

***Rama, Me, and American Buddhism:***

A Historical and Theological Examination of American Buddhism Through the work of  
Dr. Frederick P. Lenz

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For Submission to the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism

July, 21<sup>st</sup> 2017

For the past two years of my graduate studies at Naropa University, I have had the auspicious privilege and luxury of receiving the support of a generous merit scholarship covering a great deal of my tuition from the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism. Now, soon to begin my final year in the Master's of Divinity Program at Naropa, I have received the invitation to deepen my relationship to the man whose wealth has helped support my education, and to get to know Rama a little bit more. This invitation has made for an engaging few months this summer, in which, in order to write this essay in which I am to comment on some aspect of his work, I have deeply considered both the writing and thoughts of Dr. Lenz, and the *person* or figure of Rama, a teacher of American Buddhism.

At first, I had no idea where to go with this essay. Perhaps, I thought, I should write something about my gratitude for the man whose Foundation is in large part making my graduate education possible. The gratitude I would express wouldn't be inauthentic. After all, for the past few years, the Lenz Merit scholarship has been an auspicious boon to my education. Additionally, any conversation concerning the Lenz Foundation obviates mention of the widespread and open-handed support and contribution that they have, and are continually, contributing to the overarching project of American Buddhism, and all of the pivotal contributions to American society in general that that support implies. The contributions that American Buddhist institutions, social movements, and leaders are making in our country are important agents of change in uncertain, and sometimes terrifying, times. Such a movement requires organizations like the Lenz Foundation to sustain such profound change making activity.

What became obvious to me through my investigation of Dr. Lenz’s work—my research into his work on Buddhist philosophy, the practice of meditation, and the path towards personal liberation—was that I didn’t want to write something pat about generosity, gratitude, and my personal indebtedness to the Foundation that bears his name. Rather, I began to realize that I wanted to write about Dr. Lenz’s work as a whole from the perspective of what he and I have shared in common in terms of our primary life commitment: the practice and embodiment of American Buddhism.

I, like Rama, am an American Buddhist. Furthermore, as an “American Buddhist”—a designation that is in my estimation almost still worthy of being called a neologism—I am deeply concerned with understanding, constructing, and hopefully *embodying*, what that phrase can, should, or will actually mean in the future.

Perhaps others would disagree, but in my relatively short experience within American Buddhist communities—culminating in my studies and training at an American Buddhist university, Naropa—I’ve come to the conclusion that the culture of American Buddhism has yet to fully manifest with any determinacy or consistency relative to the long history of Buddhism in other cultures. It is my informed opinion that American Buddhist culture is still a wide-open landscape filled with uncertainty, indeterminacy, and most importantly of all, with the imagination, creativity, and hope that the infancy—or perhaps more accurately adolescence—of American Buddhist culture promises. As one historian of American religion determined:

...there are so many forms of Buddhism and so many different roads to Americanization that it is too early to announce the emergence of a distinct form that can be said to be typically *American*. Some forms of Buddhism have been overtly retailored to fit with one or another American ideal, often in very pronounced ways. But this in itself is not evidence that they are more authentically American or are more likely to become

permanent parts of the long-term development of Buddhism in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

If my assertion that America Buddhism is still largely in its adolescent phase is true today, then it only follows that during the prime of Dr. Lenz's transmission and embodiment of American Buddhism in the few decades preceding, Buddhism in America was an even more amorphous and inchoate phenomena existing—as all young socio-cultural movements—in a very tender and delicate time of its maturation.

As a recipient of the Lenz Foundation merit scholarship beginning my final year of study in the Masters of Divinity program, I have been asked to write a scholarly essay examining some aspect of Dr. Lenz' work. I relish this opportunity, in large part because writing this essay allows me to critically consider, evaluate, and comment upon my own vocational and spiritual trajectory, my sense of the movement and discourse in which that trajectory takes place, and ultimately, my sense of what it means to be—like Dr. Lenz—an American Buddhist. In so doing, the aspect of Dr. Lenz's work I will be engaging is perhaps the most overarching theme of both his life's work, and the Foundation through which that work is still being pursued: the practice, culture, and theology of *American Buddhism*.

In the following essay, I wish to pay homage to the man with whom I am karmically connected through both U.S. currency and spiritual identification and aspiration by using his life and teachings as a case study for the larger cultural phenomenon of the development of Buddhism in the West. This essay, if it achieves what

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), .xiii. The emphasis is my own. The citation is admittedly relatively dated, but I believe that the sentiment is more or less true today, 17 years later.

I intend, will accomplish three things. First, I will both honor and critically engage the theological presentation and embodiment of American Buddhism evident in the life and work of Dr. Frederick Lenz. Second, I will engage Dr. Lenz's work within the larger framework and ongoing project of American Buddhism, a project with which Dr. Lenz was deeply concerned to which he was committed. Finally, I will engage the work of Dr. Lenz as someone who is also deeply committed to the project of American Buddhism as a maturing Buddhist scholar, theologian, and practitioner. In all of this, I will reflect on how examining Dr. Lenz's work, and of course, benefitting from the generosity of the Lenz Foundation as I pursue my academic and spiritual vocation, allows me to examine my own path as an aspiring American Buddhist theologian and leader.

### **What Is American Buddhism?**

As evidenced in the introduction to this essay, I believe the question stated above has yet to be answered—or perhaps, more accurately, the question has many answers. Indeed, I think the latter answer is more American. Go ahead, next time you are visiting another city in this country ask your average person on the street where to go for a good dinner. “Well, what kind of food do you like? How much are you willing to spend? Do you want Thai, Indian, Italian, a burger? Are you the organic farm-to-table type, or are you not picky when it comes to level of GMO in your meal? Outdoor seating, or indoor ambience?” While this may seem like a silly metaphor, I believe that the idea of choice—and the underlying discourse of individuality—is one of the essential features of contemporary American life.

In my view, this is just as evident in the way that modern Americans approach their spirituality—and, dare I say if it’s even a relevant noun these days, their *religion*. As one scholar put it, “Whatever the term ‘American Buddhism’ may come to mean, the communities constituting the fabric of Buddhist life in America today are manifold and complex, probably more so than in any other nation on earth.”<sup>2</sup> I believe this is both an ideological feature of a uniquely American ethos that emphasizes individuality, choice, and personal creativity, and also an aspect of the constitution of the American demos, comprised of countless socio-cultural, ethnic, and religious sub-groups originating from many different waves and generations of immigration from all of the earth. Indeed, as many scholars point out, the religious history of the United States and the variance of religious institutions even within one larger category (e.g. Christianity or Judaism) is inextricably linked with the history of immigration to this country.<sup>3</sup>

Buddhism, being a relatively late-comer to the growing party of American pluralism and religious diversity, seems particularly poised to address the contemporary American spiritual landscape—where a rapidly growing interest and culture around personal growth and individual contemplative exploration and practice seems to have at least somewhat obscured participation in traditional organized religious communities. In addition, Buddhism already has a rich tradition of incredible variance amongst the various Asian, and now Western, cultures in which it has settled. As Frederick Lenz said himself when broaching the expansive subject, “Buddhism. It’s very presumptuous for me or anyone to talk about Buddhism because it is so vast, it’s so complete, and there are

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<sup>2</sup> Diana Eck, Forward in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*. Edited by Duncan Ryūken Williams and Christopher S. Queen (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 1999), x.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Seager, *Buddhism in America*.

so many aspects of it.”<sup>4</sup> This is not only a testament to the depth of any individual Buddhist cultures texts and practices around Buddhism, but also, a testament to how many different cultures have historically adopted, and inevitably created their own version of the tradition. The relatively brief history of the American foray into Buddhist spirituality and philosophy is no exception. As Rama said “Buddhism is not a singular way. It’s a compilation of ways. It’s organic. It changes. It’s a science of self-discovery.”<sup>5</sup>

As an American entering the world at the dawn of the millennial generation, my generational cohort and I were taught from a ripe young age that we “could be anything we wanted to be, and do anything that we wanted to do.” While in my case this sentiment was implicitly connected with the privilege of my white, male, upper-middle class background and identity, it also is a cornerstone of the so-called “American dream,” an ideology that rules the imagination of my generation in particular and this country in general.

In my case, this promise has more or less been fulfilled. Particularly, the idea that I can be “anything I want to be” has been an implicit, if relatively taken for granted aspect of my religious and spiritual life from a young age, and has ended into my adulthood. Eventually, I was free to make the choice to be a Buddhist, fulfilling the American dream of religious and spiritual freedom with relative ease.

As a young boy, I was socialized into a Congregational Christian Church in small suburban New England town. My childhood church was itself a microcosmic testament to the spiritual freedom of our country—no one seemed particularly dogmatic or

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<sup>4</sup> Frederick Lenz, *The Enlightenment Cycle* (Beverly Hills, California: The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, 2002), 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

fanatically devout; I remember internalizing the value, largely transmitted from my ideologically if not politically liberal mother, that church attendance had more to do with connection with community and learning about universal values of love, generosity, tolerance, and compassion, rather than feeling particularly pressured to live according to a strict ideological and/or moral Christian code. At the time that would have marked my “confirmation” in our church—which in my religious community happened in mid-adolescence—my mother gave me complete choice in the matter, and invited me to decide whether I would do so. I chose not to.

My decision had less to do with any ideological or spiritual resistance to the church or the Christian faith—there were no major or minor totalitarian provisions involved in our family’s congregation—rather, I forwent the my confirmation because I did not feel strongly committed to my church in particular and Christianity in general. Perhaps more importantly, I chose the way I did because my interests during that time in my life were—like many American boys—related primarily to video games, Sunday morning cartoons, and popular music, to name a few.

It was much later in my life that I developed what could be referred to as a spiritual consciousness. In high school, I became a full-blown avant-garde intellectual and rationalist—obsessed with journalism, dis-utopian literature, film, and philosophy. In college, I continued to refine and adorn this identity with a particularly leaning towards post-modernist theory, feminism, Marxism, and existentialist agnosticism. My spiritual turn arrived—like so many in American Buddhist culture—through my undergraduate studies. In that sense, my story is not at all uncommon. As one empirical study points out, “...new American Buddhists are *‘the most highly educated religious group in the United*

*States...*’ Small wonder that most of these respondents, like their Victorian forebears, had come to know about Buddhism by reading a book.”<sup>6</sup>

For me, it was indeed *a book*, but as any convert Buddhist would say, *not just any book*. In my third year as an undergraduate sociology major, I took a class in “The Sociology of Emotions,” taught by my undergraduate mentor, John Baugher, whom I would later learn was a practicing American Buddhist. On the syllabus around the halfway point of the semester was a short chapter written by the renowned Tibetan turned American Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa from the incredible book, *Sacred Path of the Warrior*. From this one chapter, I was almost an instant convert, finding in it a clarity and wisdom that changed entire outlook on life and certainly my aspirations for the future. In hindsight, my encounter with this book almost seems like an inevitable moment in my biography, something I was only waiting to find.

While my conversion experience was nowhere near as gripping as Dr. Lenz, I identify with this sense of uncanny in his own description of his first encounter with Buddhist spirituality. I thought I was getting an education in Sociology whereas, in hindsight, the Dharma was just around the corner; Dr. Lenz thought he was going to surf the tallest mountains in the world, whereas, in reality he was being drawn towards the Dharma as well.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Dr. Lenz, my encounter with Buddhism did not require me to leave this country. By the time *I* inherited the ancient wisdom of classical Buddhism—and the relatively adolescent heritage of *American Buddhism*— in the early years of this

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher S. Queen, “Introduction” in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*. Edited by Duncan Ryūken William and Christopher S. Queen, (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 1999), xxv. Emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Lenz, *Surfing the Himalayas*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press 1995).

millennium, there were already a multitude of fairly well established American Buddhist institutions in which I could begin, however slowly, to increase my relationship with teachings and practice of this great tradition. Like Dr. Lenz, I felt a strong conviction that, not only would the Dharma be an essential aspect in shaping the way I would lead the rest of my life, but also that I would commit myself to bringing whatever energy, intelligence, and commitment I could muster to the project of understanding and propagating the Dharma in the most skillful and effective way in my own vocational and career pursuits in this country.

While it wasn't obvious to me at first, as soon as I encountered the Dharma, I—like Dr. Lenz—began a lifelong commitment to the inchoate and ongoing project of American Buddhism. Indeed, I, like many American Buddhists, am only one story in the larger cultural narrative that inspires Americans to “be anything that we want to be.” However, despite the immediate strong conviction that Buddhism would be integral part of my vocational and spiritual life when I first encountered it, I have also learned that the role of a Buddhist leader, scholar, and practitioner is suffused with various challenges and potential pitfalls, including, to name only a few, the importance of diverse cultural considerations, the tension between spiritual freedom and truth verses conventional mores and social norms, the relationship between religion and socio-economic patterns and norms, and the reality of living in a post-modern and pluralistic era. All of these aspects of Buddhism in America deserve consideration in turn—both in terms of their relationship to the continued survival and thriving of American Buddhism, and in terms of how they require the contemporary American Buddhist leader to navigate and negotiate their role in the world.

While a thorough examination of all of the above topics, trends, and tensions within American Buddhism is beyond the scope of this essay, a few of them are broached in my discussion of American Buddhism within the context of my own aspirations within the world of American Buddhism, my life and work as a Naropa graduate student—soon to be graduate—and my examination of Dr. Lenz’s work in the world and his ideas about and contributions to American Buddhism.

### **“American Buddhism,” A Working Definition**

While, as I have discussed above, many scholars and historians of Buddhism in America argue that it is still too early to conceive of a definitive or thematically unified version of what “American Buddhism” is—a conclusion which I largely agree with—there are useful reasons to at least begin to describe what American Buddhism looks like thus far in its short history as a movement in this country. In this section I outline one such “working definition” of American Buddhism thus far, discuss some of the pitfalls of defining an “American Buddhism,” and introduce some of the ways Dr. Lenz’s life and teachings are consistent with some enduring trends in American Buddhism thus far.

While characterizing the diversity of Buddhist practice, cultures, and institutions in this culture under one single outline is difficult, as a tentative outline I agree with the three common features of American Buddhism put forward by Christopher S. Queen: *democratization, pragmatism, and engagement*.<sup>8</sup> Queen defines the democratization of American Buddhism as “a leveling of traditional spiritual and institutional hierarchies,

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<sup>8</sup> Queen, *American Buddhism*, xix.

entailing both *laicization*...and *feminization*...”<sup>9</sup> In terms of laicization, Queen invokes the de-emphasis of the monastic life amongst American Buddhists, and in my view, American convert Buddhists especially. Feminization refers to the increasing role of women in membership and leadership. While feminization is certainly one phenomenon that is at least somewhat unique to American Buddhism, I would add to this the increased inclusion of members of other marginalized communities such as communities of people of color and LGBTQ communities in both the rank and file of the average American practitioner of Buddhism, and into leadership and teaching roles within American Buddhist institutions.

Queen defines the *pragmatism* of American Buddhist communities as “an emphasis on *ritual practice or observance*...and its benefit to the practitioner, with a concomitant de-emphasis of beliefs...”<sup>10</sup> For Queen, ritual practice and observance would include meditation, chanting, and ethical activity. While I would disagree that a de-emphasis on beliefs within American practitioners is a universal—or even dominant—aspect of Buddhism in America, whether amongst convert Euro-American Buddhists or immigrants from traditionally Buddhist countries, I do agree that is a prevalent trend within Buddhism’s initiation and dissemination in the United States. Particularly, I think this trend is most readily noticeable in the exponentially growing cultural phenomena of “mindfulness” in America, a movement that has rapidly and deeply permeated the fabric of American society, and which deserves deep examination separate from American Buddhism in its own right. However, it is obvious that the practice of mindfulness in the United States, and the discourse, cultures, and institutions that have grown up around it,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., xix.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., xix.

shares at the very least an intimate relationship with the phenomena of American Buddhism. I will consider this trend only at a glance in this essay.

Finally, the last vertex of Queen's outline of the defining features of American Buddhism thus far is *engagement*, defined as "the broadening of spiritual practice to benefit...family community...society and the world, including the social and environmental conditions that affect all people..."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this is such a prevalent trend within Buddhism in general and Buddhism in America in particular that the term *engaged Buddhism* has become increasingly in vogue within Buddhist circles and communities. I would argue that engaged Buddhism is not a phenomena unique to American Buddhism, but is certainly a prevalent aspect of Buddhism in America thus far.

While I do not believe that these three aspects outlined by Queen are the sole defining features of American Buddhism, I do believe that his outline is comprehensive enough to serve as a sort of working definition of American Buddhism thus far. Furthermore, I think they are useful trends for American Buddhist practitioners, scholars, and leaders to consider in their work of participating in and advancing the project of American Buddhism. They have certainly been useful touchstones for me to consider in my own work as a Naropa graduate student with vocational and spiritual aspirations in line with the larger project and community of American Buddhism. Finally, I think Queen's outline is a useful hermeneutic tool in considering the life and work of Dr. Frederick Lenz. Aspects of these three modes of American Buddhist culture are indeed prevalent in much of Dr. Lenz's work as an American Buddhist leader, and his own thoughts and commentary on American Buddhism. In the remainder of this essay, I

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., xix.

consider Dr. Lenz's work in each of these three categories in turn, and use my analysis to reflect on my own practices and aspirations as a Buddhist leader and scholar in America.

## **Democratization**

The concept of democratization in American Buddhism, as outlined by above, features strongly in the work of Dr. Frederick Lenz. Particularly the aspect of laicization, or the de-emphasis on monastic lifestyles and traditional religious institutional hierarchies, figures as a central aspect of Dr. Lenz's conception of American Buddhism.

In his own words:

The problem, of course, with monasteries, ashrams, convents, is very often the director of such an institution is no further along than the people who study there or that the structure becomes so political...usually these institutions become extremely political. In other words, they're really small societies, and much of what you hope to avoid in societies you just find there.<sup>12</sup>

While it does not appear that Dr. Lenz outright rejects more traditional monastic paths of Buddhism and the institutional hierarchies extant in most religious traditions, here he does not mince his words in outlining the inevitability of political entanglements involved in any institutional arrangement, which he views as microcosms of society. For him, the ultimate problem with institutional spirituality is that it can serve as an obstacle to *freedom*, one of the ultimate objectives of the Buddhist path. As an alternative, Dr. Lenz leans on the fundamentally American ideal of individuality and personal freedom:

A person can really set up their own little ashram, their own little community, in their own little apartment or condominium or house, do commerce with the world and not be undone by it...If your ashram is your own, no one's going to tell you what to do. You don't have to deal with a

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<sup>12</sup> Frederick P. Lenz, *Tantric Buddhism: Twenty-Seven Talks*, (Beverly Hills, CA: The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, 2003), 60.

power infrastructure. You don't have to deal with whether someone likes you or not. You can cut your own way through the universe. I think it's better.<sup>13</sup>

Dr. Lenz's words here strongly connect with Christopher Queen's concept of the *laicization* of American Buddhism, where traditional monastic lifestyles and institutional hierarchies are eschewed in favor of a "personal" ashram or monastery, where lay Buddhist Americans can form their own modes of practice and daily spiritual lifestyles that serve them. For Dr. Lenz, the importance of such an individualistic path is the quality of freedom that it creates in one's life, and avoiding the possibility of giving up "one dictator for another when we leave society and move into an ashram."<sup>14</sup> Certainly, the notion of personal freedom and individual choice evident in Dr. Lenz's words is deeply in line with the spirit of American culture, especially in the age of post-modernity, where the ideology of self-discovery and fulfillment is a quintessential aspect of American life. Spirituality, in Dr. Lenz's view, should be no exception to this rule.

Another aspect of Dr. Lenz's work that is consistent with the trend of democratization in American Buddhism is the feminization in Buddhist communities and cultures. Dr. Lenz's work, like a host of American Buddhist leaders and scholars, emphasizes the inclusion and empowerment of women in the face of historically patriarchal structures of society, and certainly of religious institutions and communities. This work continues under the auspices of Dr. Lenz's Foundation for American Buddhism, which lists as one of its key funding missions, "supporting innovation and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 61.

advancing the cause of women's leadership in American Buddhist communities and organizations.”<sup>15</sup>

This second aspect of the democratization of American Buddhism, the empowerment and inclusion of women in American Buddhist communities, has been an important aspect of my own learning both in my graduate studies at Naropa University, and in my participation in Buddhist communities of practice and study. I share with Dr. Lenz and his foundation the goal of serving as an ally in this ongoing project of empowerment—not only to women, but to other historically marginalized people including people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, and more. Personally, given my own identity as a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual male, central to this project of working to become an ally to marginalized groups has been the task of recognizing my own privilege in a world and culture which favors certain demographic characteristics over others in terms of both success and power.

Engaging and taking responsibility for my own privilege is often a difficult task, and takes place on a daily level, where I am faced with the choice of ignoring or becoming accountable for the ways in which privilege operates in my own life. As I reflect on this work now, I am reminded of the rich diversity of my fellow American Buddhist colleagues in study and practice, and the ways in which I am daily invited to support or ignore both the struggle and the ingenuity of classmates, teachers, and fellow practitioners who are women, people of color, or members of the LGBTQ community. It has been a challenging and exciting practice to learn new ways in which to account for my privilege and support others in claiming their power within communities of

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<sup>15</sup> “Our Work,” *Frederick P. Lenz Foundation*, accessed July 19, 2017, <http://www.fredericklenzfoundation.org/our-work>

scholarship and practice. This remains a continued goal of my own vocational and spiritual path, and I believe, a defining and exciting aspect of Buddhism in America.

Overall, the trend of democratization in American Buddhism, including the phenomena of laicization, feminization, and the inclusion and empowerment of other marginalized groups, is an exciting aspect of Buddhist culture in this country. However, in my view, the trend of democratization is not without its pitfalls or dangers. Like Dr. Lenz, I celebrate the uniquely American opportunity to explore spirituality in a relatively free context, however, I also believe that the practice of any spiritual path, and especially Buddhism, requires strong guidance and support, and that any spiritual community requires structures of leadership and organization in order to foster healthy modes of practice and lifestyle amongst its adherence. Dr. Lenz himself often emphasized the role of the teacher in the path of Buddhism, and I agree that the role of the teacher is an important one in the Buddhist path of study and practice.

While hierarchical structures of power and authority can often be limiting, they can also be strong stalwarts against the dangers of charlatanism and abuse, aspects of American Buddhism that have frequently cropped up in its short history. Given the relatively short history of American Buddhism, I believe that practitioners should take their spiritual freedom with a dose of humbleness that takes into account the long history of hierarchical modes of transmission in historical practice and teaching lineages, in which the path of meditation and training offered in Buddhism is protected by practices of guidance and transmission that ensure the sanctity and veracity of a sacred tradition of personal and societal transformation. Without strong structures of leadership, authorization, and supervision, the practices of meditation and self-transformation in

Buddhism run the risk of being subject to spiritual drift, in which both practitioners and spiritual leaders could misunderstand, misappropriate, or even worse, *abuse*, the powerful teachings of the various Buddhist traditions. In my view, the creation of democratic Buddhist institutions that promote both the freedom of practitioners and the security of the teachings is an ongoing project of Buddhism in America.

## **Pragmatism**

Pragmatism, the second defining trend of American Buddhism outlined by Christopher Queen, is a strong thread running through the American Buddhist teachings of Dr. Lenz. The quality of pragmatism evident in American Buddhist communities emphasizes the observance of ritual and practice, and particularly meditation, in the lives of individuals discovering Buddhism in this country. The emphasis on meditation as the fundamental core to the teachings of Buddhism is a pervasive aspect of Dr. Lenz's conception of the path. As he offers:

Buddhism is the enlightenment cycle, and there are different types of it. Principally there is short path and long path Buddhism. The long path is the more religious aspect, that is to say, the church aspect, the practice of reading sutras, healthy ways of living, things like that—a certain amount of prayer, a little meditation. The esoteric aspect of Buddhism, which is short path Buddhism, is meditation.<sup>16</sup>

Here, Dr. Lenz draws on a classical distinction within Buddhism referred to as “the three vehicles,” Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. When Lenz refers to the “short path” or “esoteric aspect of Buddhism,” he is referring to the last of the three. In Vajrayāna, or tantric Buddhism, the emphasis of the path is less on what Lenz refers to as “the church

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<sup>16</sup> Lenz, *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 15.

aspect” and more on the path of meditation and direct perception. In line with Lenz’s outline, this aspect of Buddhism is often seen as the most direct path towards enlightenment.

While, from my examination of Dr. Lenz’s work, it does not appear as if he believes the “short path” is the only way to practice Buddhism—or even the preferable way—it is evident from any glance at his work that this is certainly the path that he favors in his own teaching. Whatever the case, it is clear that, in Dr. Lenz’s view, the most important aspect of Buddhist practice is meditation and the transformation of consciousness that leads to the state of enlightenment described in all modes of Buddhism. If this is the case, Dr. Lenz’s vision of the path is firmly in line with the trend of *pragmatism* outlined by Christopher Queen as one of the three key features of American Buddhism.

The emphasis on pragmatism, and particularly meditation, is firmly in line with the first feature of American Buddhism, defined above, of democratization. Meditation, as Dr. Lenz describes, is a deeply personal and individual practice. In his own words, “Buddhism isn’t about temples and incense and shaved heads and robes, and it’s not about church. There are aspects of Buddhism that involve that, and I guess people enjoy that—it helps them...But real Buddhism is about meditation. It’s an individual experience. It’s an individual journey into enlightenment.”<sup>17</sup> From these words it is evident that, for Dr. Lenz, the democratization and pragmatism of American Buddhism go hand in hand.

The focus on pragmatism, and particularly meditation, in Dr. Lenz’s work makes complete sense given the theological underpinnings of his comments. As I mentioned

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 20.

above, it is clear from even a quick glance at Dr. Lenz's work that he was most deeply inspired by the tantric, or esoteric approach to Buddhism. Furthermore, his emphasis on the short path of Buddhism is not a creation of his own, but comes from a long-standing historical division of the traditional as a whole. However, despite the historical precedence, I believe that the focus on meditation and pragmatism in Dr. Lenz's work also reflects a uniquely American approach to spirituality, in which ideological and traditional values—what could be said to be the “religious” aspect of Buddhism—is de-emphasized in favor of the direct, experiential, and pragmatic aspects of the tradition. This trend makes sense when we consider the historical situation of America in general, where religious institutions are increasingly fading into the background of American life, and secular values and ideologies are replacing long-held religious beliefs and dogmas. Here we see the perfect confluence between the history of Buddhism as a tradition and the epistemic shift in our own country towards secularism and ideological rationalism.

Another aspect of *pragmatism* evident in both Dr. Lenz's conception and transmission of Buddhism in particular and American Buddhism as a cultural phenomena in general is the relationship between the spiritual life and one's livelihood. In historical Buddhism, especially the foundational teachings emphasized in Theravadā Buddhism or the Hīnayāna approach, the pursuit of financial success and wealth has been largely regarded with ambivalence, if not completely eschewed. In many Buddhist cultures and traditions—both historical and contemporary—a strong emphasis is placed on the spirit of renunciation, and in the case of monasticism, specific codes of action and behavior that regulate how one relates to worldly phenomena such as money or property. In these foundational discourses and in corresponding monastic regulations, wealth and financial

success are regarded, at the very least, as distractions from the life of spiritual activity and the pursuit of enlightenment, and at the most, as particularly strong sources of confusion, potentially leading to a proliferation of the *klesas*, or defiled states of mind. In particular, the pursuit of wealth and financial success runs the risk of seducing the practitioner into destructive mental states of greed, torpor, or conceit.

However, to eschew the realm of livelihood and the profound and pervasive importance of the contemporary capitalist socio-economic structure of the United States would be wholly *un-American*. Lenz' teaching and lifestyle surely reflects this fact, and his words often illustrate the need to relate skillfully and effectively to—and certainly not repudiate—the capitalist reality of America, which is an inextricable part of the lives of contemporary Americans, American Buddhists being no exception. In Dr. Lenz' words:

Naturally, you have to have enough money to be able to live in the right kind of place that's conducive to meditation. You can't be at the mercy of society, otherwise you can't meditate well, there are too many demands and pressures... Naturally you have to be able to clothe yourself, eat, do all those things... the world is expensive. If getting involved in the making and sustaining of one's life is so complicated and takes so much energy and attention and gets you so *bound up in the world*, then you're not going to do much self-discovery.<sup>18</sup>

Crucial to Dr. Lenz' words here is the *pragmatism* of his approach. Dr. Lenz's emphasis on livelihood highlights the importance of creating the ideal situation for self-exploration and the practice of meditation. Rather than championing the accumulation of wealth for its own sake, Dr. Lenz' emphasis is on the need to support one's own spiritual lifestyle of practice and contemplation. While Dr. Lenz clearly does not eschew the worldly socio-economic reality of capitalism and the individual necessity to pursue financial gain, his words have a fine point: without some financial stability we actually

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<sup>18</sup> Lenz, *Tantric Buddhism*, 71. The emphasis is my own.

end up *more* “bound up in the world,” focusing more of our energy on survival and the basic needs of sustaining ones life and less energy on self-discovery through meditation and the spiritual path. Dr. Lenz’ words are thoroughly pragmatic—embracing the American socio-economic reality rather than rejecting it—and highlight the need for American Buddhists to work within the world and society we have inherited rather than rejecting it.

Perhaps the most extreme version of Buddhist pragmatism in America is the phenomena of *secularization* of the Buddhist path and teachings. In keeping with the pragmatism of American Buddhism, some scholars have even gone as far as to argue for a kind of “Buddhism without beliefs.”<sup>19</sup> As one scholar points out:

For many converts...the dharma is becoming integrated with a more secular outlook on life. Many have implicitly or explicitly abandoned the idea of rebirth. Cosmic bodhisattvas tend to be regarded as metaphors, rituals as personal and collective means of expression. Traditional doctrine and philosophy often take a back seat to inspiration and creativity. The transcendental goal of practice is itself often psychologized or reoriented to social transformation.<sup>20</sup>

These trends are certainly prevalent aspects of Buddhism in America, and particularly, in convert Buddhist communities. However, in my view, it is not safe to say that all American Buddhists have completely ditched traditional doctrinal views or beliefs entirely. This is certainly not the case, as some scholars point out, for many immigrant Buddhist communities, who comprise the majority of Buddhists in America.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, there are many strong and active communities comprised largely of convert

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*, (New York: Riverhead Book, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 234.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Euro-American Buddhists who have deeply embraced many of the traditional religious aspects of Buddhist practice and observance.<sup>22</sup>

It is clear that Dr. Lenz himself at least believed in the notions of karma and reincarnation extant in traditional Buddhist teachings. Dr. Lenz's teachings frequently discuss the role of karma and the aspect of rebirth in his own teachings.<sup>23</sup> In my own case, while it is often tempting to conceive of more traditional aspects of Buddhist teachings as metaphors or parables, I find myself becoming more and more deeply interested in doctrinal and systematic aspects of Buddhist teachings on such subjects as karma, rebirth, perception, ontology, and epistemology. For me, these more "traditional" aspects of Buddhist doctrine and tradition are useful supports to the more pragmatic modalities of meditation. Furthermore, these teachings, in my experience, are often in line with what one would discover on their own through the more "pragmatic" mode of meditation and analytic investigation.

In its most extreme form, the *secularization* aspect of pragmatism within American Buddhism is closely related to the exponentially growing phenomena of "mindfulness" in American culture. While a discussion of the relationship between mindfulness and Buddhism in America is beyond the scope of this essay, it is clear that the two phenomena are close cousins in the contemporary spiritual landscape in America. Mindfulness, itself having a wide variety of meanings and comprising many forms of practice and training, is arguably the most secularized form of meditation practice derived from Buddhism—although not exclusively—in this country.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Lenz, *Tantric Buddhism*.

The problem in exploring the growing phenomenon of mindfulness practice in America is similar to the problem of examining American *Buddhism*—it is difficult to even *define* the essential features of the diverse cultural trends and applications that are related to or fly the banner of mindfulness.

However, despite the difficulty in conceptualizing a core set of features constituting mindfulness in America, one figure—widely regarded as the founder and leading figurehead of American mindfulness—is worthy of examination as an ideal embodiment and purveyor of mindfulness practice and its various applications: Jon Kabat-Zinn. As one sociologist put it “If one is interested in understanding the essence of mindfulness as it is articulated in the popular media, one is interested in the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn.”<sup>24</sup> While Kabat-Zinn’s original approach to mindfulness was “fundamentally informed by his Buddhist training,”<sup>25</sup> it is clear that his ongoing relationship with Buddhism has been characterized by some degree of ambivalence. In his own words, “There was a time that considered myself to be a Buddhist, but I actually don’t consider myself to be one now, and although I teach Buddhist meditation, it’s not with the aim of people becoming Buddhist.”<sup>26</sup>

As one scholar argues, “in ‘cutting ties’ with Buddhism, Kabat-Zinn pushes MBSR [Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction] towards the mainstream of medical

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in David Jacobs Jordan, “A Critical History of Mindfulness-Based Psychology,” (Honors Thesis, Wesleyan University Department of Psychology and Science in Society Program, 2009), 28.

In my exploration of mindfulness I rely heavily on Jordan’s thesis as a thorough and comprehensive case study on mindfulness and Buddhism in America. Jordan’s thesis explores many of the same themes of this essay, and especially focuses on the emerging relationship between American psychology or psychotherapy and American Buddhism. In my own Master’s Thesis, which I will begin in the fall of 2017, I aim to consider similar issues within American Buddhism, mindfulness, and psychology, incorporating a critical theological Buddhist perspective into the conversation.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Ibid., 30.

practice,” perhaps primarily by allaying fears of religiosity characteristic of our secular society “that a religious agenda drives the movement.”<sup>27</sup> In any case, Kabat-Zinn’s effort to distance—if not completely detach—mindfulness from the socio-cultural and religious trappings of Buddhism are clear. As David Jacobs Jordan thesis encapsulates using Kabat-Zinn’s own words:

“We’re not trying to disguise Buddhism and sneak it in. We’re not talking about Buddhism, were talking about mindfulness.” While he acknowledges Buddhism primary influence on the type of meditation employed in MBSR, he attempts to drop the baggage of Buddhism.... He claims to “drop the baggage” in almost every one of his writings and his position has remained fairly constant through the years. His belief is that although mindfulness is at the very heart of Buddhism, mindfulness is a universal quality that transcends religious traditions and can exist independently of any Buddhist context. Mindfulness is simply a particular way to pay attention, to look into oneself with the perspective of self-inquiry and self-understanding. Thus, no appeal to Eastern or Buddhist traditions is necessary.<sup>28</sup>

Taking Kabat-Zinn as a strong example of the trend of the relationship between American Buddhism and the American mindfulness movement, we can see how the latter epitomizes the increasing emphasis on secularism and individualism within spirituality in this country, and in Kabat-Zinn’s case, is intentionally presented divorced from any kind of traditional or historical religious configuration or ideology. While the extremely popular trend of mindfulness has clearly had positive effects on individual lives and American culture in general, one might be concerned that the pragmatism of mindfulness has come adrift from the total package of spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, which

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 44.

also emphasize ethical behavior and views, and intellectual and perceptual insight and understanding.<sup>29</sup>

Whatever the relationship between Buddhism in America and the growing trend of *mindfulness* in American culture and institutions, it is clear that the latter is fitting given the distinctly American approach to religion and spirituality in contemporary times.

As one historian put it:

“When it comes the Dharma, there are not only baggage bearers, importers, and exporters, but shoppers as well. At least tens of thousands—and probably hundreds of thousands—of Americans have neither inherited the tradition from their parents nor bought it fully in the marketplace of U.S. religion. They shop—purchasing a bit of this and consuming a bit of that, but never buying it all.”<sup>30</sup>

In my own view, I believe the aspects of ethics and morality *as well as* the insight and perceptual wisdom available through meditation and/or mindfulness practice, form the complete package of the spiritual path offered in Buddhism—as well as other spiritual traditions—and that the complete combination of each aspect must be preserved as an essential aspect of the picture of American *Buddhism*. That is not to say that it is—or should be—inappropriate to conceive of or offer mindfulness as a practice to populations beyond those who identify as Buddhists, but rather, to preserve the integrity of the path—albeit in its Americanized version—for contemporary and future generations.

One metaphor often used to describe this package is that of a three-legged stool—where ethics, meditation, and wisdom each comprise one pole of support for the entirety of the spiritual life offered in Buddhist training. Perhaps one of the deepest challenges of the American Buddhist movement is to find the strongest form of synthesis between all

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<sup>29</sup> Thorough consideration of this point is beyond the scope of this essay, but I aim to address this question deeply in my forthcoming thesis.

<sup>30</sup> Seager, *American Buddhism*, 83.

three aspects of historical Buddhism, including the pragmatism of meditation practice with the discipline of ethical behavioral commitments and the training in insight and wisdom that is so deeply intrinsic to the historical Buddhist path. At the same time, I believe the wider dissemination of meditative practices, partially divorced from their ideological religious contexts, is an acceptable and often beneficial alternative for those Americans with no desire to “go the full nine yards” and completely identify with and pursue the Buddhist path of training in meditation, ethics, and wisdom.

### **Politicization**

In a recorded talk entitled “Freedom”, discussing how to relate to political structures of reality, Dr. Lenz once offered the following:

My advice is to blend...unless you are in a political system that's very bad, in which case you have to get involved in overthrowing it. Obviously, if you are in a situation with a dictator, you can't live with that and their taking away all your freedoms...If the boat is going in the right direction, then we leave it to the captain...if it's going in a direction that isn't right or headed for the rocks, then we have to have a mutiny. If we can't talk the captain and the crew into turning it around, if we can't convince them, then the mutiny is necessary to save all of us.<sup>31</sup>

For me, these words encapsulate the final aspect of American Buddhist culture outline above, which I will now consider: politicization.

From a superficial view, it might seem as if Buddhism would eschew the realm of politics and world affairs entirely. Indeed, when I first came to be a practitioner of Buddhism, I was primarily concerned with changing my own life on a very small-scale, starting with my own discontent, emotional confusion, and unhappiness. Certainly, meditation is a powerful way of transforming ones own life, and achieving a state of

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<sup>31</sup> Lenz, *Tantric Buddhism*, pg. 63.

being much more conducive to happiness and health than what I was familiar with before I became a full blown Buddhist convert. The transformation of my own life and psychological disposition remains a fundamental aspect of my pursuit of the Buddhist path.

However, it doesn't take one too long to discover that Buddhism is about much more than one's own wellbeing. Classically, the Mahāyāna path of Buddhist practice outlines a path of transformation that transcends the limited concern of individual happiness and wellbeing to include the almost inconceivable aspiration and wish that, not only oneself, but also *all other beings*, may attain happiness, well-being, and freedom as well. As one scholar described:

“One principle at work in much of the socially engaged Buddhism is the Mahāyāna concept of nondualism, the conviction that at the most fundamental level of existence male and female, rich and poor, employer and employed, ruler and ruled are merely relative distinctions that fall away before universal Buddha mind or Buddha nature.”<sup>32</sup>

The American adoption of this classical Buddhist theological view is one of the most exciting developments of American Buddhism as a whole.

In line with the American Buddhist trend of democratization, the politicization of American Buddhism calls practitioners to confront widespread systematic and sociological imbalances and ills as well as personal spiritual ones. Indeed, some of the most engaging and forward thinking Buddhist teachers of our time are people of color, women, and members of the LGBTQ community who are confronting not only the individual spiritual bankruptcy of contemporary ways of being, but also the spiritual bankruptcy involved in modes of domination endemic in American society and in the world at large. The trend of *engaged Buddhism* as exemplified by both immigrant and

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<sup>32</sup> Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 201.

Euro-American Buddhists alike is an exciting and necessary development in the world of American Buddhism in particular, and Buddhism in the world in general. Engaged figures such as Thich Nhat Han, Angel Kyodo Williams, Bernie Glassman, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and organizations such as The Zen Peacemaker Order, The Buddhist Peace Fellowship, and The Order of Interbeing<sup>33</sup> serve as powerful role models and organizational change-makers propounding an ethic of both personal and universal liberation that is intrinsic to the contemporary American manifestation of the Mahāyāna theology of universal liberation.

As one historian outlined, there are arguably three sources for the prevalence of what has been called “socially engaged Buddhism,” the defining trend of American Buddhist politicization: first: the liberal-leftist causes continuing from the culture of activism traced back to the 1960s, second: various social and political movements in Asian countries led by Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims responding particularly to colonialism, and finally: the religious heritage of Protestantism with its strong orientation to “this-worldly” activity and *activism*.<sup>34</sup>

Thich Nhat Han’s prolific activity in propounding engaged Buddhism, and specifically, his *Tiep Hien* Order, or Order of Interbeing, has been

“a seamless garment, to borrow a phrase from Roman Catholic ethical discourse, for personal and social responsibility. It provides guidelines for an individual’s moral and spiritual life as well as a framework for the critical evaluation of social structures and vested interests that contribute to injustice and inequity... The mystical quality of his approach to social engagement rests upon an unflinching conviction of the veracity of the law of cause and effect [karma] and the interconnectedness of all things.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> While not all of these figures are American by legal nationality, they have each strongly influenced the trajectory of American Buddhism thus far—not the least through their politicization of Buddhism.

<sup>34</sup> Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 202, 203.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), founded by a small group of Buddhists including Robert Aitken, Gary Snyder, and Joanna Macy is another powerful agent of the politicization of American Buddhism. “More American in both origin and spirit...(BPF) has come to stand at the confluence of the three different sources that inspired engaged Buddhism in this country.”<sup>36</sup> In the words of one of its founders “I thought it was time to move out from under the bodhi tree, that our habitat and our life were in danger...The Buddhists were keeping silent and even cooperating.”<sup>37</sup> Yet another leader who has politicized Buddhist theology and practice in America is The Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams, whose work explores the confluence of the anti-establishment and liberation oriented teachings of the Buddha with our countries current racial climate. In her co-written book *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love and Liberation*,<sup>38</sup> the authors take a strong theological and political stance against the largely ignored but still pervasively extant white supremacy in American Society. In Kyodo’s work, meditation combined with social resistance can serve as a potent remedy to the deep racial divide of contemporary American society and the collective American conscious.<sup>39</sup> These are only a few powerful examples of the current trend towards politicization of American Buddhism.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Aitken, quoted in Ibid., 206. The reference to the Bodhi Tree recalls the traditional account of the historical Buddha, who is said to have first attained enlightenment while sitting underneath a Bodhi Tree.

<sup>38</sup> Rev. Angel Kyodo Williams and Lama Rod Owens, with Jasmine Syedullah, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*, (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> In my own experience, the confluence of Dr. Lenz’ embodiment of American Buddhism and that of Kyodo Williams’ is particularly special, given that I first encountered Williams through a talk given under the auspices of the Lenz visiting lecturer series at Naropa. Yet another example of how Dr. Lenz work towards creating a deep and promising American Buddhist tradition continues even long after he has passed.

In my understanding, the project of politicized American Buddhism remains in ongoing imperative, especially given recent historical developments in America, where some of the most important progress of recent American history has become deeply threatened by a return to outdated modes of xenophobia, misogyny, and socio-economic conservatism, to name only a few recent trends in American culture and politics. In my view, Dr. Lenz would be overjoyed to see that, even after his own lifetime, his foundation is supporting such projects of engaged Buddhism in America through critical funding of public lectures, research, and institutional support aimed at the politicization, implicit or explicit, of American Buddhism towards the end of getting “the boat to go back in the right direction.” It is my commitment, as a member of the American Buddhist community and a firm believer in the Mahāyāna ethic of universal liberation, to participate as vigorously and deeply as is possible in contributing to the process of politicizing American Buddhism towards the end of freedom and awakening, both societal and individual, for all.

## **Conclusion**

In the words of the one historian of American Buddhism:

It is possible to talk about many developments in contemporary American Buddhism, but impossible to assess which of these “has legs” and will pass the tests of time required to become a living Buddhist tradition in the United States. It is my conviction, however, that in the future both Buddhists and historians of Buddhism will look back to the last half century and find the origins of uniquely American forms of Buddhism that will bear comparison with the great traditions of Asia.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Seager, *Buddhism in America*, xvii.

In this essay, I have attempted to critically reflect on some of the key aspects of American Buddhism as we know it today, in order that I may more consciously participate in the shaping of what American Buddhism may look like in the future. In doing so I have also attempted to pay my gratitude towards Dr. Frederick P. Lenz, whose merit scholarship has been an incredible boon for my graduate education at Naropa, and my life-long spiritual and vocational aspirations.

In my research, I have found that Dr. Lenz's work and teaching is firmly in line with some of the key features that have come to define the relatively young culture of American Buddhism. Reflecting on Dr. Lenz's has allowed me a powerful opportunity to reflect on both the larger landscape of American Buddhism at this moment in history, and my place within it as an aspiring American Buddhist leader and scholar. Certainly, the work that Dr. Lenz accomplished in his own life, and indeed the work his foundation is continually doing in the world today "has legs" and will be a noted part of the "living Buddhist tradition in the United States," as it continues to make a mark on the lives of people, who like myself, come to the Dharma in this country in hopes of both personal liberation and the pursuit of a vocation that is meaningful and engaged in creating a better world for all.

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