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Buddhism in America

Unexpected Prominence: Buddhism in Boston

Boston, Massachusetts is not typically associated with Buddhism. When considering the religious landscape of the city, one might think of its Puritan roots or the large population of Irish Catholics who arrived in the mid-nineteenth century. It is somewhat unexpected, then, that Boston experienced a period in which Buddhism flourished. The Asian religion first made an appearance in Boston when Chinese immigrants arrived in the late nineteenth century, and later became associated with Transcendentalism, which also had its roots in the Boston area. The presence of many academic institutions in the city, specifically Harvard University, allowed Buddhism and studies of the East to become part of the academic sphere. Educated Bostonians who had the means to travel and study discovered Buddhism through Japanese art towards the end of the nineteenth century. Examining Buddhism's history in Boston from 1840 to 1924, I suggest that Buddhism found a place in the upper-class, intellectual milieu of Boston at that time but flourished primarily as an intellectual, academic, and artistic pursuit, rather than a religious practice.

To discuss the history of Buddhism in Boston, it is first necessary to place it in the wider context of Buddhism in America. The time period that I examine, 1840 to 1924, is drawn from Tweed and Prothero's *Asian Religions in America*, and marks a period of first encounters between Americans and people from the East, from the beginning of Chinese immigration to the American West through the implementation of national origin quotas for immigration. With the

onset of Chinese immigration to California during the gold rush in the 1840s, Buddhism first became visible as a practiced religion in America. Chinese immigration, and by extension, Buddhism, took longer to arrive to the east coast. In Boston, Buddhism first appeared when a small group of Chinese workers moved to the city in 1875 to work on the construction of a telephone exchange (“Buddhism in Greater Boston”). Given Boston’s position as a large coastal city, one might expect that high levels of immigration would turn Buddhism into something more than just a high-class intellectual and artistic pursuit. However, the Chinese Exclusion Act implemented in 1882, effectively stopped the flow of Chinese immigrants to the United States. Thus, any possible Buddhist community in Boston would remain a small enclave. Between 1920 and 1950, for instance, the population of Boston’s Chinatown grew only from 1,000 to 1,600, and the first Buddhist temples were simply comprised of small altars and family shrines in homes (“Buddhism”). Thus, even though there was a Buddhist presence in the city as early as 1875, the environment was not right for it to become a common religion of the people. Boston’s first formal Buddhist organization, the Cambridge Buddhist Society, would not be established until 1957 (“Buddhism”).

Though Buddhism did not flourish as a practiced religion in Boston between 1840 and 1924, one of the ways in which Buddhism came into the consciousness of Bostonians was through the influence of the Transcendentalism movement in the mid-1800s. This marked the beginning of the establishment of Buddhism as an intellectual pursuit in the Boston area. Transcendentalism had its roots in Massachusetts, led by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. A philosophical and theological school of thought, it drew on Romanticism, Kantian philosophy, and other sources, promoting ideas about the divinity of all humans and

nature, self-reliance, and humans' intuitive understanding of the world (Goodman). Particularly important for this discussion is Transcendentalism's focus on the convergence of the East and West. Unafraid to draw on Indian and Hindu sources, it was "without question the first American movement to grapple seriously with Asian religious traditions" (Tweed and Prothero 93), therefore paving the way for Buddhism to eventually enter the Bostonian consciousness. Emerson presents the idea of the convergence of East and West in "Plato; Or, The Philosopher," while Thoreau engages even more directly with Buddhism in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. In this work, he uses the phrase "my Buddha," (96) and praises the Bhagvat-Geeta, a Hindu text. Thoreau writes, "The reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a higher, purer, or rarer region of thought than in the Bhagvat-Geeta...It is unquestionably one of the noblest and most sacred scriptures that have come down to us..." (96). By examining Asian religions and framing them in a positive light, Thoreau opens the door for future discussion and scholarship on Buddhism and other aspects of Eastern religion and culture.

A large part of Thoreau's interest in Buddhism came from reading translations of Indian and Chinese scriptures, and he promoted such translations by publishing them in *The Dial*, a Transcendentalist publication for which he worked as editor for several years. Living in the woods of Walden Pond, he sought to live out the life that he read about in those scriptures (Tweed and Prothero 95). The publishing of one such scripture in *The Dial*, the Lotus Sutra, marked an important moment for Buddhism in America and in Boston. Historians debate whether Thoreau himself translated the now-famous Buddhist sutra into English in 1844 or if the credit should go to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, another Boston-area Transcendentalist (Scott 14-15). Regardless, the presence of an English translation of an important Buddhist scripture in a

publication that would reach many intellectuals was an important legacy of the Transcendentalists on establishing Buddhism in Boston.

This legacy is further seen through the influential writings of Lydia Maria Child. A Unitarian from Medford, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston, Child associated herself with many Transcendentalists and engaged with Asian religions in her 1855 text *The Progress of Religious Ideals, Through Successive Ages*. In the book, she attempts, as a Christian, to write in an unbiased manner about each religion. Though she does not always succeed in doing so, her work nonetheless shows an impressive breadth of knowledge about Asian religions before it was a well-studied area. In the book, Child describes Buddhists as believing in “One Absolute Existence, including both God and Nature. When they speak of Providence, they mean an intelligence inherent in Nature, by which their movements are regulated.” This description of Buddhism, with its talk of inherent intelligence in nature, would have appealed to the Transcendentalists, bringing the religion closer to their attention. Overall, through Transcendentalism, Buddhism began to make its way into religious and intellectual circles in and around Boston as early as the 1840s and 50s.

Growing out of the influences of the Transcendentalists, Buddhism’s flourishing in Boston primarily remained in the intellectual and academic community. I suggest that the presence of academia in the city, specifically colleges and universities like Harvard, played a central role in establishing Buddhism and Eastern studies in Boston. Harvard’s Divinity School, in particular, provided a locale for discussing matters of religion, philosophy, and the afterlife. In 1908, Buddhist adherent William Sturgis Bigelow was invited to give the Divinity School’s prestigious Ingersoll Lecture, and delivered a lecture entitled “Buddhism and Immortality.” In

the address, Bigelow went into depth on tenets of Tendai and Shingon Buddhism and engaged in an intensive discourse on immortality and the soul from the Buddhist perspective. At two different points, Bigelow mentioned Emerson, demonstrating the Transcendentalist influence on Buddhism in Boston. He ended the lecture with a Japanese proverb, closing with the words, “that peace is Nirvana.” The lecture affirms that Buddhism had become a part of the academic landscape of Boston. Yet though the lecture helped establish Buddhism, it was clearly for an audience of intellectuals, academics, and philosophers. Buddhism thus remained in the high tower; it was seen as another way to philosophize about the soul and immortality, rather than as a religion to follow.

Not all Boston academics of the era looked fondly upon Buddhism the way Bigelow did. In *Christian Doctrines of Life* in 1913, Harvard philosopher Josiah Royce compared Buddhism to Christianity, calling Buddhism “pessimistic” and Christianity “a religion of hope” (Royce 340). He went on to write, “Buddhism...has as its goal a certain passionless contemplation...Christianity conceives love as positively active, and dwells upon a hope of immortality” (341). Despite Royce’s negative view of Buddhism, his examination of the religion in *Christian Doctrines of Life* shows a deep engagement with Buddhism, further proving that Buddhism was on the minds of Boston intellectuals at the time.

To better understand how Buddhism flourished as an intellectual, academic, and artistic pursuit more so than as a religion, one can look to the artistic endeavors of Bigelow and Ernest Fenollosa, known together as the “Boston Buddhists.” Described by Tweed as “romantic Buddhists,” Fenollosa and Bigelow were initially drawn to Buddhism through an appreciation for Japanese art and culture (Tweed 71-72). Perhaps their greatest contribution to Buddhism in

Boston was their relationship with Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. Bigelow served on the museum's board of trustees and "had donated tens of thousands of items of Far Eastern art to the museum, which, together with the Morse and Fenollosa-Weld collections, made that institution the finest early repository of Japanese art in America" (73). Fenollosa was the curator of the museum's Oriental collection, and the two men played a critical role in ushering Japanese Buddhism into Boston through art. In donating items like a portable Buddhist shrine from Japan, they brought a novel view of Japanese culture, and by extension, Buddhism, to the city (Tweed and Prothero 155). By having art and artifacts of the religion in a prominent cultural institution, more Bostonians could be exposed to the artistic and historical aspects of Buddhism. With that said, however, a fine arts museum was not a place that the masses went at that time, and Bigelow and Fenollosa certainly did not represent the average Bostonian. As evidenced by their interest in the arts, high education levels, and ability to travel to Japan, it is clear that they were of the upper class. In other words, they had the means to pursue Buddhism as a religious, intellectual, and artistic endeavor, when most average Bostonians—like the city's many poor Irish immigrants—did not. Buddhism remained a pursuit of the upper class.

Though Bigelow played a key role in bringing Buddhism to Boston through art, his personal experiences with practicing the religion in the city demonstrate how Buddhism did not catch on as a religious practice despite its prominence in art and academia. Unlike some Victorian-era Buddhists who were "dabbling in an exotic religion out of ennui, curiosity, psychic turmoil, or just plain silliness" (Tweed 70), Bigelow engaged quite deeply with Buddhism. Like Fenollosa, Bigelow received the precepts of Tendai Buddhism in 1885 in Japan, after studying the religion there for several years (Tweed and Prothero 154). Upon returning to Boston,

however, he was faced with a climate that was not so receptive to his religious practices and struggled with being a committed Buddhist while maintaining the appearance of a proper upper-class Boston man (Tweed 78-79). He felt isolated; writing to a teacher in Japan, he explained, “Here, it is not so easy to practice as in Japan, because when something happens in practice there is no one to ask what it means” (Bigelow, “Letter to Kwanryo Naobayashi, 1895”). Bigelow’s own father scorned his desire to practice Buddhism, and Bigelow was hurt by the “condescending grins, disdainful glances, and bewildered expressions” of those around him (Tweed 78). The Museum of Fine Arts was happy to take his Japanese Buddhist art and Harvard willingly had him speak about Buddhism, but Bigelow was seen as an oddity by everyday Bostonians. The public reception of Bigelow’s religious practice reinforces the notion that Buddhism indeed had an impact on the Boston landscape, but the impact was not felt in the area of religious practice and worship.

It is clear that Buddhism left a surprisingly strong mark on the city of Boston in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This mark, however, was an intellectual, academic, and artistic one. Because of Boston’s position as an intellectual and academic stronghold, Buddhism was primarily brought to the city by wealthy, educated people who were in the privileged position of being able to study and travel. William Sturgis Bigelow, Ernest Fenollosa, and the Transcendentalist movement each contributed to the academic, intellectual, and artistic legacy of Buddhism in Boston.

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