

# Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

By Gil Fronsdal

from Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, *THE FACES OF BUDDHISM IN AMERICA*,  
Chapter 9, Copyright 1998, The Regents of the University of California  
with the permission of the University of California Press

Among the various and varied Buddhist meditative disciplines taught in the United States. Insight Meditation, or *vipassana*, has been, since the early 1980s, one of the fastest growing in popularity. To a great extent this can be attributed to the practice being offered independent of much of its traditional Theravada Buddhist religious context. This autonomy has allowed the American *vipassana* teachers and students to adapt and present the meditation practice in forms and language that are much more thoroughly Westernized than most other forms of Buddhism in America. As the number of people participating in the mindfulness practices of Insight Meditation has increased, a loose-knit lay Buddhist movement, uniquely Western, that is sometimes known as the "*vipassana* movement," has evolved. With minimal remaining connection to Theravada Buddhism, the movement speaks of "*vipassana* students and teachers," "*vipassana* centers and communities," and even a national "*vipassana* journal." As a result, many more Americans of European descent refer to themselves as *vipassana* students than as students of Theravada Buddhism.

*Vipassana* meditation is offered in America in a wide range of contexts. The most traditional is within some of the more than 1150 ethnic Theravada temples where Thai, Lao, Cambodian, Burmese, or Sri Lankan monastics may function as meditation teachers. Here *vipassana* practice is usually intermixed with Theravada forms of worship, chanting, teachings, and efforts at cultural preservation.

At the other end of a spectrum, *vipassana*-derived mindfulness practices are taught in hospitals, clinics, prisons, and schools without any hint of their Buddhist source. Here the practice is primarily offered as an effective method of stress reduction, pain management, and self-understanding. The biggest influence *vipassana* practice will have on American society may eventually be in such non-Buddhist applications. For example, in the fall of 1995, the book *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman was regularly on the *New York Times* best-seller list. The Buddhist and *vipassana* teachings that were an inspiration for the book are nowhere acknowledged. Of his earlier book, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths*, Goleman states, "The Dharma is so disguised that it could never be proven in court."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Jon Kabat-Zinn's much-copied work at the Stress Reduction Clinic of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center and his book *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Pace Stress, Pain, and Illness* can be pointed to as "disguised" introductions of *vipassana* practice into American society.<sup>2</sup>

Between these secular and traditional contexts for *vipassana* practice, we find the loosely bounded *vipassana* movement. Primary stimulants for its growth and its most clearly visible organizations are the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts; its sister center, Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin County, California; and the semi-annual *vipassana* journal, the *Inquiring-Mind*, published by people closely affiliated with these two meditation centers. The teachers associated with IMS (such as founders Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg) and Spirit Rock (such as founders Jack Kornfield, James Baraz, Sylvia Boorstein, and Anna Douglas) have been the primary propagators of *vipassana* practice through their books, cassette tapes,<sup>3</sup> and the retreats they lead across the United States. Because of the influence of IMS, Spirit Rock, their teachers, and the *Inquiring Mind*, and because of the close association among these, this study takes them to represent the mainstream of the American *vipassana* movement, which is the primary focus of this chapter.

Outside of this "mainstream," many independent *vipassana* teachers and organizations are active. The lay Indian *vipassana* teacher S.N. Goenka teaches or oversees intensive meditation courses in various parts of the country, particularly at the Vipassana Meditation Center in Shelburne Falls,

Massachusetts. Several former Theravada monks, both Asian and American, teach *vipassana* as autonomous teachers (for example, Dhiravamsa, Sobin, John Orr, Greg Galbraith, Jason Siff). The highly respected and most senior American *vipassana* teacher, Ruth Denison, is also an unaffiliated, independent teacher. Because of the numerous autonomous teachers and centers and the absence of a guiding national organization that certifies *vipassana* teachers, the American *vipassana* movement is inherently open, amorphous, and arbitrarily defined.

## Developments in the United States

The mainstream of the American *vipassana* movement is based on the systemization of *vipassana* meditation developed and propagated by the Burmese monk and meditation teacher Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-82). An important feature of the "Mahasi approach" is its dispensing with the traditional preliminary practice of fixed concentration or tranquilization (*appana samadhi, samatha*). Instead, the meditator practices *vipassana* exclusively during intensive periods of silent retreat that can last several months with a daily schedule of meditation from 3:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. Two key elements in Mahasi's method for developing mindfulness are the careful labeling of one's immediate experience together with the cultivation of a high level of sustained concentration known as "momentary concentration" (*khanika samadhi*).

The primary purpose for which Mahasi offered his form of *vipassana* practice is the attainment of the first of the four traditional Theravada levels of sainthood (that is, stream entry; *sotapatti*) through the realization of *nibbana*, or enlightenment. In championing this goal, Mahasi deemphasized many common elements of Theravada Buddhism. Rituals, chanting, devotional and merit-making activities, and doctrinal studies were down-played to the point of being virtually absent from the program of meditation offered at the many meditation centers he founded or inspired.

With the precedence given to meditation and meditative realizations, Mahasi also deemphasized Theravada Buddhism's central focus on monasticism. Indeed, in teaching *vipassana* meditation more to the laity than to monastics, Mahasi and the meditation teachers he trained greatly contributed to breaking down the almost exclusive monopoly the monastic order had on such practice. While the monastic *sangha* remains central to the Southeast Asian Theravada tradition, the inclusion of the laity in the ultimate soteriological path made it much easier for the Western teachers to dispense with monasticism.

Mahasi was part of what is sometimes called a twentieth-century Theravada modernization movement and sometimes a revival of original and canonical Buddhist ideals.<sup>4</sup> The movement tended to simplify Theravada religious practice, sometimes to the point of relying primarily on a single practice. In stressing religious practice and experience and in downplaying much of the traditional devotional, doctrinal, and cosmological aspects of Theravada Buddhism, its emphasis was on "orthopraxy," that is, particular practices and realizations, rather than "orthodoxy," that is, particular doctrines, teachings, and sectarian identification. Teachers such as Mahasi, U Ba Khin, Goenka, Achaan Buddhadasa, and Achaan Cha seem to have had little, if any, interest in making "converts" to Buddhism. Rather they offered their teachings and meditation practices freely to anyone interested, regardless of the person's religious affiliation.

The first American *vipassana* teachers studied with Asian teachers who were part of this twentieth-century modernization movement. Joseph Goldstein (b. 1944) studied with Mahasi and his students Anagarika Munindra and U Pandita; Sharon Salzberg (b. 1952) with Goenka, Mahasi, Munindra, and U Pandita; Jack Kornfield (b. 1945) with Achaan Cha and Mahasi Sayadaw; Ruth Denison with Goenka's teacher, U Ba Khin. Focusing on soteriology and meditation, these Westerners were seldom introduced to the wider Theravada religious world, including its complex interrelationships with Southeast Asian society. They therefore returned to the United States as importers of *vipassana*, meditation but not of the much wider religious tradition of Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism. As Jack Kornfield, one of the senior American *vipassana* teachers, has said, "We wanted

to offer the powerful practices of insight meditation, as many of our teachers did, as simply as possible without the complications of rituals, robes, chanting and the whole religious tradition.”<sup>5</sup> The early American *vipassana* teachers went even further than most of their own Asian teachers in presenting *vipassana* practice independent of the Theravada tradition. Teaching as laypeople to an almost exclusively lay audience, they were thus free to package the *vipassana* practice in American cultural forms and language.

Prior to approximately 1970, very little *vipassana* meditation was taught in the United States. Occasionally a visiting Theravada monk would teach meditation on a college campus. Soon after it was founded in 1966, the Buddhist Vihara in Washington, D.C., offered regular instruction in mindfulness practice to a handful of interested Westerners. Around 1971, a few Americans who had studied in Southeast Asia during the 1960s returned to the United States and began offering retreats in *vipassana* meditation. Best known of these first Western teachers were Sujata, Ruth Denison, and Robert 'lover, all of whom had studied in Burma.<sup>6</sup>

Arguably the most significant event for the introduction of *vipassana* to America occurred when Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein taught summer meditation courses at the Naropa Institute in 1974, at the invitation of the Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa and the Hindu teacher Ram Dass (Richard Alpert). Kornfield and Goldstein's classes proved immensely successful and launched a sixteen-year teaching partnership. For the next two years they traveled around America offering meditation retreats attended predominantly by Americans in their twenties and thirties.<sup>7</sup>

The retreats led by Goldstein and Kornfield were a hybrid of Asian forms. The basic practice taught was the Mahasi technique. The structure in which it was taught was modeled on the ten- and thirty-day retreats taught by S. N. Goenka. Instead of giving the full meditation instruction all at once, as in the Mahasi meditation centers, Goldstein and Kornfield offered the instructions progressively over the first days of the retreat, much like Goenka's courses. And, like Goenka's, the first days of the retreats typically focused on mindfulness of breathing. While Mahasi never taught loving-kindness meditation (*metta*) together with *vipassana*, Goldstein and Kornfield ended each retreat with a guided loving-kindness meditation, as is done in Goenka courses.

In 1976, Kornfield and Goldstein, together with fellow teachers Sharon Salzberg and Jacqueline Schwartz, bought a former Catholic seminary and boys' school in Barre, Massachusetts. This became a permanent, year-round meditation retreat center called Insight Meditation Society (IMS). IMS quickly became the most active *vipassana* center in the West, with students coming from all over the United States and Europe to participate in ten-day to three-month retreats throughout the year.

In 1981, Jack Kornfield moved to California and a few years later co-founded Spirit Rock, a West Coast sister center to IMS. In 1984, Kornfield started his first four-year program to systematically train teachers for the growing number of *vipassana* students. By 1997, Kornfield and the Spirit Rock teachers' collective plan to start a "community leader" training program to prepare mature *vipassana* students to lead community meditation classes and gatherings. In creating these training programs, Kornfield has taken a leadership role in fostering the development of the *vipassana* movement. Other teachers have trained and authorized teachers to teach, but not by the same systematic and planned approach.

Both IMS and Spirit Rock have institutional mechanisms for approving teachers. For the most part, teachers are those who studied in Asia (Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, and Christopher Titmuss) and Westerners trained by these four. As the two centers are closely connected, their lists of approved teachers overlap. Commonly, teachers teach retreats together; larger retreats may have as many as five teachers. Such cooperation has meant that the teachers associated with Spirit Rock and IMS may be less prone to the difficulties that may befall spiritual teachers who do not have the close support and feedback of peers.

Since the mid-1970s, the "mainstream" *vipassana* teachers have held yearly meetings of *vipassana* teachers from the United States and sometimes Europe to discuss teaching and the growth

of the *vipassana* movement. While not always harmonious, these meetings have helped nurture an interactive teacher community and created the most coherent representative body for the movement.

## American Adaptations

While still in its infancy, the *vipassana* movement provides an interesting example of one shape Buddhism is taking in its North American setting. With its primary focus on a particular meditation practice, it has been relatively unencumbered by the issues of cultural preservation and accommodation that confront those Asian Buddhist traditions transplanted to America in a more intact form. It has been much easier, almost inevitable, for *vipassana* teachers and students to organize themselves according to Western values, worldviews, and institutional preferences. The *vipassana* movement has tended to incorporate such values as democracy, equality, feminism, and individualism to a much greater degree and faster than most other Buddhist groups in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

In taking on a North American form, the *vipassana* movement has aligned itself with, and borrowed elements from, particular aspects of American culture. This becomes clear if we contrast it with the True Pure Land (Jodo Shinshu) tradition of the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA). In establishing itself in America, the BCA chose to emulate many of the forms, procedures, and terminology of mainstream Christian churches. Its "churches" hold regular Sunday religious services, instituting forms of public and communal worship unfamiliar to the True Pure Land tradition in Japan but quite common among Christian denominations in the United States. The BCA installed pulpits, pews, and organs, used hymns and sermons, started Sunday schools and adopted official titles like "reverend" and "bishop." The underlying assumption of such adaptation is that the BCA is a religion or a community of worship much like mainstream Christianity.

In theologian Ernest Troeltsch's classic typology of religious orientation, the BCA would be either a church or a sect.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the orientation of the American *vipassana* movement would be what Troeltsch called "mysticism" or "religious individualism." While Troeltsch's usage of the term *mysticism* is awkward and somewhat idiosyncratic, he uses it to describe a Western religious orientation in which personal and inward experience and belief predominate over collective belief and worship. It typifies the *vipassana* movement better than the commonly used categories of "cult" or "new religion," which have been contrasted to "church," "sect," or "denomination." Troeltsch claims that the "mystical" orientation arose in the context of the growth of Western individualism and of a prosperous middle class. While too facile correlations between religious typologies and social class are often problematic, it could be fruitful to consider the relationship between the middle-class status of most American *vipassana* students and the religious orientation of the movement.

Rather than borrowing from the normative American religious landscape, the early American students of *vipassana* many of whom were part of the counter-culture youth movement of the sixties and seventies—distanced themselves from mainstream religious values and institutions. These practitioners were much more likely to describe their involvement with Buddhist practice as "spiritual" rather than "religious." More interested in personal transformation and individual meditative experience than building a cohesive religious community, these young people had more in common with Western psychotherapy and the Human Potential Movement—especially with what is now called Transpersonal Psychology—than with Christian churches. Organizationally, individuals participate in the *vipassana* movement more like therapy clients than members of a church; virtually nothing is required of the student except to pay for retreats or classes. Thus, with no required commitment to an organization, a teacher, or Buddhist teachings, even the most active *vipassana* students may retain their preexisting lifestyles, religious affiliations, and political, philosophical, and cultural points of view without conflict.

A further connection with psychotherapy appears both in the professional training of many of

the teachers and in the content of their teachings. The most dramatic example is at Spirit Rock, where nine of the fourteen regular teachers are trained psychotherapists. The books on mindfulness practice by American teachers frequently address psychological issues. For example, in *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom*, by Joseph Goldstein, we find such section titles as "Unworthiness," "Guilt," "Jealousy," "Emotional Bondage, Emotional Freedom," "Psychotherapy and Meditation," and "Birth of the Ego." In 1988, the *Inquiring Mind* devoted an entire issue to the subject of psychology, psychotherapy, and meditation.<sup>10</sup> This Western concern with the psychology and psychotherapy of emotions contrasts with the lack of such discussion among traditional Theravada meditation teachers in Southeast Asia.

Historically, Buddhism has assimilated into a new culture by incorporating elements of the indigenous beliefs. Perhaps the "indigenous belief" that the *vipassana* movement will at least partly assimilate is Western psychology. Jack Kornfield writes, "Of the Western 'inner practices,' the one that is having the most significant impact on Buddhism and on all contemporary spiritual life is the understanding and practice of Western psychology. Many serious students and teachers of the spiritual path in the West have found it necessary or useful to turn to psychotherapy for help in their spiritual life. Many others who have not done so would probably benefit by it."<sup>11</sup> Kornfield's chapter titled "Psychotherapy and Meditation" in *A Path with Heart* is in part a plea for complementing spiritual practice with psychotherapy. He writes that "at least half of our students at our annual three-month retreat find themselves unable to do traditional Insight Meditation because they encounter so much unresolved grief, fear, and wounding and unfinished developmental business from the past that this becomes their meditation."<sup>12</sup>

The connection between psychotherapy and the *vipassana* movement, however, may not simply be a response to the psychological needs of the American students. Both may be expressions of a strand of Western individualism that focuses on personal experience, inner change, and freedom.

## Teachings

The teachings that the Western *vipassana* teachers are developing in America are noticeably different from those in Southeast Asia. In discussing the Western teachings it must be kept in mind that the *vipassana* movement, even in its "mainstream" manifestation, is not a coherent movement with an established and collectively agreed-upon teaching. Among American teachers, variations in teachings usually appear in doctrinal formulations and, less often, in the practical instructions given for meditation and mindfulness practice. Since the *vipassana* movement is so praxis-oriented, this is not surprising. Indeed, we find that many of the Western *vipassana* teachers give such importance to meditation and mindfulness that they are much more likely to present Buddhism as a meditation-centered religious or spiritual tradition than Theravada teachers would in Southeast Asia. In the introduction to the book *Living Buddhist Masters*, Jack Kornfield writes, "The essence of Buddhism is its meditation practices."<sup>13</sup> And in an informational brochure distributed by Spirit Rock it is similarly written that "the heart of the Buddhist path is the practice of meditation."

While traditional Theravada teachings make some references to freedom (*vimutti*), freedom is central to the teachings of the American *vipassana*. Joseph Goldstein writes, "The essential teachings of the Buddha [are concerned with] the nature of suffering and the realization of freedom."<sup>14</sup> The realization of freedom is so closely tied to *vipassana* meditation that Goldstein titled his most recent book *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom*.

The American teachers almost exclusively discuss a freedom relevant to one's current life, while the traditional teachings focus more on freedom from the endless rounds of rebirth, or at least from future births in the lower realms of existence (*gati*; the animal, hungry ghost, or hell realms). So, in advocating a "liberation" *from* this world, Mahasi Sayadaw writes:

*The Wheel of Rebirth (samsara) is very dreadful. Every effort should therefore be made to acquaint oneself with the miserable conditions of Samsara and then to work for an escape from this incessant cycle, and for the attainment of Nirvana. If an escape from Samsara as a whole is not possible for the present, an attempt should be made for an escape at least from the round of rebirth in the realm of hell, or animals, or petas. In this case it is necessary to work for the total removal from oneself of the erroneous view that there is a self, which is the root-cause of rebirth in the miserable states.*<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, Jack Kornfield writes:

*For twenty-five hundred years the practices and teachings of Buddhism have offered a systematic way to see clearly and live wisely. They have offered a way to discover liberation within our own bodies and minds, in the midst of this very world. [emphasis added].*<sup>16</sup>

When Asian teachers do talk about freedom, it is primarily in reference to what one is free from—that is, from greed, hate, delusion, grasping, attachment, wrong view, self, and most significantly, rebirth. For the Asian teachers the religious path ends with final freedom or *nibbana*, which has no purpose beyond itself. Achaan Cha exhorts:

*Come to practice for liberation! It isn't easy to live in accordance with true wisdom, but whoever earnestly seeks the Path and Fruit and aspires to Nibbana will be able to persevere and endure. Endure being contented and satisfied with little; eating little, sleeping little, speaking little and living in moderation. By doing this we can put an end to worldliness.*<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, the Western teachers often stress the potential found through freedom. Freedom is a means to living happily, compassionately, and wisely without drastic changes in lifestyle. So Joseph Goldstein writes:

*We practice the Dharma in order ... to be free. That is the heart of all the effort we make, because from freedom come connectedness, compassion, loving-kindness, and peace.... The Buddha saw with such clarity how different states of mind and courses of action lead to different results. Unwholesome mind states have certain consequences. Wholesome mind states have results of their own. As we begin to understand the truth of how things are, we see for ourselves what brings suffering in our lives, and what brings happiness and freedom.*<sup>18</sup>

In defining freedom in terms relevant to anyone's life, the American teachers make virtually no reference to Buddhist doctrines that would be foreign and perhaps unacceptable to most Americans. While the practice's potential for ending one's involvement with the cycles of rebirth underlies the teachings of Asian teachers, the *vipassana* teachings in the West are not predicated on the traditional belief of rebirth. Other traditional teachings on realms of existence, merit making, the four stages of enlightenment, and monastic renunciation are virtually absent as well. Without the traditional Theravada doctrinal framework and goals motivating practice, American *vipassana* students are given pragmatic and experiential goals. In this light the practice is offered as a form of therapy from which practitioners can benefit in their current lives.

Four spiritual practices are central to American *vipassana* teachings. These are mindfulness (*sati*), loving-kindness (*metta*), ethics (*sila*), and generosity (*dana*). While mindfulness receives primary emphasis and is often taught independent of the other three, most mainstream *vipassana* teachers would present all four as important elements in a mindfulness-based spiritual life.

Mindfulness practice involves the cultivation of undistracted attentiveness to what is being experienced in the present. As such it is a practice that can be applied both to formal meditation and to all one's daily activities. American teachers do not always distinguish between these two areas of cultivation. An informational brochure from Spirit Rock states:

*In Insight Meditation we pay clear attention to whatever exists naturally in this present moment.*

*The specific focus of our awareness can vary, from bodily sensations to sights to thoughts and feelings. We often begin by paying attention to the sensations of breathing. We sit still, either cross-legged on the floor or upright in a chair, and allow our eyes to close gently. Then we turn our attention to the breath and simply experience, in as continuous a way as possible, the physical sensations of breathing in and breathing out ... Meditation can also be carried on throughout our daily activities. We can be mindful of the movement of our body, the sensations in walking, the sounds around us, or the thoughts and feelings that come into our mind. As our meditation practice develops, we find that the mind becomes calmer and clearer. We start to see the influence of our habitual patterns of moods, expectations, hopes, and fears. In seeing through the mind's conditioning, we can live more fully in the present moment with balance and spaciousness. We are no longer so swayed by the shifting thoughts and feelings of our conditioned responses. This [is] the first taste of freedom.<sup>19</sup>*

The formal meditation practice most commonly taught by the "main-stream" teachers is derived from Mahasi Sayadaw's systemization of traditional *vipassana* meditation. Instead of having a fixed object of attention, such as the breath, the practitioner is taught to become aware, with clear recognition, of the full range of physical, sensory, emotional, psychological, and cognitive experiences. Mindfulness of these events is not a cognitive analysis however, but rather a careful, sustained, and simple sensory perception of how each experience is registered prior to contemplative reflection or evaluation. Important to the Mahasi approach, but somewhat less emphasized by most of the American teachers, is supporting the mindfulness practice with a continuous stream of mental labeling of what is experienced.

Intensive periods of meditation practice in residential retreats are emphasized as an important means for deepening one's mindfulness practice. All the mainstream American *vipassana* teachers offer retreats, which can range from two days to three months in length. Typically these retreats have a daily schedule of sitting and walking meditation from about 5:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. and are conducted in silence except for instruction and teachings. As a student's meditation practice deepens, he or she is individually guided through what are known as the "stages of insight," which involve strong sustained degrees of mindfulness.<sup>20</sup>

Lovingkindness meditation is practiced as a complement to mindfulness meditation, both to stabilize the mind and to infuse mindfulness practice with a spirit of friendliness. Much as compassion (*karuna*) is the primary spiritual emotion of Mahayana Buddhism, so loving-kindness is the fundamental spiritual emotion stressed by the Western *vipassana* movement. Loving-kindness, one of the four *brahmaviharas*,<sup>21</sup> is the heartfelt intention for the welfare and happiness of oneself and others. The practice of loving-kindness is the cultivation of both that intention and the accompanying feelings of friendliness, warmth, and love.

The American *vipassana* teachers place more emphasis on the practice of *metta*, or loving-kindness, than do most Asian *vipassana* teachers and they often combine loving-kindness meditation with a forgiveness practice that seems to be unknown in the formal *metta* practice found in Southeast Asia.<sup>22</sup> References to loving-kindness are virtually absent in the many books by Mahasi Sayadaw except for a book specifically about the *brahmaviharas*. Similarly, except for one reference to formal loving-kindness meditation as a "rather elementary practice" that is "child's play,"<sup>23</sup> Achaan Cha does not mention *metta* in his books published in English. When it is taught in Asia, *metta* is seldom mixed with *vipassana* practice. In contrast, most retreats led by the teachers from IMS and Spirit Rock include at least one guided loving-kindness meditation during each day of the retreat, and individual students may be instructed to practice *metta* even more frequently. Virtually every book on *vipassana* practice by an American teacher contains lengthy discussions on *metta*. It is the primary theme in Sharon Salzberg's book *Loving-kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*.<sup>24</sup> One may speculate that the American near-obsession with happiness and love has influenced the American teachers to put special

emphasis on loving-kindness. The emphasis also arises out of a real need to offer an alternative to practitioners for whom mindfulness practice is unsuitable. As an awareness practice, mindfulness reveals the workings of the practitioner's mental life. If the practitioner has a strong tendency to self-criticism or self-deprecation, what is revealed in mindfulness can sometimes fuel enough self-criticism that it becomes an impediment to meditation. In such circumstances, loving-kindness practice can be an antidote to this tendency. In addition, *metta* meditation is offered as an effective practice for strengthening a meditator's concentration. This is especially important when a student is too mentally or physically restless to practice mindfulness.

The third practice taught by American *vipassana* teachers is ethics or precepts. Most commonly, precepts—specifically the five lay precepts—are understood as aids to cultivating a mindful and wise life. So Jack Kornfield writes: "We can use the precepts to train ourselves, to awaken ourselves and make our relationships more open and harmonious. When we are about to break them, the precepts are like warning lights and alarms signaling us to take a careful look at the mind state behind the action in which we are involved. If we look closely, we can usually discover where we became caught or confused and how we can let go and be free. Use the precepts. They are incomparable tools for changing ourselves and the world around us."<sup>25</sup> With such a utilitarian approach, *vipassana* students are left to decide for themselves the extent to which they use the precepts as guidelines for their ethical behavior. The only time that students are required to abide by the precepts is during intensive residential meditation retreats. The most common time that *vipassana* students formally and somewhat ritualistically "take" or recite the precepts is during the opening of such retreats.

Until the mid-1980s, *vipassana* was taught in the West with much less emphasis on ethics than in Southeast Asia. Since then, and particularly in the United States, an increasing stress has been placed on ethics and on the traditional Buddhist precepts for the laity. The change was to a great extent a response to both a wider cultural interest in ethics and to a significant number of ethical transgressions by Asian and Western teachers of Tibetan, Zen, and Theravada Buddhism. At the instigation of Jack Kornfield, the collective of teachers affiliated with the Insight Meditation Society and Spirit Rock formulated an Insight Meditation Teacher's Code of Ethics.<sup>26</sup>

The Theravada practice of *dana*, or generosity, is a key element in the spirituality of the American *vipassana* movement because it both supports and expresses the openheartedness and happiness that are said to come from mindfulness practice. Kornfield writes: "To cultivate generosity directly is another fundamental part of living a spiritual life. Like the training precepts and like our inner meditations, generosity can actually be practiced. With practice, its spirit forms our actions, and our hearts will grow stronger and lighter. It can lead us to new levels of letting go and great happiness."<sup>27</sup> The centrality of *dana* to the *vipassana* movement is at least partly a result of the manner in which the teachings are offered. It is customary for the *vipassana* teachers associated with IMS and Spirit Rock to offer their teachings freely and without being paid. Furthermore, the Insight Meditation Teacher's Code of Ethics states that teachers "agree to offer teachings without favoritism in regard to students' financial circumstances."<sup>28</sup> While retreat and class fees are charged, these cover the expenses of putting on the event (rent, food, mailings, and so on). The fees are kept as low as possible and scholarships are offered to those who cannot afford to pay. The teachers receive *dana*, that is, voluntary and usually anonymous donations from students. To a great extent this financial arrangement replicates the lay-monastic exchange system found in traditional Theravada Buddhism. However, since the American teachers have much greater financial needs than monastics, the long-term success of this *dana* system is still uncertain.

## **In the Melting Pot of American Buddhism**

One of the salient features of the *vipassana* movement is its ecumenical interaction with other meditative traditions of Eastern spirituality. Because their pragmatic approach is loosely bound, if at all, to traditional Theravada metaphysics and soteriological definitions, *vipassana* teachers and students tend to be religiously eclectic, participating in and borrowing from any religious or psychological tradition that seems to aid in the pursuit of "freedom" and happiness. The articles and interviews in the *Inquiring Mind* re-veal that both *vipassana* students and teachers actively participate not only in other Buddhist t'aditions, such as in the Tibetan and Zen traditions, but also in non-Buddhist traditions such as Hindu Advaita-vedanta. In their Dharma talks and writings, American *vipassana* teachers are almost as likely to quote a Sufi, Hindu, Tibetan, Taoist, or Zen teacher as they are to quote the Buddha or a Theravada teacher.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, many students of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism have complemented their own practice with sonic *vipassana* meditation. Some have done so enough to have become recognized as teachers in two different t'aditions. For example, teaching *vipassana* at Spirit Rock is a Zen priest who received Dharma Transmission at the San Francisco Zen Center. In recent years, some of the teachers at Spirit Rock and IMS have been involved in intensive meditation retreats in the Tibetan *dzogchen* tradition. The nondualistic *dzogchen* teachings about awareness have thus influenced the *vipassana* instructions that they give.

Perhaps the pragmatic interests of Euro-American Buddhists will lessen the sharp divisions that exist in Asia among the various meditative traditions of Buddhism. Certainly, many of the Buddhist traditions in America are losing their t'aditional metaphysical, mythological, and institutional underpinnings. Instead, one finds an increasing stress on the common foundation of all schools of Buddhism, that is, the Four Noble Truths, the Eight-fold Path, and straightforward practices of mindfulness, concentration, loving-kindness, and compassion.

In September 1994 Spirit Rock and the San Francisco Zen Center sponsored what was billed as the first American Buddhist Teacher's Meeting. Invited to the meeting were almost exclusively American-born meditation teachers of the Tibetan, Zen, and *vipassana* traditions. One attending Zen teacher with an affiliation to the Japanese Jodo Shinshu tradition complained of the elitism of a meeting called "American Buddhist Teachers' Meeting" that included only representatives of these three t'aditions. While the title of the meeting may have been a misnomer, the exclusiveness of the meeting highlights the commonality among these traditions as they develop in America. Most American *vipassana* practitioners have more in common with American Zen students than with Thai or Burmese participants at a local Thai or Burmese temple. Similarly most Zen students will have more in common with American Tibetan Buddhist practitioners than with the Japanese American congregation at the Soto Zen temple in San Francisco's Japantown.

In areas without a *vipassana*, Zen, or Tibetan center, it is common for students from the various traditions to create a single sitting group where they all practice together. With some awkwardness as they decide which meditation hall customs to follow and what text to read together or Dharma tape to listen to, these groups offer mutual support to the participants.

## Demographics

It could perhaps be argued that some of the eclectic, nonsectarian and noncommittal tendencies that are found in much of the American *vipassana* movement are an expression of its focus on freedom. For many American *vipassana* students freedom has meant, among other things, freedom from religious formalism, dogmatic teachings and teachers, religious identifications, and narrow-mindedness. Indeed, we find some *vipassana* teachers discouraging students from even identifying themselves as Buddhists:

*It is important to realize that to identify oneself as a meditator or a spiritual person or even a*

*Buddhist can be another way we get caught or lose one's true balance. This is like carrying the raft on your head instead of using it for a vehicle to the other shore. The purpose of meditation is not to create a new spiritual identity, nor to become the most meditative person on the block, who tells other people how they should live. To practice is to let go.*<sup>30</sup>

This lack of identification is paralleled by a lack of organizational affiliation. Neither Spirit Rock nor IMS, the largest centers in America, makes a clear distinction between members and nonmembers. This is in large part because they are primarily retreat centers providing classes and retreats where anyone is invited to learn and practice meditation. They are not churchlike community centers where the full range of people's daily spiritual needs and expressions are met. Rather than being based on membership dues, Spirit Rock and IMS are financed by charging fees for retreats and classes offered and by donations.

Since no institutional membership is required, demographic data on the *vipassana* movement are hard to obtain. Even so, some observations can be made.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, the loose network of *vipassana* practitioners consisted mostly of young adults attending intensive meditation retreats. Since the mid-1980s the practice has been extended beyond retreats into daily life as *vipassana* students settled down to family lives and as older, working people with families became attracted to mindfulness practice. As a result, currently at least three hundred weekly *vipassana* meditation groups meet throughout the United States to sit together in support of each other's ongoing mindfulness practice. This compares to about thirty such groups in 1984.<sup>31</sup> While most groups are small, a few have up to a hundred or more weekly participants. A couple of dozen are led by teachers. The smaller, teacherless groups usually substitute for a teacher's presence by playing Dharma talks on tapes or by reading Dharma books.

The growth in the number of sitting groups is paralleled by the growth in the number of retreats. In 1984, the *Inquiring Mind* listed ten residential retreats around the country. For 1995, the number was one hundred.<sup>32</sup> It is conservatively estimated that between 1970 and 1995 about fifty thousand Americans attended *vipassana* retreats of one day to three months. Perhaps five thousand attended such retreats in 1995.<sup>33</sup>

Most sitting groups and retreats have more women participants than men. Spirit Rock's mailing list of 24,000 contains twice as many women as men. At a weekly sitting group in Palo Alto, California, typically about 65 percent of the approximately one hundred participants are women. A four-day residential retreat in Kansas City in the spring of 1995 and a seventeen-day residential retreat for experienced practitioners held in San Rafael, California, in the fall of 1995 both had ratios of 65 percent women to 35 percent men.

Of the forty people attending the Kansas City retreat, 80 percent were over forty years of age; 60 percent were over fifty. In the San Rafael retreat, 80 percent of the fifty participants were over forty years old. The average age was forty-nine. In a survey done in April 1995 at the Palo Alto sitting group, the average age was fifty, with 81 percent of the respondents being over forty.

American *vipassana* students are overwhelmingly Caucasian. While it is difficult to discern the economic class of these students, most seem to be middle class. In the Palo Alto sitting group a majority of the participants are college-educated professionals.

While people are interested in *vipassana* in every state of the country, the mailing lists for the *Inquiring Mind*, Spirit Rock, and the Dharma Seed Tape Library show that by far the biggest interest seems to be in California, New York, and Massachusetts, in that order.

In 1995 approximately seventy lay *vipassana* teachers were active in the United States. The fall 1995 edition of the *Inquiring Mind* listed forty-eight teachers leading retreats around the country. Exactly half of the forty-eight were women. All except three or four were Caucasian and the vast majority were college-educated.<sup>34</sup> At least 30 percent of this group have received professional training in psychotherapy. They all appear to be over the age of forty.

These demographics suggest questions concerning the future of the movement. Is the aging

population of *vipassana* students an indication that interest in *vipassana* is primarily a phenomenon of the Baby-Boomer generation and so will decrease as that generation ages and dies? Or does the average participant age of fifty suggest that interest in *vipassana* extends beyond the Baby-Boomers but is still age-related? Is there something about what the American *vipassana* movement offers that is more attractive to people who have already been through twenty or thirty years of work and raising a family? Do the time and money required to attend retreats have a bearing on the age and economic status of retreatants? Furthermore, it would be interesting to discern what, if any, is the relationship between the middle-class and Euro-American identity of many of *vipassana* students and the doctrinal and institutional preferences of the movement.

## Conclusion

The twenty-five-year-old American *vipassana* movement is a significant player in the development of American forms of Buddhism and in the introduction of Buddhist influences into American culture. Its popularity is growing rapidly as the number of teachers and students increases, and as its mindfulness practice is introduced in such places as hospitals, schools, and prisons independent of its Buddhist doctrines or context.

Most forms of Buddhism arrived in the United States as full religious traditions. The *vipassana* movement is significantly different since it involved the importation of a few particular spiritual practices and soteriological goals largely independent of the wider Theravada teachings and its Southeast Asian cultural expressions. Without the conservative force of an established religious tradition, the American *vipassana* movement has been free to experiment with new religious expressions, teachings, and institutional structures that are perhaps uniquely adapted to contemporary American society. It is thoroughly lay-based. Its orientation is closer to mysticism or religious individualism than to churches or organized religion. Its practitioners do not identify themselves as members of an institution. It has rapidly incorporated Western values and worldviews. And it has been open to influences from outside its Theravada background, including Mahayana Buddhism, Advaita-vedanta, and, perhaps most intriguing and uniquely American, Western psychology.

A fascinating development of Buddhism in the modern world is the meeting in America of Buddhist traditions that existed independent of one another in Asia. It is too early to tell whether these various traditions will merge or how they will affect each other in the long term. Many American *vipassana* practitioners freely borrow from the different schools, especially those with strong meditation traditions. Perhaps *vipassana* will become a vessel within which these traditions will come together.

The forms and direction the amorphous *vipassana* movement will take, and even from where leadership might come, are uncertain. The two biggest *vipassana* centers, IMS and Spirit Rock, and their associated teachers are significant influences, but they do not provide a particularly cohesive, organized focus for the wider movement.

Many interesting questions can be asked about the future development of the *vipassana* movement. Having already lost much of its Theravada identity, how thoroughly will it maintain its Buddhist identity? If it remains pragmatically orthopraxical, will the mindfulness teachings be contextualized in any traditional Buddhist framework, or will a new doctrinal framework be developed in the West? When such central Buddhist tenets as no-self (*anatta*) can be reformulated so that at least one American teacher can refer to a "true self," will the movement eventually lack a uniform enough doctrinal foundation to hold it together, even loosely?<sup>35</sup> If the movement has minimal shared doctrinal, ritual, or institutional underpinnings, can shared spiritual practices create a cohesive enough identity for it to remain an identifiable movement? And what do the demographics of its teachers and practitioners say about the movement's long-term viability?

While it is far from clear how it will develop, the *vipassana* movement promises to be

influential in the development of American Buddhism. Perhaps this preliminary study will inspire further research on the movement during this formative time.

**Notes:**

I would like to thank Nancy Van House for patient and careful help in preparing this essay for publication.

1. *Inquiring Mind* 2, no. 1 (summer 1985): 7.
2. Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness* (New York: Delta, 1991). In his subsequent best-selling book, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), Kabat-Zinn explicitly acknowledges the Buddhist origin of mindfulness practice.
3. The Dharma Seed Tape Library, a nonprofit business, sells, throughout the country, a large volume of taped Dharma talks by these teachers. Listening to such tapes is a popular activity among many American *vipassana* students.
4. A discussion of this modernization movement can be found in Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 107-61.
5. Personal communication, June 1995.
6. Sujata wrote a short but popular book on mindfulness practice called *Beginning to See* (Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 1987). Ruth Denison teaches at Dhamma Dena, her retreat center outside of Joshua Tree, California.
7. In private communication (November 1995), Jack Kornfield mentioned that around 1975 the average age of *vipassana* retreatants was thirty, with most being in their twenties and thirties.
8. For further discussion on these developments, see Jack Kornfield, "Is Buddhism Changing in North America?" in Don Morrcalle, ed., *Buddhist America: Centers, Retreats, Practices* (Santa Fe, N.M.: John Muir Publications, 1988), pp. xi-xxviii.
9. Ernest Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931).
10. *Inquiring Mind* 5, no. 1 (summer 1988).
11. Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart* (Boston: Bantam Books, 1993), p. 244. The influence between Western psychotherapy and the *vipassana* movement has often been mutual. Mark Epstein, in his popular and influential book *Thoughts without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective* (New York: Basic Books/Harper-Collins, 1995), discusses how Western psychotherapy can be enhanced by Buddhist spirituality, particularly that of the *vipassana* movement.
12. Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*, p. 246. In 1988, Kornfield published an article in the *Inquiring Mind* 5, no. 1 (summer 1988) titled "Meditation and Psychotherapy: A Plea for Integration."
13. Jack Kornfield, *Living Buddhist Masters* (Boulder: Prajna Press, 1983).
14. Joseph Goldstein, *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom* (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), p. 8.
15. Mahasi Sayadaw, *The Satipatthana Vipassana Meditation: A Basic Buddhist Mindfulness Exercise* (Rangoon, Burma: Department of Religious Affairs, 1979), p. 7.
16. Jack Kornfield, ed., *Teachings of the Buddha* (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), p. X.
17. Ajahn Chah, *Bodhinyana: A Collection of Mamma Talks* (Ubon Rajathani, Thai-land: Wat Pah Pong, 1980), p. 45.
18. Goldstein, *Insight Meditation*, p. 3.
19. From a brochure titled "The Path of the Buddha," written by *vipassana* teacher Guy Armstrong.
20. The classic discussion of these stages is in the *Visuddhimagga* by Buddhaghosa (translated into English under the title *The Path of Purification* {Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1987}). It is also discussed in Mahasi Sayadaw, *Practical Insight Meditation: Basic and Progressive*

*Stages* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971). These "stages of insight" are seldom referred to in the writings and public talks of the American *vipassana* teachers. Like most Asian *vipassana* teachers, they prefer that students not learn about these stages prior to experiencing them for themselves. In part this is to avoid the meditation hindrance of anticipation and in part it is to avoid conditioning students' experience. The absence of public discussion of these teachings should be noted by anyone studying the *vipassana* movement. The published books and public talks do not provide the researcher with the full range of the movement's teachings.

21. That is, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, compassion, and equanimity.

22. The first reference in print to the forgiveness meditation that American teachers sometimes use to precede loving-kindness meditation is found in Stephen Levine, *A Gradual Awakening* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), pp. 86–87.

23. Jack Kornfield and Paul Breiter, ed., *A Still Forest Pool: The Insight Meditation* (if Achaan Chah (Wheaton, Ill.: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1986), p. 155.

24. Sharon Salzberg, *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995).

24. Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 183.

25. The *vipassana* teacher's code of ethics is found in the appendix of Jack Kornfield's *Path with Heart*, pp. 34<sup>0</sup>-43.

26. Goldstein and Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, p. 8.

27. Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*, p. 34<sup>1</sup>.

28. A good example of the eclectic and ecumenical utilization of material from the world's spiritual traditions is found in *vipassana* teachers Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield's book, *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart: Parables of the Spiritual Path from around the World* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).

30. Goldstein and Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, p. 173.

31. These figures are conservatively obtained by doubling the number of sitting groups listed in the spring 1984 and the fall 1995 issues of the *Inquiring Mind* (1, no. 1 and 12, no. 1). Probably a majority of the *vipassana* sitting groups in the United States are not listed in this journal (*Inquiring Mind*, P.O. Box 9999, North Berkeley Station, Berkeley, California 94709).

32. *Ibid.*, 12, no. 1.

33. These figures are calculated based on the number of well-advertised or listed retreats offered each year in the United States and Europe. Estimating that half of the retreatants have attended previous retreats, only half of the participants were counted in these calculations.

34. Of the eleven primary teachers at Spirit Rock, all but one have attended not only college but also graduate or professional school.

35. Jack Kornfield, in the chapter discussing self and no-self in his book, *A Path with Heart*, has a section titled "From No Self to True Self."