

Reflections on *Habits*, Buddhism in America, and Religious Individualism*

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The twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Habits of the Heart*, coincidentally, coincides with the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the two Buddhist centers I write about in my book, *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America* (Cadge 2005). Shortly after I was invited to speak on the 20th anniversary of *Habits*, the director of Cambridge Insight Meditation Center (CIMC) in Cambridge, Massachusetts—one of the two Buddhist centers I studied—asked me to speak at their twentieth anniversary party. I said yes to both invitations, though with a bit of hesitation.

My hesitation stemmed primarily, as I said to the three hundred or so celebrants who gathered at CIMC on a steamy Sunday afternoon in July 2005, from the fact that I was not around for most of the history of CIMC. Nor was I aware of the discipline of sociology or the wide range of newspapers and other media in which *Habits* was reviewed when it was released in 1985. Rather, I was in elementary school getting ready for that not so happy move to the middle school and, at least in July of 1985 when CIMC opened, probably attending vacation bible school at the United Methodist church my family attended in suburban Philadelphia.

Much has changed since 1985—in my life, in the field of sociology, in the structure and operation of CIMC (and the other Buddhist center I studied, a Thai Buddhist temple Wat Mongkoltepmunee near Philadelphia), and in the lives of the authors of *Habits* and the founders of CIMC. Thinking about the central arguments made in *Habits* in relation to the history, structure, and evolution of CIMC, and Buddhism in America more broadly, has led me down some intriguing thought paths. Here I briefly share three of those.

First, and most generally, I was struck in re-reading parts of *Habits* by the descriptions and characterizations of “Eastern religions” in its pages. Putting to the side the big fact that the voices and life experiences of post-1965 immigrants were largely missing from its pages, it was revealing to me to see Buddhism characterized primarily as “counter-cultural.” A few of the people described were seri-

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ous Zen practitioners, but my sense from the descriptions of others involved with Buddhism was that most were exploring the tradition as seekers. This presentation likely reflected the realities of those interviewed as well as some of the public sentiment towards Buddhism at the time. At least as practiced by non-Asians and non-Asian-Americans, Buddhism was fringy, younger, and significantly less central to mainstream American culture when the research for *Habits* was conducted than it is in some parts of the United States today.

While some people have and continue to explore the Buddhist tradition for a short time and then move on, we know from looking around as well as from the growing body of literature about Buddhism in America that the tradition has put down deep roots in the United States (Prebish 1999; Seager 1999; Prebish and Tanaka 1998; Williams and Queen 1999; Gregory 2001; Numrich 1996). These roots are evident formally and informally, through Buddhist organizations, Buddhist teachers, Buddhist forms of meditation taught everywhere from Christian churches to gyms, and increasingly through forms of complementary and alternative medicine. In addition to the two to three million Buddhists across the country, a national survey in 2003 showed that that one American in seven claims to have had a fair amount of contact with Buddhists and that one person in eight believes Buddhist teachings or practices have had an important influence on his or her religion or spirituality (Wuthnow and Cadge 2004). While some people only scratch the surface of the Buddhist tradition in the States, others have a much broader range of experiences with the tradition than profiled in *Habits*. This depth of experience raises a series of important questions about whether people learn about Buddhism as individualistically today as is evident in the people profiled in *Habits*. Much more so than at the time *Habits* was written, Buddhist practitioners today have the option of being connected to Buddhist communities. For example, the teachers and a number of the people involved with the founding of CIMC were at the anniversary celebration and are still involved now twenty years later.

If we think specifically about the ways Buddhism is practiced by non-Asian-Americans in the U.S. today, especially in terms of the issues of individualism and community raised by the authors of *Habits*, we might say yes, it looks like Buddhism is understood as an individualistically oriented tradition and the people learning about it today fit within the broad individualistic frames used to describe the people interviewed and described in *Habits*. This was certainly my impression when I began research and attended my first class at CIMC. I thought it was a Center filled with "Shelias," each piecing together their own private "religion." When I attended my first class at CIMC, I found about thirty people sitting on green cushions on the third floor of a recently refurbished Center, facing a large altar holding a Buddha image. Everyone was silent, eyes closed, legs crossed, hands in their lap, breathing in and out in meditation by following their breath. I imagined the members of this class and others at the Center I watched over the next weeks and months as bubbles gathered together, in large part

because of what they described as suffering, trying to connect with one another, but really only learning through meditation to study the inside of their bubble and develop their own personal “faith” (though they would never use that word). As I learned about the beginnings of the Center in the 1980s, I heard stories about people coming to classes but almost never talking or even making eye contact. Just coming in, sitting to meditate, bowing to the teacher or Buddha image, and going home. That seemed pretty individually focused to me.

But some scholars argue that Shelia’s private religion may have been over-interpreted or taken out of context by people referencing her description in *Habits*. In the same way, my initial impressions of CIMC and the individualistic ethos present at its inception shifted over the course of its history and my research. This is my second point.

The teachers and practitioners at CIMC realized early on in their history that a Buddhism based only on meditation was not very sustainable for themselves individually or in relation to one another at CIMC. A few years after the Center opened, they created rituals which were reformulations of parts of the Buddhist tradition they had rejected initially in favor of the meditation they thought was its core. Gatherings were held where people chanted in Pali to take refuge in the Buddha, his teachings, and the Buddhist community. The Buddhist precepts or ethical guidelines for living were reinterpreted as guidelines (not commandments) and also recited and posted around the Center. Social gatherings were held, people married, memorial celebrations took place, and people came to know each other outside of the Center. In the language of *Habits*, the tensions between individualism and community began to be worked out in a way I think the authors would smile upon, a way that did not privilege either but required both. CIMC evolved to fit somewhere between broad interpretations of the “internal and “external” religion the authors of *Habits* describe.

As CIMC developed and people made connections with one another, they continued to spend most of their time together at the Center largely in silence. When I first met people at CIMC in 2001 and was thinking about them as bubbles, they were largely sitting in silence. As I began to get to know people, however, I saw things in a slightly different way. From the perspective of the concepts used in the chapter on religion in *Habits*, the people at CIMC are not one “local congregation” but many. Their worship is not reiterating their relationship with God, though character and virtue are being taught in their gatherings in part through the precepts. And while they may look like radical individualists there is something more going on; they do not really fit the mysticism component of Ernst Troeltsch’s famous typology. The communal dimension of CIMC is based in silence and its glue is a kind of “interconnection” practitioners describe emerging from the silence. The language of “relying” on others being there to support the practice is used at CIMC, and while it is about practitioners developing as individuals, there is also more awareness of and responsibility to the group than I would have guessed on my first visit. This responsibility to people beyond them-

selves is reinforced by some at CIMC through their participation in an Engaged Buddhism group that meets at the Center and thinks and acts around broader questions of social responsibility. Like the individuals profiled in *Habits*, the emphasis on personal “freedom” is strong at CIMC, but it does not exist in isolation.

Finally, a few thoughts about “communities of memory.” The authors of *Habits* talk about religious organizations as communities of memory, and they are in their rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations. Almost all of the speakers at the twentieth anniversary of CIMC talked about the building previously being one of the first birthing centers in Cambridge, yogis from the Cambridge Zen Center helping to shovel sand out of the basement when the Center first opened, and the cushions being green to symbolize the Center’s connection to the Thai forest tradition. But religious organizations in the pluralistic American religious landscape today exist within a broader range of frameworks than just the biblical and civic republican traditions described in *Habits*. The monks and practitioners at the Thai Buddhist temple I studied—who have been in the United States for twenty years—might speak within some of these frames. But there are others, as well, particularly those that include people and organizations in Thailand that are a part of much broader transnational communities than those imagined when *Habits* was published. It is by understanding transnational connections and conducting additional analytically rigorous studies of religious traditions that move across national borders that some scholars are expanding and gaining analytic leverage on the issues that were central to *Habits*.

Habits of the Heart has had a profound impact on the sociology of religion, culture, politics, and civic life. It has affected many non-academics, as well. A colleague told me recently that a Korean-American pastor mentioned the book to her as she prepared to interview him for her dissertation research. People have read and come away from *Habits* with a wide range of messages, much as people describe CIMC in a wide range of ways. At CIMC’s 20th anniversary party, there was a cake with a lotus flower on the top. A small child, knowing that cake decorations in the U.S. are made from sugar, reached for the lotus flower and took a big bite out of it. Imagine the child’s surprise upon discovering that the flower was crafted from an onion. I think of *Habits* a bit like this—as a book whose arguments are familiar but are still able to surprise me in subsequent re-readings, leaving me with a great deal to consider.

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