Medical Xpress

Stanford scholar tracks meditation's migration from ancient monasteries to modern yoga

May 2 2012, by Kelsey Geiser

For many Americans, "yoga" conjures up mental images of athletic-minded people engaging in a simultaneous "warrior pose" while being told to focus on their breathing.

What many yoga enthusiasts may not realize is that this athletic practice represents only one of the various ways in which aspects of Buddhism have infiltrated the secular American culture.

From its start, Buddhism has emphasized the achievement of a state of liberation and enlightenment, which can be achieved through a variety of methods, including meditation. Historically, this mentally challenging practice has been limited to monasteries and not even utilized by the typical Buddhist. Over time, however, the less technical forms of meditation have become popular in the United States – a glimpse of which can be seen in the athletic practice of yoga and its focus on counting one's measured breaths.

Religious Studies Professor Carl Bielefeldt has dedicated his academic career to the study of 13th century Japanese Zen, a tradition of Buddhism that emphasizes the practice of meditation. As Bielefeldt describes it, the deep visualization of more technical meditation could not realistically play a role in modern American life. "I am not going to get up in the morning and enter into a deep state of trance and visualize something because then I will be late for work, so instead I will get up in

the morning and watch my breath in and out."

Tracing the route to modern Buddhist meditation

As the editor of a project to translate the scriptures of the largest school of Zen in Japan, the Soto Zen School, Bielefeldt is shedding light on the works of the 13th century Zen master Dōgen.

Bielefeldt said he is providing annotation and translation of the master's often-obscure essays in hopes that the English translation will help his work to be more accessible to the international community.

Buddhist meditation has taken a long journey to reach U.S. shores. While it technically began in China in the seventh century, it was not popular in countries such as Japan and Korea until approximately 1200.

When Japan opened itself to the West in the 19th century, Buddhism changed forever. As Western ideas of religion and the academic field of religious studies began to flood into the country, many citizens began to view their spiritual practice of Buddhism as a form of religion for the first time.

Not only did Western influence come into the country, but Japanese traditions of Zen flowed out as well. "Zen became popular in the West, but then there was a certain kind of feedback system where people in Japan became more interested in Zen, saying 'Oh, other people outside of Japan find this interesting, maybe there is something more to it,' " Bielefeldt said.

Despite this feedback system, the movement of meditation from the monasteries to ordinary communities in Japan and other Asian nations did not rival the movement in the United States. As Buddhism moved to the western hemisphere, meditation began to spread into the broader

cultures, even outside of the religious realm. Today, Bielefeldt notes, meditation is used in health care as a way of coping with pain and in the sports industry as a way to focus the mind.

"We [Americans] don't really have much example, certainly to this degree, of a religion escaping from its religious tradition and background and community into the broader culture," said Bielefeldt. "We are looking at a religion that is going to have broader diffuse influence on American culture than any other major religion."

Bringing meditation theory into the classroom

Recently, Bielefeldt brought his broader interest in meditation into the classroom. His winter-quarter class on Buddhist Yoga was created to give students a basic understanding of meditation's role within Buddhism and societies across the globe.

Bielefeldt connected with students through an emphasis on meditation's journey from Japanese monasteries to San Francisco apartments.

"Meditation appeals to what is more interesting, typically, about Buddhism," said Bielefeldt. "It is a religion in which we can do something, do a practice, a kind of utilitarian or therapeutic practice."

The class focused on meditation as a form of Buddhist soteriology or, in other words, as a theory of salvation or "what people in the religion want or expect to get, hope to get, and how they get it."

In class, Bielefeldt focused on the meditation path taken by some Buddhists to achieve this salvation. Buddhism, unlike other religions, is not a way of life, but rather a means to get from one state to another. "Buddhism is often said to be a raft that takes you from one shore to the other shore," said Bielefeldt. "Then you don't carry the raft with you

afterwards."

Buddhists generally strive to achieve the three elements of the spiritual discipline before they can reach their desired end state of awakening: ethics, mental (including meditation) and wisdom. "Meditation is a kind of door between the elements," said Bielefeldt. "In one sense it's a kind of behavior, so it has to do with ethic. In another sense it involves certain states of understanding, so it is connected with wisdom."

While some Buddhists approach meditation through the traditional practice of visualization, "It is really complex and requires a lot of work," said Bielefeldt. "It is not a thing that you can just sit down and do on a Saturday."

The technicality of this meditation has, for the most part, been limited to Buddhists in monasteries rather than ordinary practicing Buddhists. It is only since the 20th century that there have been concerted efforts to bring meditation practices out of the monasteries.

Through this movement, the more popular forms of meditation have been the less technical ones, the "mindfulness practices." These mindfulness practices, however, have taken a much stronger hold in ordinary communities in the United States than in many Asian countries.

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Stanford scholar tracks meditation's migration from ancient monasteries to modern yoga (2012, May 2) retrieved 4 May 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-05-stanford-scholar-tracks-meditation-migration.html