

Buddhism and American Consumerism:  
Religious Identity as Protest

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the constructive doctrinal project of American Zen Buddhists through utilizing field research conducted at the Green Gulch Farm Zen Community. American Zen Buddhists have radically re-interpreted traditional Zen teachings in light of their engagement with American culture. Consumer culture and American capitalism are conceptualized as the source of suffering, with Zen Buddhism presented as the antidote for suffering Americans. As a result of this doctrinal project, the creation of the Zen community itself as a place of social reeducation therefore becomes the enactment of the salvific actions of a bodhisattva.

**Keywords:** American Buddhism, consumerism, bodhisattva, conversion, Zen

The First Truth of Buddhism, realized by the Buddha when he sat beneath the bodhi tree and attained enlightenment, is that life is suffering. All life, anywhere and at any time, is suffering. While this may seem to be a rather pessimistic view, the Buddha went on to teach that suffering has a cause and therefore an end, inspiring Buddhist thinkers for centuries to find ways in which Buddhist doctrines and teachings can stop the causes of suffering. As Buddhism has become an increasingly American religion, Buddhist converts have focused their efforts on uniquely American problems and concerns, transforming the practices and doctrines of traditional Buddhism in response. How do American convert Buddhists conceptualize the suffering of all beings and work through Buddhist doctrines to

end suffering? How does this idea of suffering integrate into Buddhist religious practice? How are American Buddhists transformed by Buddhist religious teachings, teachings that they themselves transformed?

In order to explore the ways in which American convert Buddhists use their new-found religious identity to engage with American society, I undertook a period of intensive field work at the Green Gulch Farm Zen Community in the summer of 2007. Located in Marin County, Green Gulch Farm is a residential community operated by the San Francisco Zen Center, an influential American Zen practice center founded in the 1960s by the Japanese priest Shunryu Suzuki. Today, Green Gulch Farm is a fluid community of about fifty residents staying anywhere from three months to twenty-five years, with constant streams of shorter staying guests, guest students, retreatants, and volunteers. In return for room and board—and in some cases health insurance and a small allowance—residents work in a variety of programs during their stay. True to its name, Green Gulch is a working organic farm, though it also offers extensive retreat, conference, and religious services.

For those who live and practice at Green Gulch Farm, Buddhist doctrine has become radically re-interpreted. The cause of suffering is no longer identified solely as ignorance of the central truth of no-self, but rather as the larger American consumer society and its effects on both the individual and the world. In the rhetoric of Green Gulch Farm, Zen Buddhist practice is offered as the antidote for consumer culture—the end to suffering. Green Gulch Farm residents re-interpret the work of the great Mahāyāna Buddhist hero, the bodhisattva, to be the creation of a place of reeducation, a means to change the mentality of Americans by presenting an

alternative lifestyle to consumer culture. In Green Gulch Farm's constructive doctrinal project, therefore, the heart of Buddhist compassionate action is radically re-conceptualized as an act of extreme social reeducation through Zen Buddhism.

In interviews, Green Gulch Farm residents consistently connected their decision to adopt Zen Buddhism with their rejection of America's rampant consumer culture. Shunryu Suzuki, the founder of Green Gulch Farm, wrote that "if your true nature is covered by ideas of economy and efficiency, Dogen's way [Soto Zen Buddhism] makes no sense."<sup>1</sup> Suzuki's distrust of traditional capitalist values is mirrored in residents' perceptions of American society. Ivan Richmond, a second-generation American Buddhist raised by his parents at Green Gulch Farm during the late 1980s, describes what he was taught as a child at the farm:

The 'outside' America was viewed by the people of Green Gulch as the world of unenlightened slaves to the delusions of their society and culture. Outside, people were thought to be intemperate. Their minds, we were led to believe, were cluttered with empty ambitions and materialistic desires. In effect, we were taught to think of the world outside as the opposite of Green Gulch in every respect.<sup>2</sup>

While Ivan was reared at Green Gulch Farm in the 1980s, many of the emotions he describes still pervade the community. During meal discussions, it was common practice to criticize the material culture of America. Amy specifically called American culture a "disposable culture," and mourned the loss of workmanship in goods produced by mass-market companies such as Wal-Mart and Target. During a work break, a resident explained to me how American children today are raised in

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<sup>1</sup> Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, ed. Trudy Dixon (Boston: Weatherhill, 1970), 93

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Richmond, *Silence and Noise: Growing up Zen in America*, (New York: Ataria Books, 2003), 7

captivity and placated with consumer products. Edward spoke of American society's conflation of happiness with comfort, connecting this relationship to his perception of Western religion's ineffective engagement with modern society:

I think now we are living in a religion of materialism...They [Christians] define happiness with comfort—a cozy house, a nice car, a nice job, lots of money in the bank. And this is happiness for them. So, the sense of religion is lost. In the Western churches, you cannot find happiness. It is the opposite; everything is gloom and sad.<sup>3</sup>

In daily conversation and life at Green Gulch Farm, American society is negatively described as resting upon a foundation of consumerism in direct contrast to the Zen Buddhist community.

In response to this perceived consumer culture, Green Gulch Farm residents offer Zen Buddhism as an antidote and alternative lifestyle. Residents defended the farm in interviews as entirely other to American consumer society. Cameron explained Zen Buddhism as completely antithetical to consumer culture:

I think Buddhism's pretty much diametrically opposed to consumer culture. I mean, so much of the teachings are about renunciation and kind of giving up worldly attachments that I think if one is practicing the teachings, it would be really hard to live a regular, consumer lifestyle, like driving an SUV and buy, buy, buy and still be true to the teachings.<sup>4</sup>

When describing the value of Japanese Zen meditation, Ash, a young priest who had been practicing Buddhism since graduating college, specifically emphasized its sharp contrasts to the consumer-driven world: "To do nothing [i.e. meditation] in a world where everything is more than ever so production oriented, to just radically

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<sup>3</sup> Edward (resident 2 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Cameron (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

be with things as they are, is so wonderful and such a break from the world.”<sup>5</sup> This total opposition to American capitalism makes Zen Buddhism a uniquely powerful tool to address and fix consumer culture. During a formal discussion with beginning students at Green Gulch Farm, the guest student coordinator explained that people often think fondly of new things to buy—a car, a house, or clothes—but she described Zen Buddhism as jumping in and breaking the cycle of desire. Kojitsu, an advanced Zen practitioner with his own students, elaborated on how unfulfilled desires for objects and things are a necessary precursor to Buddhist practice:

I do feel that people are more open to practice when they actually realize the world is *not* going to satisfy your needs. Ever. For a while, but only for a while. Whatever you get, you lose. People, places, things are changing all the time. It’s not going to work for you. And this is the definition of suffering. We’re always looking for that thing that’s going to last, and it never lasts.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, a student of Kojitsu considered the transformative effect Zen Buddhism had in his life, discussing how it helped him see the world differently from the American consumerism he conceived of as completely foreign to his life at Green Gulch Farm:

I didn’t mind working hard, but I did mind working hard to support that other system [consumerism]. So I was kind of looking into Buddhism and Zen. Just a lot of things clicked for me to be able to understand that you don’t have to have that security. You don’t have to have the car. You don’t have to have all that stuff, and you can feel good about it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ash (resident 17 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 13 June 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Kojitsu (resident 30 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Lance (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

For residents of Green Gulch Farm, Zen Buddhism is the antidote to American consumer culture, providing an opportunity to change one's relationship with American capitalism.

As part of their opposition to American consumer society, Green Gulch Farm residents conceive of Zen Buddhism as a radically different, alternative lifestyle, rather than a mere religious identity. When asked what Zen Buddhism offers the world, Elayne emphasized both its complete otherness and its complete lifestyle, explaining that it provides the opportunity “to see that you can live life a little bit differently—just an alternative to the big, wide world.”<sup>8</sup> Morgan also saw life at Green Gulch demonstrating an alternate way of being in the world: “I think this place is really important, just to give an idea that there might be a different way to live your life.” She later added that Green Gulch Farm residents “live it—live the vow, and live the [Buddhist] principles.”<sup>9</sup> This conception of Zen Buddhism as a lifestyle rather than a religious identity was a constant theme in discussions of religious practice. Throughout her interview, Gabrielle highlighted the ways in which her Buddhist practice represented a complete lifestyle: “In reciting the [Buddhist] refuges every morning, I am affirming that I am giving myself over to this practice, and that this practice is my life.”<sup>10</sup> Gwen also affirmed the holistic nature of life at Green Gulch: “I can live here and live in a place, and be able to work here—to work here, live here, eat here—and have the practice be central to my life.”<sup>11</sup> Helena,

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<sup>8</sup> Elayne (resident 9 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 1 July 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 12 June 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Gabrielle (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Gwen (resident 15 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 14 June 2007.

who was a guest student for a week as she explored taking the Buddhist refuges, was struck by the devotion residents had for Buddhist practice: “Everyone is very devout in their following of the forms, and they take it as a way of life...it can be a way of life in and of itself.”<sup>12</sup> Green Gulch residents conceive of their Buddhist identity not only as a religious practice, but also as a complete alternative lifestyle in opposition to the consumerism of the larger American culture.

Having identified the cause of suffering as American consumer culture and the alternative lifestyle of Zen Buddhism as the antidote, the practice of American Zen Buddhism at Green Gulch Farm becomes deeply interconnected with the Mahāyāna Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva and the bodhisattva’s vow to save all beings from suffering. Although the idea is complex and has a historically fluctuating definition, a Mahāyāna bodhisattva is generally understood to be one who has taken a vow to achieve enlightenment and become a Buddha for the benefit of all beings. A bodhisattva tirelessly works to save all sentient creatures—every ant, jellyfish, and person—and never leaves the cycle of suffering until every being attains liberation. Possibly the most famous model of the bodhisattva is “the shepherd, who follows his flock into the shelter of the pen and closes the gate behind him.”<sup>13</sup> The religious identity of a bodhisattva is open to every practitioner of Zen Buddhism, and in contrast to most Zen Buddhists in Japan, the majority of residents at Green Gulch Farm have taken bodhisattva vows, indicating the concept’s extreme importance in their religious lives and practice.

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<sup>12</sup> Helena (resident 1 week). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 28 June 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Lopez. *The Story of Buddhism* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 73

Saving all beings, however, is a tall order and Japanese Zen Buddhism has traditionally focused its efforts on private individual practice with the hope that in future rebirths one can help save all beings through advanced knowledge and spiritual attainment. In contrast, American convert Buddhists have transformed the meaning of the bodhisattva vow to save all beings by re-conceptualizing their practice and work at Green Gulch Farm. Through constructing a welcoming environment for guests and an impermanent residential community, American Zen Buddhists understand their practice at Green Gulch Farm as the compassionate actions of a bodhisattva and the fulfillment of the vow to save all beings. Although a monastic Zen community, Green Gulch breaks from Japanese tradition by being a relatively open environment with numerous ways for guests to learn about Zen Buddhism. The community invites visitors to explore Zen Buddhism through a variety of venues. For example, there is a Sunday program each week with a Dharma lecture and meditation session. Throughout the year, there are also frequent daylong retreats and workshops on issues pertaining to Zen Buddhism. During the week, many of the facilities at Green Gulch specifically offer educational experiences for visitors. The Head of Visitor Services explained to me that over 15,000 people visit Green Gulch Farm every year. The farm and garden themselves do not bring in much income and are used primarily for these educational visits. Scattered throughout the farm and garden crews' daily work schedules are numerous school and organization field trips. During my fieldwork, one Sunday guest specifically asked the Head of the Garden if the schizophrenic patients his wife worked with could have the opportunity to visit the farm and stroll through the gardens as a form



of therapy. This request was quickly granted, and the next week several Zen priests took turns walking with the schizophrenic patients in silent meditation.

Beyond visitors and guests, Green Gulch Farm also has a substantial residential population. Many individuals come for a personal retreat on the guest program, staying in a luxurious guesthouse housing up to twenty-four people, with small private rooms and shared baths. A guest can also come as a retreatant, which includes a discounted cost for the guesthouse because the individual works with the community in the mornings. A long-term option for residential practice is to live with the community as a guest student in-group housing and follow the full daily schedule, paying only twenty dollars a day for room and board. There are also two several-month-long apprentice programs, one on the farm and one working with the community, which provide free room, board, and Dharma education in return for labor. Each year, there are two four-month-long practice periods and opportunities for more permanent residence following participation in a practice period.

This residential community, however, is specifically structured to be impermanent as residents are encouraged to take the Buddhist practice and lifestyle they learn at Green Gulch Farm and return to the larger world to enact significant change in American consumer society and consumer culture. The vast majority of residents are not expected to live out their entire lives at Green Gulch as they would at a typical Japanese Zen monastery. Whether they are staying for several years, a few months, or even only a week or two, residents are encouraged to eventually leave and to take what they have learned out into the larger society. Individuals may return to Green Gulch after several years away or remain part of the community

through volunteer work; however, few will become permanent residents. Lance was inspired by those who left, and he discussed their model for his future as a Zen Buddhist practitioner:

There are people who were here ten years ago and keep coming back for a week each year. It's really interesting, because my ultimate goal is to go back [to the outside world] in some other capacity. So, it's really interesting to see people who have done that, gone back and continued practice, but are still able to be in that economic circle.<sup>14</sup>

Dara explained to me that residents “do not stay forever, because that’s not the way it works here.”<sup>15</sup> When I pushed her to expand on that statement, she simply said, “This isn’t a place to live the rest of your life.”<sup>16</sup> Violet expressed a strong desire to leave the community at some point in the future: “I kind of want to just practice with everyone—to not practice as a separate entity, as a little community that’s apart from the breadth of humanity or Americans or society.”<sup>17</sup> Patrick had similar feelings, telling me that he wanted to leave Green Gulch Farm because “life is practice. You don’t have to be in a monastery or a temple to practice. If you stop practicing, you don’t [actually] stop practicing, because life is practice.”<sup>18</sup> Green Gulch encourages its residents to eventually leave the community and take their Buddhist practice out into the larger world of American society.

While one can see the transformative and educational objectives through the residential structure and community outreach of Green Gulch Farm, residents

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<sup>14</sup> Lance (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Dara (resident 8 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 20 June 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Dara (resident 8 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 20 June 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Violet (resident 4 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 2 July 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick (resident 2 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 6 July 2007.

explicitly express these goals through Zen Buddhist doctrine as the community's fulfillment of the Mahāyāna Buddhist ambition of saving all beings. Mel Weitsman, former co-abbot of Green Gulch Farm, writes that Green Gulch has few specific volunteer programs because their existence is a form of social activism in itself: "[the San Francisco Zen Center's] purpose is to introduce people to Buddhism and to give them a place to practice. These are great accomplishments. Social outreach is important, but it has to be secondary."<sup>19</sup> While initially frustrated by public lectures held at Green Gulch, Delia came to see them and her participation in them as an expression of her vow to save all beings:

I think it's [Sunday lecture program] part of the vow to help other beings. This is our practice. We find this helpful to us; perhaps you might find it helpful too. So, we offer it...For me, that feels like I want to do that. I want people to come and see the beauty of the physical space and to also see how people can live together—prepare food and eat together, do the dishes and laugh together, go down Wednesday morning and hoe together. There is just something about sharing that. Just so they know that this is here. People who are teachers, part of their vow is to share the Dharma.<sup>20</sup>

Owen agreed, viewing Green Gulch's open interaction with the surrounding public as "what we really are supposed to be doing. It's part of our [Buddhist] practice."<sup>21</sup> When asked about the Guest House and its relation to Green Gulch's Buddhist identity, the current abbot explained:

It is both the intention of serving others in that way, and the opportunity to bring awareness to it, giving a full sense of commitment of bringing your whole heart to it...So part of our

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<sup>19</sup> Mel Weitzman. Interview by Michael Downing. Quoted in *Shoes Outside the Door: Desire, Devotion and Excess at San Francisco Zen Center* (New York: Counterpoint, 2001), 188

<sup>20</sup> Delia (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Owen (6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 7 June 2007.

practice is being willing to take different roles in relation to other people; in one role, you simply take care of the space that you got to be in. I think that is completely part of our practice.<sup>22</sup>

Rebecca discussed Green Gulch's commitment to saving all beings and its seemingly inward focus: "You might feel that if you stay here too long, you wouldn't be fulfilling that role of sending love and compassion out, but if you're creating a place where people can come and reboot their batteries so that they can go out and give that love, we are doing that."<sup>23</sup> In defense of Buddhist practice and the residential life at Green Gulch, Ash told me "others might look at Buddhist practice as a waste of time or self-indulgent or something. It's really the opposite, but it's hard to explain the practice to somebody who has no connection to it at all."<sup>24</sup> We see, therefore, the culmination of the American Buddhist doctrinal project—at least for right now. Through action, community structure, and creative interpretations of traditional Buddhist doctrine, Green Gulch Farm proposes Zen Buddhism as an alternative lifestyle for those suffering from American consumer culture—an act that is radically re-interpreted as the culmination of the bodhisattva vow to save all beings.

After studying Green Gulch Farm and its radical transformation of traditional Zen Buddhist doctrine as a protest to American capitalism, I am incredibly excited by the growth and development of a Zen Buddhism that is uniquely American. However, I am also forced to consider the influence of Green Gulch Farm residents' socio-economic background in analyzing their interpretations of Zen Buddhist doctrine. James Coleman has written extensively on the statistical profile of

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<sup>22</sup> Ryoshu (resident 35 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 26 June 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Rebecca (resident 6 weeks). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 30 June 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Ash (resident 17 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 13 June 2007.

American convert Buddhists, finding that they are significantly more educated and wealthier than other Americans on average.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, when reflecting on the reaction of Green Gulch Farm residents to American consumerism, I wonder whether this question is itself socio-economically constructed. Would someone coming from a different economic or educational background even voice consumerism as an important source of suffering, rather than perhaps focusing on more pressing social issues? While this particular question is unanswerable at the present time, it raises an important concern that the American Zen Buddhist community will have to address in the future as American Zen establishes a more pervasive presence in American society and the bodhisattvas of Green Gulch Farm find themselves faced with social concerns they previously ignored.

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<sup>25</sup> James Coleman, *The New Buddhism: the Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

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