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The Individual in Relation to the Sangha in American Buddhism: An Examination of “Privatized Religion”

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In his celebrated book *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert Putnam noted the increased level in the phenomenon of “privatized religion” within the previous thirty-five years. Many of the Baby Boomer generation left churches in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Some sought out new religious movements and religious therapies, but most simply “dropped out” of organized religion altogether. He cites Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, specialists in American religion, who describe the outcome of this trend in American religious behavior: “[The consequence was a] tendency toward highly individualized religious psychology without the benefits of strong supportive attachments to believing communities. A major impetus in this direction in the post-1960s was the thrust toward greater personal fulfillment and quest for the ideal self. . . . In this climate of expressive individualism, religion tends to become “privatized,” or anchored in the personal realms.”¹ Putnam observes that although privatized religion may be “morally compelling and psychologically fulfilling,” it involves less social capital than environments in which individuals are connected to other individuals in shared faith commitment.

Interestingly, American Buddhism may be one of the beneficiaries of this trend, for the recent growth of Buddhism in the United States is partly attributable to the climate of “privatized” religion. Nowhere is this symbolized more than by the so-called Nightstand Buddhists.²

The Nightstand Buddhists derive their name from their practice of placing a Buddhist meditation book on the nightstand after reading it before they go to sleep. They get up the next morning and practice to the best of their ability the meditation they had read about the night before. Further, they may frequently attend lectures at the local university and visit a Buddhist center’s webpage or participate in an online Buddhist discussion group. And if we were to visit them, we might find their homes decorated with Buddhist artifacts.

But these Nightstand Buddhists do not show up in any statistics on the

American Buddhist population because they would not identify themselves as Buddhists. According to Thomas Tweed, who coined the term Nightstand Buddhists, “Sympathizers (= Nightstand Buddhists) are those who have some sympathy for Buddhism but do not embrace it exclusively or fully. When asked, they would *not* identify themselves as Buddhists. They would say they are Methodists, or Jewish, or unaffiliated.”³ However, they have been an important part of the story of Buddhism in America from its beginning and continue to be so today.

Among the three million Buddhists currently estimated to be in the United States, I believe there are Buddhists who exhibit many of the same characteristics as the Nightstand Buddhists. And this number is significant, particularly among those converts to Buddhism whose main practice is meditation. This group of convert Buddhists is one segment of the larger Buddhist community in the United States, which I have categorized into four groups.⁴

1. New Asian American Buddhists (those who have mostly arrived in the United States since the 1960s: Vietnamese, Thai, Korean, Cambodian, Myanmar, Laotian, and Sri Lankan).
2. Old-line Asian American Buddhists (those who were established before World War II: Chinese and Japanese).
3. Convert Buddhists whose main practice is meditation (predominately Euro-Americans practicing in the Zen, Vipassanā, and Tibetan traditions).
4. Convert Buddhists whose main practice is chanting (Sōkagakkai International–USA, a sizable percentage of whom are African and Hispanic Americans).

In this paper, I wish to focus on a Jōdo Shinshū temple from the second group (old-line Asian American Buddhists) and on several centers collectively that belong to the Zen, Vipassanā, and Tibetan traditions from the third group (convert Buddhists whose main practice is meditation), looking at the manner in which individuals relate to their respective institutions and traditions, with special attention given to the phenomenon of “privatized religion.”

For purposes of this paper, my definition of “privatized religion” is based on the observation of Roof and McKinney, cited above, as “a tendency for individuals (1) to emphasize practicing at home over religious centers, and (2) to value the subjective and the inward.” The homebound orientation is connected to the tendency to deemphasize the importance of religious institutions and the traditions they represent. The subjective and inward features reflect the quest for personal fulfillment that focuses, in the words of Wade Clark Roof, “very much upon the person and his or her own inner life and feelings.”⁵

SOUTHERN ALAMEDA COUNTY BUDDHIST CHURCH: BACKGROUND

The Jōdo Shinshū group to be discussed is the Southern Alameda County Buddhist Church, or commonly referred to by its members and others by its initialism, SACBC. SACBC holds a special place in my heart, for I served as its resident priest (*jūshoku*) for a three-year period from 1995 to 1998. It is one of the “newer” temples of the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA), having been founded in 1962. The approximately fifty families who founded the temple were longtime residents of the then largely agricultural area of Alameda County. Most were involved in agriculture or worked in the salt fields along the San Francisco Bay.

Today, southern Alameda County has been transformed into a bustling residential and commercial region in tandem with the explosive growth of the neighboring areas of San Jose and the Silicon Valley. This transformation is evident in the neighborhood of the temple; its five-acre site is located on a major thoroughfare and surrounded by residential homes and high-tech companies. The community and the entire region are ethnically diverse, with virtually every group in the United States well represented.

The founding members of the temple were all Japanese American, motivated to establish a religious community to serve their common religious, cultural, and social needs. This made them no different from many other immigrant communities in American history, but I believe the unique internment experience during World War II led them to emphasize the social and cultural dimension to a greater degree than most other groups. This fact is epitomized in what one of the elderly founding members of the temple once said to me, “When we bought this property back then, the others around here didn’t think we Japs could do anything with it, but we built a heck of a temple and proved them all wrong!” He was proud of the facilities, which included a parsonage, an elegant Buddha Hall, and especially the huge gymnasium, an envy of many in the larger community who have sought to rent it for their activities. Within the past year, it has witnessed the addition of a \$2.2 million senior home. The combative tone in the words of the elderly founding member is more an exception than the rule among his peers, but his sentiment underscores the strong ethnic identity that has served as a galvanizing force of SACBC, often in competition with that of the Buddhist religion.

The membership in 1998 (the last year for which an accurate figure is available) was 329 adult individuals as compared to the original membership of fifty families in 1962. Although this does not constitute phenomenal growth—particularly when we consider its location within a region in which population has soared—it is growth, nevertheless.

What is of interest is the change in the ethnic makeup of the membership, which was 100 percent Japanese American in the beginning. Of the 329 members in 1998, fifty individuals or 15 percent were non-Japanese Americans. Of

the fifty, twenty-five were Caucasian and twenty-five were of Asian ancestry other than Japanese.⁶

NONRELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES AT THE TEMPLE

The members of SACBC have the opportunity to participate in a wide range of activities, which can be divided largely into religious and nonreligious categories. Let me first describe the nonreligious activities.

The annual calendar is dotted with "established" events throughout the year. The major fund-raising events, which, interestingly enough, cater mostly to nontemple clientele from the larger community, include a luau on the last weekend of January, a crab feed in September, bingo every Friday night throughout the year, and the summer festival on the second weekend in July.

Among them, it is the summer festival and bazaar that has become an institution of sorts in the larger community, having been listed as one of the official attractions on the annual calendar for Union City and the neighboring city of Fremont. Several thousand people attend the festival for the wide assortment of game booths, cultural exhibits such as displays of bonsai and of flower arrangements, reasonably priced flowers and vegetables, and Japanese cuisine from *tempura* to *teriyaki* burgers.

Virtually every SACBC member participates, even those who may never come to another temple event the rest of the year. I found it somewhat amusing to see some individuals to be so proudly attached to their assigned tasks, which some have done for years with dedicated but uncompromising fervor. So, in their opinion, only they and no one else could do the *teriyaki* burger or the *chow mein* just right! As the resident priest, I was grateful for their fervor but glad I did not have to work alongside them.

The preparation for the festival picks up full steam from mid June until the second weekend in July, and offers temple members an opportunity to work together and socialize in ways that are not possible during other temple functions. Moreover, they share a common goal of carrying out a vital fund-raiser that accounts for a significant percentage of the annual temple income. So, contributing one's time and energy at the summer festival, along with paying membership dues, is not only a basic obligation but also the best indicator of one's membership in the *sangha*.

RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES AT THE TEMPLE

The temple's religious activities involve a conscious effort to learn Buddhist teachings or to participate in the spiritual expressions of the tradition. In the case of SACBC, these expressions take the form of Sunday services, study classes, and memorial services.

Memorial services requested by the family of the deceased during the prescribed periods after the date of death start with the forty-ninth-day service and

go on to the one-, three-, seven-, thirteen-, seventeen-, twenty-three-, twenty-seven-, thirty-three-, and fifty-year memorial services. As would be expected, fewer families observe the higher numbered memorial services, particularly beyond the twenty-fifth year. And the younger generation is less prone to observe them, because these services hold less meaning for younger people than for their parents and grandparents. It is interesting to note that for half of these families, memorial services were the only religious activities they participated in, for they rarely attended the temple’s Sunday services and never the study classes. This, in my view, reveals their interest in the culture of ancestor veneration common in Asia but not necessarily in Buddhism, which, after all, were originally unrelated during the time of the Buddha.

Study classes are normally held on weekday evenings and attract twenty-five or so members. These classes, as one would expect, are attended by the most highly motivated seekers within the sangha, and among them is a disproportionately large number of converts to Buddhism.

Most of the study class attendees also attend the Sunday morning service called the Dharma Family Service. As it best symbolizes the religious activities of the temple, I would like to describe it in greater detail. The service begins at 9:30 AM, lasts about one hour, and is attended by children and adults. Attendance averages about seventy-five on a normal Sunday, but doubles in size at special major services such as the celebration of the Buddha’s and Shinran’s birthdays. The twenty or so children also attend classes according to their grade level after the service as students of dharma school. A typical order of service is as follows:

- Tolling of the bell to signify the beginning of the service in the Buddha Hall
- Greetings by the chairperson of the service
- Quiet sitting or “meditation” (five minutes)
- Sutra chanting of verse sections from a Pure Land sutra or Shinran’s writing (ten minutes)
- Gatha or song
- Recitation of the “Three Treasures” or “Golden Chain”
- Dharma talk by the resident priest or guest speaker (twenty to thirty minutes)
- Voluntary sharing of experiences and insights by anyone in attendance
- Another gatha or song
- Announcements of temple activities
- Individual offering of incense by those lining up at the front of the Buddha Hall

The centerpiece of the service is the dharma talk, in which the speaker generally takes up basic Buddhist principles such as impermanence and interdependence, illustrating those principles with parables from the scriptures as helpful guidelines in daily life. Jōdo Shinshū has long stressed the importance of such

dharma talks almost as a form of spiritual “practice” called “listening to the dharma” (*monpō* or *chōmon*).

In observing the service, one cannot help but notice its highly communal character, though this may be expected of any congregational worship format, Buddhist or Christian. Everyone hears the same dharma talk, does the quiet sitting or meditation together, chants in unison, sings together, and recites the sacred readings together. The only exception might be the offering of incense at the end of the service, which the attendees do on their own and in their own style.

A strong sense of community infuses the entire service, which is not too surprising when we consider that the phrase *ondōbō ondōgyō*, meaning “companions and cotravelers,” has long described the nature of the Jōdo Shinshū sangha. As further evidence of this communal outlook, I wish to cite the “Golden Chain,” which was composed in Hawai‘i, not in Japan, and is a favorite among the readings for many Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists in America, especially the young.

I am a link in Amida’s Golden Chain of love that stretches around the world. I
will keep my link bright and strong.
I will be kind and gentle to every living thing and protect all who are weaker
than myself.
I will think pure and beautiful thoughts, say pure and beautiful words, and do
pure and beautiful deeds, knowing that on what I do now depends not only
my happiness or unhappiness, but also that of others.
May every link in Amida’s golden chain of love become bright and strong, and
may we all attain perfect peace.

It is, then, safe to conclude that the religious activities as exemplified by the Dharma Family Service on Sundays are characterized by strong communal and public features. Moreover, the bulk of members’ religious activities are conducted at the temple, and, in my estimation, far less goes on when away from the temple, with the exception of the practice of expressing gratitude before and after meals. While some of the senior members make offerings or interact spiritually with their home shrine (*butsudan*), hardly anyone I knew engaged in sutra chanting at home on a consistent basis.

These observations applied to about 25 percent of the members who attended Dharma Family Service on a regular basis, which means that the majority of the members participated in even fewer religious activities. For the majority of the members, their sense of membership, besides their financial support, is defined by their participation at the temple, such as in the summer festival, and their choice of activities is quite selective. Most select only one or two activities that interest them, while neglecting others. Thus, at the risk of being too flippant, I have in the past described their involvement by categorizing them into “bazaar Buddhists,” “basketball Buddhists,” “board of director Buddhists,” “bingo Buddhists,” and “Buddhist Buddhists,” with the last one being those most interested in learning and practicing the teachings.

So, what emerges here is a portrait of a Jōdo Shinshū sangha in which its members are motivated by a diverse set of reasons. However, the one common quality that we find among the members, both the religious and the nonreligious, is the importance of going to the temple and participating in activities of their choosing. And it is their physical participation at the temple that provides them with a sense of identity and meaning as members of SACBC and as Buddhists.

CONVERT BUDDHIST COMMUNITIES

In examining the “converts whose main practice is meditation” (the third group in my categorization of American Buddhists), I have relied heavily on a study reported by James Coleman⁷ in 1999, supplemented by my personal observations as a participant in some of this group’s activities.

Coleman’s study is based on a questionnaire survey gathered from seven groups, of which two are Zen, two Tibetan, two Vipassanā, and one eclectic. The two Zen groups were the Berkeley Zen Center in California and Rochester Zen Center in New York. The two Tibetan groups were Karma Dzung in Boulder, Colorado, and the Dzogchen Foundation centered in Boston. The two Vipassanā groups were the Spirit Rock Meditation Center in California and the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts. Coleman also selected the White Heron Sangha in San Luis Obispo, California, an eclectic group without a clear denominational affiliation.

Coleman received back a total of 359 surveys from the respondents from the seven groups. Because the groups were reluctant to share their mailing lists, the questionnaires were distributed by group officials at their meetings and gatherings. The exception was the Rochester Zen Center, which sent the survey to its entire mailing list along with a general mailing. Because six of the groups handed the survey to those attending their activities, it was expected that the respondents would likely be more dedicated and active than the average. This methodology would, thus, weed out the more apathetic and inactive members, which was not the case with SACBC.

BACKGROUND OF THE RESPONDENTS

Fifty-seven percent of the respondents were women; 43 percent were men. Most of the respondents ranged in age from late thirties to early fifties. The youngest was nineteen, the oldest was seventy-eight, and the mean age was forty-six. Ethnically, the respondents were overwhelmingly white. Only about 10 percent identified themselves as Asian, black, or Hispanic. Concerning their families’ religious backgrounds, 31 percent were Protestant, 25 percent Roman Catholic, 16.5 percent Jewish, 6 percent nonreligious, 2 percent Buddhist, and 19 percent other or no response. This confirms the often-made observations that those of Jewish backgrounds are proportionally more attracted to Buddhism than any

other group of Americans. Catholics are quite well represented proportionate to their number; the Protestants are not.⁸

Regarding economic class, Coleman observes that the respondents were mostly middle and upper-middle class, with incomes higher than the national average. However, what clearly stood out the most was the respondents' extraordinarily high educational background. For example, only one out of the 353 who responded to the question about education level had not graduated from high school. A little fewer than 5 percent were high school graduates who did not go on to college. Eleven percent had some college experience, and 32 percent were college graduates. The most surprising finding of all was that 51 percent had advanced degrees.

Regarding their political affiliation, an overwhelming 60 percent were Democrats, while only 2.5 percent identified as Republicans. Even the number of Green Party members surpassed the Republicans, with 9.9 percent.

CONVERT AMERICAN BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

When asked how they became involved in Buddhism, the majority reported that it was through reading books. The other commonly given response was hearing about Buddhism from friends.

In another set of questions regarding the role of psychedelic drugs and martial arts in getting them to take interest in Buddhism, 66 percent had taken psychedelic drugs, definitely a much higher rate than in the general population. And of these, half indicated that use of drugs played some role in attracting them to Buddhism. In contrast, martial arts played a lesser role, for 34 percent had practiced some form of martial arts, but only one-third of those said their involvement was a factor in helping them to take interest in Buddhism.

In a related question in probing the reasons for their attraction to Buddhism, Coleman asked the degree of agreement or disagreement with three statements: (1) "I became involved in Buddhism in order to help deal with my personal problems"; (2) "I became involved in Buddhism because of a desire for spiritual fulfillment"; and (3) "I became involved in Buddhism because I was attracted to the people I met who were involved with it." The response revealed that the desire for spiritual fulfillment was by far the most important reason, with 53.5 percent who "strongly agreed" with it. It was followed by a desire to deal with personal problems, with 20.6 percent strongly agreeing. Interpersonal attraction was the least motivating factor, with only 12 percent strongly agreeing.

This desire for personal spiritual fulfillment as their principal attraction to Buddhism was reinforced by the finding that the respondents valued meditation over the social dimension of Buddhist practice. When asked to rank the relative importance of meditation, services and ceremonies, and social relations with other members of the group, more than 90 percent ranked meditation first. Social relations generally came in second, while services and ceremonies were least valued.

With meditation being highly valued, it was not surprising to find that most respondents maintained a regular meditation schedule. Of the 359 respondents, only ten meditated less than once a week. A typical respondent carried out sitting meditation almost every day for a mean of forty minutes. Of these, nearly 90 percent occasionally supplemented their sitting meditation with walking meditation.

The kinds of meditation practiced derived from the respondents' respective Asian Buddhist root traditions, and included such methods as visualization and koan practice. However, for the majority of the meditators their primary method was one of focusing awareness on their breath, either by counting breaths or paying close attention to them.

The majority in this group meditated at home, but also meditated with other members of their group at their centers, rented halls, or private homes. More than 90 percent of them had also attended intensive meditation retreats. Their participation in retreats averaged a little more than one retreat a year, with these retreats lasting one to ten days.

Respondents also attended some form of religious service at a surprisingly high rate of nine times per month. This amounts to about two services per week. Coleman, however, does not describe the kind of services or whether they were held at the various Buddhist centers, held in people's homes, or conducted in conjunction with meditation sessions.

Finally, reading plays an important role. Sixty-three percent indicated that they "frequently" read books or articles relating to Buddhism, and 32 percent "occasionally" read such material. In contrast, only 5 percent answered "rarely," and a mere 1 percent never read any Buddhist-related material.

THE FEATURES OF PRIVATIZED RELIGION

Because a typical respondent meditated for about forty minutes almost every day, respondents' homes served as the locus of a significant amount of spiritual practice. Also, because most tended to do quite a lot of reading on Buddhism, we can assume that most of this reading was done outside of Buddhist centers, most probably at home. This, then, confirms one of the features of privatized religion: the tendency to carry out practices at home rather than at religious centers.

However, this does not mean that these convert Buddhists completely fit the Nightstand Buddhist model. Coleman found that their attendance at their centers for meditation sessions and meditation retreats reflected a higher frequency of participation in religious services than was expected. So, it is not the case that they ignored their centers. Nevertheless, these respondents had a far looser relationship to their centers than SACBC members had to their temple. For example, for this group often there were no clearly defined criteria for institutional membership or monthly or annual dues. Those interested simply signed up for retreats, classes, or activities of their choice, perhaps more like students at an adult school.

This characteristic was supported by my observations at one-day retreats I attended during the month of August 2006 at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center, a cousin organization to the Berkeley Zen Center, one of the groups included in the survey. In speaking to some of the eighty-four participants at the Spirit Rock retreat, I did not get the sense that they saw themselves as “members” of Spirit Rock in the traditional sense that SACBC members experienced membership; they had attended one or a few retreats over the past several years and were connected to the center by being on the mailing list, but that was the extent of their involvement.

The second of two characteristics of privatized religion is the importance of inner, subjective experience. In Coleman’s survey, this was evidenced in respondents’ clear interest in spiritual fulfillment as their reason for being attracted to Buddhism and in their preference for meditation over religious social relations and ceremonies. I believe this high evaluation of personal experience over institutional allegiance can be seen in the frequent citations in American Buddhist literature of those scriptural passages that support that theme. For example, Norman Fischer, a prominent Zen teacher and poet, writes, “In texts like the *Parinirvana Sutra* and the *Kalama Sutra*, we find the Buddha encouraging his disciples to find their own way to the teachings, not to trust charismatic teachers, tradition, custom unless what is presented has been verified by personal experience.”⁹

The *Parinirvana Sutra* passage states, “Make yourself the light and make the Dharma the light,” the famous admonition uttered by the Buddha on his deathbed. And the *Kalama Sutra* says:

It is proper for you, Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in you about what is doubtful. Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another’s seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, ‘The monk is our teacher.’ Kalamas, when you yourselves know: ‘These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,’ abandon them.

These two passages place a premium on personal experience and a healthy skepticism of institutional authority.

This privatization tendency has not been without criticism by those who feel that it privileges the individual over the tradition, thus helping to undermine Buddhist authenticity. Buddhism, these critics assert, has long respected the role of the tradition, where the tradition transformed the individual. However, in the United States we now have a situation in which the individual is transforming the tradition.

Not only have individuals loosened commitment to the sangha that usually

supports and is an integral part of the tradition, but they have begun to be eclectic by picking and rejecting certain practices according to their preferences. Gil Fronsdal, a well-known Vipassanā teacher, has voiced his concern that the Vipassanā groups in the United States have embraced only meditation while rejecting wholesale other important dimensions of the rich Theravada tradition such as its ceremonies and its worldview.¹⁰

In the same vein, one can make the argument that one of the outcomes of privatized religion is “multiple allegiances,” where an individual is affiliated with more than one tradition. In such a case, it can be argued that the individual rather than the tradition becomes the primary standard for determining what is correct and important. Ironically, Gil Fronsdal himself has had more than one Buddhist affiliation: he is a Vipassanā teacher affiliated with Spirit Rock but was also ordained and is certified as a teacher with the lineage of the San Francisco Zen Center. He is not alone among many American Buddhist teachers.¹¹

A QUESTION OF BUDDHIST AUTHENTICITY

The critical question that needs to be asked is whether these subjective characteristics of privatized religion undermine Buddhist authenticity. Until further investigation yields a clearer answer, one possible answer is that spiritual awakening is ultimately deeply personal, as can be witnessed in the lives of Shakyamuni and others, both luminaries and ordinary people, throughout Buddhist history. According to this view, Buddhist institutions were intended to facilitate individual fulfillment.

On the other hand, our question can be answered by seeing that the community of sangha, indeed, constitutes one of the Triple Jewels (Buddha, dharma, and sangha) of a Buddhist practitioner’s life. As such, the community has played a vital role in transmitting Buddhist authenticity throughout Buddhist history. And perhaps SACBC exemplifies this emphasis.

Because this paper is not meant to proffer a definitive answer to this question, I’d like instead to close with a heartwarming Jōdo Shinshū story from premodern Japan that I hope will serve to warm our hearts as well as stimulate us to ponder our question.

Once upon a time in a small village, there were two Buddhist temples, one monastic and the other Jōdo Shinshū. The tiny village of some sixty families could no longer afford to support both temples. The villagers had to choose one and abandon the other. They decided to hold a contest to see which of the two temple heads, the monk or the Jōdo Shinshū priest, was more fit to be their spiritual leader.

When the day of the contest came, a large group of villagers gathered in the village plaza where they had set up a large vat of boiling water. They asked the two, “What will you do with this?”

The monk stepped forward first. He was tall and well built as a result of the long, hard training required by his school. He stepped up to the vat with confi-

dence and slowly lowered himself into the boiling water. The head-shaven monk recited the sacred mantras and performed *mudra* (ritual hand gestures) and focused his mind. It was an impressive sight. The boiling water did not seem to bother the monk at all as he calmly dipped all the way in until his shoulders were completely immersed. The villagers looked on in awe as the monk stepped out of the cauldron, without any visible signs of having been harmed.

Now it was the Jōdo Shinshū priest's turn. He turned to the villagers and asked them to bring several large wooden tubs filled halfway with cold water. The villagers thought this was a strange request, but they did as he asked. As the tubs arrived, the Shinshū priest began pouring hot water from the vat into the tubs to make them lukewarm. He then said, "This is perfect for a hot-tub dip! But it's a waste for me to enjoy this all by myself. Won't you all join me and enjoy this tub?" Many of the villagers did join the Shinshū priest. As the villagers began to appreciate the warm water and the camaraderie, some even began to sing! They had a great time!

The villagers were impressed with the monk's extraordinary abilities, but wondered what would happen after he died. His personal accomplishments and training would be of little use once he was gone. On the other hand, the Jōdo Shinshū priest showed no special abilities. He seemed like one of them, yet he lived by the ideals of sharing, humility, and finding joy in doing ordinary things. This teaching could be practiced by every villager and would live on beyond the priest's lifetime.

So the villagers decided in favor of . . .

Well, I shall leave the conclusion to your imagination, as we continue to ponder the question of Buddhist authenticity within the context of the relationship of the individual to the sangha.

NOTES

1. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (Simon and Schuster: 2000), pp. 73–74. He cites Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, pp. 18–19, 7–8, 32–33.

2. Thomas Tweed, "Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures: Sympathizers, Adherents, and the Study of Religion," in Duncan Williams and Christopher Queen, eds., *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (Curzon Press, 1999), p. 74.

3. *Ibid.*, 74.

4. No category is perfect, and this is no exception in that there are, for example, a growing number of non-Asian Americans, including priests, who belong to institutions of the first two groups. Conversely, Asian Americans are found, though smaller in numbers, in the third group (Zen, Vipassanā, and Tibetan centers) and, in larger number, in the fourth, the SGI.

5. Wade Clark Roof, "Religious Kaleidoscope: American Religion in the 1990s," *Temenos* 32 (1996): 183–193. Seen in its digital format at <http://www.abo.fi/comprel/temenos/temen032/roof.htm>, p. 3.

6. The figures are based on the 1998 temple directory and personal knowledge of the members involved. Among the twenty-five Caucasian members, ten had Japanese

spouses, whereas nine of the Asian American members had Japanese spouses. The breakdown of the Asian American members was nineteen Chinese (seven with Japanese spouses), one Korean (with a Japanese spouse), two Filipinos (none with a Japanese spouse), one Vietnamese (with a Japanese spouse), and two Asian Indian (none with a Japanese spouse).

7. James William Coleman, “The New Buddhism: Some Empirical Findings,” in Williams and Queen, *American Buddhism*, pp. 91–99.

8. As of 1996, the U.S. Protestant population was 56 percent, the Catholic population was 28–29 percent, and the Jewish population was 3–4 percent. See Roof, “Religious Kaleidoscope,” pp. 1–2 (in the digital format).

9. Norman Fischer, “Revealing a World of Bliss.” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 16, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 71.

10. Gil Fronsdal, “The Treasures of the Theravāda.” *Inquiring Mind* 12, no. 1 (Fall 1995): 14–15.

11. For example, of the twenty current teachers at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, eight have studied and are certified to teach in traditions other than Vipassanā.