

Age of enlightenment

*While churches struggle to fill their pews, Buddhism is on the rise in the west as devotees numbering in their millions seek happiness and fulfilment. **Yenni Kwok** reports how the 2,500-year-old religion is finding – and adapting to – a new congregation*



Zen practitioners at Zen-Dojo Ryu-Mon. Photo: Gunter Gluecklich; www.guntergluecklich.com

Maria Andreasen had her first serious encounter with Buddhism in Thailand in 1996. She joined a 10-day meditation retreat in a monastery “simply to learn what Buddhism was and how to meditate”, the 31-year-old Dane says.

She did not become convinced it was the way of life for her, however, until she attended a lecture by a Danish Buddhist teacher in Copenhagen three years later. She felt what he said had more relevance to her life. “I liked the focus on how to use Buddhist methods in your daily life, how to deal with disturbing emotions and how to work with yourself in order to help others.”

Andreasen's conversion to Buddhism a year later, in 2000, reflects not only the growing popularity in Europe of this eastern faith – begun by Siddhartha Gautama,

who is believed to have been born and raised near the present-day Indian-Nepalese border in the 5th century BC and became the Buddha after attaining bodhi, or enlightenment, at the age of 35 – but also the emergence of a unique strand of Buddhism.

While Christian leaders lament dwindling church congregations across Europe, Buddhist centres are being thronged with adherents. Thursday is the busiest day of the week at the Diamond Way Buddhist Centre in Hamburg, Germany. Nearly 200 people, mostly young professionals and students, sit in the lotus position in the vast hall and spend an hour meditating.

Elsewhere in the city, the Tibetan Centre, linked to the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan people, offers meditation classes and religious lectures by Tibetan monks, German nuns and teachers. Several kilometres away, at Zen-Dojo Ryu-Mon, a group of men and women dressed in Japanese robes sits facing a wall in a rigorous 90-minute zazen, or sitting meditation.

There are few official statistics but the European Buddhist Union estimates there are between 3 million and 4 million adherents across the continent, a figure that includes both Asian migrants and European converts. The figure has at least doubled in 11 years, up from 1.5 million in 1996.

In Germany, where 45 per cent of the 220,000 adherents are home-grown, Buddhist groups have multiplied from about 15 in the early 1970s to more than 600 today. A 2002 poll revealed that every third German considers the Dalai Lama "the wisest man in our time".

In France, home to between 650,000 and 730,000 practitioners, millions of young people express sympathy for a Buddhist world-view and feel an intellectual affinity with the religion. About 40 per cent of an estimated 160,000 Buddhists in Britain are of European descent.

Across the Atlantic in the US, despite a pronounced upsurge of evangelical Christian churches, Buddhism has been growing quietly. Teaching centres and Buddhist groups are spreading beyond the coasts to the traditionally conservative Midwest. From 1990 to 2000, the number of Buddhist followers rose 170 per cent, the American Religious Identity Survey claims. The current figure is estimated to be between 1.5 million and 3 million, of which one-third are converts.

“Why this Buddhist wave?” mused French philosopher Luc Ferry in 2002. “In this time of de-Christianisation, Buddhism has furnished to the west a rich and interesting alternative.”

According to the French government, the average non-migrant Buddhist in the

country is between 30 and 45 years old and tertiary educated. The situation elsewhere is similar; non-theistic Buddhism, which does not postulate an all-mighty creator God, has become one of the fastest-growing religion among the largely secular, educated elite of the west.

Oliver Petersen, a former Buddhist monk who now lectures at the Tibetan Centre, sees the attraction lying within the compatibility of the Buddha's teaching with reason. "Buddhism allows science and religion to go hand in hand," he says.

The recent surge of scientific research into Buddhist meditative practices, much of which is endorsed by the Dalai Lama, surely boosts the impression.

Furthermore, in cultures where people tend to mistrust a commanding authority, "the Buddhist emphasis on intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, authority - thinking for yourself - also makes it attractive", says Alison Murdoch of Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London. "You don't need to take any big leap of faith to become a Buddhist; you can simply try out the water with the tip of your toe."

It is easy to dismiss the popularity as a fleeting fad in exotic Oriental belief, as parodied in Hanif Kureishi's novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, or a 'new-age' alternative to psychiatry but while quite a few people take up and drop out of Buddhism, many stay on for years, even decades.

Elizabeth English, 44, from Cambridge, England, has been practising since she was 20. "I had been interested in the nature of the mind," she recalls. She heard about meditation and how it could do wonders for one's mind. She came across the activities of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, set up by Sangharakshita, an Englishman who established the group with the aim of deconstructing sectarian forms of Buddhism and creating a movement that draws from all traditions.

With its emphasis on the human mind and emotions, from anger to compassion, the Buddha's teaching appeals to restless souls who wish to find peace with themselves and the world. "I was a fighter and my life used to be a struggle," says Michael André, a 54-year-old German who studied karate before immersing himself in the Japanese austere brand of Buddhism. "With Zen, it's become much quieter and peaceful."

Andreasen, who meditates every day, agrees. "On an inner level – a lot of things have changed. The Buddhist viewpoint allows me to handle things in a more sensible way. The methods help me to avoid anger or other disturbing emotions and see things in a broader perspective."

The European view of Buddhism has come a long way since Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany commissioned the use of the Buddha's image as a symbol of Oriental

menace in the 1898 painting *Yellow Peril*. In the picture, the Asian deity looms threateningly on the horizon, facing off against the good people of Europe, led by the Archangel Michael and overseen by a Christian cross.



The Yellow Peril, drawn by German artist Knackfuss in 1898

At the time, though, Europeans had already begun to take Buddhism seriously. Scholars began translating and studying Buddhist religious texts in the mid-1800s. Although lacking reliable sources, 19th-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer is acknowledged as being the first European thinker to take an interest in the faith.

The first school of Buddhist thought introduced to the west was Theravada – which is practised widely in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar – primarily due to the tireless work of Sri Lankan Buddhist lay reformer Anagarika Dharmapala. He toured Europe and North America at the turn of the 19th century, teaching a modernised, rationalised form of Theravada, which led to the founding of several Buddhist societies in North America, Britain and Germany.

After the second world war, Zen Buddhism came to the west. The lectures of Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki in North America in the 50s, and the encounter with Japanese culture by many Americans during their occupation of Japan, sparked a Zen boom

in the 60s. The spontaneity of Zen appealed to the beat generation writers, from Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder to Allen Ginsberg.

“The interest was the strongest among those in counter-culture,” recalls poet Mike O'Connor, 63, who was introduced to Zen meditation by Snyder in the late 60s.

“Gary is very much a Bodhisattva [a being dedicated to assisting everyone to achieve Buddhahood] for many folks in our culture, especially in what was, or is, the counter-culture – environmentalism, poetry and 'back country' consciousness.”

The interest in Tibetan Buddhism followed about a decade later. The flight of Tibetans from their homeland during and after the rebellion that was crushed by Chinese forces in 1959 brought their branch of Buddhism out of obscurity. By the mid-70s, the Dalai Lama and many high-ranking lamas began extensively touring Europe, North America and Australia, attracting many followers and installing their school as the most popular in the west.

It is ironic that the spread of Buddhism in the west in the second half of the 20th century was triggered by turbulence and violence in its continent of origin. In 1966, as the Vietnam War was raging, Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh left home to campaign for peace and was later forced into exile in France. He is now one of the best-known Buddhist teachers in the world. When he returned to Vietnam for only the second time in 41 years in February he was greeted like a hero. The master recently spent 10 days in Hong Kong, during which he addressed an audience of 5,000 on “mindfulness”.

Defying the western conceptualisation in separating religion and philosophy, Buddhism answers those who seek either or both. Some converts readily embrace the esoteric beliefs, such as rebirth and karma, but it is also alright to be a Buddhist without subscribing to the major tenets that have become a focal point in Asia. It is, as one book title aptly puts it, Buddhism without beliefs.

“Buddhism has developed an extremely complex system of analytical thinking, logic, epistemology and so forth,” says Jan-Ulrich Sobisch, a professor in Tibetan studies at the University of Copenhagen. “It is a treasure trove even for a matured philosopher.”

Just as Buddhism has changed the spiritual dynamics of Europe, western interest in the teachings are changing the religion. “Just the fact that men and women sit together in a zendo [meditation hall] rather than separated is a small example of how Buddhist practice is being adjusted to western ways,” says O'Connor, who lives in Port Townsend, Washington state.

Martin Baumann, professor of comparative religious studies at the University of Lucerne, Switzerland, agrees. “I think we have seen the start of western

Buddhism. It is more lay-oriented, more egalitarian and more democratic. Women have more to say and many Buddhist circles are even led by women.”

Buddhism assumed different forms when it arrived in Thailand, Japan and Tibet, but they share characteristics. Baumann's research has discovered that while ritual ceremonies, asking for blessings and devotional worship play a central role in the traditional laity's practice in Asia, western converts focus on the monastics: meditation, study of religious texts and philosophical discourse.

“The line between the monastics and the laity is blurred,” observes O'Connor. Wary of celibacy and institutional control, many western Buddhists do not want to join the monastic order. But they aren't satisfied with being traditional lay followers either. “We want a spiritual life deeper than that,” he says.

Hence, many Buddhist schools make some adjustments. Some abandon the monastic order altogether, but even those that still insist on clergy leadership open the door to lay teachers. “We will not solely depend on monks and monastery. Some people may think this is a complete degeneration,” says Petersen, 46, who disrobed in 1999 after being a monk for 16 years. “But there are many intelligent and learned lay people who can be great teachers.”

André, a monk at Zen-Dojo Ryu-Mon, has a daytime job in a hospital and lives with his girlfriend, also a Buddhist, and their daughter. “Married monks are not uncommon in Japan but some monks [there] wonder whether I am really a monk because I don't live in a monastery,” he says. “We have to juggle between our personal life, family and work; we cannot follow the Japanese way here.”

The ordination of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order is neither for monks nor nuns, but members who are committed to the core Buddhist precepts. There's no requirement to shave one's head and be celibate, but it demands years of study.

“What matters most is a person's inner commitment to follow the Buddha's teaching,” says a teacher at the order, Annie Rankin, better known as Vajrasara (literally: “she whose essence is the diamond truth”; the tradition of taking a Buddhist name - a sign of spiritual rebirth, usually given upon ordination - is one that has survived the transition to the west). “How they express it in their individual lives is secondary and for them to decide.”

Says Sobisch: “Buddhism has never been a religion that could be defined as a single identity. It has always been what the people who practised or followed it wanted it to be.”

Yet, despite the ideal image of sensible men and women spreading the wisdom of the dharma – the Buddha's teachings and doctrines – not all is perfect. The late

founder of Tibetan sect Shambhala, Chögyam Trungpa, who once counted rock star David Bowie among the meditation pupils at his monastery in Scotland, was a charismatic teacher who didn't deny he drank heavily and bedded many women. (Followers defend his controversial lifestyle, saying he practised Tibetan "crazy wisdom".)

Danish Lama Ole Nydahl's strong language against, among other things, Islam has earned him criticism from fellow Buddhists. "He is and has always been a controversial teacher who speaks his mind," admits Andreasen, who follows Nydahl's Diamond Way Buddhism. "He finds being honest more important than political correctness ... He dislikes the part of the Koran that says to kill non-believers, Buddhists included. That deeply worries him."

Yet, the Buddhist charm persists, even among non-Buddhists. English and her colleagues at Life at Work, a consulting/coaching company that gives training in communication, stress reduction, personal development and conflict resolution, use Buddhist concepts to teach accountants, managers, doctors and police officers. "The Buddhist approach to compassion and non-violence can easily be translated," she says.

Elsewhere, Murdoch is developing Universal Compassion and Wisdom for Peace, an education charity that gives training rooted in Buddhist philosophy and psychology to teachers around the world.

"We are helping people everywhere to develop their natural compassion and wisdom - to be kind and wise," she says. In the long term, she hopes to include materials from other spiritual traditions and promote "what is truly universal".

Some Christians have tried to integrate the Buddhist practice of meditation into their life. Protestant and Catholic clergy, such as German Lutheran minister Gundula Meyer, German priest Willigis Jaeger and the late Father Hugo LaSalle, have not only studied Zen meditation but have become recognised Zen masters. Franciscan and Benedictine monks in southern Germany have given Zen meditation courses.

Many church leaders are uneasy, accusing them of mixing faiths. But the octogenarian Jaeger, who runs Benediktushof Centre for Spiritual Paths in Holzkirchen, southern Germany, is unrepentant. "What I have taken from the east is essentially the knowledge of Christian mysticism that was taught in the late Middle Ages. I want to bring it back."

Two and half millennia after Siddhartha formulated his teachings in northern India, Buddhism has succeeded in gaining a large following in the west despite a lack of missionary zeal. The Dalai Lama, the world's most famous Buddhist

figure, advises against converting; he considers the west a land of Christian traditions, he says, and it is better for the people to follow their spiritual heritage. But this humble appeal is unlikely to stem the interest.

In more than three decades, O'Connor has seen the interest in Buddhism shift to the mainstream and upper-middle classes. "I suspect anywhere you find a large university or a liberal society, you will be able to find places of Zen practice," he says.

"Western Buddhism is certainly now established in one sense, and has grown very quickly in about four decades," says Vajrasara. "But I think it will take a few hundred years to really see what western Buddhism evolves into.

"What can be adapted for the west is the way or forms these teachings take, more about lifestyle rather than principle," she adds. "I think it is important that Buddhist principles are not adapted to the west. The principles and truths that Buddhism points out are timeless and universal."

O'Connor agrees. "It's hard to say what the face of Buddhism in the west will look like in 30 or 50 years, but I suspect and am certain the essence will be retained."

BOX:

From east to west and back...

U-Theatre, one of the leading theatre troupes in Taiwan, is eponymous not only with Buddhist-themed performance but also the steely displays of its actors. The secret? "Rigorous meditation training," answers artistic director Liu Ruo-yu. "It helps us bring life to the stage."

Liu's introduction to Buddhist meditation was in California during a one-year workshop by Polish director Jerzy Grotowski in the mid 1980s. "We had to meditate and chant the whole night," she recalls. "Only after I went back to Taiwan did I realise we were chanting a Buddhist mantra."

Many urban, educated and cosmopolitan young adults in Asia have embraced the western brand of Buddhism, moving away from the traditional way of their parents. "What my family traditionally practise is not real Buddhism," says Manoj Rauniar, a Nepalese who came across Lama Ole Nydahl's Diamond Way Buddhism while studying in Switzerland.

This is no surprise, according to Pankaj Mishra, author of *An End to Suffering*:

The Buddha in the World, who was introduced to Buddhist meditation while he was in the US. “These people have gone through some degree of stability and affluence, and also unhappiness, that is similar with the people in the west,” he says. “The ritualistic religions may be relevant for an agricultural society but the urban people need something more.”

Wei Hui, the enfant terrible of Chinese literature whose debut novel, *Shanghai Baby*, glorifies the decadent life of a Shanghainese girl, confesses she has found solace in the Buddha's teachings. Her latest, near-autobiographical work of fiction, *Marrying Buddha*, charts her spiritual awakening during her stay in New York.

Cynics may think this is a marketing ploy but the author insists she is sincere. “After *Shanghai Baby*, everyone criticised me. It was like being dumped in a public toilet,” she says. “I was angry but the spirituality helps me face the world.”

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