

Variegated fabrics flap in the wind outside the small storefront, each featuring a stylized depiction of the Buddha, cross-legged in meditation. Inside the shop are countless more Buddhas—embodied in stone statues, carved as gilded paperweights, embroidered on prayer rugs. The store also sells singing bowls, incense, books on Buddhism, and countless other paraphernalia related to the ancient religion. One might guess that this shop was in India, Tibet, Japan, or another Asian country where Buddhism has been deeply rooted for thousands of years. However, this shop, the Dekey Tibet Shop, is in our very own Cambridge. Today, in the Boston area alone, there are over 188 yoga studios (Massachusetts Yoga Directory) and countless Buddhism and meditation clinics. Buddhism is now the third largest religion in the United States (Tanaka). Despite Buddhism’s modern-day popularity, however, it was not until the Beat Movement of the 1950s and the Counterculture of the 1960s that Buddhism gained a significant American convert following, first touching mainstream society. Buddhism’s emergence in America during the Beat and Counterculture movements of the 20th century highlights Americans’ dissatisfaction with the growing consumer capitalism and industrialization of the time. Buddhism offered Americans a relief from the attachment to material goods, a sense of individualism and exoticism, and a political justice outlet against government action regarded as immoral.

Buddhism has served as a religion, philosophy, and lifestyle for millions of people since its creation over 2,500 years ago in eastern India. Over the years, Buddhism has undergone many changes, but its core principles have remained the same throughout all its incarnations. Its founder, Prince Siddhartha Gautama, abandoned his life of privilege in order to seek a means of ending suffering. He developed many of the core teachings of Buddhism, including the Four Noble Truths, and subsequently became known as the Buddha or the Enlightened one.

Together, belief in reincarnation, also known as Saṃsāra, and the Four Noble Truths make up

the core beliefs of Buddhism. Saṃsāra determines that after death, one is reborn as another person or life form. A king could be reborn as a serf, a fly could be reborn as a deity, and then the deity could be again reborn as a blade of grass. The Four Noble Truths, the heart of the Buddha's teachings, are intertwined with this belief in reincarnation. Because the first noble truth states that "all life is suffering," Buddhists believe Saṃsāra's endless perpetuation of life to be negative; their goal is to end Saṃsāra by reaching Enlightenment, or Nirvana, for themselves. To do this, they must learn to control desire, which is the root of all suffering, according to Samudāya and Nirodha, the second and third noble truths. The final noble truth, Magga, serves as a guide of how to get there, stressing morality and awareness of oneself (BBC).

These Buddhist beliefs did not, however, truly touch America for over 2,300 years after their development. Although convert Buddhism had flickered at the fringes of American society since its emergence in the Transcendentalist movement of the 19th century, Buddhism did not emerge into the mainstream of American society until the 1950s. During this decade, awareness of Buddhism began to spread, largely through the work of professor and guru D. T. Suzuki, who gave lectures about Buddhism at universities around the United States. In addition, Suzuki translated many ancient and modern Buddhist texts into English, making them accessible to Americans. Through Suzuki's work, Buddhism first caught the attention of the mainstream press, with *Vogue* and *Times* magazines featuring Suzuki in articles during the late 1950s. Suzuki's work was essential in attracting Americans' attention to Buddhism, but it was by no means sufficient; Countless Buddhists had worked to spread Buddhism throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries as Suzuki did, but the "Zen Boom" of convert Buddhism did not occur in America until the '50s and '60s (Keown and Prebish 175). Without the rise of consumer culture and the needs it created, Buddhism would never have spread to the groups

responsible for bringing it into the mainstream: the Beat Generation and Counterculture.

While Suzuki was spreading awareness of Buddhism through lectures and literature, the Beat Generation was developing its own, distinctly American, form of Buddhism. Writer Josh Rann explained in his article about the movement that the Beat Generation emerged as a result of students “beginning to question the rampant materialism of their society” (Rann) after the post-World War II economic boom. Members of the movement advocated for all that the previous generation eschewed: drug experimentation, open discussion of sexuality, rejection of materialism, and more (Rann). Beat literature and art was often denounced as obscene for its bold and explicit nature (Rann). The Beat Writers’ introduction to Buddhism came from diverse sources; Jack Kerouac discovered Buddhism through literature (Haynes), Allen Ginsberg through travel (“Allen Ginsberg”), Gary Snyder through study at Berkeley (“Gary Snyder”). Their attraction to Buddhism, however, all spurred from the same source: aversion to consumer capitalism.

The Beats, however, did not only practice Buddhism—they also altered the way Buddhism *was* practiced. Throughout history, Buddhism has often been a rigid faith (Keown and Prebish 345). For most immigrant Buddhists, it was institutionalized like any Western religion: it had its dogma and its traditions and, although it did evolve and experience many schisms, core beliefs had been shared for over 2,5000 years. However, when the Beat Generation adopted Buddhism, they brought a new mindset to the old religion—they made it “lax.” Richard Hughes Seager, author of *Buddhism in America*, explained that many converts of the ’50s learned about Buddhism through Beat literature, such as Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* (1958), rather than from Gurus or temples. American converts often concluded from Beat literature that “the pursuit of enlightenment could be highly individualized and personalized . . . augmented through the use of mind-altering substances, pursued without sustained

discipline, and divorced from institutions” (Seager 43). Writer and philosopher of the '50s Alan Watts dismissed the Beat Buddhists as “self-indulgent dabblers” (Seager 41), and in many ways they were. The Beat Generation divorced Buddhism from institutions, making the practice more individualized. One person could read *Dharma Bums* (1958) and decide to be Buddhist based solely on that text. Many convert Buddhists did not even believe in the central concept of reincarnation (Thurman). Buddhism became secularized, viewed just as much as a philosophy as a religion. Drugs became closely tied to the conversion experience. In a 1996 study by *Tricycle*, an American Buddhist magazine, over 40% of responders, many who had converted to Buddhism during the '60s and '70s, said that LSD or mescaline had sparked their interest in Buddhism (Seager 43). In short, the Beat Generation made Buddhism into something it had never been before. It was now distinctly American and therefore distinctly tied to the needs and wants of Americans. Convert Buddhism in America would never be the same.

In many ways an extension of the Beat movement, the Counterculture continued to bring Buddhism more into the mainstream of American society. The Counterculture was a movement, largely made up of youth, during the 1960s where members repudiated traditional values and norms within American society. Many directed their anger at “The System,” a term referring to the large corporations and institutions of the time. The Counterculture believed that, with the use of advertising, these corporations and institutions were dictating who they should be by forcing conformity to societal expectations. Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, authors of *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*, explained that members of the Counterculture believed “The System” to “instill manufactured needs and mass-produced desires” (Heath and Potter 9). Corporations’ advertisements told people what to purchase, and by doing so, they told people what they needed, what

they valued, and what they wanted. It is this power that the Counterculture was afraid of, and, regardless of whether or not its fear was rational, it produced the dissatisfaction with consumer capitalism that ultimately inspired the “Zen Boom” of the 1950s and ’60s.

This fear of “The System” was rooted in the substantial increase of mass-consumerism that overtook America starting in the late 1940s. Wartime production during World War II had thrust America out of a depression and left citizens with increased job opportunities, wages, and, therefore, spending power. And given the paucity of consumer goods during the war, Americans were particularly eager to spend. Most importantly, there was a growing movement towards the acceptance and promotion of spending, giving birth to the mass-consumer culture that flourished in the 1950s and ’60s. Before the late 1940s, buying had been seen as luxurious—families tried to make do with what they had and repair old items several times over before buying new ones (“The Rise of American Consumerism”). After the war, however, advertisers and the government were able to spin consumption as something that benefitted the whole United States. Historian Lizabeth Cohen explained that during the ’50s, “The good purchaser devoted to ‘more, newer and better’ was the good citizen, since economic recovery after a decade and a half of depression and war depended on a dynamic mass consumption economy” (“The Rise of American Consumerism”). Buying was no longer excessive: it was essential, moral even. Economist Victor Lebow described the shift towards consumer capitalism in the 1955 Spring edition of the *Journal of Retailing*,

Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction and our ego satisfaction in consumption . . . The very meaning and significance of our lives today expressed in consumptive terms. The greater the pressures

upon the individual to conform to safe and accepted social standards, the more does he tend to express his aspirations and his individuality in terms of what he wears, drives, eats- his home, his car, his pattern of food serving, his hobbies. (Lebow 3)

Now, *this* was the system. The phenomenon Lebow discussed, where consumption must be Americans' "way of life," where the worth of citizens' lives depend on their consumptive worth, where people must express their individuality through consumption, is *exactly* what the Buddhists of the 1950s and '60s were trying to escape. Americans were measuring their worth in terms of consumption, causing members of the Beat and Counterculture movement to desire four things: first, they wanted a religion or philosophy that emphasized moving away from material desires (and therefore consumerism), and one that was duly divergent from institutionalized religion. Second, they wanted a religion that encouraged the expression of their individualism in ways other than "in terms of what he wears, drives, eats" (Lebow 3). Third, in order to feel fully removed from this capitalist consumer economy, they wanted a religion from somewhere far, far away. And fourth, they wanted a religion that lent itself to protest of the oppressive institutions of the time, including the government.

Buddhism appealed to converts in terms of the escape from consumer capitalism in several ways: its dogma of abandoning desire, the anti-bureaucratic way in which the religion is organized, and its emphasis on return to the natural world. At the core of Buddhism, explicitly detailed in Nirodha, the third noble truth, is the belief in detachment from material desires necessary for the cessation of suffering. In other words, Buddhism advocated freeing oneself from, as the people of the counterculture put it, "the System." The first action that the Buddha took after realizing suffering's existence was to leave all his material possessions behind, clearly showing that, in his mind, his life of privilege served as

an obstruction to finding the truth. Kerouac likewise cited that “my fault, my failure, is . . . in the passions I have . . . in my lack of control of them” (“Jack Kerouac Quotes”). In 1950s and ’60s America, desire was very much manifested in the mass consumer capitalism of the age. Buddhism offered an escape.

Buddhism also appealed to the anti-consumer capitalism of the age in its individual and borderline disorganized nature. Courtesy of the Beat Generation, convert Buddhism was not an institutionalized matter as it was for immigrant Buddhists: there were no strict traditions, temples, expected stays in monasteries . . . Buddhists of the Counterculture were free to leave or take different teachings, and many became Buddhist entirely independent of an institution such as a temple or meditation center (Seager 43). This freedom in method of worship was not offered by Western religions like Christianity and Judaism. Heath and Potter explained that, “Whatever else they may be, the traditional churches are hierarchical, bureaucratic institutions of mass society” (Heath and Potter 258). Furthermore, Judaism and Christianity had developed originally to “teach morality, sanctify marriage and family, and anchor social stability through shared beliefs, rituals and institutions” (Heath and Potter 258). This purpose is perhaps the antithesis of the needs of the Counterculture; people were searching for freedom from blanket rules and regulations, and therefore for an escape from institutionalized religion. In other words, Western religions were not able to “resolve conflicts between individuals and institutions because they represent the very institutions that are thought to be causing the problem in the first place” (Heath and Potter 259).

Buddhism also advocates a deeper reverence for nature that was welcomed during the industrial, mass-produced consumer culture of the 1950s and ’60s. In Buddhism, any life form can have at one time been a deity, a beetle, or any other life form, creating an inherent respect for nature that is lacking in the inherently human-supremacist Western religions. Watts highlighted the connection between

Western Religion and removal from nature in his book *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen* (1967),

Always in the background there is our vague disquiet with the artificiality or ‘anti-naturalness’ of both Christianity, with its politically ordered cosmology, and technology, with its imperialistic mechanization of a natural world from which man himself feels strangely alien. (Watts 5)

As Watts articulates, Western religion distances itself from nature by explaining the creation of the universe in terms of God and humanity, rather than giving nature a value inherent to itself as Buddhism does. The Old Testament further shows its belief in the subjugation of nature,

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” (Genesis 1:26)

Here, we clearly see that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all operate under the assumption that humans are meant to rule and conquer nature, thus alienating humans from the natural world. This hierarchical supremacy made Western religions unattractive to members of the Beat and Counterculture movements who searched for a deeper connection to nature in hope of further distance from the consumerism of the age.

Tied directly to this aversion to “the System” was the desire to escape the conformity associated with it. Buddhism provided followers with a sense of individualism, in both its personalized style of practice and its stress on the individual throughout its teachings. In 1954, Kerouac articulated the need for individualism created by the consumer culture of the time,



Self be your lantern/self be your guide—

Thus Spake Tathagata

Warning of radios

That would come

Some day

And make people

Listen to automatic

Words of others (Kerouac 192).

The poem explained that industrial mass-consumer culture, as represented by “radios,” is forcing conformity on individuals by “mak[ing] people/Listen to automatic/Words of others” (Kerouac 192). “Tathagata” being another word for Buddha, Kerouac suggested that Buddhism, with its dogma of individualism, can serve as an antidote to conformity. Sociologist Robert Bellah also noted benefits of Buddhism’s stress on individuality when compared to Western religion,

In many ways Asian spirituality provided a more thorough contrast to the rejected utilitarian individualism than did biblical religion. To external achievement it posed inner experience; to the exploitation of nature, harmony with nature; to impersonal organization, an intense relation to a guru (as quoted by Prebish and Tanaka 2)

Bellah described how Buddhism allows for the expressive individualism of the Counterculture, in contrast to philosopher John Locke’s “utilitarian individualism” where individuals and institutions are inherently intertwined, meaning that the individual cannot exist separately from institutions. Buddhism’s

stress on “inner experience” is clear throughout the Buddha’s teachings—the Middle Way is about finding *one’s own* path towards Enlightenment. Some branches of Buddhism do not even allow for teachers because one’s path to Enlightenment is thought of as so individualized that assistance would prove unhelpful.

Although there is, of course, no religion that is an exact equivalent to Buddhism, many Western philosophies share similar key features with it. The attraction towards Buddhism in particular, as opposed to the Western philosophies, during the 1950s and ’60s highlights the longing for the exoticism of the East of the time. In Watts’ book *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*, he lists several Western philosophies he considers similar to Buddhism, such as Existentialism and Wittgenstein (Watts 5). If there were so many similar philosophies rooted much closer to home, why was Buddhism the religion that most flourished? Why did Buddhism’s following increase 15-fold from 1960 to 2000 (Tanaka) while the followings of the other philosophies remain almost entirely non-existent? The answer: Buddhism was from far away, making it exotic and therefore “hip.” Identifying as Buddhist set followers apart from practitioners of more mainstream and local religions; the exoticism of the religion was welcomed by those seeking individualism. Heath and Potter referenced that “Asian exotic credibility” (Heath and Potter 264) makes Buddhism instantly more appealing than Western spiritualities. Although, at a most basic level, anything from somewhere lesser-known and abroad is immediately more intriguing simply due to it being different, this specific instance of exoticism connects back to the dissatisfaction with the consumer society of 1950s and ’60s America. Heath and Potter explain that the attraction to the East during the ’50s and ’60s

. . . flows quite naturally from the Countercultural idea. If our own culture is a system of total manipulation and control, perhaps the best way to shake ourselves free from the

illusion is to immerse ourselves in some other culture—preferably one that is as radically distinct from our own as possible. (Heath and Potter 252-253)

Therefore, a philosophy from Europe such as Existentialism could never satisfy the needs of the 1950s' and '60s' convert Buddhists. The dissatisfaction with American society prompted a desire for a spirituality as different from Western thought as possible. In addition, the unhappiness with the industrial consumer capitalism of the West strengthened the draw towards cultures appearing more “primitive,” such as those of the East. The belief that “through the development of civilization, we lose touch with who we really are, what life is all about” created appeal for seemingly “uncivilized culture” or “esoteric religions” (Heath and Potter 253-254), such as India and Buddhism, respectively.

Celebrities traveling to the East during the 1960s strengthened this attraction to exoticism, as their journeys unleashed floods of Eastern and Buddhist imagery in pop culture. Heath and Potter asserted that, “Westerners have been using Third World countries as a backdrop for their own personal voyages of self-discovery for decades” (Heath and Potter 252). Travel to experience far-off cultures was attractive for many reasons—for some, it was a nostalgia for the “lost past” of society before mass-consumerism swept in (Heath and Potter, 254). For others, it became merely “difference for its own sake” (Heath and Potter, 254). The most popular belief of the Counterculture, however, was that travel was needed to rediscover one's “authentic self” that had been lost to the ruthlessness of mass-consumerism (Heath and Potter, 254). In 1968, the Beatles themselves traveled to Rishikesh, India for a Transcendental Meditation session in an ashram. “The news coverage was nonstop and global,” noted Philip Goldberg, author of *American Veda: How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* (Goldberg). In his book, Goldberg claimed the Beatles' India trip to be “the most momentous

spiritual retreat since Jesus spent those forty days in the wilderness . . . It was as though the earth tilted on its axis in February, 1968, making ancient Eastern teachings flow more easily and quickly to the West” (Goldberg). Now Indian and Buddhist-style teachings were more than exotic, they were also well-known and tied to pop-culture, thanks to the publicity the Beatles’ trip attracted. The effect this publicity had cannot be underestimated. Goldberg described that after the band’s stay in India, “Young people everywhere, always eager to emulate their musical heroes, flooded TM [Transcendental Meditation] centers” (Goldberg). 1968 was named “The Year of the Guru” by *Life* magazine. Years later, the Beastie Boys, Nirvana, Alanis Morissette, and others would all cite Buddhism or Eastern spirituality in their music, as the Beatles did before them. The craze of exoticism created by these journeys brought Buddhism even farther into mainstream society.

Internally, Buddhism helped converts combat mass-consumerism and sate their need for exoticism, individualism, and detachment from material goods. Externally, Buddhism also served as a perhaps unlikely outlet for social and political protest. In various circumstances throughout the ages, Buddhism’s philosophy has grown tied to certain acts of activism, the practice being known generally as socially engaged Buddhism. Seager described socially engaged Buddhism as “a movement to apply Buddhist principles to issues in contemporary society” (Seager 201). In the very first Sangha, or Buddhist community, Gautama defied the caste system of the time by creating a classless community in protest against the politics of the age (Seager 201). In the 1950s and ’60s, the link between Buddhism and activism continued, but with a different focus.

Seager explained that activists of the ’50s and ’60s began meditation “as a complement to political work,” only realizing later “that the dharma could be a powerful vehicle for social change” (Seager 202). For the Beat Generation, Buddhist activism implied helping to maximize individual

freedom in any way possible. Snyder, one of the most highly regarded Beat writers, described that Buddhist morality implied

supporting any cultural and economic revolution that moves clearly toward a free, international, classless world . . . It means affirming the widest possible spectrum of non-harmful individual behavior . . . Worlds of behavior and custom long banned by the Judeo-Capitalist-Christian-Marxist West. (as quoted by Seager 42-43)

Snyder connected his actions as an activist of the Beat Generation to his beliefs as a Buddhist, setting an example for other Buddhists of the time. Movements towards social equality also found support in the Buddhist belief of nondualism. Because of reincarnation, any person could have been any race, gender, or social class at some point in time, making such dualistic distinctions negligible. Seager explained nondualism, saying that “Attachment to distinctions such as gender, economic class, and race is a hindrance to an individual’s experience of liberation. Social inequities resulting from such ultimately illusory distinctions are to be remedied through compassionate action” (Seager 201). “Compassionate action,” however, was defined differently by different groups. Snyder advocated “using such means as civil disobedience, outspoken criticism, protest, pacifism, voluntary poverty and even gentle violence” (as quoted by Seager 42-43). Seager cites political peace work and running hospices as two other examples of socially engaged Buddhism. Forms of protest connected to Buddhist morality became popular during the Counterculture, especially prominent in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War nonviolent rallies and marches. Inner reflection was also seen as an important reaction towards societal ills during the Counterculture. In the Beatles’ 1968 song “Revolution,” they sang “But when you talk about destruction/Don’t you know that you can count me out . . . You tell me it’s the institution . . . You

better free your mind instead” (as quoted by Heath and Potter 60). Many Buddhists believed that, as the Beatles articulated, inner awareness and mindfulness was necessary to overcome the nation’s problems. Buddhist philosophy thus dovetailed with forms of government protest during the ’50s and ’60s, providing an additional way in which Buddhism helped converts cope with their distaste for the current government and consumer-culture of America.

In the 1960s, the Vietnam War also served to inspire an increase in Buddhism. The United States was rampant with War protests, with 30,000 protests in October 1965 alone (“Protests Against the Vietnam War”). The Counterculture’s creed of “Love not War” tied into, and, in some cases, was caused by, Buddhism’s advocacy of peace. This belief in peace is shown in the Fourth Noble Truth, where the Buddha advises “sammā kammanta” or “right action,” usually interpreted as living peacefully and harmoniously with all life forms. In addition, the Vietnam War’s publicity in America brought attention to Vietnam and the Buddhism practiced there. Articles about Vietnam published during the time sensationalized Buddhism, stressing the mysticism of the religion. One article, published by *Time* magazine, described Buddhist monks: “In the murky world of Oriental mysticism and Saigon’s immemorial intrigue, these robed and shaven men have emerged as the new Machiavellis of the Vietnamese political scene” (“Vietnam’s Political Buddhism and the War”). This sensationalized publicity and Buddhism’s anti-war dogma drew attention to Buddhism during the time, ultimately inspiring the conversions of many.

In the United States today, we are constantly bombarded with reminders of Buddhism’s effects on our society: yoga is a routine activity, Tibetan shops peek out behind street corners, meditation clinics dot every major city. 12.6% of Americans today claim that Buddhism “influences their daily spirituality” (*Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion*). What Buddhism’s success in America says

about our own culture, however, is far less talked about and far more interesting. The success of Buddhism in our society is rooted in Americans' dissatisfaction with the mass-consumerism that skyrocketed after World War II and only continues to increase today. Buddhism's emphasis on renouncing materialism and escaping material desires created a boom in Buddhist conversions that coincided with the boom in consumerism that occurred post-World War II. Those seeking to be defined by something outside "the System" found a spiritual home in the individualism stressed by Buddhism. The exoticism of the religion attracted more converts, including pop stars, who, in turn, attracted the media, further popularizing Buddhism. Finally, Buddhism's ability to lend itself to social protest allowed for a connection between the numerous protests of the time and the protesters' spirituality. Today, over forty years after the initial emergence of Buddhism into the mainstream culture of America, the question remains: how long will Buddhism continue to satisfy the needs of its American converts? Can a religion that is now the third largest in the country remain exotic? Thousands of yoga studios, meditation clinics, and Tibetan shops are making money off of the attraction to this anti-materialist religion. When does Buddhism become one of the hated institutions of "The System?"

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