Buddhism took centuries to adapt to each new country and each new culture as it spread beyond its ancestral home in India. Many see the same kind of slow evolutionary development occurring in the West. It is said that we will not know what shape Western Buddhism will take for generations to come. But whether we like it or not, the frenetic pace of postmodern society has rewritten the equations of change. The story of Western Buddhism may be told in decades, not centuries, but Buddhism has already made some of the most radical changes in its history. It would certainly be wrong to say that Buddhism has entered its final form in the West, but what living religion has a final form? The goal of this chapter, then, is to chart the trajectory of change along which this new Buddhism is moving, not to divine its ultimate destination.

When scholars and researchers look at Western Buddhism they often divide it into two camps. The “ethnic Buddhism” practiced by immigrants from Buddhist countries and their descendents make up one group, and the “convert Buddhism” of the Westerners who have taken it up are the other (Prebish 1999). The focus of this chapter is on the latter, even though the term itself is likely to become increasingly problematic as time goes by and as an increasing number of the children of Western converts grow up in the Buddhist tradition. In other works, I have referred to the meditation-oriented Buddhism group whose membership is primarily of Western origins as the “new Buddhism,” and I will argue here that it represents a distinctively different form of Buddhism that has adapted to the social realities of postmodern society.

Somewhere between the ethnic Buddhism of the Asian immigrants and the meditation-oriented “new Buddhists” there is another stream of Buddhism—the Soka Gakkai—that follows its own distinctive path. This unique Japanese import, a case study from which is the subject of the following chapter, has attracted large numbers of Western converts,
yet unlike all the other forms of convert Buddhism it does not emphasize
meditation, but focuses on a chant in praise of the Lotus Sutra. Also,
while most of the other groups have a decidedly anti-materialist bent,
the Soka Gakkai feels that diligent chanting produces wealth as well as
personal happiness. Most of the discussion that follows focuses on the
new meditation-oriented Buddhism, but it is important to note at the
outset that the Soka Gakkai plays an important part in the Western
Buddhist scene as well. It has been more successful than other groups
in winning converts among minorities and in recent years has been
building stronger bridges to the other Buddhist traditions in the West
(Hammond and Machacek 1999).

The New Buddhism and the Old

It seems fair to say that the new Western Buddhism is no longer in its
infancy, but neither has it reached mature adulthood. Fresh, innovative,
and diverse, it still maintains a good deal of its adolescent awkward-
ness. And like most adolescents, it is easy to see the seeds from which
it is growing, and its differences from the parents that give it birth.
Buddhism as refracted through the prism of late Western modernity
certainly bears a family resemblance in one degree or another to its
diverse Asian ancestors.

It has some striking likenesses to the original “Buddhism” Siddhartha
Gautama first taught in India over two millennia ago (Robinson and
Johnson 1982; Skilton 1994; Smith and Novak 2003), but some of the
most pronounced differences as well. One obvious similarity is that
Siddhartha’s followers were not born into the faith but had to make
their own decision to join. Thus, the term “convert Buddhism” would
seem to apply equally well to the original Buddhists as to the members
of Buddhist groups in the West today. As converts, it is logical to assume
that most of the early Buddhists must have had the same kind of spiritual
hunger that draws Westerners into Buddhism today, in contrast to
most contemporary Asian Buddhists who are simply born into the faith.
Siddhartha himself never placed much emphasis on rites, rituals, and
ceremonies, and neither do many of the new Buddhist groups. Even
the most formal groups almost always have fewer such practices than
the Asian traditions that gave them birth. Another striking similarity
between the oldest and the newest Buddhism is in their egalitarianism.
While it is easy to be misled by the stories about the Buddha’s hesita-