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**The Urban Dharma Newsletter - Nov. 1, 2007**  
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HI,

It was a busy month for me in Oct... Not enough time to get the UD Newsletter out...

A few days ago I watched "The Undertaking" on PBS and was moved to put this issue of the newsletter together... "The Undertaking" is on line (see link below), and is well worth the hour needed to watch.

"American Buddhism still hasn't solved the koan of how to get born, married and buried as a Buddhist."

The last article is a good read... Can American Buddhism live and prosper without the Baby Boomers? Are we doing our part to keep Buddhism alive, even in death?

Peace... Kusala

**1. The Undertaking** / Frontline on PBS

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/undertaking/>

"Every year I bury a couple hundred of my townspeople.  
Another two or three dozen I take to the crematory to be burned ...

I sell caskets, burial vaults, and urns for the ashes ... I am the only undertaker in this town."

-- Thomas Lynch

Thomas Lynch, 58, is a writer and a poet. He's also a funeral director in a small town in central Michigan where he and his family have cared for the dead -- and the living -- for three generations. For the first time, Lynch agreed to allow cameras inside Lynch & Sons, giving FRONTLINE producers Miri Navasky and Karen O'Connor rare, behind-the-scenes access -- from funeral arrangements to the embalming room -- to the Lynches' world for this film, *The Undertaking*.

In his critically acclaimed book, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade*, excerpted in the film, Lynch chronicles a life spent in the presence of the dead. "We have in some ways become estranged from death and the dead," Lynch believes. "We're among the first couple of generations for whom the presence of the dead at their own funerals has become optional. And I see that as probably not good news for the culture at large."

The Lynch family believes that the rituals of a funeral are more than mere formalities. "Funerals are the way we close the gap between the death that happens and the death that matters," Lynch contends. "A good funeral gets the dead where they need to go and the living where they need to be."

Often people come to Lynch & Sons long before a death. "My mother had a little stroke about a month ago, and those things make you think more about what's going to happen and how you're going to arrange it," says Anna Dugan, a retired nurse who came to the Lynches' to pick out a casket. For Dugan's 89-year-old mother, protection, even in death, is important. "She doesn't want water inside her casket. So if she's buried in the ground and it's a wet season of the year, she wants to stay dry."

And it's not just the elderly who face these difficult decisions. Anthony and Nevada Verrino, both in their early 30s, came to Thomas Lynch to talk about funeral plans for their only child, Anthony, who was born in 2004 with a rare genetic syndrome. Although baby Anthony, 24 months old, has defied expectations, they know he won't live long, and they speak with remarkable candor about his imminent death. "We still get the question, 'Well, why isn't he eating?'" says Anthony, the baby's father. "And my answer is, 'Because he's dying. You know, because he's dying.'"

"When we're planning ahead," says the young mother, "it might even be in some ways a survival mechanism, because for us it gives us ... steps and procedures of how to do something." Yet the Verrinos also recognize that nothing they do will fully prepare them

for losing their son. "I've spent two years with a very sick baby ... whose prognosis has never been bright," Nevada tells FRONTLINE. "But when I sit and think about the day waking up when he's gone, I can't prepare for that completely, you know."

Before his father's death, David King had been skeptical about many funeral rituals: "I went into it with a lot of reservations, ... and the viewing of someone's body with makeup and all the stuff that goes along with that can be a really strange, alienating thing. ... I thought the funeral would be a necessary custom, that we'd just have to get through it, [but] it ended up being a real comfort."

For Lynch and his family, their business has always been about more than just caring for the dead. "What I've written is that while the dead don't care, the dead matter," Lynch explains. "The dead matter to the living. In accompanying the dead, getting them where they need to go, we get where we need to be -- to the edge of that oblivion and then returned to life with the certain knowledge that life has changed."

**You can view "The Undertaking" with your computer on line at:**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/undertaking/view/>

## **2. Funeral (Buddhism) / From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funeral\\_%28Buddhism%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funeral_%28Buddhism%29)

In Buddhism, death marks the transition from this life to the next for the deceased.

Among Buddhists death is regarded as an occasion of major religious significance, both for the deceased and for the survivors. For the deceased it marks the moment when the transition begins to a new mode of existence within the round of rebirths. When death occurs all the kammic forces that the dead person accumulated during the course of his or her lifetime become activated and set about determining the next rebirth. For the living, death is a powerful reminder of the Buddha's teaching on impermanence; it also provides an opportunity to assist the deceased person as he or she fares on to the new existence.

Theravada traditions

For the non-Arahant, death is a time of transitioning to a yet another rebirth; thus, the living participate in acts that transfer merit to the departed, either providing for a more auspicious rebirth or for the relief of suffering in the departed's new existence. For the

living, ceremonies marking another's death is a reminder of life's impermanence, a fundamental aspect of the Buddha's teaching.

In Sri Lanka, funeral customs include:

\* "Offering of cloth on behalf of the dead" (mataka-vastra-puja):

Prior to a cremation, at the deceased's home or cemetery, the funeral's presiding monastics are offered a white cloth to be subsequently stitched into monastic robes. During this ceremony, the following verse is recited:

Impermanent are formations,  
subject to rise and fall.  
Having arisen, they cease;  
their subsiding is bliss.

Anicca vata sankhara,  
uppada vayadhammino.  
Uppajjitva nirujjhanti  
tesam vupasamo sukho.

\* "Preaching for the benefit of the dead" (mataka-bana):

Within a week after the funeral (usually on the third day after), a monastic returns to the deceased's home to provide an appropriate hour-long sermon for surviving relatives and neighbors.

\* "Offering in the name of the dead" (mataka-dana):

Made three weeks after the funeral and then annually afterwards, the deceased's survivors hold an almsgiving on their behalf.

Mahayana traditions

In China, numerous instructive and merit-transferring ceremonies are held during the forty-nine days between death and rebirth.

Tibetan traditions

A person who is dying and who is recently dead will have for example the "Tibetan Book of the Dead" read to them (in the Nyingma tradition) to help guide them through the

transition period (Tib.: bardo) between lives, easing attachments to this life and deepening bodhisattva wisdom. The corpse is either cremated or dismembered and fed to vultures (Tib.: jhator).

Other Tibetan traditions have other special texts read and rituals performed, which may also be personalized to the specific (vajrayana) practice a person focussed on during his/her life. As the bardo is generally said to last a maximum of 49 days, these rituals will usually last 49 days also. Death and dying is an important subject in Tibetan Buddhism as it is a most critical period for deciding which karma will ripen to lead one to the next rebirth, so a proper control of the mind at the death process is considered essential.

Great meditation masters can even stay a long period (sometimes weeks or even more) in a state between what we would call clinical death and the separation of the mind and the body (the moment of death in the Tibetan tradition), during which they meditate on the special appearance of the 'clear light mind'. Using this special, very subtle state of mind, it is said in the Vajrayana teachings that great spiritual progress can be made, if one has the capacity to be clearly aware of it. In this state of meditation, the body will not show any ordinary signs of death, decay or even smell. After this prolonged meditation, the meditator continues into the bardo or even towards enlightenment. Great masters are often cremated, and their ashes stored as relics in stupas.

In Tibet, firewood was scarce, and the ground often not suitable for burial, so the unusual practice of feeding the body to vultures or other animals developed. One can see this also as an offering to these animals, a last act of generosity and detachment to one's own body.

### **3. Buddhist Funeral Rites**

<http://www.buddhanet.net/funeral.htm>

Theravadins Buddhist follow the Indian custom of burning the body at death. The Buddha's body was cremated and this set the example for many Buddhists, even in the West. When someone is dying in a Burmese home, monks come to comfort them. They chant verses to them, such as:

"Even the gorgeous royal chariots wear out; and indeed this body too wears out. But the teaching of goodness does not age; and so Goodness makes that known to the good ones."

After death, while the dead person is being prepared for the funeral fire, the monks

continue to chant in order to help the dead one's good energies to be released from their fading personality.

The monks come with the family to the funeral. The family and all their friends give food and candles to the monks. Goodwill is created by these gifts and it is believed that the goodwill helps the lingering spirit of the dead person.

Other worlds:

In Tibet, a Mahayana country, the day of death is thought of as highly important. It is believed that as soon as the death of the body has taken place, the personality goes into a state of trance for four days. During this time the person does not know they are dead. This period is called the First Bardo and during it lamas (monks) saying special verses can reach the person to them.

It is believed that towards the end of this time the dead person will see a brilliant light. If the radiance of the Clear Light does not terrify them, and they can welcome it, then the person will not be reborn. But most flee from the Light, which then fades.

The person then becomes conscious that death has occurred. At this point the Second Bardo begins. The person sees all that they have ever done or thought passing in front of them. While they watch they feel they have a body but when they realize this is not so, they long to possess one again. Then comes the Third Bardo, which is the state of seeking another birth. All previous thoughts and actions direct the person to choose new parents, who will give them their next body.

## Traditional Chinese Funeral Arrangements

### Lineage

On the passing away of the father, the eldest son becomes the head of the family. If the eldest son passes away, his second brother does not assume leadership of the family. Leadership passes to the eldest son of the eldest son or the grandson of the father. He must assume the responsibilities and duties to the ancestors on behalf of the family.

### Form of the Funeral Ceremony

There are two main traditions that are observed:

1. The funeral ceremony, traditionally lasts over 49 days, the first seven days being the most important. Prayers are said every seven days for 49 days if the family can afford it.

If the family is in poor circumstances, the period may be shortened to from 3 to 7 days. Usually, it is the responsibility of the daughters to bear the funeral expenses. The head of the family should be present for, at least the first and, possibly the second, prayer ceremony. The number of ceremonies conducted is dependent on the financial situation of the family. The head of the family should also be present for the burial or the cremation.

2. In the second tradition, the prayer ceremony is held every 10 days. The initial ceremony and three succeeding periods of ten days until the final burial or cremation.

After 100 days a final prayer ceremony is conducted, but such a ceremony is optional and not as important as the initial ceremonies.

In the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, to which most Chinese Buddhists subscribe, it is believed that, between death and rebirth, there is an intermediate period called *Antarabhava* in Sanskrit or the *Bardo* in Tibetan. It is an important period which has an influence on the form that the rebirth shall take. If the family ensures that proper assistance in the form of prayer and remembrance ceremonies are duly performed, the departed is better able to take a favourable rebirth.

Funeral Rites (as practiced in Thailand and other South East Asian Countries)

Funeral rites are the most elaborate of all the life-cycle ceremonies and the ones entered into most fully by the monks. It is a basic teaching of Buddhism that existence is suffering, whether birth, daily living, old age or dying. This teaching is never in a stronger position than when death enters a home. Indeed Buddhism may have won its way the more easily in Thailand because it had more to say about death and the hereafter than had animism.

The people rely upon monks to chant the sutras that will benefit the deceased, and to conduct all funeral rites and memorial services. To conduct the rites for the dead may be considered the one indispensable service rendered the community by the monks. For this reason the crematory in each large temple has no rival in secular society.

The idea that death is suffering, relieved only by the knowledge that it is universal, gives an underlying mood of resignation to funerals: Among a choice few, there is the hope of *Nibbana* with the extinction of personal striving; among the vast majority there is the expectation of rebirth either in this world, in the heaven of *Indra* or some other, or in another plane of existence, possibly as a spirit. Over the basic mood of gloom there has grown up a feeling that meritorious acts can aid the condition of the departed. Not all the teaching of *Anatta* (not self) can quite eradicate anxiety lest the deceased exist as *pretas* or as beings suffering torment. For this reason relatives do what they can to ameliorate

their condition.

According to tradition, when a person is dying an effort should be made to fix his mind upon the Buddhist scriptures or to get him to repeat one of the names of Buddha, such as Phra Arahant. The name may be whispered in his ear if the person is far gone. Sometimes four syllables which are considered the heart of the Abhidharma, ci, ce, ru, and ni, representing "heart, mental concepts, form and Nibbana" are written on a piece of paper and put in the mouth of the dying man. It is hoped that if the last thoughts of the patient are directed to Buddha and the precepts, that the fruit of this meritorious act will bring good to the deceased in his new existence. In a village, at the moment of death, the relatives may set up a wailing both to express sorrow and to notify the neighbors who will then come to be of help.

After death a bathing ceremony takes place in which relatives and friends pour water over one hand of the deceased. The body is then placed in a coffin and surrounded with wreaths, candles and sticks of incense. If possible a photograph of the deceased is placed alongside, and colored lights are suspended about the coffin: Sometimes the cremation is deferred for a week to allow distant relatives to attend or to show special honor to the dead. In this case a chapter of monks comes to the house one or more times each day to chant from the Abhidharma, sometimes holding the bhusa yong, a broad ribbon, attached to the coffin. Food is offered to the officiating monks as part of the merit-making for the deceased.

The food offered in the name of the dead is known as Matakabhatta from mataka ("one who is dead"). The formula of presentation is:

Reverend Sirs, we humbly beg to present this mataka food and these various gifts to the Sangha. May the Sangha receive this food and these gifts of ours in order that benefits and happiness may come to us to the end of time.

At an ordinary funeral in northern Thailand the cremation takes place within three days. The neighbors gather nightly to feast, visit, attend the services and play games with cards and huge dominos. The final night is the one following the cremation. On the day of the funeral an orchestra is employed and every effort is made to banish sorrow, loneliness and the fear of spirits by means of music and fellowship. Before the funeral procession begins the monks chant a service at the home and then precede the coffin down the steps of the house, - stairs which are sometimes carpeted with banana leaves. It is felt that the body should not leave the house by the usual route, but instead of removing the coffin through a hole in the wall or floor, which is sometimes done, the front stairs are covered with green leaves to make that route unusual.



A man carrying a white banner on a long pole often leads the procession to the crematorium grounds. He is followed by some elderly men carrying flowers in silver bowls and then by a group of eight to ten monks walking ahead of the coffin and holding a broad ribbon (bhusa yong) which extends to the deceased. Often one of the monks repeats portions of the Abhidharma en route. The coffin may be carried by pall bearers or conveyed in a funeral car drawn by a large number of friends and relatives who feel that they are performing their last service for the deceased and engaged in a meritorious act while doing so. If the procession is accompanied by music the players may ride in ox carts or in a motor truck at the rear. During the service at the cemetery the monks sit facing the coffin on which rest the Pangsukula robes. After the chanting the coffin is placed on a pyre made of brick; the people then come up with lighted torches of candles, incense and fragrant wood and toss them beneath the coffin so that the actual cremation takes place at once. Later the ashes may be collected and kept in an urn.

Frequently the bodies of prominent or wealthy persons are kept for a year or more in a special building at a temple. Cremations are deferred this long to show love and respect for the deceased and to perform religious rites which will benefit the departed. In such cases a series of memorial services are held on the seventh, fiftieth, and hundredth days after the death. In one instance a wealthy merchant did not cremate the body of his daughter until he had spent all her inheritance in merit - making services for her. Another merchant spent the ten thousand baht insurance money received on the death of his small son entirely for religious ceremonies.

As long as the body is present the spirit can benefit by the gifts presented the sermons preached and the chants uttered before it. This thought lies back of the use of the bhusa yong ribbon which extends from the body within the coffin to the chanting monks before it. The dead may thus have contact with the holy sutras. When the body is cremated the spirit is more definitely cut off from the world, it is best therefore not to force that spirit to enter the preta world finally and irrevocably until it has had the benefit of a number of religious services designed to improve its status.

At cremations it is quite common for wealthy people to have printed for distribution books and pamphlets setting forth Buddhist teachings in the form of essays, translation of the sutras, historical sketches and explanations of ceremonies. Such books, numbering in the thousands, are not only a tribute to the dead and a means of making merit but they have practical value as well.

### **Dying is easy**

In Japan a form of Mahayana Buddhism called Zen is practiced. Japanese Zen masters sometimes know when they are going to die.

Once master Hofaku called his monks together and said: "This last week my energy has been draining - no cause for worry. It is just that death is near."

A monk asked: "You are about to die! What does it mean? We will go on living. And what does that mean?"

"They are both the way of things," the master replied.

"But how can I understand two such different states?"

Hofaku answered: "When it rains it pours," and then calmly dies.

#### **4. Burial at sea describes the procedure of disposing of human remains in the ocean.** / From Wikipedia

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burial\\_at\\_sea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burial_at_sea)

Two reasons for burial at sea are if the deceased died while at sea and it is impractical to return the remains to shore, or if the deceased died on land but a burial at sea is requested for private or cultural reasons.

In the latter case, the body might be cremated and an urn containing ashes is committed to the ocean, or the ashes are scattered on the water. Remains may also be dropped from aircraft. The ashes of a survivor of the USS Arizona (see Attack on Pearl Harbor) have been laid to rest with his crew mates in the ship by divers.

Deceased may also be buried in lakes or rivers, the best-known example being the Ganges River in India, which has received the ashes of deceased Hindus for generations.

Burial at sea differs from land burial in that the procedure cannot be reversed. While bodies buried on land can be exhumed for an autopsy, for a relocation, posthumous execution, or for illegal purposes (necrophilia, souvenir hunting, mutilation, or similar), this is usually not possible after a burial at sea. The same difference applies to scattering of ashes or to cremation in general: both the burning and the scattering are irreversible.

Furthermore, while burial on land allows relations to return to the burial site for further services, this is also difficult for burials at sea, and no memorial can be constructed at the burial location. However, it is also possible to interpret every part of the ocean being part of the grave site, and the relatives may return to any coastline or ocean for

remembrance services.

### Modern burial at sea procedures

Burial at sea services are available at many different locations and with many different customs, either by ship or by aircraft. Usually, either the captain (or commanding officer) of the ship or aircraft or a representative of the religion performs the ceremony. Legally, a captain can bury remains at sea, provided that environmental regulations are satisfied. In the United States, ashes have to be scattered at least 3 miles from shore, and bodies can be given to the sea if the location is at least 600 feet (200 m) deep. Special regulations may also apply to the urns and coffins. However, local laws may differ, and in the Great South Bay, New York it is legal to drop ashes right from the dock .

The ceremony may include burial in a casket, burial sewn in sailcloth, burial in an urn, or scattering of the cremated remains by ship. Burial at sea by aircraft is usually done only with cremated remains. Other types of burial at sea include the mixing of the ashes with concrete and dropping the concrete block to form an artificial reef such as the Atlantis Reef. Below is a list of religions in alphabetical order that allow burial at sea, with some details of the burial. However, there are always many different beliefs even within the same religion, and views may differ according to those beliefs.

Because of the particular logistics of scattering ashes at sea, there are commercial services that do so for a fee. One such service, the Neptune Society (a franchise with many branches) was charged in a class action lawsuit in California with causing emotional distress by co-mingling ashes, and with illegal dumping.

### Buddhism

There are very few traditional Buddhist burials at sea. Traditionally, as in Hinduism, the deceased are cremated and the ashes are placed in a grave or columbarium. Particularly in East Asian or Mahayana Buddhism, a physical gravesite is considered important for the conduct of memorial and ancestor rites. The Buddhist Churches of America, the North American branch of Japanese Jodo Shinshu Buddhism, has created a service for Buddhist burials at sea, primarily for military service members.

## **5. Tibetan sky burial among Buddhists by Can Tran**

<http://www.helium.com/tm/257502/after-death-ceremonies-faith>

After death ceremonies vary from each faith from Judaism, Islam, Christianity, etc. In Tibetan Buddhism, there's a method of burial known as sky burial. Being Buddhist myself, I didn't know what a sky burial was. My humanities professor in college explained the sky burial before we watched a movie called "Kundun." The story behind Kundun is a biographical drama detailing the life of the current Dalai Lama who is the religious leader of the Buddhist faith.

The sky burial is pretty gruesome sight especially watching it for the first time. First time I saw the sky burial that was portrayed in Kundun, I wanted to cringe. It gave me the creeps. But you can't overlook the symbolism behind a sky burial. Each burial ceremony is sacred and carries a lot of symbolism. Sky burial is no different from such burial ceremony.

During the ceremony, the deceased is carried out to the open mountainous areas where vultures are present. What the monks do is sever each body part of the dead body and toss them out to the vultures. It seems disrespectful and sacrilegious to most faiths because it looks as if the body is desecrated. But that's not the intention of the sky burial.

Sky burial's intention is that when the vultures tear apart the flesh from the bones, your essence is part of the birds' essence. To them, you're still living but part of your body lives on in the birds. Also, the sky burial represents that you're giving back to life and to nature. Vultures are considered birds of prey and the sky burial is to honor those birds of prey.

Instead of being buried in the ground, your body is carried up in the sky. Such as a ground burial is common in Christianity, a sky burial is common in Tibetan Buddhism. The terrain of Tibet has a lot to do of why the sky burial is practiced over burial and cremation. Tibet itself is at a high altitude where the terrain is hard, rocky, and mountainous. If you're not conditioned enough, you'll get sick from the lack of oxygen due to the air being thin.

The terrain was very hard meaning you couldn't dig a hole and place a person's remains in. Resources such as timber and fuel are pretty scarce and hard to come by. Which is one of the factors that the Tibetans would rather use the sky burial.

From what I saw in Kundun, the sky burial is one of the most simplistic burial ceremonies I had ever seen or heard about. It's very simplistic. No extravagant nor glamorous things are done. It's just simple, nothing more and nothing less, which is what nature intended. A sky burial is to simply dispose of the deceased's remains.

If you ever take an interest in Tibetan Buddhism, definitely read up on the sky burial. It

also happened to be applied to some Native American cultures.

A lot of people would consider a sky burial to be disrespectful. But a sky burial possesses strong symbolism and a few benefits. A sky burial represents generosity which is one of the virtues taught in Buddhism. You're giving your body up to the birds in a generous act in hopes to reincarnate in better circumstances. However the reason it's called a sky burial because it was dubbed that name by the Westerners. While in Tibet it's called a jhator which is defined as giving to the birds. A sky burial is also friendly on the environment because no nutrients and resources are wasted. Meaning no trees are chopped up, no rocks containing minerals are crushed, and no fuel is burned meaning no pollution.

In a nutshell, a sky burial was the cycle of life and death at its simplest as nature intended.

Like any other burial, a sky burial has its laws and costs. Anybody that is non-Tibetan are not usually allowed to witness and observe a sky burial nor are people allowed to take pictures. There are numerous sites where sky burials take place one example is the Drigung Monastery which happens to be one of the most important. By burial law, relatives can be present but they can't actually see the sky burial ceremony take place.

A full service sky burial is very costly. With a full sky burial, monks would be present and giving chants during the ceremony. People would just place their deceased on the high rocks and let the vultures tear the remains apart instead.

Recently, sky burials were brought back in the 1980s. The Chinese had considered the sky burial to be forbidden and thus outlawed it from the 50s to the 70s due to the barbaric looking nature of the sky burial.

## **6. "Change or Die:" American Buddhism When Baby-Boomer Converts Are Gone / ReligionWriter.com**

<http://www.religionwriter.com/conversion/change-or-die-american-buddhism-when-baby-boomer-converts-are-gone/>

**"American Buddhism still hasn't solved the koan of how to get born, married and buried as a Buddhist."**

In the current issue of the quarterly American Buddhist magazine Tricycle, contributing

editor and former Zen monk Clark Strand makes a provocative claim: that American Buddhism must "change or die."

American converts to Buddhism have focused on spiritual practice to the exclusion of concerns like creating rituals and passing along the tradition to the next generation. "With few exceptions, Buddhism is not being passed down in families by members of the convert community," he writes in his article, "Dharma Family Values."

Although Strand praises the American Buddhist group Soka Gakkai International for better incorporating children and families into their practice of Buddhism, he writes that even that group "still hasn't solved the koan of how to get born, married and buried as a Buddhist."

ReligionWriter called Strand at his home office in Woodstock, NY, to find out why he thinks American Buddhists have failed to develop their own religious culture, and how this gap might be filled.

**RW:** When you write that American Buddhism faces the possibility of extinction, are you exaggerating?

**Strand:** It's not an exaggeration, though by "death" I mean that American Buddhism becomes so completely marginalized as to not exert any significant impact on society. Buddhism in this country has a good start, and it has developed a fair amount of vitality and visibility; words like karma and nirvana are part of the popular lexicon now.

But if American Buddhism doesn't come to see itself as a religion, or at least as addressing religious needs, sometime over the next generation or two, it's going to run afoul of the generational bias of Baby Boomers, who tend to think that anything they embrace in numbers is here to stay. In fact their large numbers create an illusion, and as they begin to die off, what seemed like a significant movement may go back to a baseline number. I think that's what's going to happen, unless American Buddhist wake up and approach Buddhism as a whole life enterprise.

**RW:** One often hears American Buddhists say things like, "You can be a Christian or Jew and be a Buddhist. It's not a religion." Do you think that idea, appealing to many, that Buddhism is not a religion has also caused these problems you're outlining?

**Strand:** When you hear statements like that, keep in mind that Buddhism entered the American scene when the traditional moral and spiritual authority of the Christian and Jewish communities were being called into question. Buddhism came to this country through the Academy, through people like [Buddhist author] D.T. Suzuki and [philosophy

professor] Paul Carus, so from the word go, Buddhism was in slightly disembodied state. Ethnic Buddhism had been here for a while, of course; Chinese railroad workers, Japanese sugar cane cutters and others brought the religion with them but they didn't proselytize. Americans were interested in meditation or philosophy or other aspects of the Buddhist experience, but they didn't get the whole cloth.

This happened right about the time modern life was going ballistic, becoming very stressful. People were starting to think about the relaxation response and meditation and how to slow down. Buddhism fed into the craze for self actualization and self help. Now American Buddhists have to figure out a way of appropriating it on a more significant level. They can't call it a religion because it doesn't feel like a religion to them. As an alternative, American Buddhists tend to say they are "spiritual:" That seems to express the middle ground between religion and self-help.

**RW:** How many Buddhists are there in the U.S., and what percentage of that number are converts like yourself?

**Strand:** The numbers are notoriously unreliable. The numbers tossed out there over the last few years range from six million to 600,000. The percentage of converts is hard to judge. Is a convert a person who has a few books by the Dalai Lama on his or her night stand? If you ask them what religion they are, they might say, "I'm more Buddhist than anything." Buddhism has become a kind of default religion for American seekers.

**RW:** Do those people with a casual involvement in Buddhism matter in the larger scope of American Buddhism?

**Strand:** A lot of people will deemphasize that as a trend, but I don't. [Academic] Thomas Tweed used the term nightstand Buddhists to describe people he felt weren't Buddhist at all but liked to keep Buddhist books as an inoculation against anxiety, or to have some contact with spiritual tradition in their lives. Tweed didn't take such people seriously as Buddhists, and his term reflects that. But I think when people say, "If you held a gun to my head, I'd say I'm Buddhist," they are expressing their dissatisfaction with existing religious models. They know enough about Buddhism to know it doesn't have the congenital defects of their own religious traditions, but they don't know enough about it to see that Buddhism has its own congenital defects. Embracing Buddhism becomes a way for people to project their hopes for a sane, global religion for 21st century.

**RW:** It seems like there's a conflict here. You want American Buddhism to be more like a religion, with child care on Sunday mornings. But one of the main attractions to Buddhism for many Americans is that it is not a religion. Can you explain?

**Strand:** That conflict has been there before. The oldest Buddhist organization in the U.S. is the Buddhist Churches of America. It was formed mostly by Japanese field workers who first came to California and Hawaii almost 100 years ago. It is faith-based, rather than meditation-based. When the group started in the U.S., it still had many earmarks of being culturally Japanese or Asian. But after Japanese-Americans were incarcerated during World War II, they tried to assimilate more quickly; they adopted American customs like having pews and wearing suits and calling their priests "ministers." When a lot of Americans were looking for alternative religious experiences in the 1960s and 70s, the Buddhist Churches of America had the best infrastructure and the most feet on the ground, but nobody was interested in them because "they look too much like us." And they were — the religion was very Americanized.

One of the big questions for converts to American Buddhism is: What happens when the exoticism wears off? When you're like I am, and you've been at it for a while, and you're married and you have kids, you are no longer going off for week-long or month-long meditation retreats. How do you work with that? How do you pass along your practice? If there is not some weekly gathering you can go to with your whole family, the chances you're going to pass along Buddhism to your children is almost nil. If all you have to work with is a monastery and retreat system, and a leadership of celibate or semi-celibate monks and nuns, not much is going to happen with the next generation.

**RW:** Why are ethnic Buddhist and convert Buddhist communities so separate?

**Strand:** The communities have different needs and different values. Ethnic religious communities are hugely interested in two things: They want the rights and opportunities and protections of being members of American society — assimilation — and at the same time, they want to conserve their religious tradition and density. American converts are interested in appropriating religious teaching and fashion and ideas, but they're usually not so interested in conserving traditional ethnicity and ritual. There is a fair amount of incompatibility there.

**RW:** Given that many Americans came to Buddhism as young people in the 1960s and 70s, why wasn't there a gradual, organic growth of American Buddhist culture as those people, like yourself, matured and had families?

**Strand:** My most honest response is that you cannot import a religion the way you import a product. Religion purports to connect us to the deepest level of our beings. You can't just go to another country, meet a teacher, go on a retreat, buy some cushions, bring it all back and suddenly the religion is here. It takes a long time to transmit teachings and adapt rituals. It takes a long time to develop a culture to support a religion. That's the big problem: When you import a religious teaching to a country, you get the teaching but not



the culture, and a lot of Asian culture doesn't work in the U.S. without being adapted.

**RW:** What would you like to see American Buddhists doing more of?

**Strand:** I think Buddhists need to hold weekly or, at the very least, monthly discussion groups. They need to get together and talk to one another, not just practice together or listen to a teacher, but just talk to one another about their lives. Buddhists need to ask honestly: "What kind of Buddhism addresses the questions and needs of my life?" If I'm a Zen Buddhist, and therefore spend long periods in meditation, I should ask myself: "Is this meditation really helping me? Is it addressing the issues of my whole life? Or only part of my life?" If you have kids or a stressful job or a difficult marriage or financial problems, Buddhism should be able to address those issues. If it can't, then it's not functioning.

The second thing Buddhists have to ask themselves is: "Do I compartmentalize Buddhism in my life?" Very few observant, devout Catholics would dream, for example, of being married in a secular service. Yet Buddhists routinely get married by justices of the peace, because the culture is not there to support them in being Buddhist; it has not yet evolved. I wrote my article to point out that Buddhists in this country aren't as concerned about developing this culture as they should be. I'm afraid they won't see the need until the numbers go way down.

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