



PURSUING AN AMERICAN BUDDHISM

LINDA HEUMAN INTERVIEWS PIONEERING
SCHOLAR CHARLES PREBISH

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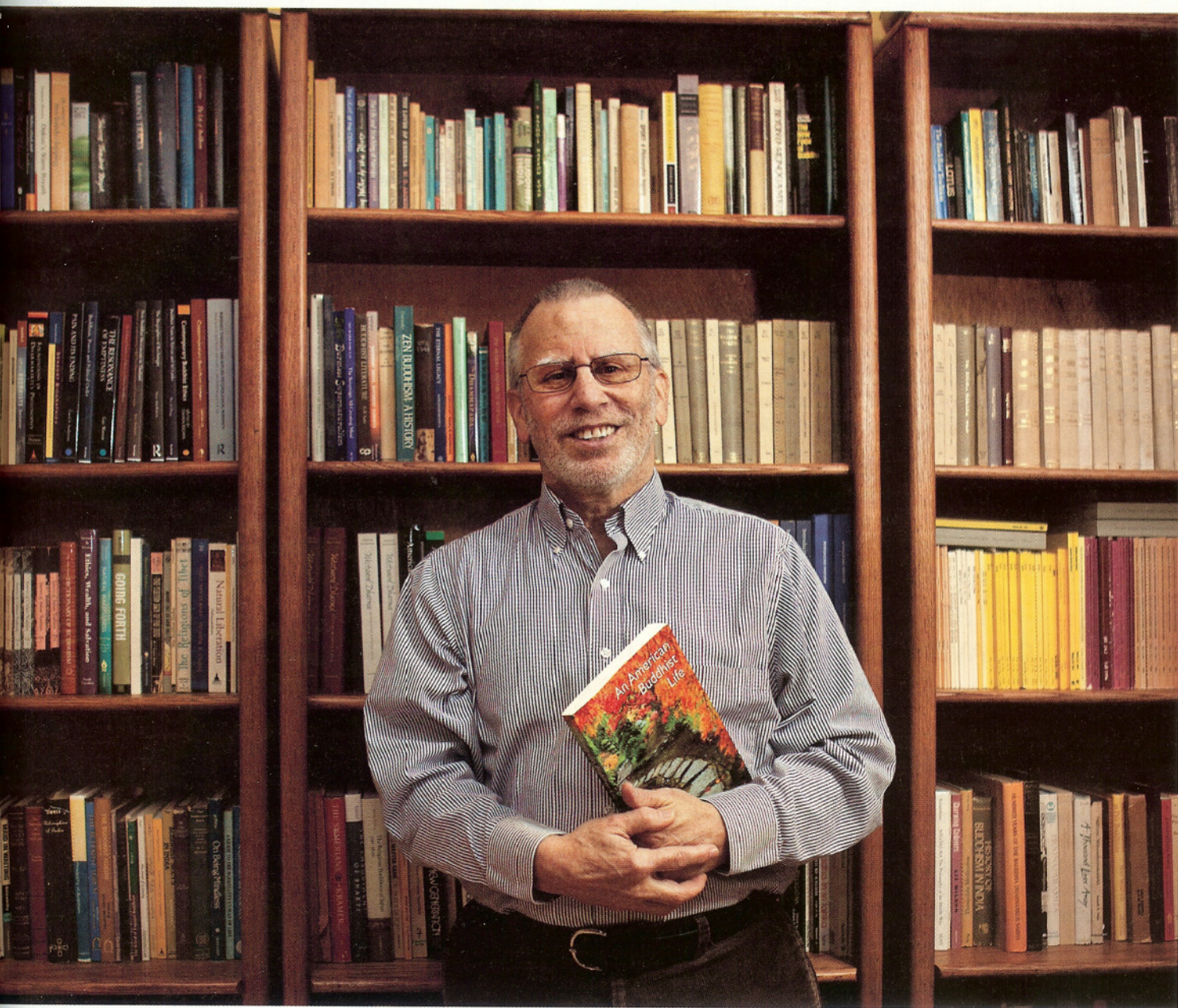
Charles Prebish has probably visited more American dharma centers than anyone else on the continent. For those familiar with his work, this should be no surprise, as Prebish pioneered the scholarly study of American Buddhism as a subdiscipline of Buddhist studies. In the late sixties and early seventies, when Prebish was beginning his career, the academic study of Buddhism meant largely its study as an artifact of “Oriental” culture. As a young scholar Prebish focused on early Indian Buddhism: the development of the monastic system and the disciplinary literature known as Vinaya, topics well within the range of traditional Buddhist studies scholarship. But by the seventies, Prebish was among the first academics to observe that the burgeoning importation of Buddhism to the United States was developing its own cultural face, one that itself was worthy of observation and study. He taught the first course on American Buddhism in 1974 and published the first scholarly book on the topic in 1979. In the decades since, as Buddhism’s popularity in the West has soared, Prebish has been tracking its rapidly evolving course, recording its progress, and chronicling its milestones. Now Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University and Utah State University, Prebish has recounted the experience of practicing and studying Buddhism in America for four decades in his recent memoir, *An American Buddhist Life*.

—Linda Heuman

Do we really have an American Buddhism yet? Many people don’t like to use the phrase “American Buddhism.” Last weekend [the Buddhist scholar] Jan Willis said, “I don’t think we’re quite there yet.” I’ve been using that phrase since 1975, but she is probably right; we’re probably not there yet. First we need all the Buddhist traditions to come to America in their integrity—with their traditions and their lineages and their rituals and so forth. Then it will take time for them to become distinctly American, to factor into American culture, for Buddhists to communicate with other Buddhists. We need patience. Eventually, some-

thing that we could call “American Buddhism” will emerge. And that doesn’t mean that there will be one vehicle. We will still have the same sects and so forth, but they will be much more interpenetrating, I think.

Americans tend to be impatient. We think if Buddhism has been here for a hundred and fifty years, of course it should be totally American. But that ignores the fact that in Asia it took centuries for Buddhism to become fully acculturated when it moved to a new cultural region. When it moved from India to China, it took at least 500 years before it became sinicized. And we’re expecting it to happen so quickly. It will take time.



What is distinctly American about United States Buddhism?

It reflects democratic principles, the sense of “liberty and justice for all.” These are unifying principles within sanghas—equality in the best sense of the word. Understanding the way of the bodhisattva in an American context involves social engagement—things like hospice work, environmentalism, and prison ministries.

American Buddhism reflects the kinds of values that we find in our culture, but that’s not always positive. Americans are very much concerned with personal attainment; in American Buddhism, people often overemphasize the role of meditation above all else in Buddhism, even above being part of a Buddhist com-

munity. So American Buddhism might include people who self-identify as Buddhist but don’t really connect with the Buddhist community or sangha. And I find that problematic.

For example, if you look at me, I took refuge at a Theravada center, I talked regularly with the Tibetan master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and I had a personal Buddhist teacher in my Buddhist Studies mentor, Richard Robinson. But at Penn State, I never had a community to be a part of, so for the 36 years I was here, my meditation was solitary, my practice was alone; I was a sangha of one. For me, that was and is a very difficult circumstance, because you miss the sense of community that really helps

to define the tradition. There's no place where you can go and share with other Buddhists. There is something you don't get that you might find in a Tibetan refugee community somewhere, or if you went for a weekend at, say, Zen Mountain Monastery and hung out and participated in the programs and sat in the zendo with everybody and just ate your meals together. And that is hard, because that sort of communal behavior is very reinforcing.

The Buddhist studies scholar Michael Carrithers wrote something that has always stuck in my mind. He said, "There is no Buddhism without the sangha and no sangha without the discipline." So we could say we're still wanting in American Buddhism because we really don't have a full development of the sangha, even though it's significantly better now than it was, say, in 1975, when I started studying it.

A full development of the sangha is not quite as easy as it sounds, because the word *sangha* is a lot more complicated than one would think. In the earliest tradition of Buddhism, when Buddha used the word *sangha* he meant monks. But eventually the sangha became known as the sangha of the four quarters and included everybody: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. So you could say we do have that here, but it's not fully developed.

What would be the criteria for saying "Now the sangha is fully developed"? We would need a more complete and structured

about your practice." To this day I don't know how he knew, because there was no way he could have known. But he said to me, "I know that you've been sitting for four hours a day. And I know that during those hours you basically withdraw from the world into the quiet of your head and deal with the issues that you think are Buddhist. I want you to stop sitting." It knocked me on my rear.

He explained that I was very effectively shutting down the world. I thought I was becoming aware of my breathing, my body, and my feelings. That might have been true, but I was doing it in a complete vacuum that didn't engage the part of me who was Buddhist within the world at all. He told me to take what I learned in my practice, to take Buddhist values, and to get off my cushion and out into the world. And he said to me, very distinctly, "You will occasionally lose faith. And when you lose faith, that's when you need to sit down on the cushion again and make some space and reaffirm your commitment to the dharma." That was a turning point for me.

I wish I could have understood and gotten involved earlier in what Stephen Batchelor has called "precepts as practice," because the basic precepts for lay practitioners—not to kill, not to lie, not to steal, not to take intoxicants, and not to have illicit sex—are not something you just do for 30 minutes or an hour on your cushion. They are something you do all of the time as a Buddhist living in modern America. And if you take that into your life with the

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Buddhist literacy. Buddhist tradition always emphasized that study and practice go together; they interpenetrate. And because they interpenetrate, the more you study and the more you understand the intricacy and nuances of Buddhist doctrine, the more sophisticated and deepened your practice will become. And as your practice deepens you gain ability to understand the doctrine in a more subtle way. So they work back and forth. I think in many Buddhist communities here we don't have that. And we also would need more of a complete Buddhist practice that emphasized more than simply the meditative tradition.

Why do you think Americans' focus on meditation is an over-emphasis? When people talk about practicing the buddhadharma, I think they sometimes fail to realize that the buddhadharma is a comprehensive religious system. It doesn't just mean sitting on your meditation cushion and focusing on your breath. Buddhism is a practice for your whole life.

When I took refuge in 1965, I didn't know much about Buddhism, but I knew that I wanted to learn meditation. My teacher said, "If you want me to be your meditation teacher, you will have to sit for four hours a day and all day on Sunday." I started doing that in 1965, and I did it until 1974, when I met Trungpa. I was doing what I thought was the best of the Buddhist tradition that I could find in America. But in my very first meeting with Trungpa, within 30 seconds he said, "I have something I need to tell you

awareness that comes from your practice, then you're getting a balanced and comprehensive Buddhist experience that I think provides a religious maturity and focus for your life. Put into that mix sometimes going to Buddhist communities where they do ritual. I think many people undervalue ritual. They don't want to have anything to do with it. But if you do ritual properly, you are really creating a meditative focus. It preserves the tradition in a way that really comes into your heart.

Can you describe the progression of American Buddhism over the last four decades? What new trends are you seeing? When I first started, we were talking about American Buddhism and whether there was such a thing at all. That's clearly developed to the point where we are starting to see a distinctly Western form of Buddhism. Now even that is almost passé. When I first started studying American Buddhism, we used the telephone. Today there is the internet. Buddhist communities everywhere in North America and the world are so networked that I started using the phrase "global Buddhist dialogue" to talk about a worldwide Buddhism rather than just an Asian, European, or American one. Western Buddhism is increasingly only one part of global Buddhism.

In the seventies and even into the eighties and early nineties, groups were distinctly one tradition or another. Today lots of communities combine bits and pieces of various Buddhist traditions into something that works for them. For example, you might have

a group that picks up bits and pieces of doctrine and practice from Zen and also from Theravada. Some scholars have called this “hybridity.”

How did hybridity develop? By the end of the 20th century, we had every sectarian affiliation from every Buddhist tradition and every Buddhist ethnic culture all present in America. They invariably encountered each other, and as they did so they began to respect each other as sharing the Buddha’s tradition. There were some very explicit ecumenical groups that developed to do just that—like the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California or the American Buddhist Congress. And while they weren’t altogether successful, they at least started the ball rolling to get Buddhists to talk together.

There was a very explicit example of hybridity I saw about three years ago when I went back to Cleveland, Ohio, for a reunion of my college fraternity. When I first started studying American Buddhism, the Buddhist Churches of America organization—Jodo Shinshu Buddhism—was an organization that was predominantly Asian American. And there were a few Zen groups with centers in Cleveland that had little to do with the Asian American population. When I went back to Cleveland, I found that those two groups actually shared a temple together, called the Cleveland Buddhist Temple. In parentheses they call it the Zen Shin Sangha. When they list their denomination,

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they say “Japanese Zen/Shin Buddhism.” The main teacher is Japanese and is affiliated with the Buddhist Churches of America. So they are beginning to talk together. And as a result, hybridity is suggesting to Buddhists that even though they have their own distinct sectarian affiliation, Zen Buddhists aren’t necessarily totally separate from Shin Buddhists and they can learn something from each other and share as Buddhists, even though their sectarian affiliation, ethnicity, and membership may be different. As a result Buddhists are learning more and more about each other.

As American Buddhism develops, do you see a tension between traditions maintaining the integrity of their lineages and this movement toward hybridity? We all should remember that one of the three marks of existence is impermanence. Everything is changing all the time. If you look at the history of the development of Buddhism from early India on, you find that in the early traditions, sometimes known collectively as Nikaya Buddhism, there were as many as 18 different sects. So there were a lot of different ideas about what Buddhism was. Why? Because as Buddhism moved from community to community, teachers lived in different areas where the customs were different: people dressed differently; they acted differently; they ate differently; and they *thought* differently. And so some of these sects that developed reflected not so much a doctrinal difference

between Buddhist communities (although that was the case too sometimes) as they reflected differing lifestyles and values in different communities. And *that’s* why Buddhists split off. Of course out of all those 18 Nikaya sects, only one survives today—Theravada. But the same could be true with Mahayana. When Mahayana developed, it split up into other sects too. Obviously the sects that survived into the modern world are very resilient. When they came to the United States, it was certainly not unreasonable to think that they would change again. It may be that in this coming century we will see some sects that become distinctly North American.

When you pour these lineages that have come from such different histories and backgrounds into an American melting pot, isn’t there a risk that they will get fused into a lump? Isn’t there some integrity in maintaining the distinctiveness? In a personal way, I would like to see the integrity of the individual traditions maintained, but I also understand that we need to consider what, after all, is the point of Buddhism—to eliminate human suffering. And I think if some of these traditions come together in a way that lead people to realization, that makes them whole human beings, that enables them to escape from suffering, that enables them to factor out of the cycle of samsara [if they are Theravadins] or [if they are Mahayanists] to maintain their involvement as bodhisattvas until *all* beings are

saved, then I think that would be valuable. What sometimes gets lost in various debates is that the point of Buddhism is to bring all people out of suffering and to bring them to realization.

What is the importance of academic Buddhist studies for the practice of Buddhism? The early Buddhist tradition generally identified two kinds of monks. One was called the *vipassana dhura* monk. These were monks that were basically meditating monks; they pretty much lived and wandered in the forest. And then there was another kind called the *gantha dhura* monk. *Gantha dura* means “the vocation of books.” These were literate monks who generally tended to gravitate more toward villages and settled areas. You might consider them scholar-monks rather than practitioner-monks. In many respects, they were the individuals who conveyed the Buddhist tradition to the laity in the villages. And when Buddhists were asked which of the two was most important, surprisingly it was the vocation of books that was more important, because the presumption was if the tradition died out there would be no meditation and there would be no monks.

So then fast-forward to the Western world. The United States has never been a very monastic culture, even in other religious traditions. Americans tend not to be willing to renounce the

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world, and there are very few monks and nuns now in modern America. So who fulfills that role of scholar-monks for practitioners and potential practitioners? I've argued since the early nineties that it's scholar-practitioners who fulfill that role, because they have a personal commitment to the tradition. They have a *practice* in the tradition, but they also have the *intellectual knowledge* that comes from having gotten a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies.

In 1978 you referred to "two Buddhisms"—one practiced in "American convert Buddhist communities" and the other in Asian immigrant communities. Do you still see it that way? When I first coined the "two Buddhisms" term, it was very accurate; now it's not. A young scholar, Jeff Wilson, recently pointed out that we haven't really studied the differences in American Buddhist communities based on their locations. Rural Buddhists in North Carolina who are Zen practitioners might be very different from Zen practitioners in San Francisco. It's absolutely true, and nobody has really investigated that. About a year ago, when he first gave a paper on this idea, which he calls "regionalism," I said to him, I think you're dead-on right, but what happens ten years down the road? What with Facebook and YouTube and Skype, maybe people in New York City are going to be savvier about rural Buddhism than they are

now, and people living in Iowa are going to understand big-city people a lot differently than they do now. Regionalism may become passé. And I related this to my "two Buddhism" theory, because this is what has happened with it.



Would you say, then, that convert Buddhists have something to learn from Asian immigrant Buddhist communities? Yes. As opposed to the American convert communities, who are cherry-picking the meditation parts or the parts that they think are going to get them enlightened quickly, the Asian immigrant communities better understand that this is a practice we do as part of our life experience. It's a practice we share with our children. It's a practice we take with us out of the temple. It doesn't mean we shouldn't meditate; it means we need to understand the *context* in which to do it in consonance with the tradition that we've chosen and the lineage that we've followed. And this isn't suggesting that all convert Buddhists should immediately jump into what have traditionally been Asian sectarian affiliations. It means that you make a good decision about what works for you, but then you do it in a full and comprehensive way. ▼

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