Monastery). This institution has been around for a long time and has disseminated into New York City, by forming a Zen center. It has also made programs aimed at the surrounding community such as the National Buddhist Prison Sangha, and the Environmental Studies Institute. “Loori, the [original] abbot, has described his approach at ‘radical conservatism,’ by which he means that Buddhism’s rich Asian heritage, adapted to the needs of Americans, can serve as the basis for a genuinely alternative form of transformative spirituality” (Seager, 124). At ZMM there are both monastic and lay residents who are focusing on the Zen study of Buddhism. The retreats are open to the public, for a fee:

As one of the few Zen monastic training centers in the west, ZMM is in the unique position of offering spiritual seekers a rare blend of authentic—yet distinctly Western—Zen training. Participants can experience monastic daily life whilst engaging in retreats specifically designed to address the concerns of twenty-first century practitioners. Whether through the study of kado (flower arranging) or the exploration of the role of the Precepts in the workplace, our training program is always grounded on a single premise: the clear and personal realization of enlightenment and its functioning in the world. (Zen Mountain Monastery)

The retreat I went to was aimed at bringing Zen into higher education, which drew in a crowd of both students and professors. The aim of this retreat is to provide tools and methods for rediscovering our natural qualities of mind. “While the sessions will include lectures and discussion, the context of the retreat within the rigorous monastic training schedule, punctuated by periods of silence, will allow for an experiential inquiry that transcends intellectual understanding” (Zen Mountain Monastery). This was the most opportune and seemingly interesting retreat that they had to offer that fit my research needs. Unfortunately the weekend that the retreat was set we got a huge blizzard, which inhibited the travel of many of the participants. This worked in my favor because I was able to speak to almost every participant and many of the residents due to the small number of people that were present. I was able to obtain many perspectives, which helped me to synthesize the all of the information and get a

broad image of what Zen was and how it functioned in this institute. “Loori grounds ZMM programs in what he calls the ‘Eight Gates of Zen,’ which includes sitting meditation, liturgy, face-to-face learning with the teacher, the study of Buddhism, work practice, the observation of Buddhist precepts, body practice, and the arts” (Seager, 124). I certainly got all “Eight Gates of Zen” in just the short weekend that I spent there.

The weekend started with a tour of the facilities and the time to settle into our rooms. The rooms consisted of three units of bunk beds, the most simple, minimalist, set up for a room possible. We then joined together for dinner a simple meal of rice and soup. It was there that I met a few residents. I ended up sitting next to Brown Curly Hair (F) who was in a six-month residency. This was her second time as a resident. When I asked her what she found most rewarding in the residency program she said that it was the emphasis on individual fulfillment. I was curious about how that had affected her relationships with people outside of the monastery; she replied that she had always had partners who were involved with Buddhism. She said that she had incorporated her family into the Buddhism practice by introducing them to zazen, meditation. Outside of the monastery she admitted to holding many different jobs and had never had a stable career in one field. The woman on the other side of me at dinner Brown mid-length hair (F), displayed erratic behavior and seemed quite anxious. She identified other students as “punk” due to their dreadlocks and multicolored clothing. She seemed to be the organizer of the night’s events, which could account for her anxiety. In told me that she was in the middle of a three-month residency here at ZMM. After dinner we had the chance to relax prior to the evening session of the retreat.

I was able to speak to more residents such as Red Short Hair (F) who had described her reason for coming to ZMM as due to a “cascading of tragic events” in her life. She was currently

on a two-year sabbatical from a PhD in clinical psychology. She was originally from South Africa. She had a sad story to tell, and it appeared to be like a 'last resort' type of a commitment. She was committed to a yearlong residency, and had learned about ZMM through her previous involvement with the Temple in New York City. In a later discussion that I had with her she was complaining that there was not enough group meditation and reflection/debriefing in the Resident program, that there was too much alone time. As a clinic psychologist I would imagine that she would hold group therapy in high regard. I was also able to speak with people participating in the retreat. Pink hair + Partner (F-F) were seniors at a Waldorf high school in Connecticut, they were both activists for animal rights, with a life goal to stop all Animal Farming. They were both very eccentric and enthusiastic, and had big plans but knew that it requires the ability to work within, the system not against it. They were both planning to attend Hampshire College next fall, an alternative university with no grades or set class schedule. The bell in the sitting hall was rung and we were summoned to evening meditation.

The training coordinator gave all of the retreat attendees an introduction to zazen. Body positions, hand positions, and mental focus were all of the topics covered in this introduction. We then joined all of the residents in sitting meditation for 25 minutes. After the sitting there was an introduction to the retreat given by the abbot Kondrad Ryushin Marchaj Sensei. He became the abbot after the death of Looi in 2009; he was a former Pediatrician and Psychiatrist and had been studying Buddhism since 1987 (Zen Mountain Monastery). The abbot shared with us the mission of this retreat and the thought process behind it. He said that the education system needs to change to better serve our humanity. He emphasized the importance of zazen as a practice to recognize our thoughts and then to let them in to our being, to accept them and then move on from them. He shared with us a story of the moment that he first realized that our education

system was failing. As a pediatrician he was present at many risky/premature deliveries. At one delivery in particular the child died soon after being delivered and he expressed the inability to tell the mother that her newborn son had just died. He had never been taught in all of his schooling how to deal with the humanity of the situation he was faced with. Soon after that experience he started studying Buddhism. He told us that the missing ingredient is being present in what we are actually doing; that the missing ingredient is us. We then departed from the mediation hall to our rooms for a very early lights out.

Wake up call was extremely early and consisted of a gong being hit in our faces. We were instructed not to talk prior to breakfast so everyone was silent as we woke up and prepared for the day. We went straight to the mediation hall for morning zazen. We sat for 25 minutes, and then proceeded to walking meditation, then sat for another 25 minutes. We had morning chanting and bowing liturgy. I was surprised just how ritualistic everything is. I had always thought of Zen as non-ritualistic and more focused on the individual but this was highly scheduled and organized so that everything was chanted in unison and every bow was synchronized. Then it was breakfast time, prior to which we chanted the Buddhist Gotha, which thanked all sentient beings for the food that we were provided. At breakfast I spoke with Short Black Hair (M) who was a freshman at Vassar College. He was from Hong Kong and has practiced meditation before when he was in China, but never been to a monastery before. He learned about ZMM through his friends that he came with; there were four other Vassar students attending the retreat. I also spoke with a Carpenter (M) who had just begun his residency of seven days. He had studied Buddhism in college, so he was very interested in my research. He was surprised to learn of the convert Buddhist demographics and how easily most of the people who were residents fit the mold so well. He had sat for a year before becoming involved with Zen Buddhism. He was

initially a member of a commune when he lived in California where the focus was based in Buddhist beliefs. After breakfast there was the period of silent caretaking, where each individual, both resident and retreat attendee, was assigned to a work practice. I was assigned to housekeeping and cleaned the bathrooms in silence for about an hour. We were supposed to be doing our work-practice in a meditative way, hence the silence.

After caretaking the retreat sessions started, lead by the Abbot. We worked with different meditative practices focusing on sight, sound, cognitive processes, and the entire body. He expressed that the goal is to have choiceless awareness of what is going on around you so that you could experience that much more. When we focus on one aspect of our sensory perceptions we ignore all the others, and therefore cannot experience reality in its entirety. We were given an assignment over lunch. If we knew that it would be our last hour to live how would we live it? I decided to live with more awareness. I enjoyed the taste of my food more and my conversations with people more. I spoke the entire lunch period with Short Brown hair (M) who had been resident for one and a half years, so far. I decided to be bolder in my questions and asked him flat out how he could justify removing himself from society to live at ZMM. He answered saying that his life here was not removed from society; it was just a different aspect. I stated my belief that Buddhism had always appeared very selfish to me. He said that we all try to live selfishly as selflessly possible. We discussed relationships and how he did feel lonely at times at ZMM, there was a lot of solitude here and time for introspection. Before he came to the monastery he was an artist who had experienced a great loss in his life, and at first the monastery was an escape, but here he felt forced to deal with the loss and move on from it. I asked if he ever missed his family, and he said that the feeling of “missing out” was the hardest thing that he had to deal

with here. It was the most honest conversation that I have had in a long time and I really feel as though I connected with this individual for the “last hour” of my life.

We had another retreat session after lunch where we debriefed about our experiences over lunch. People also expressed the feeling of being hyper-aware and trying to soak in all the things that we possibly could. We then experimented with more meditative practices including the body scan meditation, creative audience, and the imagined pilgrimage. The body scan was where the Abbot guided us through a meditation where our focus was drawn to each part of our body individually and then as a whole. The creative audience was when we were shown a piece of art and we were supposed to express what the painting was telling us through non-verbal communication. It was amazing to see all of the varied responses to the same painting. The imagined pilgrimage was, for me, the most powerful. You take a journey to a cave and imagine that it is your true-self waiting for you. You are allowed to ask one question and receive one answer. It was a very overwhelming moment for me, and brought up a lot of emotions. After all of those meditations we all needed a break so there was a question and answer session with the Abbot.

Q: There is a lot of liturgy used in the daily practices, how is it connected to the practice? A: Liturgy is just a microcosm of action, as conversation is just an invitation to engage in action.

Q: How are we able to extrapolate what we learn here to our daily lives? A: Human nature wants to externalize, but the Buddhist goal is to break that down to an internal practice.

Q: What does Buddhism say about relationships? A: We are already complete individuals; this leads to a radically lonely journey, because you want to get rid of your attachment to individuals.

Q: Is Buddhism becoming a consumer product? A: Compartmentalizing religion as something you do on Sundays or in a specific room, Buddhism has been turned into a consumer item, an object of spiritual materialism, creating an item out of religion, turning a religion into a sellable item, a buffer between you and your life. Most of us turn towards Buddhism because of pain and suffering, it is the most selfish thing you can do but it is also honest.

Q: What is the present moment? A: We are capable of directing our attention for 4.6 seconds of natural concentration, that is our inherent capacity. 1) Concentration 2) Mindfulness 3) vigilance, all of these qualities are trainable. With practice thought is decoupled with habitual actions.

Q: What is your Story? A: Abbott's Story: Child of Holocaust survivors, brought up in Poland, immigrated to the U.S. and read Thomas Merton and wanted to become a Catholic monk, but mother forbade it. After medical school and residency he had the experience of the baby die in his arms and then he removed himself and received instruction in Zen.

Q: How do we deal with Anger? A: The energy of anger is powerful, do not suppress anything, it is the attachment to our thoughts that clouds our judgment. When we can be taken over by our emotions, is the cause of suffering.

Q: How do we act without attachment? A: We need to investigate our individual tendencies and thereby clarify our intention.

After the question and answer session dinner was served. I was able to speak with Red Shirt (F) a long-term Resident who was considering taking her vows as a monk. She was having an existential crisis at dinner. She had just read an article on how Karma equals action, but we do not control the action nor the intention behind those actions. The author was claiming that intention is just causes and conditions that arise independently. Now, to me, this is a basic tenet

of Buddhism called inter-dependent arising, but Red Shirt was having a crisis of faith over this tenant. She believed that she was in control, making the decisions that effect her life, not that her life is just a series of causes and conditions that independently arise (like Buddhism tells us). This experience taught me that even Buddhists have crises of faith. We were then summoned to the meditation hall for evening meditation and chanting. As we entered the mediation hall we were told that from this point on we were not permitted to speak until breakfast the next morning, the point was to reflect on all of the things that we had learned. We sat for 25 minutes, did walking meditation, and sat for another 25 minutes and chanted. There was a somber mood as everyone prepared for bed, and sleep came easily as my head hit the pillow.

Wakeup was in the same way as the morning previous, but this time breakfast was first. I was able to sit with Red Shirt (F) again and it appeared that she had gotten over whatever concept she was perplexed with and seemed as sure as ever to her future commitment as a monk. After breakfast was another round of silent caretaking where I was again assigned to housekeeping. Then there was the morning liturgy and zazen meditation with individuals from the community who joined us for the traditional sit and sermon-like dharma talk given by the Abbot. The talk was to wrap up our retreat and the main point that I gained from the talk was the we are the missing ingredient, and that humanity needs to be taught in higher education because that is how we will be successful in our lives. I met so many amazing people at this retreat and gained so much information from professors, students, and residents.

Overall, my experience at this retreat taught me a lot about how Zen is being practiced and taught. The retreat was set up so that we could get a feel of what the monastic life is like and how we can incorporate Zen into our daily lives outside of the Monastery. This gives retreat attendees a unique opportunity to see how each side lives. Although I had learned that Zen was mostly a

tradition that focused on individual meditative practices, I experienced the importance placed on studying the history of Zen Buddhism, the student-teacher relationship, and the extensive use of liturgy and rituals in almost every aspect of their daily lives. Zen and Tibetan Buddhism do not have many differences, just the methods that they use to attain spiritual fulfillment are slightly altered in the application of methods. Buddhism in general works to better the community that it inhabits, all sentient beings, and individual persons. The ZMM exemplifies this through the bringing together of Monks, Residents, and laypersons in projects to better the world.

SHAMBHALA OF ALBANY

My third and final center is Shambhala International in Albany. I found this group through one of my friend's mother, who attends weekly meditations at this center. Of course, I did my background research on the organization as a whole. The Shambhala community was founded by Chogyam Trungpa and incorporates both Tibetan and Zen Buddhism to help envision an enlightened society (Seager, 67). Shambhala International is primarily associated with the Kagyu School (Seager, 147). There are three paths that are the focus of this sect of Buddhism, the first of which is Nalanda "Nalanda is a path for cultivation of wisdom through the integration of art and culture, which can be pursued through a range of disciplines from photography and dance to archery, poetry, and the medieval arts. Nalanda is most closely associated with Shambhala's educational activities, such as its Sea School and elementary schools in Nova Scotia and Naropa Institute, a fully accredited liberal arts college in Boulder, Colorado" (Seager, 149-50). The focus on education is very important for the transmission of these belief systems to future generations. "A second path, Vajradhatu, is the most traditionally Tibetan, but it also reflects Trungpa's interests in Zen and Theravada Buddhism and his concern with adapting Vajrayana to the needs of western students. This path is cultivated in a network of

local practice centers called Shambhala Meditation Centers” (Seager, 150). The ability to adapt to new cultures and environments is crucial for the continuation of a tradition. “A third, more thoroughly innovative path is Shambhala Training” (Seager, 150). Training ensures that there will be qualified teachers to continue the practice. These are the basic tenants that Shambhala was founded on. Each center is supposed to incorporate all paths in order to create a cohesive and comprehensive experience in each Shambhala center across the country and the world.

The Albany Shambhala center is no different, and it incorporates all of values into their mission: “The vision of Shambhala is based on the wisdom and compassion of the meditation tradition. It proclaims that our lives can be workable, and even wonderful. Through the path of meditation we can touch our inherent sanity, and by sharing that with others, we can create an enlightened society. The Shambhala community is a support for those who aspire to follow this path” (<http://www.albany.shambhala.org/>). This organization was, by far, the least trusting of me, it took many attempts for me to obtain interviews with specific members. The members that I did gain access to were all of the higher-ups and they had administrative roles in the Albany Shambhala center.

During my visits to the Shambhala center I attended one of their weekly meditations. These meditations are always open to the public and are led by a meditation leader. There was about ten people at this particular meditation, five were college students from The College of St. Rose, and the other five appeared to be business people on their way home from work. The door to the meditation room was always open, and people were allowed to come and go as they pleased. Although the first part of the meditation was supposed to be a 25-minute sitting meditation, there were people who were standing or even sitting in chairs. This was very different from what I had experienced in the Zen Mountain Monastery. People were allowed to move their arms, stretch

their back, itch their nose, and adjust their posture as needed. In the Zen sitting practice of Zazen, the goal is not to move a single muscle when engaged in meditative practice. At Shambhala it was very evident that the rules were much more relaxed, and that the meditation was to get you more comfortable. After the 25 minutes, there was a gong that signaled walking meditation and we walked around the room for about 15 minutes. There was then a short 15-minute sitting meditation, which closed with some readings dealing with the Buddha and how to allow meditative practice to enter every aspect of our lives.

After this meditation I approached the meditation leader and inquired about conducting interviews with members of this organization. Her initial reaction was skepticism and a reluctance to allow me to interview anyone, but she seemed willing to help with my research. We then exchanged emails for a month attempting to set up an interview date with members of her choosing, and eventually we scheduled a time for me to come and talk to four members, including her. I found this quite opportune because my interviews with the Diamond Way of Albany also included four people. But this interview style proved to be much different because it was not a roundtable discussion as it had been with the Diamond Way. These were all private conversations one-on-one, so that each member of the group had no influence on the others. This type of interview was similar to what I did at the Zen Mountain Monastery, with personal, private conversations that did not allow for outside influence. I did not determine right away if this was a good or bad way to conduct interviews, but it proved to uncover some interesting information and some discrepancy within the organization.

The first person that I talked to was “E” with whom I had made initial contact at the mediation that I attended. E was a 57 year old white female who had dropped out of graduate school and now worked as an information technology manager. She was raised in the Catholic

tradition, but she would now state that her religious tradition was Shambhala Buddhism. She began her interest with Buddhism through a personal spiritual discovery. She described that she learned about and embraced atheism when she was about 10 or 12, but was open to and interested in spirituality and the mind. Her mother signed her up for an anthropology course on comparative religion and brought home a few books on Buddhism, which she read and made an immediate connection to. Books were the major method with which she used to learn about Buddhism. She described reading books as a teenager and college student, and a specific article in the New York Times which included meditation instruction which she tried to follow on her own. She was given several books by Chogyam Trungpa in 1976 when she was ill with mono and began reading his books avidly. She connected with a Shambhala Group in 1980 and began formal study and practice and became a student of Chogyam Trungpa. At the Shambhala center in Albany she is a member, meditation instructor and teacher. She also mentors teachers and meditation students. When asked how she incorporated Buddhism into her daily life she responded that she aspires to bring fearlessness, gentleness and wisdom into all aspects of her life. Work and family are an ongoing opportunity to practice mindfulness and compassion. She described Buddhism as including religious practices, and would classify it as a religion. When asked how she describes the American public's views Buddhism she responded: "I think many Americans have some knowledge of Buddhism but many have serious misconceptions and misunderstandings, such as, Buddha is god, Buddhists are nihilists, Buddhists are always nice, Buddhists are exotic, you have to learn Tibetan (Japanese, Thai) to be a Buddhist." She described those beliefs as being naïve and not understanding the weight of the full Buddhist practice, and romanticizing the tradition. As to whether Buddhism has become ingrained in American popular culture, she said that being a Buddhist seemed very unusual 20 or 30 years ago. Now most

people (at least in the northeast) know someone who is a Buddhist so it's not quite as foreign. She seemed pleased by this notion.

My next interview was with “J” who was a 60 year old, white male with an associate computer science and accountant licensing. He is a retired from the New York State Attorney General Office, where he worked as a Network Operations Manager. He currently is a frozen food buyer for Honest Weight Food COOP. He was raised as a Roman Catholic, but now specified his religious affiliation to be a Buddhist. He first became interested in Buddhism six years ago when his therapist told him that he needed to be more present. So he started to practice meditation, he was not looking for specifically Buddhism. He described his experience as just looking for someplace to sit in a group, and then he took some classes, and it just felt right and it made sense and it worked for him. His current affiliation with Shambhala is the Director, and he formally acted as the treasurer and membership liaison. He described his personal meditation practice as about 50-60 hours per month. In answer to the question: to what extent do you incorporate Buddhism in your life outside of this organization. He said: “Buddhism is a way of life it does not stop once you leave the Center. It is better to not start on this path if you have doubts because there is no getting off. Even if you want to stop it I don’t believe that it is possible to do so. Once you have solid meditation practice this seeps into every aspect of your life even if you don’t want it to.” He described Buddhism as being more spiritual than religious, as a way of life, a way of living, not just a religion. He saw that the view of the American Public toward Buddhism as shifting. He said that there is much scientific evidence now of the effects of meditation on our brains. Meditation physically changes your brain. It is nice that science has finally verified what meditators have known for over 2,500 years. In his opinion Buddhism has a lot to offer Americans, in general. “More eastern medicine is being incorporated into western

medicine. There is no dogma. It is all self-experiential. I see more and more people exploring Buddhism and meditation. The way we approach our lives and the world does not work. We are killing our planet and our brothers and sisters throughout the world. People are starving while others have more than they could ever need.” As someone who was not looking for Buddhism in the first place, J has certainly become quite an advocate for it!

I next interviewee was “L” a 56 year old, white woman with a bachelors degree who is a licensed massage therapist and a cashier for Honest Weight Food COOP. She was raised protestant/Lutheran, but would currently describe herself as a Buddhist. She first became interested in Buddhism in the mid-1990’s through reading books. She is quite involved in Shambhala, holding a leadership position on executive council, and acts as a “guide” (can give meditation instruction). She described that her involvement with Shambhala was much more than just at the Center, but it was her lifestyle. Even though, she did not see Buddhism as a religious practice, but a purely spiritual one. When asked about how she sees Buddhism in American popular culture she did not seem to notice an increase or decrease in Buddhist influence. “Perhaps a certain use of words, terms (karma, etc) but I do not think Buddhism as such is ingrained. However, compassion, caring and love are the core of Buddhism, and these are also the core of the human heart. So the qualities are a part of everyone, of every ‘religion.’” This subject seemed the least willing to share her personal story, and very hesitant about postulating about societal impressions of Buddhism.

My next subject was “K” and she seemed extremely excited to speak with me. She is a 55-year-old white woman with a graduate degree and is currently a Professional Reference Librarian. She was raised in various Protestant churches, but currently considers herself to be a Secular Humanist with Buddhist leanings; a description that I absolutely loved! She started becoming

interested in Buddhism when she began seriously meditating in 2006. She was introduced to Buddhism through classes at the Shambhala Meditation Center in Albany. She is an officer, the Treasurer. She then described what Shambhala has meant to her. “Shambhala has its primary emphasis, taking the teachings into everyday life to help create and sustain a sane, grounded, and enlightened society. In my everyday life as a reference librarian, I strive to see, and reflect, the inherent basic goodness of each and every individual that I encounter (including myself).” Although she does not see Buddhism as an organized religion, but rather as a spiritual discipline in which everything and every moment (every breath of life) is seen as sacred and interdependent. “Worthy of respect and appreciation; It does not conflict with the basic moral principles of organized religions, and as such, does not exclude them.” She sees the American public is still mixed in its understanding of Buddhism, depending on where you are, geographically, in the U.S. For example, it's widely accepted in the more liberal East and West-coastal areas, but less-so in the heartland and bible-belt areas of the Deep South. “However, I think most people regard Buddhists as peaceful and peaceable. Buddhism is becoming more integrated into American popular culture, especially among the young. Many Buddhist practices, such as yoga and vegetarianism are becoming quite common, and many terms, such as: karma, dharma, mantra, and yogi are widely in use and understood among the ordinary public.” She seemed to embrace the American public’s involvement with Buddhism. This concluded my interviews for the night.

The following week I received an email from a Shambhala member who could not make the interview time, but she was interested in my research. She too was studying Buddhism in America but on the graduate school level. I invited her to participate, and I conducted the interview over email. “R” is a 28 year-old white PhD student who is a doctoral student and an

adjunct professor. “R” is quite unique because she was raised as a Buddhist and currently still subscribes to the Buddhist tradition. Her parents converted to Buddhism prior to her birth. When asked how she first became involved with Buddhism she answered: “I was born into it so it is hard to say. I became interested in formally practicing meditation when I was about ten years old. Interest in Buddhist study probably increased at this time as well. I became more conscious of it. In middle school sometimes I would just meditate at my desk. Growing up Buddhist made it so that I never had to adjust to new imagery or terms—it all feels very natural to me.” She has had extensive involvement with Buddhism all of her life she described her experience spending many summers at Karne Choling (a meditation center in Vermont) in the presence of advanced practitioners and a “wonderful” teacher, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso Rinpoche. “Even though I was only about 8 when we started going to the program and I was in childcare rather than a formal participant, I picked up on the energy and the teachings just by being in that environment. Also, I recall that there was a book at Karne Choling I read over and over again around the age 10-11. It was called Meditation for Kids. It was really helpful in making meditation accessible to me at a young age.” When asked how she would describe her involvement with Shambhala she said that it has been an on-again off-again relationship. “There have been points in my life where I have stepped back from Shambhala. I felt like people were hypocrites and questioned whether or not it was a cult. After a few years of not practicing meditation, studying Buddhism, or participating in any community events I was drawn back in about three years ago through a series of auspicious coincidences. I came back to it on my own rather than through the encouragement of anyone else.” She went on to say that she was not so committed to the community but to her own personal spiritual practice. Outside the Shambhala organization she describes as: “Buddhism informs my view of the world, and myself so any action or interaction has a foundation of

Buddhism—which is really just being in the moment. I also find myself discussing being present, compassion, and our interconnectedness on a regular basis even when I’m not with other Buddhists.” Even though she does not see Buddhism as a religion, she believes that she can be portrayed in such a way that emphasizes its religious qualities. “I consider it a spiritual discipline rather than a religious experience.” When asked about her views on societal impression and Buddhism, she had a lot to say because this is what her dissertation is on. “I think there is a growing acceptance of Buddhism but there are also a lot of misconceptions and fears.” She described an article that stated that in Ohio many parents were upset that teachers were teaching students mindfulness techniques. The main concern was that these children would be influenced by “Eastern” religions. “This speaks to a fundamental ignorance in American society that still perceives the world as East-West. Some people see Buddhism as very esoteric and different but at the same time more and more people are open to it.” She described that with Meditation becoming more common and is found in magazines, websites, and newspapers for its ability to decrease stress. As more people connect with meditation she thinks that more will become interested in Buddhism. When asked is she thought that Buddhism has become ingrained in American popular culture: “Yes, absolutely. This is a phenomenon that I study. Advertisers have tapped Buddhism—a clear indication that it is part of American pop culture. Other examples include, Daily Show “Moment of Zen,” Zen as a slang word, karma as a slang word, etc.” It was truly amazing to be able to add this woman’s input into my research because she acts as an academic and a practitioner. To add her thoughts on these questions provided me with a whole other level of understanding to this organization.

The people that I was able to interview in-person all fit within the mold of the typical New American Buddhist that has converted from the Christian tradition from which they were

raised to Buddhism, and have found spiritual fulfillment there. The graduate student who was raised Buddhist and is now studying Buddhism in America for her doctorate. She provided me with a vision of Shambhala that I would not have obtained from the senior members.

Why Are We So Interested In Buddhism?

I began this thesis by describing the current state of Buddhism in this country, and the past research on Buddhism that has been preformed by great scholars. In an attempt to compare my findings to theirs I have discovered that the basic demographics and methods of becoming interested in Buddhism have been similar. All of my participants were white, middle or upper-middle class, between late 30s to early 60s, were raised in Judeo-Christian traditions, and highly educated with high-ranking professional jobs. Taking into account the fact that I am in the Northeast region of the United States, it is still impressive that almost everyone that I talked to and met fit this description. The major method that many participants came to be interested in Buddhism was through books, similar to the findings of William James Coleman. Although I looked into the research of many individual scholars interested in Buddhism in American, I did not find one that looked into the in-depth and personal stories of those individuals who were choosing the incorporate Buddhism into their lives, perhaps it is because that type of data does not have the ability to be generalized to an entire population. Personal stories are what I was quite fascinated with, because that is how I first became interested in this field of study.

The phenomenological method of doing research was the most appealing to me because it allowed for the free-flowing conversations that allowed the participants to share their full stories with me, without the constraints of a survey type questionnaire. I was able to get to know the subjects as people using the phenomenological method. I did not follow just one phenomenologist, I took the advice of Heimbrock and devised my own method to this study that involved a general set of questions that I wanted answered but that allowed room for the participants to be open enough with me, to obtain their personal accounts dealing with Buddhism. I feel as though I was able to accomplish this goal with just about everyone that I

have the great privilege of interviewing. At each center that I attended I found out something new, that I had never thought of before.

At the Diamond Way of Albany, I discovered that the growing presence of Buddhism is not just a phenomenon in the United States, but all around the world. All of the members that I met with from the Diamond Way were from Russia, I had never considered that other countries were experiencing a similar influx of Buddhist ideology, just as we are experiencing here in the United States. At the Zen Mountain Monastery I discovered just how deeply people are willing to commit their lives to Buddhism. I met individuals who were almost ready to take their vows as a Buddhist monk. I also learned that ritual is highly valued in the Buddhist tradition. Many people see Buddhist practice as anti-ritual, but it is in fact riddled with routine and scheduled moments of prayer, meditation, and sacred recitations. At Shambhala I uncovered how far down the “rabbit hole” one could go. Many of the members who I spoke with started by picking up a book on Buddhism, not expecting to get much out of it, and now find themselves leading this Buddhist organization. Buddhism has this ability to spark interest and curiosity, unlike anything that I have ever seen before. The three centers that I chose reflected the Tibetan, Zen, and an eclectic Buddhist organization. The reason that I chose them was because I wanted to get a well-rounded vision of Buddhism here in the capital region of New York, and these three groups represent major sects of Buddhism.

I gained so much knowledge and information from this research, and I feel as though I got the results that I was expecting, but it was the personal accounts that I found the most valuable. If I had unlimited time and resources I would have loved to expand my research to include more centers in the area. This type of questioning I think is extremely important in figuring out how people are making that very deep and personal connection with Buddhism. I

believe that Buddhist ideology will become more prominent in the United States, and possibly around the world, as more people are embracing this tradition. The next step would be to interview more people like “R” who was raised as Buddhist by Buddhist converts, a new phenomenon that would perhaps need more time to develop.

My inspiration for writing this thesis, and for majoring in Religious Studies is my father. He was raised Episcopalian, but I would now classify him as a Christian with strong Buddhist leanings. Approximately eight years ago he began practicing yoga, then he incorporated meditation into his daily life, then he began attending retreats at Buddhist monasteries, and now he is working on becoming a Tai Chi master and he is even talking about going back to school to learn about eastern medicine to integrate into his medical practice. I am sure that you are all very familiar with the old adage that “you cannot teach an old dog new tricks,” well my father is the exact opposite. He has a dynamic lifestyle that changes daily, just as his interests do. When he is not at the hospital working long hours, he is “playing” Tai Chi or meditating. Although we do still attend our local Episcopal church on Christmas and Easter, my father spends his time reading Buddhist texts rather than the Bible. When I talk to my mother about my father’s ever-changing daily practice, she claims that this was definitely not the man she married twenty-five years ago. When I initially set out to conduct this research I thought of my father and what his responses would be to my list of questions. I knew that they would be long and drawn out, just as all of his answers had been to all of my questions growing up. One night, when I was home for a weekend, I decided to ask him what he thought of the findings that I had discovered through this research. He responded that he wasn’t surprised that many of the people who I had interviewed fit a “mold.” He said that many brought up in Judeo-Christian households would seek out Buddhism because it does not directly conflict with those teachings. Many people see Buddhism

as a spiritual practice, and not necessarily religious; it does not put pressure on the traditions from which they came from. He explained that Buddhism has the ability to compliment any tradition because Buddhism only seeks to enlighten people.

So why are we so interested in Buddhism? I believe that it is because Buddhism allows people the freedom that the traditional Judeo-Christian traditions lack. Through the individuals that I interviewed it is evident that people take as much, or as little, from Buddhism as possible. Buddhism is not a tradition that requires a “take it all, or leave it” mentality, there is wiggle room available. Practitioners have the ability to use meditation sporadically or to become a monk. Buddhism has become more prominent in this country because of the amount of people that are choosing to engage with it. Books, movies, magazines, and newspapers, all define American popular culture. The more people who become connected with Buddhism through these methods, the more outstanding the presence of Buddhism will be in the United States.

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