Zen Buddhism Essay, Research Paper

Zen; Buddhism’s trek through history, politics, and America

Zen, or Zenno (as it is known by the Japanese word from which it derives), is the

most common form of Buddhism practiced in the world today. All types of people from

intellectuals to celebrities refer to themselves as Buddhist, but despite its popularity

today in America, it has had a long history throughout the world.

“Here none think of wealth or fame,

All talk of right and wrong is quelled.

In Autumn I rake the leaf-banked stream,

In spring attend the nightingale.

Who dares approach the lion’s

Mountain cave? Cold, robust,

A Zen-person through and through,

I let the spring breeze enter at the gate.”

-Daigu (1584-1669, Rinzai) (DailyZen)

Zen Buddhism’s history begins where Buddhism’s history began. It originated on

the continent of Asia around 500 B.C.. The founder of Buddhism; Gotama Siddhattha, a

former price in what is now known as India, is known as “The Buddha,” which roughly

translates to ” one who is awake” (Merit 102). “At the age of twenty-nine, deeply

troubled by the suffering he saw around him, he renounced his privileged life to seek

understanding. After six years of struggling as an ascetic he finally achieved

enlightenment at age thirty-five” (DailyZen). In 475 A.D. a Buddhist teacher,

Bodhidharma, traveled to China and introduced the teachings of Buddha there. In China

Buddhism mixed with Taoism, and the result was the Ch’an School of Buddhism, and

from there Ch’an spread to Japan where it is called Zen Buddhism (DailyZen). The

Buddhist Religion has always been passed down from teacher to student, and through the

use of books and sacred works such as the Malind-panha, Pali Tipitaka, and the Pitaka

series (Merit 102). These books and teachers taught students of the religion the

philosophies of the practice.

They taught of Satori, or enlightenment, which is the main goal of the Zen

Buddhist, which is to achieve peace of mind despite external turmoil ( Archer ninety-six).

One way to reach enlightenment is through meditation. Zaren is sitting in meditative

absorption as the shortest yet most steep way to reaching enlightenment (Zen 233). The

Buddhists stressed the fact that existence is painful. They believed that suffering was a

result of false human attachments to things that were impertinent, “including the

attachment to the false notion of self or ‘I’(DailyZen).” They said that, ” the conditions

that make an individual are precisely those that also give rise to suffering. Individuality

involves limitation; limitation ends in suffering (Buddhism eighty-six).” They taught that

ridding themselves of these attachments they could end suffering (DailyZen). ” This pure

Mind, the source of everything, Shines forever and on all with the brilliance Of its own

perception… If you students of the Way desire knowledge of this great mystery, Only

avoid attachment to any single thing beyond Mind.-Huang Po (DailyZen).”

As well with the philosophical side of the teachings were the basics of Guidance and

ethics. “Buddhist philosophy is both a system of thought and a set of ethical norms

(Buddhism eighty-six).” It offers practical guidance in everyday social affairs.

Socially, the Buddhists have often been thrown into the political arena. Due to

the nature of politics, where originally, “in Vietnam, the Buddhist Community was not

politically activated until it was mistreated (Brittanica ninety-two), “the Buddhists have

been divided into two groups. There is the moderate group that was led by Thich Tri

Quang, that claimed political neutrality, but any of their movements for peace were seen

as a weakness in the face of communism by the government of Saigon. And there are the

militant Buddhists, who support upheavals. One such incident of upheaval was in 1963

when ” the government (of Vietnam) forbade the flying of the Buddhist flag during the

May eighth celebration of Buddha’s birthday (Britanica ninety-two). “A riot erupted by

Buddhists against their cruel treatment, but it was it was put down by heavily armed

guards. Not only did the government serve as a political persuader for the Buddhists, but

the Roman Catholic Church was excessively partisan against the Buddhists, and the Ngo

Dinn Diem family had an anti-Buddhist policy. The militant Buddhists also organized a

coup against the Diem regime on November first, 1962, but it too was put down. The

Buddhists also protest in more passive ways, “since 1963 there have been over thirty self-

immolations of monks in South Vietnam protesting the ruin of their country (Britanica

ninety-two).”

China Town in San Francisco, California, is where much of Buddhism started in

the U.S.. By the mid 1850s many temples began to appear, “within a quarter century

several hundred temples dotted the California coastline (experience 670).” The

American form of Zen owes its origins to Sogaku Harada, who had three deciples who

each contributed to the American form of Zen. One deciples of Harada was Taizan

Maezumi, who arrived in America in 1956.Taizan Maezumi founded the Zen Center of

Los Angeles. Another one of Sogaku Harada’s deciples was Hakuun Yasutani Roshi.

Hakuun held Zen meditation sessions in many major US cities from 1962, until he died

in 1973. Sogaku Harada’s Third deciple was Philip Kapleau. Not only did Philip

Kapleau found the Zen Meditation center in Rochester, New York, But he also published

a book called “The Three Pillars of Zen” (experience 670). The Nations first Buddhist

monastery was founded in Big Sur, California, in 1967, by Richard Baker and Zen master

Shunryu Suzuki, it was called Tassajara. It was the main learning ground for Zen

Buddhism in the US. The sixties is when Zen’s popularity made it’s way into the

mainstream. It was referred to as a cult, just as was Hare Krishna, by the American

Public. It attracted many intellectuals, such as scientists and doctors (Archer ninety-

three). It also attracted poets and writers, “Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, the beat

poets of the fifties, were early apostles of the Zen and Hare Krishna cults that flowered in

the sixties (Archer ninety-three).” “All the constituents that exist are transitory and

there’s no permanent self (bigtable).” Allen Ginsberg was one poet who understood, and

practiced the Buddhist philosophy. The Religion’s ideals were slightly radical as

compared to the mainly Christian population of the time. It also came as a shock because

women were welcomed to join.

America was in a chaotic state during the 1960s. The country was basically torn

apart, and highly tormented by the controversy over the Vietnam war. People were

breached by the traditional American ideals of serving the country, and heroic

nationalism, and new ideologies and beliefs systems. More Americans were open to try

different things. The Hippie era, trials of free love, and experimenting with fresh

cultural aspects, all probably led to a sort of flourishing of spiritual awareness. As the

cultures’ curiosity and confusion led to a blossoming of new religious forms, or at least

new to the Americana. Zen Buddhism was among these ideas, that was grasped at by

Americans seeking new spiritual enlightenment.

Zen went from India to China to Japan to Western civilization, and made a

variable impact in each place it traveled to. The ideas, customs, beliefs, and philosophies

of the Zen Buddhist religion spread globally due to its universality. From politics to

poets, Zen impacts all aspects of life, and forms ethics through guideline, and basic

philosophies of human nature and spirit.

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