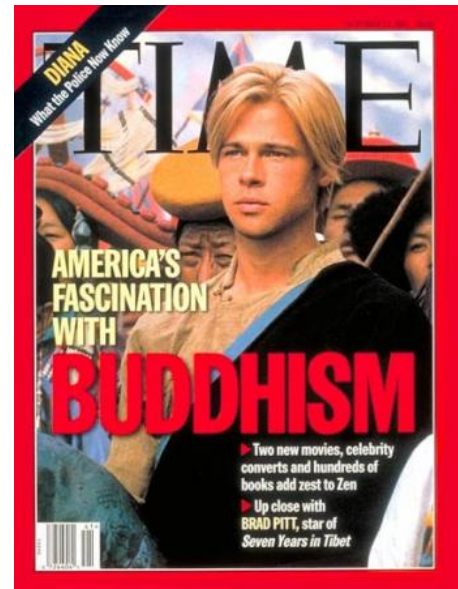


BUDDHISM IN AMERICA

Monday, Oct. 13, 1997 By David van Biema

If you listen closely, you can hear the spinning of the dharma in the multiplexes. In two of the most anticipated Hollywood movies of the season, the talk is of worms and nothingness. About halfway through *Seven Years in Tibet*, which will open Wednesday to considerable hoopla, Brad Pitt is trying to construct a building. But there is a problem. His workers will not dig a foundation, because they don't want to kill any worms. Why? As Pitt's character is informed: "In a past life, this humble worm could have been your mother." Meanwhile, in Martin Scorsese's *Kundun*, scheduled to open on Christmas Day, the protagonist muses, "My enemies will be nothing. My friends will be nothing. All will be nothing." This is spoken not morbidly but philosophically--a most peculiar sentiment in a Hollywood film, even one made for a mere \$30 million. Or it would be, were this not the season in which the world of American entertainment became fascinated with Buddhism. Neither *Seven Years* nor *Kundun* is overtly about the faith. The first recounts the story of Pitt's character, Heinrich Harrer, a superstar mountain climber and Nazi poster boy who is humanized while tutoring the preteen Dalai Lama in Tibet in the 1940s and '50s. The second tells the remarkable tale of the Dalai Lama more or less through his own eyes, from his recognition as reincarnated Buddha of compassion at age two until his escape to India at 24. Each film's strongest statement is on China's brutal, 46-year occupation of Tibet. But just as both open with the soulful moan of Tibetan horns overlapped by the eerie, two-toned chanting of monks, the spiritual underlay of both is Tibet's ornate, pacifistic Buddhist belief. Says *Seven Years* director Jean-Jacques Annaud of his film: "Buddhism is everywhere." And he is right. Pitt's hair shines with its usual otherworldly luster, yet it is upstaged by the inner glow of his Tibetan co-stars. "I have to stay here," the young Dalai Lama says when offered a chance to escape the Chinese. "Saving others is my path to liberation." Pitt's response is admiration mixed with yearning. *Seven Years* speaks to our own situation as outsiders, filled with angst and ego, looking for something different, listening for the sound of horns and chanting.

A new makeup is called "Zen Blush"; a new sitcom, *Dharma and Greg*. A designer fruit-juice container entreats, "Please recycle this bottle. It deserves to be reincarnated too." A Buddhist temple is where Al Gore came into some dubious campaign money, and monks star in computer commercials. Type buddhism into the search engine of amazon.com the Internet bookstore, and it spits back 1,200 titles, from scriptures to modern inspirational writings to a robust selection of cookbooks. And then there is



Hollywood, where more and more people seem torn between a sincere desire to conquer ego and the drive to be seen doing so.

Have we all been here before? Yes, and in this lifetime too. America flirted with Buddhism in the 1950s and again in the '70s; vestiges of those dalliances still waft, pleasant yet amorphous, through the pop atmosphere. Chicago Bulls coach Phil Jackson applies Zen to the art of Michael maintenance, and Tina Turner and Herbie Hancock chant Buddhist mantras. Terms such as Nirvana and koan are in common usage, if seldom understood.

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And now crests the Tibetan wave, building roughly since the Dalai Lama's 1989 Nobel Peace Prize. Richard Gere pioneered the full religiopolitical embrace years ago, but he may have found a successor in Adam Yauch, 33, singer for the punk-rap group the Beastie Boys. Not only has Yauch guided his famously irreverent band into songs like Bodhisattva Oath; he is also primary architect of two Tibetan Freedom Concert benefits that became instant touchstones for a Gen X phenomenon quickly dubbed Tibet Chic. Like the new movies, the concerts' first concern was political but they too opened with that signature chanting, and Yauch, a convert, made sure spiritual seekers could find low-key "monastery tents" on the concert grounds. Then there are celebrities whose exact commitment to the faith is a guessing game. Oliver Stone publicly conscripts Tibetan "wrathful deities" to fend off his detractors; Courtney Love is said to be a practitioner, while Harrison Ford simply supports Tibetan freedom (his wife Melissa Mathison wrote Kundun's script). Composer Philip Glass, yes. REM singer Michael Stipe, maybe. And in one of the more peculiar occurrences along the Hollywood-Lhasa axis, action-film star and all-around surly guy Steven Seagal was recognized by the head of the venerable Nyingma Tibetan lineage as the reincarnation of a 15th century lama.

Pulled down raw out of the ether, the new Buddhist vibe can seem surrealistically jumbled, as a poem in a recent New Yorker acknowledged: "The huge head of Richard Gere, a tsonga blossom/ in his hair, comes floating like a Macy's/ Parade balloon above the snowcapped summit/ of sacred Kailas." But in fact intrigued Americans need not remain perplexed: they can investigate a vibrant, if small, U.S. community of believers. This does not mean the hundreds of thousands of Buddhist immigrants, who have yet to have an impact on mainstream culture. Rather, it refers to some 100,000 American-born Buddhists, many of whom have been practicing for decades and have, as sociologist Don Morreale puts it, "gone mainstream." While the Dalai Lama bestrides the globe, Zen Buddhists in San Francisco run two of the better-respected AIDS hospices, and their philosophy infuses the entire "good death" movement. In New York City and elsewhere, fans flock to talks by Thich Nhat Hanh, a French-based, socially engaged Vietnamese monk whose book *Living Buddha, Living Christ* sold 100,000

hardcover copies. In cyberspace the Manhattan-based Asian Classics Institute has transferred 100,000 deteriorating pages of scripture from Tibetan block prints onto the Internet. Mirabai Bush, a devotee of the non-Tibetan Vipassana school, teaches Monsanto executives nonreligious meditation techniques out of Williamsburg, Mass. Since 1988, reports Morreale, the number of English-language Buddhist teaching centers has jumped from 429 to more than 1,062.

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The faith's attraction differs for different Americans. At a recent public appearance by the Dalai Lama, a woman named Ellen White said it helped her "to make sense out of life" without the fear and guilt she associated with her earlier Roman Catholicism; converts also mention American Buddhism's relative lack of hierarchy. Meditation strikes some as a daily, direct experience of the sacred absent from Sundays-only religion; others hope to use it merely to tune out the late 20th century's frenzied multicasting or, as someone once advised, Be Here Now. Baby boomers embraced Buddhism as a means of protesting a war or widening their minds. To jaded, postmodern twentysomethings who suspect that institutions such as family, government or even reality are insubstantial, it offers assent--and a richer philosophical response than Kurt Cobain's nihilistic Nevermind. (Remember his band's name?) Others agree with Scorsese that "anything infused into our world today about nonviolence can only help."

Back in 1938, a Japanese monk, noting that it took China three centuries to adopt Buddhism from India, said introducing it in America would be like holding a lotus to a rock and waiting for it to take root. It has been only 60 years, and at least one authority, Columbia professor Robert Thurman, states grimly that as far as he is concerned, a true, indigenous Buddhism doesn't yet exist here. But others are convinced that for the first time, American Buddhism may be strong enough not only to withstand the distortions of celebrity but also to attract and hold a significant number of serious searchers. And short of a full transplanting, who would have imagined that the lotus would have offered up such a wild and confusing profusion of blooms?

In the beginning the Buddha found enlightenment underneath the bodhi tree, near what is now Nepal. A pampered prince born around 563 B.C., he frustrated his father's efforts to shield him from the sights of suffering and death, became a wandering holy man and eventually formulated the Four Noble Truths that unite all Buddhists today: that life is full of suffering; that most of that suffering, including the fear of death, can be traced to "desire," the mind's habit of seeing everything through the prism of the self and its well-being; that this craving can be transcended, leading to peace and eventually to an exalted state of full enlightenment called Nirvana; and that the means to do that lies in the Eightfold Path of proper views, resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration.

The Truths dovetailed with the Hindu scheme of reincarnation: we are reborn again and again, in an endless and wearying cycle called samsara, each life affected by the good and bad deeds performed in previous existences, according to a system called karma. The attainment of Nirvana allows us finally to step away from what one writer called "the squirrel cage of birth and rebirth" and enter into oneness with the cosmos. From the beginning, a practice of meditation was the chief mechanism to gain the awareness necessary for enlightenment.

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The Buddha posited no creator God; no Jehovah, Jesus or Allah. His Truths are so distinct from the primary concerns of other faiths that some Western observers see Buddhism as a philosophy or even a psychology. By the same logic, employed optimistically by Jewish, Protestant and Catholic Buddhists of the late 20th century, Buddhist practice can be maintained without leaving one's faith of birth.

Eradicated from India through the efforts of successive invaders by the 13th century, Buddhism--or, as its practitioners knew it, the dharma--had already expanded outward in three main variations. Theravada, which came to dominate Southeast Asia, was probably closest to the original, concentrating on meditation-aided awareness. Its monastic practitioners regarded the Buddha as a great sage but no deity.

Mahayana Buddhism, which caught on in China, Japan and Korea, sustained the Four Noble Truths and the practice of meditation. But Mahayanans saw the Buddha as a divinity to whom prayers could be addressed. They also revered--and hoped to become--bodhisattvas, fully enlightened, Buddha-like beings who had won the right to enter Nirvana but chose to be reborn on earth to enlighten others. A cornucopia of Mahayana offshoots sprang up over the centuries. Zen, which was adopted by the Japanese samurai class, combined chanting and teacher-student dialogue with an extremely strict sitting meditation practice, often enforced with whacks from a ceremonial wand. As a tool toward faster enlightenment, Zen's Rinzai school had its students wrestle conundrums, or koans, such as the famous query "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" The late-blooming Soka Gakkai practice, favored by Tina Turner, is also nominally a Japanese Mahayana offshoot, although rather atypical in its teaching that the repetition of a four-word phrase, translatable as "Devotion to the mystic law of the Lotus Sutra [scripture]," can gain adherents happiness and material amenities in this world.

By far the most colorful of the three major Buddhist branches, however, was Vajrayana, the "Diamond Vehicle" adopted in Tibet in the 7th century. Instead of attaining complete enlightenment gradually, Tibetan monks claimed to do so in a single lifetime, an approach compared by Rick Fields, author of the American Buddhist history *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, to climbing the sheerest face of a Himalayan cliff: demanding and perilous.

Unwilling to limit themselves to the standard tools--chanting and meditative breath-control techniques--the Vajrayana Buddhists employ an eclectic mix that includes religious visualizations, philosophical debate, ritual, yoga and the energies of tantric sex. Buddhism typically took on some of the color of local faiths, but Vajrayana's incorporation of Tibet's gods and demons was especially dramatic, resulting in what Fields describes as "a baroque exuberance [of] priestcraft, rituals, mantras, magic, monasteries, mystics and hermits." Another singularity was the succession process for a ranking monk: upon his death, associates used dreams and portents to locate the child deemed his next incarnation, whom they then groomed to "resume" his "old" duties. The search took on political ramifications in Tibet, where the Dalai Lama, the head of the largest Vajrayana lineage, was also head of state.

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"There has been not enough time to ferment and intoxicate the culture in America," says Richard Gere. "But our approach, because we're so new at it, has a certain eagerness and excitement that you sometimes don't see in the Tibetans. Westerners ask questions. They take notes."

Gere gets most of his questions answered these days by his primary teacher, the Dalai Lama. The actor has probably done more than any other individual to propel the current wave of Buddhist interest, with its distinctly Tibetan flavor, and he may spend more time these days in Dharamsala, the Indian town where the Dalai Lama lives in exile, than on Hollywood sets. But his Buddhist fascination, like that of many his age, began during his college years with Zen, as idiosyncratically presented by Beat writers like Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg. America had shown some interest in Buddhism before the 1950s: Henry David Thoreau wrote, "some will have bad thoughts of me, when they hear their Christ named beside my Buddha." But the Beats' incorporation of koans into the phenomenon of "hip" made them de facto recruiters for a hardy group of Japanese Zen masters who had begun arriving on both coasts in the 1930s.

What drew the Beats to this very different creed? Not everyone would go so far as spiritual explorer Alan Watts, who once credited Buddhism with enabling him to "get out from under the monstrously oppressive God the Father." But the absence of that ultimate authority figure--and the corresponding decoupling of the notion of compassion from a terror of hell or guilt before an Almighty--was attractive. Likewise, although it contradicted the Christian notion of an individual soul, Buddhism's idea of universal interconnectedness--that, as Kerouac wrote, "there is no separation in any of it"--appealed to the Beats, as it would in a few years to the flower children.

By the time the Beats and a lively (but very superficial) national "Zen fad" began to fade from national prominence, two more groups of Buddhists had converged with two more groups of seekers. Helen Tworikov, editor of the

influential Buddhist quarterly Tricycle, says a generation explored Buddhism "out of an enormous sense of shame" over the Vietnam War and its images of monks setting themselves afire in protest. Others were in search of enlightenment that lasted longer than a tab of acid. Their quests seemed to end in Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a brilliant apostle of Vajrayana and part of the Tibetan diaspora. Trungpa's Naropa Institute in Denver, an eclectic colloquium of Eastern spiritual and Western intellectual cultures, constituted one of the great spiritual bazaars of the 1970s. One of its most popular courses, after Trungpa's dialogues with such people as Timothy Leary, was a seminar offered by Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein, two former Peace Corps volunteers who returned from Southern Asia as adepts in the Theravadan practice's Vipassana meditation. Suddenly all three branches of Buddhism were teaching on American soil. It must be noted, however, that they did not necessarily teach here the way they taught anywhere else.

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Every morning at 4:55, Egyoku Nakao, 48, head priest at the Los Angeles Zen Center, dons the golden brown robes of her station and presides over 33 students engaged in Zazen, Zen's painstaking sitting meditation. Her authority, like that of hundreds of senseis before her, is absolute; a student would no more contradict her than question the break of day. A few hours later, however, the Japanese-Portuguese American slips into civilian clothes and rearranges the meditation cushions for an innovation called a Practice Circle, where the talk is free and her view is not privileged. "The center is in the process of redefining its mission," she acknowledges. "This is a very complex place. We are trying to figure out how to live and learn together." It is a notion no Zen cleric would have expressed until American Buddhism led the way. Of course, so is the idea of a female head priest.

Very early on, the American Buddhist trailblazers, particularly those working in Vipassana and Zen, made a vital break from Asian tradition: they opted against trying to replicate the Asian monastic system, where intense practice is left to the monks and the main devotion of laypeople is once-a-week temple offerings. "American people don't want to be monks and nuns," says Kornfield. "They want practices that transform the heart." The approach seemed to work: Kornfield's meditation seminars with Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg in Barre, Mass., and at Spirit Rock in California, turned out thousands of graduates. Zentos began spreading to Middle America, and when Chogyam Trungpa died in 1987 at age 47, a contingent of lay American-born Vajrayana Buddhists was able to perform the funeral liturgy along with Tibetans. (Last year Naropa Institute became a fully accredited college for "contemplative studies.")

Then, rather suddenly, a further change occurred. Beginning in 1983 the community discovered to its horror that a probable majority of U.S. teachers, both foreign born and American, had abused their authority by sleeping with their disciples. In a particularly tragic case, the American

regent of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism admitted that he had infected one of his students with HIV. The student had then transmitted it to his girlfriend. The result, in many schools, was a radical democratization, with leadership often subdivided to prevent abuse, and even a certain amount of government by consensus. "It doesn't mean we vote on what the dharma is," says Kornfield, "but there is a kind of input from our communities." Women received more authority. Morreale notes that the "almost martial discipline" of the Zen masters softened, and the monastic pattern of "strict practice and intensive retreat," which had continued to mark early American observance, gave way in many cases to "strong daily practice in the midst of one's ordinary circumstances." For many Buddhists, even one so serious as Gere, this seems to mean 45 minutes to an hour of meditation a day.

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The liberalization was theological as well. In traditional Buddhism, withdrawal from the world's passions was often assumed to preclude political action (although heads of large Asian monasteries often set up de facto alliances with local power structures, for better or worse). Americans, however, were attracted to "engaged Buddhism" of the sort most eloquently championed by Thich Nhat Hanh, famous for his 1960s anti-war activism. In Yonkers, N.Y., Zen master Bernard Glassman has established--using Zen principles--a bakery, garment company and building-renovation firm staffed by the formerly homeless and unemployed.

There are dozens of other innovations and debates, some small and some quite radical. A civil but ferociously felt argument has raged for the past few months around a book called *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, in which Stephen Batchelor, a former monk in both Zen and Tibetan traditions, suggests that Buddhism jettison reincarnation and karma, thereby making possible what he calls an "existential, therapeutic and liberating agnosticism." In fact, many American practitioners have already Batchelorized themselves by default. A good example is Ann Buck, 67, a retired businesswoman and teacher of Theravadan meditation. Although she does not reject karma, it plays little role in the groups she gathers in her house in Malibu, Calif.; it will certainly not figure in a phone service she is helping plan that will furnish computer-generated meditation guidance. If participants move further into Buddhism, she says, she will be gratified, but her first goal is to service "the enormous need of people to find a safe home, a refuge, within their being." Some think meditation will constitute Buddhism's distinct contribution to American religious life. Different branches practice different varieties, but each begins with a simple awareness of breath drawn in and let out. Fields notes that a near mechanical process that allows each individual to look inside him- or herself for the divine fits in particularly well with the democratic tendency of the faith here: "Americans have always been a do-it-yourself culture, and this is a do-it-yourself philosophy." Benedictine Sister

Mary Margaret Funk, executive director of the International Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, goes considerably further. "Christianity and Judaism don't go deep enough in helping people live [spiritually] every day," she says. "What [American Buddhists] are doing, and it's kind of amazing, is taking a path of enlightenment into a lay culture without priests and temples and structures, and moving it right into daily practice for everyday life." Once established in Buddhism, she feels, the movement will spread to other faiths. "It's beneficial to all of us. It will go down in history as one of the best things that happened to civilization."

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A generous response, but one understandably more concerned with the fate of faith in general than the integrity of Buddhism. Most American Buddhists do not see themselves as proselytizers. The Dalai Lama has stated that the age of useful religious competition is past; people should stay with their birth faiths while profiting from other traditions. But some of Western Buddhism's more influential thinkers believe that it has far more to offer than meditation and may lose its essential core if it strives to Americanize too fully. Tworkov, who balances all sides nicely in *Tricycle*, believes many practitioners of engaged Buddhism are merely aping Christian charity, a trend she fears. "We have a lot of Red Cross Buddhism. I have no problem with the Red Cross. But the question is, Will any of the three Buddhisms survive Protestantism because of [the strength of that] culture?" If they fail, she thinks America will have lost out on their most novel and vital contribution. "What can Buddhism provide this country that it doesn't have? The teachings on mind and the Four Noble Truths. There are enormous absences in the wisdom of this culture."

Even grimmer, in a way that would do Jeremiah proud, is Robert Thurman: father of the actress Uma, adviser on both upcoming films, the Dalai Lama's longtime friend, co-founder with Gere of Tibet House and Jey Tsong Khapa Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University. Thurman states baldly that those like Batchelor who prefer their Buddhism karma free "are non-Buddhists...they want to live as American humanists and call it Buddhism, [but] it's not really solid." He is only slightly less disdainful of Vipassana seminars that de-emphasize the supernatural side of the faith for the mechanics of meditation, or who, as Thurman puts it, "teach laypeople and rationalize their own departures from the traditional view. I did so for 15 years myself." For Thurman, "Euro-American Buddhism doesn't exist yet," nor can it do so until it can furnish the true motors of devotion and keepers of the flame, "ordained monks and nuns, supported in vows of celibacy and poverty, divorced from everyday life and supported by a community of lay members." Even if the majority of American Buddhism seems to be fleeing such an ideal, he remains convinced that especially within the Tibetan tradition there exists a promising community, and individuals "slowly coming closer and closer to the institutional breakthrough, who could live that way

with a lifelong vow."

As I develop the awakening mind I praise the Buddhas as they shine I bow
before you as I travel my path To join your ranks I make my full-time task
For the sake of all beings I seek The enlightened mind that I know I'll reap
--Bodhisattva Vow, the Beastie Boys

Adam Yauch's recorded voice comes pounding out of the speakers, in support of political justice and inner peace. If the world of Tibeto-Buddhist chic can be said to have a red-hot center, it inhabits the small restaurant in Manhattan's East Village where Yauch and his Milarepa fund are celebrating the release of the Tibetan Freedom Concert's CD. Opinion makers in knapsacks and nose rings schmooze; a large portrait of the Dalai Lama beams.

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Yauch himself is remarkably slight and soft-spoken, given the aggressiveness of his group's punk-rap music but then since he began practicing Tibetan Buddhism, the group spits into the crowd a lot less. Yauch, brought up secularly by a Jewish father and Catholic mother, first meditated after attending teachings by the Dalai Lama in India in 1992. "It felt logical to me," he explains. "Real, not hokey." He spends anywhere from 20 minutes to two hours a day in cross-legged contemplation. Back braced against the wall--a flaw in technique, he'll admit--he repeats short prayers, in English, assigned by his teacher. He prefers not to share their content, other than that they have to do with having "no interest in self except for where it can benefit other beings." He waxes genuinely enthusiastic about becoming "more aware of what I do now and how it affects other people." Yauch, 33, does not disagree with Thurman--"to really be a Buddhist practitioner, you need a real lama and direct link to the heritage," he says. But his youth and enthusiasm make the possibility seem more palatable. "There's something going on," he says. "It's at its inception, its birth; it's kind of helpless right now. But as it takes root, it will evolve into American Buddhism."

Two generations ago--two years ago, actually, given his milieu--he would have been a curiosity. Today he is something of a role model, although his attitude about this can only be called detached. "I'll walk through life and do the best I can to benefit other human beings," he says. "Feels like I'm in for the long haul, at least for this lifetime."