



SIMILARITIES BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND AMERICAN CULTURE

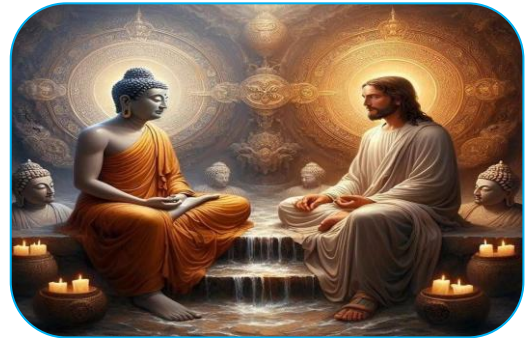
Nguyen Thi Anh Vy

(Bhikkhuni Thich Nguyen Giac Hanh)

**Ph.D. Research Scholar , Department of Buddhist Studies ,
Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India.**

ABSTRACT

America, also known as the United States of America, is based on Western culture (primarily European) but has been shaped and developed through the cultural diversity of many different communities. Groups such as Africans, Native Americans, Asians, Polynesians, and Latin Americans have contributed significantly to the richness and diversity of American culture throughout its history, creating a blending of cultures. Besides the diversity of different skin colors and ethnicities, there are also diverse parties and religions such as Christianity, Non-religious/secular, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Agnostic, Atheist, Hinduism, etc. This has helped the United States develop a distinctive cultural identity and create a strong global influence.



The message that America wants to send to the world about itself is the "American Dream". In the speech by Martin Luther King, the saying "I Have a Dream" is considered a classic milestone showing the effort towards racial equality in America. In a secular society, moral standards are always the foundation for society to develop and survive, especially, the United States also uses ethics in religion to teach people to respect equality and human rights.

This shows the similarity of equality in Buddhism in American society. So, what are those similarities? How was Buddhism received when it was introduced to America?

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, American culture, American society, message, similarities, democracy, Buddhist traditions..

1. INTRODUCTION

The United States of America is a proud country with the title of the New World. Although this country has a relatively young history, it is still a promised land that attracts many immigrants from other countries. Meanwhile, in faraway India - the land of spiritual colors, people come back to immerse themselves in the endless sound of prayers or indulge in the forest of philosophy, the place where Prince Siddhartha was born from the capital city of Kapilavastu, He attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, becoming the Enlightened One, a Buddha of humanity more than 2,500 years ago. How did two countries with different cultures and religious beliefs meet in the light of Buddhism? How could the indigenous people of that promising land receive the teachings of Buddha? Would the influence of Buddhism slow down the development of that multi-ethnic, multi-religious country? To this day, what

has Buddhism contributed to the achievements of America? Americans are still famous for their pragmatic way of life, they need clarity so they do not easily accept what goes against science or is obscure in the name of mystery. Is Buddhism obscure? Or is it mysterious in its anti-science? Or is it ambiguous in its teachings of wisdom and compassion?

2. Overview of the United States of America

The Americas, also known as the New World, consist of two continents: South America and North America, with an area of 42 million km², stretching from the Arctic in the north to the Antarctic in the south, bordering the Pacific Ocean to the west, the Atlantic Ocean to the east, Canada to the north and Mexico to the south. The Isthmus of Panama, less than 50 km wide, is the narrowest part of the Americas, cutting through the isthmus, connecting the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Christopher Columbus (1451-1506), an Italian navigator, is considered the first person to discover America during his transatlantic voyage in 1492. He and his Spanish supporters reached this new continent and described it as a New World because they thought it was a completely unknown region.

The United States of America, also known as America, abbreviated as U.S. or USA, is a Federal Constitutional Republic consisting of 50 states and a federal district. The government agency is located in the capital Washington, the busiest city is New York.

The country's motto is "In God We Trust" which has been officially used since 1956. However, in his speech on September 11, 2016, former President Barack Obama - the 44th President, added another slogan that we cannot forget, which is "Out of many, we are one". Before being elected President, in 2004, his speech also emphasized the slogan "Out of many, one" - a speech that made President Obama admired by the whole world. The 16th President, Abraham Lincoln (1809 - 1865) was voted by a British historian as one of the five greatest people in the world when he declared the abolition of classes and the liberation of slaves during his second presidential term (1861 - 1865).

3. The First Buddhist Imprint on American Land

When did Buddhism enter the United States? Many documents have mentioned this issue. Some researchers believe that Buddhism officially appeared in the United States in the second half of the 19th century, about a century after this country gained independence.

However, a recent document based on M. de Guines, a French Orientalist, has sparked controversy in the study community, claiming that Buddhist monks first set foot in the United States in 458, long before Columbus discovered America. Bhikkhu Hwui Shan of the Southern and Northern Dynasties of China reported to the king about his journey with four Kapul monks in 458 to the country of Fusang. It is known that Kapul is today's Afghanistan. This country was once a massive center of Buddhism belonging to the Gandhara sect. Specifically, according to the document *Was Middle America Peopled from Asia?* by Edward. S. Morse, also mentions the visit of Chinese monks to the land of Fusang in 458 and the return of a Buddhist monk from that land in 499. M. de Guines's memoirs appeared in 1761 and for about 40 years received little attention. In 1831, Klaproth, the famous German Orientalist, opposed the view that Fusang was Mexico and insisted that it was Japan. In 1844, Chevalier de Paravey argued that Fusang should be sought in America. Professor Karl Friedrich Neumann also supported this view.¹

In addition, the work *Fu-sang on the Discovery of America by Chinese Buddhist Priests in the Fifth Century* by Charles Godfrey Leland—a researcher of American folk songs—also supports M. de Guines's point of view. He believes that, in the past, the people of Fusang were ignorant of Buddhism. Five monks

¹ Edward Sylvester Morse, "Popular Science Monthly Volume 54 November 1898", 'Was Middle America Peopled from Asia'?

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Popular_Science_Monthly/Volume_54/November_1898/Was_Middle_America_Peopled_from_Asia%3F

from Kipin (Cabul) arrived there in 458 A.D., bringing with them scriptures and beliefs.² This view is repeated many times in the work, they emphasize that these five Bhikkhus came to Fusang and spread the law of Buddha³. The more interesting is that they also hope that time will soon prove that the Buddhist monks themselves were in America. These things are completely certain facts and not fiction. Although the majority of people do not know, that information needs to be respected even if it is a very brief fact included in the annals. The truth has been covered in darkness for a long time, one day it will come with clearness.⁴

Moreover, John Fryer – a researcher at the University of California spoke up in an article titled “*The Buddhist Discover of America a Thousand Years before Columbus*” published in Harper’s Monthly Magazine in 1901. John Fryer acknowledged that Afghan Buddhist monks had traveled to the United States. He said that an ancient statue had been discovered in the town of Magdalena in Mexico and that these monks had brought the teachings of Buddha to America.⁵

Ten years later, in 1885, an American expert named Edward Payson Winning agreed with M. de Guines’s point of view through his work *An Inglorious Columbus: or Evidence that Hwui Shan and a Party of Buddhist Monks from Afghanistan Discovered America in the Fifth Century A.D.* The author quoted the report of Bhikkhu Hwui Shan with details of his journey to America, about the lifestyle of the natives, their personal life, family, society, customs, and beliefs. Traces of this missionary work were only found in 1914 on a swastika-shaped site in Lakeside Mountains, near San Jacinto Valley, California. At the same time, he also said that the noun “Maya”⁶ - a people with a great civilization in Mexico - originated from the queen’s name in India.

In 1953, Gordon Ekholm, a scholar and archaeologist, demonstrated the similarities between Buddhist and Hindu art in Mexico in an article published in *American Antiquity*, in January 1953.⁷ Symbols of lotus pedestals, alms bowls, suns, dragons, snakes, etc. appeared around the 5th century when Chinese monks set foot in America.

Furthermore, in 1996, Donald Mackenzie’s work *Pre-Columbus American Myths and Legends* was published, detailing the customs and practices of the indigenous people before Columbus set foot in the New World, emphasizing the influence of Buddhism in the rituals and ways of behaving of the people there.

In short, M. de Guines with the data about the journey in 458 of Bhikkhu Hwui Shan with four Bhikkhus from Kabul has been an attractive topic attracting scholars to prove its history, stirring up a doubt in the research community: Were Buddhists the ones who discovered America in the early days when the border between Mexico and the United States was still very fragile in the 5th century? After that, from the 5th century to the 19th century, people did not see any trace of Buddhism, so this period can also be called interrupted Buddhism, and the 5th century is considered the time when Buddhism began to make its first mark on American land. So, what happened when Buddhism was officially introduced?

4. Buddhism in America - Formation and Development

William Jones (1746 - 1794) - a famous jurist, and a pioneer in the study of Sanskrit in the West, is an outstanding and versatile Orientalist. During his years of working in India, he aroused a lively interest in the study of ancient Indian society through his tireless literary activities. He published a set of 50 Oriental scriptures, of which 10 volumes were about Buddhism, the Lotus Sutra was also written

² Charles Godfrey Leland, *Fu-sang on the Discovery of America by Chinese Buddhist Priests in the Fifth Century*, New York: J.W. Bouton, 1875, p. 168-69

³ Ibid, p.155

⁴ Ibid, p.186

⁵ Brannon Parker, *The Serpent The Eagle The Lion & The Disk*, United States, 2012, p. 332

⁶ Vining, Edward Payson, *An Inglorious Columbus: or Evidence that Hwui Shan and a Party of Buddhist Monks from Afghanistan Discovered America in the Fifth Century A.D.*, New York: Appleton, 1885, p. 234

⁷ Henriette Mertz, *Pale Ink*, 1953, at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/earth/pi/pi10.htm>

on this topic. In *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844 -1912* by Thomas A. Tweed, there is a part in the foreword as follows: "Some Americans were quite impressed with what they saw in Buddhism's compatibility with science",⁸ which is why they were attracted to Buddhism.

In 1826, Eugene Bournouf composed the Pali Grammar and translated the Lotus Sutra into French. In 1844, Henry David Thoreau (1871 – 1862) (a native American) translated the Lotus Sutra from French into English and introduced it to the American people. Thus, H. D. Thoreau was the first propagator of the teachings, Buddhism officially appeared in the United States in the second half of the 19th century. While studying the Lotus Sutra, he was completely conquered by Buddhist teachings. The Lotus Sutra is considered a Buddhist literary work that influenced the American natives, carrying the idea of the One Vehicle path, and is considered the core and heart of the Buddhist teachings. True to what H. D. Thoreau contributed to the development of Buddhism in America later, it is not too much of an exaggeration when James Hilgendorf - author of two works *The Buddha and the Dream of America* and *Life & Death* emphasized that Thoreau was the harbinger of a great revolution in Buddhism and it would flower in the West.⁹

The seeds began a new life. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) - a key figure in the American literary tradition, and an extraordinary thinker - helped found a philosophical, social, and literary foundation in the United States in the early 19th century. It is worth mentioning that his thoughts were also influenced by Buddhism with many philosophies paralleling the Zen school of Buddhism. He advised that to understand the way of practicing Buddhism, it is necessary to have basic knowledge of the Three Refuges, Samsara, Karma, Nirvana, or the Four Noble Truths. Thus, around the 19th century, the teachings of the Buddha were beginning to be accepted and developed among intellectuals in the West.

The roots had begun to take root and take hold in the ground. The first American Buddhist to take refuge in Sri Lanka – retired colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832 – 1907) and Russian Buddhist Petrova Blavatsky founded the Buddhist Theosophical Society in 1875 in New York. It was the first Buddhist organization in the United States, quickly attracting American intellectuals' attention and creating a wave of interest in Eastern Buddhism among American philosophers, writers, and poets. Olcott is considered a modern figure of Buddhism because of his efforts to interpret Buddhism through a Western lens, reviving what the Buddha did and what he taught. Moreover, Buddhists from a country where Buddhism was not yet developed made great contributions to Sri Lankan Buddhism, reviving Buddhism in this country, and wholeheartedly helping Sri Lankan Buddhists to gain the rights they had lost. At this point, can we say that Buddhism has truly taken root and firmly anchored in the soil of the United States?

Anagarika Dharmapala (1864 – 1933), whose secular name was David Hewavitarana, contributed greatly to the movement to revive Buddhism in India, reclaiming Buddhist relics for Indian Buddhists. At the age of 20, he began a celibate life, devoting all his time to serving Buddhism, and working as an interpreter for H. S. Olcott. In 1893, the World Congress of Religions was held in Chicago, and he traveled to the United States to attend as a representative of "Southern Buddhism" - the name of Theravada Buddhism at that time - at the invitation of Reverend J. H. Barrows after reading Dharmapala's articles published in the Maha Bodhi magazine.

The congress was held with the participation of representatives of more than ten religions in the world. This was also an opportunity for Buddhism to stand before these major religions and introduce itself, creating a major turning point in the process of Buddhism entering the New World. With shoulder-length black hair and the bright eyes of a person who has achieved wisdom and far-reaching vision, he confidently looked straight at the audience in the hall, where someone was walking

⁸ Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844 – 1912: Victorian Culture and the Limit of Dissent*, Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

⁹ Charles Creekmore, *The Accidental Buddhist: How Henry David Thoreau Can Make Us All Better Buddhists*, at <http://buddhismmagazine.com>

toward the salvation of God. With the clear voice of a person who was sending the Buddha's messages to humanity, fluent in English expression, he presented Buddhism according to Western concepts, standing from the perspective of people who love science to accept Buddhism. In this way, he became an unparalleled missionary carrying the Buddha's message to the four corners of the world. In his opening speech, Dharmapala confidently stood before the hall and affirmed *"The Creator has no place in Buddhism. Therefore, Buddhism does not need to invent any myths or miracles that are contrary to scientific discoveries"*. Moreover, he also declared in his second speech that *"The object of enlightenment today is no longer theology but philosophy and psychology"*. He bluntly criticized the ambiguous attitude of Hinduism when considering Buddhism as a part of traditional religion while there were differences between the two religions that could not go together. *"Twenty-five centuries ago, India witnessed an intellectual and religious revolution to overthrow the monotheism of the castes of selfish and monopolistic priests, to establish a synthetic religion, a system of life and thought appropriately named dharma – philosophical religion"*¹⁰.

Dharmapala preached from the perspective of the recipient, understanding their psychology and desires. *"Why do I come here today? Because I find in this new city, in this land of freedom"*. That is why he came to this conference. The United States is a country that loves freedom. He did not stand from the perspective of Buddhism to praise the religion he was following, but he stood on the side of those who were longing for a scientific, non-theistic faith and spoke the truth about a philosophical religion that originated in India 2,500 years ago. In 1896, Dharmapala returned to the United States and preached in major cities on the topic he had presented many times: "Reconciliation of Buddhism and Christianity". In 1897, for the first time, Dharmapala held the first Buddha's Birthday celebration in America, 400 American Buddhists respectfully listened to him chant the Magala Sutra from a palm leaf manuscript. In 1902-1904, Harvard professor William James was converted to Buddhism by Dharmapala. Perhaps the United States at this time was ripe for a spiritual revolution because the younger generation was no longer confined to so-called traditions¹¹ and Americans would learn how to have a truly happy smile.

The message of peace, freedom, and classlessness was spread throughout America, and intellectuals directly accepted Buddhism as a way to build a United States society without discrimination and war. Also, at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Zen Master Soyen Shaku (1851-1919), in addition to his speech "The Law of Cause and Effect of Buddhism", strongly declared: *"Our Buddha, he taught that all Buddhist practitioners are completely equal, just like all rivers flow into the ocean... We are not born to fight each other. We are born to enlighten our understanding and to cultivate good qualities under the guidance of truth... We should not differentiate between one race and another, between one civilization and another, between one creed and another, or between one faith and another... All beings in the universe are in the bosom of truth. We are brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of truth. Truth be praised"*¹².

If Japanese Buddhism had its beginnings in America with considerable achievements in the years of the 20th century, Chinese Buddhism appeared in the New World earlier because of immigration in the early 1950s after a gold mine was discovered in the north of San Francisco. In 1853, the first Chinese Buddhist temple appeared in America, and by the end of the 19th century, there were more than 400 Chinese temples across the United States. A "boom" (not to say development) of the temple system of Chinese Buddhism was quite rapid. Why? The American people do not like a religion that reeks of praying, asking for lots, fortune telling, and incense smoke. If we talk about faith, they already have "In God We Trust", that is the slogan of their spiritual belief, we cannot change that unless we give Americans a direction that is even better than "In God We Trust". Religious beliefs are not easy to

¹⁰ Anagarika Dharmapala, "Mr. H. Dharmapala at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago," in *Journal of the Maha-Bodhi Society*, Vol. II, No. 7, Calcutta, November 1893, p. 862-880, 863.

¹¹ Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, Boston & London, 1992, p 246

¹² John H. Barrows (edited), *The World's Parliament of Religions*, Vol. II, Chicago: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893, p. 1285.

change, Buddhism should prove its inherent scientific nature, the truth in a philosophical religion rather than competing for belief in God. Chinese missionaries have not lived with the American people, have not understood or do not need to understand what the American people need and desire, what American society desires to develop, not believing in a distant, vague future through the judgment of ... divinations. Today, the number of Chinese Buddhist temples is not much, because the large temples do not have abbots to manage, in addition to national pride, they do not emphasize learning English, leading to language differences, and there are no native Buddhists to continue, it is even more painful when the younger generation is caught up in a lifestyle where morality is underestimated, they have not had the opportunity to come into contact with the teachings of Buddha while hundreds of temples have sprung up that only focus on belief, lacking in practice and study. That is why Chinese Buddhism did not develop much in America. So, will Buddhism die out here?

Vietnamese Buddhism with the torch of Venerable Thien An. In 1966, the Venerable set foot in the United States with many contributions and outstanding achievements. He ordained Karuna Dharma (1940 - 2014), becoming the first American Bhikkhuni and also a doctor of Buddhist studies, later one of his successors. Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh (1926 - 2022) was the one who passed the lamp to Venerable Thien An. The world Buddhist community always holds a respect for this Vietnamese Zen Master as well as his brown-robed Sangha - Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. Peace is always the desire, the main idea for those who love and respect this world. The American people are the same. What they need is a way for them to know how to face suffering, resolve deadlocks with their own understanding, and build love and forgiveness for the surrounding environment. They do not need material things, because they have enough material things and are too comfortable, they do not need a savior because they already have God, they already have Jesus. Buddhism should be more realistic with people's desires. Thich Nhat Hanh succeeded in practicing the Buddha's teachings because he grasped this law, helping the people of that rich and powerful country escape from the confinement of the digital network and the freezing of human emotions. Likewise, the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, the spiritual leader, artistic politician of the Tibetan people and also the most prominent political refugee in the world, when developing Buddhism in the West, both he and Thich Nhat Hanh shared the same view, which was not to convert others but to encourage people to look deeply into their own spiritual and cultural traditions. Their Nobel Peace Prize demonstrates the development of Buddhism in the West, promoting the spirit of democracy and protecting human rights that American society in particular, and developed countries in general are in great need of.

In terms of media information, many Buddhist magazines were born in the United States such as The Buddhist Ray (1888-1894) in Santa Cruz, The Light of Dharma (1901-1907) in San Francisco, New York Buddhists, The Path, etc. All of these further prove the truth that Buddhism entered and developed in the United States through the path of knowledge, not with a strong prayer nature but with a practical and fruitful nature. Buddhism did not come to America to gain more followers, the main purpose of Buddhism is to help people face and resolve deadlocks in life, and at the same time find faith in the religion they follow. They can believe in God according to their own beliefs and can also believe in the way that Buddhism has shown them to find the treasures in their beliefs. "In God We Trust", we believe in God but only believe in what does not bring war, violence, or suffering to this humanity. That is how Buddhism has existed and developed in European and American countries, helping people there create a source of peaceful energy within themselves.

5. Similarities between Buddhism and American Culture

The development of Buddhism in the United States will show the similarities between American culture and Buddhism because only similarities lead to the development. The biggest similarity is the promotion of democracy, moreover, both aim to develop a religion that is always equipped with wisdom, focusing on maintaining inner peace rather than being bound by form. As we know, Buddhism has a history of more than 2,500 years and America has a relatively young history of founding the nation, but the combination to be called Buddhism in America has affirmed the nature of peace that is always emphasized.

If Americans are people with a very practical way of life, Buddhism is not a religion that promotes fantasy. The teachings that Buddha proposed are to escape suffering and achieve peace and happiness in this life. Americans need the same! They do not like ambiguity and vagueness, just as Buddhism does not like things that are far from reality. Americans can ask what benefits they will get when they put their faith in a religion. Buddhism also advises people to carefully consider what is beneficial to themselves and others, then they should believe and follow it. Americans promote an independent way of life, not relying on anyone, and taking responsibility for their own actions. Buddha also taught his disciples to light their own torches and go, to be their own islands. In addition, the doctrine of Karma, and the doctrine of Cause and Effect are an immortal law that helps people be aware of the effects of actions before doing something. There is no racial or class distinction in the Buddhist Sangha, he has carried out this revolution in the Sangha since his lifetime. Likewise, Americans hate racial discrimination, they promote and protect human rights, especially the elderly, women, and children. It is the Buddhist doctrine of equality that has helped American women realize their full potential and skills. Environmentalists also consider the Buddhist doctrine of compassion as the basic principle to call on people to respect and preserve the ecological environment.

America is vast because of its tolerance, accepting all cultures of immigrant countries as its own culture along with the ideals of freedom and peace. The Buddhist Sangha accepts all those who want to practice the Buddha's teachings, aiming for liberation, without discrimination of caste or class. The most intelligent and humane solution is to not contain discrimination, always have understanding, and be full of love. America has done so for homosexuals who cannot stand the pressure of society. That is why the people of some countries want to come to America to live more and more!

These similarities have created Buddhism in the heart of American society. The development of Buddhism is not about big temples, many monks and nuns, and many Buddhists, but about those who know and seriously practice the Buddha's teachings to move towards a world without war and violence, where there is only freedom and peace as two famous Buddhist leaders, Dalai Lama, and Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh are contributing something to American culture, not trying to convert others. They do not build magnificent temples but provide what Americans need for spirituality, which is reconciliation and harmony and the way to have peace of mind and body.

6. CONCLUSION

In short, the United States of America is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, therefore, to be able to call it American Buddhism after a process of being identified, formed, and developed is very difficult because American Buddhism is still a combination of several Buddhist traditions of other countries. Although there are many traditions, such as Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, Pure Land, Japanese Zen, Chinese Zen, etc., the most popular with the American people are still Vipassana meditation, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, and the meditation method of Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, these three traditions represent the characteristics of American Buddhism, which promote equality and democracy, development associated with society, and an open and flexible spirit of practice, not bound by form, as the Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso once said: *"My religion is very simple. There is no need for temples, no need for lofty philosophies. My heart and mind are temples; my philosophy is kindness... Happiness is not something ready-made, it comes from your own actions"*¹³.

A special thing we can see is that all Buddhist traditions in the US develop naturally, as if there were sufficient conditions, in parallel, without competition, without causing conflicts of doctrine and worldly interests as seen in some other religions. American Buddhists can therefore choose different sects and traditions, to suit their instincts and spiritual tendencies.

¹³ <https://graciousquotes.com/dalai-lama/>

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