CHAPTER SIX
BUDDHISM UNDER STUDY
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The study of Buddhism in the United States includes research about the increasing number of Buddhists and the increasing influence of Buddhism on American culture. The former topic, in turn, is divided into studies of non-Asian, primarily European, Americans and studies of Asian Americans.

Various national surveys suggest that the percentage of Americans who are Buddhists grew from about 0.1 percent in the 1970s to about 0.5 percent around the turn of the century (Smith 2002). Many more Americans are influenced by Buddhism than convert to this religion. National studies suggest that about 17 percent of Americans know a Buddhist, that nearly 30 percent are very or somewhat familiar with Buddhist teachings, that most of these people have favorable opinions about the religion, and that about 12 percent of Americans report being influenced by Buddhism (Wuthnow and Cadge 2004). Thus, sympathizers far exceed adherents (Tweed 1992: 42–43).

As a perusal of the reference section would make clear, almost all the relevant research has been done during the last fifteen years. During the 1970s, ’80s, and early ’90s, only occasional studies about Buddhist converts were published. Almost all of the considerable work about Asian-American Buddhists appeared after 1990.

European-American Converts

To begin, let us consider why European Americans have been attracted to Buddhism.

Predisposing Factors

There are two social conditions that make religious change of any kind more likely.

The first is the openness of the religious market. In the United States, the state exercises little control over religion, and thus the religious situation
is a competitive one, increasing opportunities for any religion that seeks to capture part of the religious market (Finke and Iannaccone 1993). It also seems true that public opinion has become more accepting of foreign religions. Louise H. Hunter (1951: 100–11) has documented the extent to which Hawaiians equated Americanization of Japanese immigrants with their Christianization during early modernity (1880–1950). Today Americans seem more open to religious diversity.

The second predisposing factor is the number of structurally available people. Using ideas from diffusion theory and the study of new religions, it can be anticipated that religious innovation is more probable among people who are both likely to learn about new ideas and free enough to experiment with them. Indicators of exposure include: being young, being educated, being more exposed to channels of communication such as the mass media, and living in urban areas. Indicators of opportunity to experiment include: being never married, having a higher social status, being mobile, and being without strong personal networks (Wuthnow 1978; Rogers 1983). It can be assumed that all modern societies, and perhaps especially the United States, have a significant number of people in their populations who are structurally available in these ways.

Consistent with this theory, European Americans who either become Buddhist or are simply interested in Buddhism tend to be middle class, educated, and urban (Wuthnow 1976; Tipton 1982; Preston 1988; Gussner and Berkowitz 1988; Tamney 1992a: xvii; Tweed 1992: 42–45; Coleman 1999; Hammond and Machacek 1999: 53, 94, 145; Wuthnow and Cadge 2004). Moreover Hammond and Machacek (1999: 145) reported that when people converted to Soka Gakkai, they were “structurally available,” that is, they tended not to have full-time jobs, not to be married, and not to be living in the same geographical region as their parents and siblings. In addition, a large percentage of converts had traveled outside the United States (66 percent) or read about non-Western cultures (43 percent) prior to joining Soka Gakkai (1999: 153; see also Wuthnow and Cadge 2004).