Buddhism first came to America in the late 1800s, transported by immigrants from Asia (Duerr 2010). In recent years Buddhism has grown to include people who have lived in Asia and adopted Buddhist practices and converts who have never left America. In order to better understand Buddhism in America I interviewed two people who agreed to answer a few questions about their beliefs.

Steve is a lay teacher at the Olympia Mahayana Buddhist Center in downtown Olympia, Washington. A Caucasian convert, Steve preferred not to publish his last name. When I arrived, the daily meditation had just finished. A bowl of chocolates sat on a low table in a conversation area. The meditation room had chairs set up in rows.

Viet La came to the United States twenty years ago from Vietnam. He serves as the youth director for Buddhist Associates Temple in Olympia, Washington. The Buddhist community purchased the temple from a Christian church twenty years ago. When I walked in, a woman stood contemplatively before an image holding incense in her hand. A group of youth practiced the “Lion Dance” moving to the beat of drum and cymbals. A costume draped over two teenaged boys created each “lion.” Two lions sparred with each other. We watched and retreated to a quieter room.

Aletha Gruzensky (AG): Realizing that there are many forms of Buddhism, what are the basic beliefs of your religion?

Steve: That’s a real open-ended question. There are twenty-two books that discuss the teachings. Do not kill. Loving-kindness. Cause and effect. Ultimate truth.
Viet La: There are many branches of Buddhism, but two main branches: the southern and the northern. People in the southern branch (India, Nepal and Tibet) focus more on living with people and doing good deeds. The monks dress in dark brown. People in the northern branch (Korea, Japan, Thailand and Vietnam) look more for the meaning in life and real philosophy. They try to give up desire. The monks dress in bright yellow.

Both branches use the same writings. We are more of the northern branch from Vietnam, but we are also more hybrid. Here at our temple we have had a Sri Lankan and a Tibetan monk. The monks are vegetarian. Here in the USA, they are ova-lacto vegetarians to get all that they need for health. However, in Vietnam the monks often eat vegan. They even avoid garlic and caffeine because those are stimulating.

Regarding philosophy, we are all made of atoms. We are a part of the world. We have four stages of life. We are born, get old, get sick, and die. Karma means that our atoms get recycled into another body.

We believe in having an open heart, in helping and doing good deeds. Some in the older generation believe that if they have a miserable life now, it means that they must have had a bad previous life. If they do good deeds now, the future life will be better.

AG: What do you have in common with other religions?

Viet La: Do not harm others. Treat others the way you would want to be treated. We believe in forgiveness, no retaliation. We believe in common sense, helping people and not doing bad things.

Buddha is not God. He was a great teacher. He said to look at the ideas. If you like them, then believe them. People do not have to announce that they are Buddhist.

Steve: The question is a comparative religion question that might be better answered by those who have studied comparative religions. I think loving-kindness, cherishing others, helping others to be happy and freeing people from suffering are part of every religion.

The Dahli Lama says that if science proves that Buddhism is wrong then Buddhism has to change. It is flexible. It has evolved. It’s more of a practice than a religion.

AG: How do these beliefs help you in your daily life?

Steve: Buddhism is made to be practiced. An intellectual understanding is of no use. I apply Buddhist teachings to everyday life. Many practices help that. It helps me cherish other living beings and help free them from suffering.
Viet La: Buddhism helps me to forgive people, to do good deeds, to not attach to material goods. Sometimes it hurts to see others who have more material goods. Buddhism helps me put that aside. It helps me be aware of who I am and the environment around me and principles around me.

AG: What steps do you take to forgive?

Viet La: Don’t take revenge. You have to make a decision to stop retaliation. Maybe things will get worse, but in yourself you know you did right. In this way people can decrease violence. There are three tenants of Buddhism: (1) be humble/compassionate, (2) be knowledgeable, and (3) be brave. Sometimes we have to act. The goal is to not harm, but to help people simmer down, not to retaliate.

AG: What hopes for the future do your beliefs give you?

Viet La: I hope that people will live in harmony, that people will understand other people more.

Steve: Peace doesn’t come from institutions, because someone says so, but peace comes from the heart. When we are peaceful beings, harm will cease.

AG: What help or hope for the relief of suffering does your religion offer?

Steve: We believe that all happiness in the world arises from wanting others to be happy and all suffering comes from wishing self to be happy. Buddhism is about people becoming permanently free of suffering.

Viet La: Our youth group volunteers at the Salvation Army where we cook meals for the homeless. Our approach to suffering is to endure and overcome through the three basic tenants. Buddha said, “Were you born? Then you have suffering. Don’t ask why. It’s just part of life.”

If you suffer, try to do something different. Don’t be lazy and give up. But let it go. If you are attached to something that makes you hurt, then stay away from it.

AG: How do you interact with people around you who believe differently than you do?

Viet La: We live with people. We have to mix with people to make a difference. Buddhism doesn’t force faith.
For example, in Vietnam we have eighty percent Buddhists and some Catholics. Sometimes a Buddhist and Catholic will marry. Usually the Catholic wants the Buddhist to change. Often the Buddhist does change. Buddhism is relaxed about this because you don’t give up your Buddhist nature; you just change the form. We don’t make people feel bad about it. What good does it do? They already have so many things in their minds.

We teach respect for other religions. We don’t feel superior. We participate in the interfaith community and events. We try to live in harmony with people.

Steve: Cherish them. Cherish everybody.

AG: What have you found to be most difficult in your interactions with people of other religions?

Steve: That question doesn’t evoke a response from me. You don’t have to be Buddhist to benefit from Buddhist teachings. I don’t see any difference.

Viet La: Superiority. A stereotypical perspective of what Buddhism is about without asking. This makes interactions, not harmful, but awkward. Caucasian “hippies” or people from Hollywood who adopt Buddhism as a trend make people think that this is Buddhism. People don’t ask questions, like you are doing, to find out what Buddhism really is.

Our temple here is more a community center than a church. We teach Vietnamese, take the youth camping, and do charity work. Sometimes we get loud, but the neighbors understand.

Buddhism fits with my lifestyle. My parents are Buddhists, so I have no problems with them. I don’t feel restricted or indoctrinated.

AG: How did you become Buddhist? Or have you been all your life?

Steve: That’s a good question. I think everyone at some point faces life’s circumstances. There is a wish to change some aspect of life coupled with circumstances. A person goes looking for what will help that change.

Post-script: Viet La expressed appreciation for being asked and indicated that maybe he needed to do the same with Christians. He talked about how awkward he felt when he first came to America, he couldn’t speak the language and knew that all around him were people who didn’t believe as he did. He mentioned that understanding others comes through communication rather than being fearful.

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