

Article

Whose Dharma Is It Anyway? Identity and Belonging in American Buddhist (Post)Modernities

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Abstract: This study engages some aspects of the conversations, implicit and explicit, between American(ized) Buddhism in non-heritage/convert communities and religious nationalism in the U.S. Specifically, how does a Buddhist understanding of emptiness and interdependence call into question some of the fundamental assumptions behind conceptions of divine and political order, as expressed through ideologies of “God and Country”, or ideas about American providence or exceptionalism? What does belonging to a nation or transnational community mean when all individual and collective formations of identity are understood to be nonessential, contingent and impermanent? Finally, how can some of the discourses within American Buddhism contribute to a more inclusive national identity and a reconfigured understanding of the intersection of spiritual and national belonging? The focus here will be on exploring how an understanding of identity and lineage in Buddhist contexts offers a counter-narrative to the way national and spiritual belonging is expressed through tribalist formations of family genealogy, nationalism and transnational religious affiliation in the dominant Judeo-Christian context, and how this understanding has been, and is being, expressed in non-heritage American(ized) Buddhist communities.

Keywords: religious nationalism; American Buddhism; God and Country; minority religion in the U.S.; Engaged Buddhism

It is another chilly morning at 5:45 a.m. I am lingering over the thimbleful cup of tea that has become part of morning practice and fighting the urge to sleep. Candles and incense are lit. The “Heart Sutra” is chanted in English, then the “Great Dharani” is chanted in Korean. As we sit in silence in the temple overlooking the mountains in Eastern Kentucky, the sky lightens and the fog begins to lift from the forests below. All too soon the bell will ring, the retreat will end, and we will return to our homes, our jobs, our children—and all of the pressing social, political, climactic and environmental issues that face us as Americans and as citizens of the world. But Zen practice does not begin and end with sitting on a cushion, and seeing the world through a Buddhist perspective is not limited to the personal and the spiritual. How does this impact a sense of belonging to the larger American culture and nationhood that is largely, and historically, constructed around a Protestant Christian identity?

This study engages some aspects of the conversations, implicit and explicit, between American(ized) Buddhism in non-heritage/convert communities and religious nationalism in the U.S. Specifically, how does a Buddhist understanding of emptiness and interdependence call into question some of the fundamental assumptions behind conceptions of divine and political order, as expressed through ideologies of “God and Country”, or ideas about American providence or exceptionalism? What does belonging to a nation or transnational community mean when all individual and collective formations of identity are understood to be nonessential, contingent and impermanent? Finally, how can some of the discourses within American Buddhism contribute to a more inclusive national identity and a reconfigured understanding of the intersection of spiritual and national belonging? The focus here will be on exploring how an understanding of identity and lineage

in Buddhist contexts offers a counter-narrative to the way national and spiritual belonging is expressed through tribalist formations of family genealogy, nationalism and transnational religious affiliation in the dominant Judeo-Christian context, and how this understanding has been, and is, being expressed in non-heritage American(ized) Buddhist communities.

1. For God and Country?

To the question, “Why do most American churchgoers proudly display prominent US flags at the front of their sanctuaries and find little or no conflict between devotion to the American state and loyalty to Christ [. . .]?” J. Christopher Soper and Joel S. Fetzer (2018) find no easy answers (Soper and Fetzer 2018, p. xv). In their introduction to *Religion and Nationalism in Global Perspective*, they note that while religious and national affiliations have been, and continue to be, foundational and potent sources of identity and meaning, fostering a sense of belonging “across space and time” (ibid., p. 1), they argue that there is neither a “simple or straightforward pattern” with regard to how religion and nationalism intersect, nor a “continuing nexus between civic and spiritual identities within states”. (ibid., p. 2). This is particularly complicated in the context of secularized/secularizing modernities, globalized/globalizing transnationalism, and ways in which religious traditions and cultures have had to adapt. However, they do find that “Americans almost naturally link their nationalistic ideology with their religious point of view. It would seem that it has always been this way; that the relative power of religious traditions wax and wane, new groups emerge and old ones decline, yet the connecting thread between religion of virtually any stripe and the American nation remains strong” (ibid., p. 71).

The conflation of divine and social/political order, with a subtext of supremacy or dominion, seems to permeate the idea of American-ness. *Pro Deo et Patria*, (For God and Country), the motto of the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps, founded in 1775, explicitly links the work of the military and the faith community as though they are serving a common cause. The motto chosen in 1782 by the founders, *E pluribus unum* (“Out of many, one”), was officially replaced in 1956 with “In God We Trust”, which echoes the added statement to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1952 that we are one nation “under God.” While the expression of the U.S. as a pluralistic whole did not disappear—*E pluribus unum* still appears on most U.S. currency and the Great Seal—it was clearly relegated to a secondary position. In its stead is a vision of a (primarily Protestant) Christian nation, whose fate lies not in the hands of a unified and inclusive collective, but in the providential hands of God, and whose favor depends on the faithfulness of its citizens in carrying out the divine charge of American’s unique role in history. Herman Melville seems to sum this up succinctly: “We Americans are the peculiar chosen people, the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world” (in Guelzo 2019).

This belief is not an artifact of a more religiously homogenous past. A fairly recent article in *Christianity Today* cites research that confirms the continued adherence to the doctrine of American exceptionalism, and by extension the role of religious nationalism in public discourse and identity: “And though the U.S. Constitution makes no mention of God, 53 percent of Americans say they believe God and the nation have a special relationship, a concept stretching back to Pilgrim days. Even a third of atheists, agnostics, and those with no religious preference believe America has a special relationship with God” (Stetzer 2015). Stephen H. Webb (2004) argues that “Americans have never been able to think about their role in the world without relying on some form of the doctrine of providence,” (p. 43) and that “Americans tell themselves that they are joined together not by the past but by the future, and not by blood and soil but by a transcendent moral purpose” (p. 45). Furthermore, the fact that “Both ends of the political spectrum—from President Obama to the Republican Party platform—have touted American exceptionalism” further reinforces the paternalist ideology that to be American is, at least in part, an act of faith, as much as it is an official identity on a passport (Green 2015).

The construction of a conjoined religious and national identity has historically been the norm, and normative to the degree in that it is invisible and perceived as part of the natural order of things. However, both religion and nation are, to use Benedict Anderson’s term, ‘imagined communities,’ in that the affinity of members towards each other is based upon an idea or mental image rather

than actual contact or connection. While these imagined communities do function as established social realities to contend with, it is important to remember that they are forged through narrative, transmitted and granted legitimacy and continuity through collective storytelling and ritual, grounded in physical reality through the marking of textual, historical, and architectural sites, and ultimately legislated through the organization of time and social spaces. They function as both metaphorically tribal and genealogical, while at the same time affirming truth value through universalist claims and aspirations, which obscures their status as ideological constructs subject to challenge and change. Examining them from a distance, however, can be much more revealing, as in the following examples from the nascent nationalism in early medieval Europe, whose echoes can still be heard in the present:

In a seventh-century Frankish oath occurs the phrase, “Christ so loved the Frank. . . .” This might seem an odd idea. Christ’s message had been addressed to all human beings, and not pre-eminently the Franks, a people of whom it is not probable that Christ had ever seen a representative. Yet the Franks had clearly convinced themselves that Christ viewed them with peculiar favor, not accorded to other people. The medieval Church taught that Christendom collectively is the legitimate successor of ancient Israel. But it was already clear, within medieval society, that new claimants to that succession were emerging among particular Christian nations; new chosen peoples, not just in some abstract theological sense but existentially, as peoples actively loved and favored by God in the here and now, above all other peoples. (Panov 2010)

Later, in *The Song of Roland*, which recounts the Battle of Roncevaux in 778, the Frankish soldiers under Charlemagne (whose flowing white beard suggested an iconic reflection of God) did not merely engage in a battle for territory, but instead fought against Muslim Saracens—designated as treacherous, idolatrous, and infidel—who were to be defeated and slaughtered to save *la douce France* for the civilized Christians, loyal to God and king.

It is clear, though, that identification or affiliation is not necessarily a neutral force, and tends to remain unchanged even when overt religious doctrine is rejected to be absorbed as “values” in a secular state. The narratives constructed from religious nationalism which engender imagined communities can be unifying and inspiring, promote and defend important values, forge positive social change, and create contexts where people move beyond individual needs and interests in service to the collective. However, these narratives also have a long shadow. The belief that “God is on our side” has often served as a prelude and a justification for engagement with violence or exclusion, a shift from a patriotic love of country to a nationalistic strategy reliant on identifying, separating from, and overcoming that which is defined as “Other”. Such assertions of identity and affirmations of being “on the right side” of God or history are often so tightly woven into truth claims that questioning them is equated with betrayal. There is ample evidence that weaponization of conflated religious and national loyalties has been deployed across the globe, resulting in discrimination, oppression, incarceration, expulsion, and genocide, even in and at times in conjunction with the contexts of materialist, rationalist, and secularizing discourses of modernity. Furthermore, as documented by Barbara Rieffer (2003), “The stronger the religious influence on the national movement, the greater the likelihood that discrimination and human rights violations will occur” (p. 215). This makes it all the more important to not only examine how power is forged by and funneled through imagined communities, but also to take measures to limit or mitigate possible negative effects, particularly when the discourses of dominate traditions muffle or silence minority ones.

In the U.S., conversations around religion and nationalism have primarily centered on the role of Protestant Christianity, which, despite the official separation of church and state in the Constitution, has been foundational not only to the establishment of the country, but also its development through the 20th century. The inclusion of other religious identities, such as Jewish, Catholic, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Muslim, has not been without conflict, and has often depended on the degree to which adherents could prove that their religious allegiance did not preclude their national one. (This is particularly true for immigrants, who must also sublimate their belonging

to other heritages or countries of origin.) These religious identities, however, share some of the same fundamental tenets: monotheism, the notion of a chosen people, God working divine will through history, and secular law as a reflection (to varying degrees) of divine law, the nation and the traditional patriarchal family as a reflection of God's rule of "His" kingdom. Considerably less attention has been given to how traditions outside of monotheistic contexts contribute to the conversations around religious and national identity. Furthermore, although Protestant Christianity may still be perceived as the dominant religious tradition in the U.S., and although its values and concerns continue to be played out in the media and public discourse, the reality is that it is no longer the undisputed majority. The October 2019 article, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace", from the Pew Research Center cites that:

The religious landscape of the United States continues to change at a rapid clip. In Pew Research Center telephone surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019, 65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade. Meanwhile, the religiously unaffiliated share of the population, consisting of people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular", now stands at 26%, up from 17% in 2009. (Pew Research Center 2019)

Both Protestantism and Catholicism are experiencing losses of population share. Currently, 43% of U.S. adults identify with Protestantism, down from 51% in 2009. And one-in-five adults (20%) are Catholic, down from 23% in 2009. Meanwhile, all subsets of the religiously unaffiliated population—a group also known as religious "nones"—have seen their numbers swell. [...] 17% of Americans now describe their religion as "nothing in particular", up from 12% in 2009. Members of non-Christian religions also have grown modestly as a share of the adult population. [...] Meanwhile, the share of U.S. adults who identify with non-Christian faiths has ticked up slightly, from 5% in 2009 to 7% today. This includes a steady 2% of Americans who are Jewish, along with 1% who are Muslim, 1% who are Buddhist, 1% who are Hindu, and 3% who identify with other faiths [...].

Similarly, on the issue of American exceptionalism, again according to Pew Research: "Americans believe that their country is great, but a majority would not say it is truly exceptional. A majority of the public (53%) says the United States 'is one of the greatest countries in the world, along with some others. Fewer (38%) say that the U.S. 'stands above all other countries in the world' (Heimlich 2011). This loss of faith is only likely to increase, given how many challenges the U.S. is facing both domestically and abroad, politically and economically, and its decreasing status as world power and moral arbitrator.

In light of these trends and changing demographics that continue to favor a more diverse population in terms of race and ethnicity, and somewhat by extension religion and ideology, challenging the myths and myth-making around American religious nationalism seems particularly timely and relevant. Although many of our communities are "imagined," the stories we construct around individual and collective identities and their functions have direct, and sometimes dire, consequences. Since the identities we claim typically determine our motives, methods, and actions in the world, it is all the more important to widen the conversation to include identities and voices that are often considered marginal, but that may have important insights to share.

2. Positioning (Post)modern American(ized) Buddhism

Why focus on Buddhism in America? Although people who specifically identify as Buddhists comprise only about 1% of the population and Buddhism is often perceived to be a form of Eastern spirituality (among many others) and a relatively recent addition to the religious mix in the U.S., the reality is that Buddhism is not marginal, "other," nor "foreign," to Western cultural traditions in general, and America in particular. As a global religion, its origins and development in India and East Asia do not define it, in the same way that Christianity, or any other tradition, cannot be

completely defined by and limited to its points of origin and/or development. Furthermore, Buddhism has been integral to the formation and the evolution of Western culture from its inception. In *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (1997), J. J. Clarke calls attention to the long and often suppressed history of influence: trade routes from the Indus Valley to the Mediterranean, the Indian gymnosophes in Rome, Renaissance travels to the exotic East, Jesuits in China and the influence of their writing on Enlightenment philosophers and deism, the Romantic infatuation with India, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's appropriation of Buddhist ideas, links between Buddhism and positivism, the *japonisme* of the 19th century, and the indebtedness of some of Europe's major writers to Buddhism, including Hugo, Goethe, Baudelaire, Yeats, Tolstoy, the existentialists and the absurdists (Clarke 1997). Less directly obvious influences include phenomenological, existentialist, deconstructionist, and postmodern philosophy, developments in psychotherapy, and accords with neurosciences and physics. Even more to the point, Buddhist influences, in various forms, have been an integral part of the discourses of American-ness, American values, or American cultural and spiritual experience. Alongside the cultural heritage and influences from Europe, Buddhism's history can be traced in the U.S. through Chinese immigrants in the mid-19th century, the writings of the transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, the poetry of Whitman, and Theosophy. Buddhism was formally introduced in 1893, at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, through Buddhist teachers such as Japanese Zen Master Shaku Soen and Anagarika Dharmapala from Sri Lanka. The 1950s and 1960s—following the influential translations and writings of D.T. Suzuki and the postwar wave of Japanese, Korean, and later Tibetan teachers to the U.S.—witnessed Buddhist influences on Beat Poetry, the emergence of counter-culture movements and deep ecology. Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg, among others, have been instrumental in translating Theravadan meditation practices taught by Burmese and Thai teachers into Vipassana (insight meditation), which has in turn deeply informed the currently ubiquitous applications of mindfulness to everyday life.

In the last twenty-five years, a significant body of scholarship has documented how "Buddhist" forms and ideas have always been, and continue to be, an evolving part of "American" culture. Some examples include: *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (1992) by Rick Fields, *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture*, by Stephen Batchelor (1994), *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844–1912* (2000) by Thomas A. Tweed, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (2001) by J. Coleman, *Buddhism in America* (2002 and 2012) by Richard Hughes Seager, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (2014) by Jeff Wilson, *Buddhism Beyond Borders: New Perspectives on Buddhism in the United States* (2015) by Scott A. Mitchell and Natalie E.F. Quli, and *Buddhism in America: Global Religion, Local Contexts* (2016) by Scott A. Mitchell.

Additionally, Buddhism increasingly permeates American cultural discourse and experience. Practice centers for both heritage and non-heritage Buddhists, once rare, are increasingly common. Instead of maybe one Buddhist group in a major city or college town, as was the case in the 1980s, it is now unusual not to find several, and from diverse lineages and traditions. Teachers like Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hahn are revered by many, regardless of religious affiliation. Journals like *Tricycle*, *Buddhadharma*, and *Lion's Roar* (formerly *Shambala Sun*) are readily available in bookstores, as are shelves of publications from both Asian and American Buddhist teachers. Books and audiobooks from Tibetan teacher, Pema Chödrön, and Vipassana teacher, Tara Brach, are widely popular among self-help resources. Mindfulness, which is traditionally taught as just one part of the Noble Eightfold Path, has become a secularized movement. Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program is regularly offered in a variety of secular community settings in healthcare, schools, and the workplace. Meditation and mindfulness, much like yoga, has been decontextualized, adapted, mainstreamed, and commodified to the point where its relationship to source traditions is either often obscured or completely effaced. Vipassana teacher, Trudy Goodman, refers to this as a kind of Trojan horse or "Stealth Buddhism," where the implicit ethics of mindfulness influence the larger culture (Glieg 2019, p. 72). Stephen Batchelor's complete secularization of Buddhism, and the fact that one

does not have to officially or exclusively “become” Buddhist to practice or to be part of a community, makes it easy to incorporate and assimilate Buddhism within other existing religious or ideological structures. It should be no surprise to anyone that Buddhist images and ideas are ubiquitous in popular culture. However, they can also be found in relatively unlikely places, from movies such as “Star Wars”, “Groundhog Day”, and “The Matrix” to the Netflix series, “The Good Place”, or the music of David Bowie, Tina Turner, Leonard Cohen, Philip Glass, or the Beastie Boys.

Moreover, the forms of Buddhism that have taken root in the U.S. are, in some ways, uniquely their own. Just as the Buddhisms of Japan, Thailand, and Tibet are interwoven with their cultural norms and identity, both heritage and non-heritage Buddhist communities in the U.S. reflect the social realities of the process of creating discursive, and physical space where none had been before. Perhaps even more interesting is that so many diverse forms of Buddhism have never been in such immediate direct contact or mutual dialogue with each other. Practitioners are faced with a multiplicity of Buddhisms, each based on the same core teachings, each reflecting the others, and each in the continued process of individuation and innovation in a globalized postmodern context. As David McMahan (2008) explains:

It is, rather, an actual new form of Buddhism that is the result of a process of modernization, westernization, reinterpretation, image-making, revitalization, and reform that has been taking place not only in the West but also in Asian countries for over a century. This new form of Buddhism has been fashioned by modernizing Asian Buddhists and western enthusiasts deeply engaged in creating Buddhist responses to the dominant problems and questions of modernity, such as epistemic uncertainty, religious pluralism, the threat of nihilism, conflicts between science and religion, war, and environmental destruction. (p. 5)

Although Buddhism is both an “insider” religion (since it so well assimilated) as well as an “outsider” religion (not foundational to American culture), it is not linked with any single ethnic group, does not represent any form of national identity or project, and does not compete with other religious traditions. Unlike historical conditions where Buddhism and ruling classes were linked in Asia, or modern nationalist movements in Buddhist countries that arose as a response to colonization and the imposition of Western culture, there is no possibility of a Buddhist nationalist sentiment in the U.S. As such, the pluralistic and hybrid American(ized) forms of Buddhism in the U.S. are uniquely positioned to challenge the more dominant discourses of religion and nationalism and related normative cultural views in the U.S., and, as McMahan (2008, p. 259) notes, could “bring novel conceptual resources to the West and the modern world that might indeed offer new perspectives on some of modernity’s personal, social, political, and environmental ills.”

3. “Original Face”

Belonging, in the Buddhism that the historical Buddha established, was revolutionary. To become part of the community, or sangha, merely required a request and an agreement to abide by the rules established for the well-being and harmony of the group. Caste based on class and color disappeared. Seniority was determined by how long one had belonged to the monastic community. A community of nuns was established as well (albeit later and with more rules and less status), which was perhaps even more extraordinary, in that there was, at the time, no place for women apart from in families, dependent on fathers, husbands, and sons. This radically revised construction of belonging functioned as a rejection of identities and obligations based on family lineage and caste, and the creation of a new one, with the capacity of awakening as a birthright. Besides leaving family, shaving the head, wearing similar saffron robes and receiving a new name, formal belonging was predicated on taking refuge in the three jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. This meant taking refuge in the willingness to let go of an identity based on ego in order to realize one’s own Buddha nature, being willing to follow the path that leads to this realization, and being willing to support and be supported by a community with the same aspirations.

At its core, Buddhism is a radical deconstruction of identity, beyond all personae, social locations, and limits of conceptual thought. This is not meant to serve as a theoretical or philosophical exercise, but rather as a very pragmatic strategy aimed at the elimination of suffering by addressing its root cause: believing in, grasping at, and trying to secure a selfhood that does not fundamentally exist. The Buddha taught that there were three truths about existence: (1) that since everything comes into and goes out of existence due to the causes and conditions which create them, there is no permanence (*anicca*), and (2) thus no separate, intrinsic and essential self-nature (*annata*), and (3) that not understanding this gives rise to all kinds of suffering (*dukkha*). That which we call the self, in a conventional sense, is merely the coming together of five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, impulses, and consciousness, and the sense of self we construct from them is very literally a form of mistaken identity. As one American Buddhist nun describes her spiritual practice:

I had been studying and practicing the Buddha's teaching and thus had spent years trying to deconstruct my identity, to see it as something merely labeled, not as something fixed, not something I truly was. So many of our problems—personal, national, and international—come from clinging to these erroneous, solid identities. Thus in Buddhism, we are not trying to find out who we are but who we aren't. We work to free ourselves from all our erroneous and concrete conceptions about who we are. (Chodron 1999)

The teaching of no-self (*anatman*) does not imply a nihilistic lack or void, as early Western interpretations of Buddhism suggested. Neither does it support a strictly materialist view, as implied by our secularized and scientific culture. Rather, it points to an understanding that the "emptiness" (as expressed through Mahayana thought) of intrinsic selfhood is another way of understanding the fact that all of existence is not only interconnected, but completely intercausal and interdependent, or as McMahan describes: "the world as a vast, interconnected web of interrelated beings—that is, whose identity is not a priori independent of the systems of which they are part of but is inseparable from those systems" (p. 150). The classical illustration of this is the image of Indra's Net in the Flower Ornament (*Avatamsaka*) Sutra, composed in the late third or fourth century CE and foundational to the Hua-Yen School of Chinese Buddhism. The sutra describes an infinite and celestial net which extends across all space, time, and dimensions. At every intersection of the net lies a multifaceted jewel which reflects—and is simultaneously reflected by, *ad infinitum*—all other jewels, and the entirety of the net itself. More familiar to contemporary Buddhists in the U.S. and the West is the explanation offered by Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (2012):

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. We can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. "Interbeing" is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix "inter-" with the verb "to be", we have a new verb, "inter-be".

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. So we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also, so we can say that everything is in here in this sheet of paper.

You cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything coexists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. To be is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is. Sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

If an interconnected/nondual understanding of identity is the warp on which belonging is woven, lineage, which articulates spiritual and social connection, is its weft. On the most basic level, as Tibetan teacher Reginald Ray (2005) explains, organizational lineages of teachers and schools and monasteries, which confer authenticity and legitimacy, have functioned to link practitioners in the present to particular traditions or communities, while transmission lineage follows the symbolic and spiritual ancestries of students and teachers back to the historical Buddha. However, of the greatest importance is what is known in some traditions as the primordial lineage: one's own inherent and intrinsically enlightened *buddhanature*—the same capacity for enlightenment as that of the Buddha himself. These forms of belonging, themselves connected both horizontally and vertically in space and time, reinforce the figuration of selfhood as a net of interconnection rather than a discrete entity. Moreover, the experiential realization of the “emptiness” of the phenomenal self directly informs social engagement and ways of being in the world in the form of profound compassion. Mahayana Buddhism exemplifies this in the figure of the bodhisattva who, hearing the cries of the world, vows to forego the bliss of nirvana to work to liberate and save all sentient beings from suffering. From an ordinary dualistic perspective, this work is unending. However, at the same time, and in the same nondual way that “form is emptiness” and “emptiness is form” in the “Heart Sutra,” that the absolute completely coinheres with the particular, that each jewel in Indra's Net reflects and includes all others, there are no beings to save and no beings that are unsaved. The well-being and the liberation of one implicates the well-being and liberation of all.

While the notion of ourselves as interconnected with others and the rest of life is certainly not foreign to the West, and has been quite integral to discourses within theology, biology, and ecology, the Buddhist approach aims for a much deeper understanding beyond the conceptual and discursive. American Buddhist poet, Jane Hirschfield (1998), points to the possibility of this through an empathic leap into our own experience, not limited by culture or ideology:

‘Show me your face before your parents were born, ‘says the Buddhist koan [. . .]. For Neruda, that face becomes a poetry of all things: a long praise-song to salt in the mines and in the ocean, to a wrist watch ticking the night's darkness like a tiny saw cutting time, to the dead body of a fish in the market. In the light of the poet's abundance of heart and imagination, we remember the threshold is a place at once empty and full. It is on the margins, where one thing meets another [. . .]. (p. 213)

4. Belonging to the World/Acting for All Beings: Towards a Non-Nationalism

How might this Buddhist understanding of self contribute to a conversation on religion and nationalism in the U.S.? The ways in which we construct a sense of selfhood for the individual is the basis for all constructions of identity and belonging in collective contexts, which in turn creates the causes and conditions of social well-being or unrest. As psychologist and Vipassana teacher, Tara Brach (2001), notes, the emphasis on individualism and self-reliance in the West, and particularly in the U.S., is extreme to the point of being almost pathological:

Never in the history of the world has the belief in a separate self been so exaggerated and prevalent as it is now in the twenty-first century in the West. In contrast to Asian and other traditional societies, our distinctive mode of identification is as individuals, without stable pre-existing contexts of belonging to families, communities, tribes or religious groups. Our desperate efforts to enhance and protect this fragile self have caused an unprecedented degree of severed belonging at all levels in our society. In our attempts to dominate the natural world, we have separated ourselves from the Earth. In our efforts to prove and defend ourselves, we have separated ourselves from each other. Managing life from our mental control towers, we have separated ourselves from our bodies and hearts.

The consequences of this can easily be found in social/political polarization, increasing political and economic inequities, rising religious and ethnic separatism, nationalist rhetoric and policies, and environmental and climate crises. In a similar vein, David Loy (2009) underlines the fact that the suffering engendered by the belief in a separate self is fundamentally no different from the suffering caused by identification with imagined communities:

In fact, many of our social problems can be traced back to this deluded sense of collective self, this “wego”, or group ego. It can be defined as one’s own race, class, gender, nation (the primary secular god of the modern world), religion, or some combination thereof. In each case, a collective identity is created by discriminating one’s own group from another. As in the personal ego, the “inside” is opposed to the other “outside”, and this makes conflict inevitable, not just because of competition with other groups, but because the socially constructed nature of group identity means that one’s own group can never feel secure enough. For example, our GNP is not big enough, our nation is not powerful (“secure”) enough, we are not technologically developed enough. And if these are instances of group-lack or group-dukha, our GNP can never be big enough, our military can never be powerful enough, and we can never have enough technology. This means that trying to solve our economic, political, and ecological problems with more of the same is a deluded response. [. . .] If the parallel between individual ego and collective wego holds, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the great social, economic, and ecological crises of our day are, first and foremost, spiritual challenges, which therefore call for a response that is (at least in part) also spiritual.

In his 2019 article in *Tricycle*, Bhikkhu Bodhi, an American Theravada Buddhist monk and scholar, emphasizes the importance of moving away from practices that are the result of collective self-making, such as profit-seeking, environmental plundering, and national projections of power, toward a greater vision of inclusivity and care which reflects Buddhist perspectives of identity and belonging:

To achieve real peace, we need a global commitment to protecting people everywhere from harm and misery. This commitment must be rooted in a universal perspective that enables us to see all people as brothers and sisters, worthy of care and respect regardless of their ethnic, national, and religious identity. As Americans we can’t go on thinking that American lives are more important than the lives of people elsewhere—in Iraq and Afghanistan, in South America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. We can’t think that only the lives of middle-class people count, but not the lives of black youths in Chicago, herdsman in Ethiopia, rice farmers in the Philippines, or factory workers in Bangladesh. Rather, we must regard all people as endowed with intrinsic value, which we must affirm by establishing greater economic, social, and political justice. (Bodhi 2019)

What Buddhist narratives on self can offer to a larger conversation about national identity and purpose in the U.S. is threefold. First, as Saul Tobias (2018) points out: “The similarity between the core principles of nationalist ideology and the qualities of the doctrinally based self are not coincidental,” and that “nationalism provides a secular version of the guarantee of a unitary and immortal soul that both the great Western monotheisms and Hinduism provides” (p. 636). Buddhism, on the other hand, provides an important critical framework that challenges these foundational principles:

With its distinctive account of the self, the *skhandas* and the afflictions, Buddhist thought provides insight into the basic psychological mechanisms that explain the consistency of certain features of nationalisms across various historical and political contexts, as well as the appeal and pervasiveness of nationalism and the intensity of feeling it evokes, even to the point of violence. To use a traditionally Buddhist distinction between *causes* and *conditions*, one might say that modern nationalism has required the coming together of numerous historical conditions, including modern technology and communications, the emergence of mass societies and the displacement of religion in the West. But from a psychological point of view, the enduring causes of modern nationalism lie in what Buddhism understands to be the very engine of our conditioned existence, namely the relentless process of *ahaṅkāra* or self-making. (Tobias 2018, pp. 640–41)

This approach has the added benefit of clarifying an apparent paradox within the usual paradigms of nationalism used in contemporary scholarship in the West:

Viewing the nation through the lens of Buddhist psychology therefore helps to resolve one of the principle difficulties with the dominant modernist account of nationalism in Western political theory: how to reconcile an insistence on the ‘imagined’ or ‘ideological’, in other words, purely conventional nature of the nation, with the intensity of feeling and commitment that this imputed phenomenon evokes. (Tobias 2018, p. 637)

One might describe the Buddhist approach as a “middle way” between these two positions, a non-nationalist stance that recognizes the real-world effects on a conventional level while at the same time denying any essentialized status to fictitious collective selfhoods. Secondly, the presence of Buddhist perspectives in American culture contributes to the possibility of a re-examination and a dialogue regarding the nature of individualism, self-reliance, and exceptionalism, as well as how they manifest and create specific effects in collective and systemic contexts. Individual, familial, group, tribal, or national agency do not exist in any absolute or neutral way, but as a function of privilege and access to resources, which, in any healthy pluralistic and democratic society or in the interest of global politics, should be a matter of shared concern. Thirdly, a Buddhist perspective which holds that all fixed identity positions, both individual and collective, are fundamentally mistaken assumptions, has the potential to significantly lessen ideological, emotional, and tribal attachments to them. In turn, this lessens the possibility of division and conflict and opens a space for a reconstructed sense of belonging based on interconnectedness in its widest sense, both human and planetary.

How have the “new” Americanized forms of Buddhism in the U.S. contributed to a more “non-nationalist” vision of collective identity and belonging? In an article describing her (then forthcoming) book, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (2019), Anne Glieg (2018) highlights what she calls “three emerging turns, or sensibilities, within meditation-based convert Buddhism: critical, contextual, and collective.” She notes that:

First-generation practitioners tended to be very celebratory of “American Buddhism,” enthusing that they were creating new, more modern, and “essential” forms of Buddhism that were nonhierarchical, gender-egalitarian, and free of the cultural and religious “baggage” of their Asian predecessors. While the modernization and secularization of Buddhism certainly continues, there is now much more discussion about the problems and pitfalls of these processes, with some exposing the Western ethnocentrism that has operated behind the “essential” versus “cultural” distinction.

She describes the contextual turn as the increased awareness of how forms of Buddhism evolve and are expressed according to surrounding cultural contexts and social locations and conditionings, including around issues of power, globalization, economics, privilege, and marginalization. The collective turn challenges individualism in favor of embracing inclusivity and a sense of “collective awakening” to systemic forms of suffering due to sexism, racism, and economic and environmental

exploitation. Importantly, Glied finds, “With the ‘three turns,’ previously excluded, neglected, or entirely new conversations—around critical race theory, postcolonial thought, and cultural studies—are shaping the dialogue of Buddhist modernism.” It is precisely this syncretic approach that is a hallmark of Buddhism in America. Christopher S. Queen (2000), a foremost scholar of engaged Buddhism, writes that: “the direction of contemporary Buddhism, like that of other ancient faith traditions, has been deeply influenced both by the magnitude of social suffering in the world today, and by the globalization of cultural values and perspectives we associated with the Western cultural tradition, especially the notions of human rights, economic justice, political due process, and social progress” (p. 23). It is no longer enough, in many Buddhist contexts in the U.S., to be satisfied with a practice or a community that limits itself to “time on the meditation cushion” without addressing how the development of wisdom and compassion can, and should, manifest not only in one’s daily life, but also in communal and systemic ways for the well-being of those outside one’s direct circle:

As we begin to wake up and realize that we are not separate from each other, nor from this wondrous earth, we realize that the ways we live together and relate to the earth need to be reconstructed too. That means not only social engagement as individuals helping other individuals, but finding ways to address the problematic economic and political structures that are deeply implicated in the eco-crisis and the social justice issues that confront us today. Ultimately the paths of personal transformation and social transformation are not really separate from each other. Engagement in the world is how our original awakening blossoms, and how contemplative practices such as meditation ground our activism, transforming it into a spiritual path. (Loy 2019, p. 5)

Inspired by the nonviolence of Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, the Thiền Buddhist teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh coined the term, “engaged Buddhism,” to describe the efforts he and the Buddhist community made in response to the suffering that surrounded them during the Vietnam War. Since then, it has developed into a movement within American Buddhism and has taken multiple forms and directions. Practices of socially engaged Buddhism in the U.S. have included environmental and antinuclear activism, the promotion of sustainable food production and permaculture, criminal justice reform and prison ministries, hospice projects for AIDS patients, and most recently the ecodharma movement which applies Buddhist teachings and resources to climate activism. Engaged Buddhism has also included the founding of organizations such as the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and Zen Peacemakers, holding conferences on decolonizing the dharma, applying Buddhist approaches to gender and racial discrimination, and incisive self-examinations of power and privilege within Buddhist communities themselves. Ultimately, what the contemporary globalized (post)modern forms of American Buddhism offer to conversations regarding national identity and belonging is an affirmation of American values of inclusivity and mutuality while at the same time calling into question the limitations of a collective ego and self-congratulatory stories of infallibility, chosen-ness, and exceptionalism that can, and have, been used to obscure or efface some of the very real failings whose legacies still pose formidable challenges as the U.S. moves into the next decade of the 21st century.

5. Whose Dharma?

Sitting on a cushion on a chilly morning, in a temple near the Daniel Boone National Forest, the question of what it means to exist in the current contexts of political polarization and rising nationalism, gun violence and mass shootings, extreme economic inequities, and mass extinction and climate crisis, as an American, is not a philosophical question. I understand that the sense of self that I use to navigate the world does not mean that I am separate or that my existence isn’t bound up with the rest of the world. My community is not imagined. It is not an ideological affinity or an emotional sense of belonging, but a direct and tangible sense of connection. My community is this rock, that tree, these birds, those clouds, the people and the deer I pass on the highway, the world that I hear about on the radio, everyone in the gas station and grocery store, and everyone in my home. The word,

dharma, in a Buddhist context, means the teachings of liberation from greed, hatred, and ignorance and the realization of profound interconnectedness. However, in its original context within Hinduism, it also means “path” or “duty.” As a participant in the “American project” of democracy in a nation forged with the rhetoric and intention of freedom—but built to a large degree on slave and immigrant labor on lands taken from Native populations that were killed or forced to move, that granted women the vote only 100 years ago and passed the Civil Rights Act just 25 years ago, that is experiencing crises in healthcare, education and immigration, and that is not facing the devastating challenges of ecological crisis and climate change—my understanding of interconnection means that it is not only my responsibility to look at the history and the present directly and see what is, but also to empathize and “be with” in order to effectively do the work that needs to be done for the “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” for us all. From a Buddhist perspective, there is no divine being dictating the course of American history from the blueprint of a providential plan from above. However, there is the direct and active agency of individuals and communities paying attention to the present moment, their place in it, and with each other. An understanding of a de-essentialized or non-nationalist “nationalism” is not a play on words, mystic mumbo-jumbo, or a philosophical sleight-of-hand. It is a sense of connection and shared purpose, not in an abstract notion congealed into a collective identity, but in the mutuality of our well-being and the well-being of the natural world that supports us and from which we are not separate. This inclusive and pluralistic approach fully accords with the tenets and values of Christianity, Judaism, Islam and other religions—particularly around questions of human equality, social justice and care of the earth, as well as the foundational aspirations of the U.S. As Teigan Dan Leighton (2019) affirms in “American Buddhist Values and the Practice of Enlightened Patriotism” in the the journal of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship:

The Buddhist ideal of universal awakening is supported by the American democratic principles of liberty and justice for all, equal justice under the law, and the unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And these American ideals are enhanced, in turn, by the Buddhist ideal: May all beings be happy. There can be no true peace and justice, or happiness, which is not somehow shared with all people.

It also serves as a call to return to the “*E pluribus unum*” vision of our founders—but in the fullest way possible. In her entry in *It occurs to me that I am America: New Stories and Art*, Alice Walker (2018, p. 356), a longtime student of Buddhism (who refuses to identify with the label of Buddhist), writes: “Together we move forward. [...] We are here now. In this scary, and to some quite new and never-imagined place. What do we do with our fear? Do we turn on others, or towards others? Do we share our awakening, or only our despair? The choice is ours.”

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