Research Article

From Buddhist Hippies to Buddhist Geeks:

The Emergence of Buddhist

Postmodernism?

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Abstract

Drawing on discourse analysis and ethnography, this paper will critically examine the effects of generational differences emerging in North American Buddhism through an analysis of the Buddhist Geeks network. Buddhist Geeks is an online Buddhist media company and community that launched in 2007. It consists of a weekly audio podcast and a digital magazine component and since 2011, has hosted an annual conference. I will discuss the main characteristics and concerns of the Buddhist Geeks community and explore how it can be situated both in relationship to traditional Buddhism and Buddhist modernism. In conclusion, I reflect on whether Buddhist Geeks signals the emergence of a new, distinctly postmodern stage in the wider assimilation of Buddhism in America.

A young woman with a dyed blonde faux-hawk and Ray-Ban sunglasses greets me with a warm welcome at the entrance to the conference room. Directly ahead, a massive neon projector screen flashes with Twitter updates, controlled presumably by the sophisticated sound system taking up most of the right side of the room. The excitement is palpable as skinny-jeaned clad hipsters in thick-rimmed glasses mingle with elegant silver haired ladies in shawls and ageing techies rub shoulders with young tattooed students. iPads, iPhones and laptops abound across and unite the intergenerational audience. An electrifying silence descends as conference organizer, Vince Horn approaches the podium: "Welcome to Buddhist Geeks," he announces, "This weekend we will be exploring the big questions such as "What is the nature of suffering? "Who am I?" and "How do we survive in a time of great climate change?"

Next to take the stage is keynote speaker, American Tibetan Buddhist popularizer, Lama Surya Das. Surya Das's entertaining talk, provocatively titled "Does Buddhism Have to Die to Be Reborn in the West?" touched lightly (a little too lightly it later transpired for many participants) on the central themes that were to be unpacked over the next two days. These included questions such as: how can we bring awareness and compassion to our use of social media and technology? What kind of technological tools can we utilize to maximize Buddhist practice in the twenty-first century? It also included warnings such as: Buddhist communities risk becoming stagnant or obsolete unless they engage with technology, and that wisdom was a scant, threatened natural resource in contemporary Western culture.

In other words, Buddhism needed the Geeks, and the Geeks needed Buddhism. Although was it exactly Buddhism that the world needed or was it more the perennial, universal

spiritual qualities of wisdom, awareness and compassion? After all, Surya Das's talk was as much littered with references to the Bible, the Dao De Ching, and Bob Marley as it was to any specific Buddhist teaching. Moreover, as he reminded the audience, the Buddha never called his teaching Buddhism, so "Buddhism Schmuddism," Surya Das declared; it is the resources found within and not the traditional forms of Buddhism that we should really care about. And yet, from their deeply engaged questions, it seemed that the audience—most of whom were one or two generations behind Surya Das— did actually care about the specifically Buddhist side of the dialogue. One male in his thirties, for example, wondered how to square the mind-only perspective of Yogachara with social activism; another went straight for the soteriological goods in asking, "What do we have to do to revive the corpse of enlightenment in this culture?"

With its electronically equipped audience and punchy TED-style conference format, its wide range of participants from experienced practitioners and self-identified "complete and utter newbies," its interlacing of technological and contemplative discourses, and its heated discussions of emerging generational differences amongst American Buddhists, the opening evening of the 2012 Buddhist Geeks conference encapsulated that which marks Buddhist Geeks as a unique and distinct phenomena in contemporary American Buddhism. Put simply, it encapsulated the shift from the baby boomer to Generation X and Y, Buddhist hippies to Buddhist geeks. Drawing on ethnography and discourse analysis, this paper will discuss some of the effects of the generational shift amongst American Buddhist practitioners through an analysis of the main characteristics and concerns of the Buddhist Geeks community. It will explore how Buddhist Geeks can be located in relationship to both traditional Buddhism and Buddhist modernism, and will reflect on whether Buddhist Geeks signals the emergence of a new, distinctly postmodern stage in the wider assimilation of Buddhism in North America.

Buddhist Geeks: History and Mission

Buddhist Geeks is an online Buddhist media company that launched in 2007. It consists of a weekly audio podcast and a digital magazine component and in 2011 hosted the first of what is expected to be a series of annual conferences. Vincent Horn and Ryan Oelke, who at that time were both students at the Buddhist-inspired liberal arts college, Naropa University, in Boulder, Colorado, began the podcast to explore issues that were particularly relevant to them as young Buddhist practitioners in the twenty-first century, but were rarely addressed in prevailing Buddhist circles. Joined later by a third member, Gwen Bell, the three wanted, they explained, to provide a public forum for the kind of discussions they were having amongst themselves such as what was actually happening in their meditation practice and how to think more positively about the way "practice is changing to meet the culture."[1]

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[1] Information from "BG 001: Meet the Geeks."
http://www.buddhistgeeks.com/2007/01/bg-001-meet-the-geeks/ (accessed November 7, 2012) and personal interview with Vince Horn September 20, 2012.

Their original idea was to interview a different figure every week as an audio podcast and then post it on the Buddhist Geeks website where it would be available for free download. The innovative and interdisciplinary nature of the podcast is emphasized in its advertisement as "an ongoing conversation with the individuals and communities who are experimenting with new ways of practicing Buddhism, as well as new ways of bringing Buddhist and contemplative insights into other disciplines" ("Our Koan," 2013). Horn reports that there is no specific criterion for who is interviewed and that he has tended to choose people, both Buddhist and non-Buddhists, he is personally interested in learning more about.[2] The result is nearly 300 interviews with a range of figures cutting not only across Buddhist traditions and lineages but also from fields as diverse as neuroscience, technology, business, social justice, and the creative arts.

Horn and Oelke report that after a few years, and over a million downloads of their weekly podcasts, "it became clear that Buddhist Geeks was something closer to a movement or community, rather than just a podcast." The thought of bringing this community together inspired the first 2011 Buddhist Geek conference at the University of the West in Los Angeles. Given the size of the conference—around 150 participants—the international media coverage it received was quite extraordinary. In large part due to Horn's media savviness, it received enthusiastic reviews in a number of newspapers including the Los Angeles Times and the British broadsheet, The Guardian.[3] In August 2013, a second conference that was twice the size took place at the University of Colorado at Boulder and a 2013 conference is planned at the same location.

Reflecting on how to define Buddhist Geeks, Horn notes:

> Like every good question, each time I ask the answer changes. In the beginning the answer was, "It's a podcast where we interview geeky Buddhists about things we don't see being talked about anywhere else." ... At a more recent point the answer was that Buddhist Geeks exists to serve a question. The question being: "How can we serve the convergence of the time-tested practices and models of Buddhism with rapidly evolving technology and a global culture?" Put another way: "How can we help bring Buddhism into the 21st century?" ("Our Koan," 2013)

The Buddhist Geeks website has been recently redesigned and highlights three main features: the podcast, the conference and the Life Retreat. The latter is an exclusively virtual practice or "new delivery model" that includes weekly one-to-one instruction with a teacher and group meetings. Another new feature on the revamped site is "The Lab," which contains a series of reflections on emerging trends in Buddhism by the major figures in Buddhist Geeks. Included in the "koan" that functions as a mission statement for Buddhist Geeks is the statement that all of the Buddhist Geeks projects are motivated by the observation that Buddhism is a dynamic and heterogeneous

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[2] Vincent Horn, personal interview. September 20, 2102.

[3] Horn and Gunatillake were also included in the popular design magazine, *Wired's* 2012 list of the 150 people most likely to change the world.
http://www.wired.co.uk/magazine/archive/2012/02/features/the-smart-list April 2, 2013.

tradition that has always shaped and been shaped by the different cultures it has come into contact with. Moreover, not only has Buddhism crossed geographical boundaries, it has also moved through cultural epochs from the Agrarian Age, to the Industrial Age, and now into the Information Age, a period in which rapid technological development is "altogether changing our understanding of what it means to be human" ("Our Koan," 2013 and Horn, 2012).

Since its inception, the Buddhist Geeks core team has undergone various transformations with both Bell and Oelke leaving, and new influential members, including Horn's wife, Emily Horn, Rohan Gunatillake, Kelly Sosan Bearer, Hokai Sobol, and Daniel Thorson joining the organization. [4] In addition to focusing on the perspectives of the core team of Buddhist Geeks, particularly Vince Horn and Gunatillake, I will include the views of a number of interviewees, particularly ones from the Pragmatic Dharma community, such as Kenneth Folk and Daniel Ingram, and the Integral Community, such as Diane Hamilton, who have been repeatedly featured. The term "Buddhist Geeks community," as I use it in this article, thus functions therefore as a loose signifier for a diverse network of people who share some common interests but are not united by any specific ideological consensus. An essential point to acknowledge here is that the following analysis focuses on the views of Buddhist Geeks core members and prominent speakers. Although I have had much informal interaction at the 2012 and 2013 conferences, as well as on-going personal email correspondences, and have tracked responses to on-line audio and written material through the comment threads, my methodology does not engage significantly or sufficiently with the diverse audience of Buddhist Geeks. Due to the scale of the project, I made the conscious decision to privilege the vision of Buddhist Geeks that is presented by its main players. Whilst this will inevitably limit my conclusions, my hope is that it will, at least, produce a heuristic and analytic starting point upon which future research, my own and others, will nuance, problematize, and refine.

The Evolution of Buddhism: Emerging Trends on Buddhist Geeks

According to American Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Ken McLeod, the 2011 Buddhist Geeks conference was a "pivotal game changing movement in the development of Buddhism in the West." The "genius" of Buddhist Geeks, he suggested, was that it had provided a forum for a conversation about Buddhism that people had been seeking for at least twenty years. Buddhist Geeks had been able to host a unique discussion about Buddhism because of the sheer number and diversity of Buddhist teachers interviewed for its weekly podcast, its attraction of a much wider audience than typical Western Buddhist sanghas, and its freedom from traditional Buddhist institutional structures (McLeod, 2012). Drawing on a close reading of over two hundred audio podcasts and written reflections on the Buddhist Geeks website, participant-observation at the 2012 and 2013 conferences, and personal phone and written correspondences with popular speakers, I have identified some of the main themes of this conversation or what

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[4] For a list of the Buddhist Geeks team and related associates see "Our Team" http://www.buddhistgeeks.com/team/

Buddhist Geeks refer to as the "emerging faces of Buddhism in the modern world."

First, there is a fundamental optimism about the impact of technology on Buddhist practice in the twenty-first century. Whilst there is acknowledgment of the dangers of technology—such as the fragmentation of attention or the sense of disembodiment it can produce—the main emphasis is on its spiritual benefits. Much of Buddhist Geeks is devoted to celebrating how technology and social media is being used to both aid traditional Buddhist practices and enable the emergence of radically innovative forms of Buddhism. This essential affirmation and embrace of technology signifies a discernable shift in the dialogue between Buddhism and technology. As Horn notes, Buddhist communities are starting to utilize technology as a spiritually transformative tool rather than dismiss it as a hindrance to practice or reluctantly accept it as a necessary evil of modern life (McLeod, 2013).

A second theme is the contemporary democratization of Buddhism. As Kenneth Folk who presented at both the 2011 and 2013 Buddhist Geeks conferences stated, the goal was "enlightenment for everyone," and not just for a few privileged monks and nuns (Folk 2013a and 2013b). This democratization is occurring on multiple levels from the recasting of enlightenment as a natural human developmental capacity to the emergence of more collective and participatory models of Buddhist communities. Technology is playing a fundamental role in this trend through enabling unprecedented direct access to and mass availability of Buddhist teachings without the mediation of a teacher or community. Similarly, with the rise of the cybersangha, the traditional teacher-student model is being either replaced or supplemented by a peer-to-peer approach (Gunatillake, 2013b). From an organizational angle, McLeod notes that a defining feature of the 2012 Buddhist Geeks conference was its non-adherence to traditional hierarchical Buddhist structures; for example, teachers and students mixed freely and there was an absence of formal markers of authority such as special seating for teachers.

Closely related to the democratization of Buddhism is the advancement of a pragmatic and utilitarian approach to Buddhism that utilizes whatever teachings and practices are helpful to end suffering. This type of orientation, commonly referred to as "DIY Buddhism," was the topic of one of the roundtable discussions at the 2012 conference. Gunatillake used the analogy of computer "hacking" to describe the expedient attitude towards Buddhism that characterizes many of the Buddhist Geeks participants:

> Everyone here is a hacker of the dharma. We take methodologies, systems, techniques, teachings and we make them personal to ourselves. We sort of cobble together teachings with bits of string and tape and we sort of make it all work and we get results and progress and what we're looking for. And that's the experience of hacking. (Gunatillake, 2013a)

Another clear articulation of this democratic-based pragmatism is Kenneth Folk and Daniel Ingram's "pragmatic dharma," a goal-oriented approach to awakening, which draws from the various enlightenment models and meditative techniques across the Buddhist traditions. Horn, a student of Folk, teaches in the pragmatic dharma lineage

and both Folk and Ingram have presented at the Buddhist Geeks conference and have been interviewed several times for the podcast. Pragmatic Dharma is rooted in the belief that the highest Buddhist meditation stages of awakening, particularly those states outlined in Theravada Buddhism, are and should be taught as transparent and achievable goals. It advocates a precise, technical approach to meditation, which is focused on attaining the highest stages of Buddhist insight and concentration meditation. Ingram describes pragmatic dharma as a reform meditation movement, which aims "to strip away the aspects of dogma, ritual, rigid hierarchy, myth and falsehood that hinder high-level practice and keep the culture of meditation mired in unhelpful taboos and misplaced effort" (Ingram, 2012).

Underlying this methodological pragmatism is a non-sectarian and pluralistic approach to the numerous Buddhist lineages and traditions. Participants drew liberally across the different forms of Buddhism and no one tradition is privileged on the Buddhist Geeks website. However, whilst Buddhist Geeks presents itself, and can be legitimately read, as a non-sectarian Buddhist community, there is also a distinct naturalistic, developmental or evolutionary reframing of Buddhism emerging within it. This developmental thread can be seen both in regards to the Buddhist soteriological goal of liberation and also in the framing of the historic trajectory of Buddhism as a world religion. Two of the main sources for this developmental reframing are Folk and Ingram's pragmatic dharma and Ken Wilber's integral theory, both of which have considerable presence, shaping power and popularity within the Buddhist Geeks network.[5] Folk teaches what he calls a "developmental enlightenment" that integrates Theravada and Dzogchen Buddhism with developmental psychology and neuroscience. He claims that awakening is a "natural part of human development" and "enlightenment is an old, maybe an outdated word for human development" (Folk, 2013c). Similarly, Ingram is inspired by the 19th century naturalists and advocates the creation of a developmental scale that would chart, measure and biologically correlate Buddhist qualities such as compassion and concentration (Ingram, 2012).

Another strong influence on the evolutionary framing of Buddhism is Wilber's integral theory. In a corpus spanning over thirty years, Wilber has attempted to unite the different cartographies of consciousness presented in Asian religions with the insights of modern psychology and postmodern epistemologies in order to construct an all-inclusive model of human development. His latest offerings "the four quadrants model" and the "integral map" integrate Western structural development frameworks, evolutionary theory and Asian, particularly Buddhist, nondual mysticism and philosophy. A strong integral presence on Buddhist Geeks is found in the work of Diane Musho Hamilton who has integrated Zen Buddhism with Wilber's integral evolutionary framework to create "Integral Zen." Hamilton frames enlightenment as a developmental achievement and places Buddhism on an evolutionary spectrum (Hamilton, 2013). Similarly, Hokai Sobol, Buddhist Geeks official "mentor" and a teacher in the Japanese Vajrayana Shingon lineage, draws from Wilber to reframe the historic trajectory of Buddhism as the unfolding of "a spiritual evolutionary trajectory," in

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[5] There are numerous personal and professional connections as well as thematic affinities between Buddhist Geeks and Wilber's integral community.

which each progressive unfolding includes but transcends the previous stage (Sobol, 2013).

The integral influence can also be seen in Buddhist Geeks advancement of an integrative and world-affirming approach to Buddhism in which all aspects of contemporary daily life—technology, business, relationships, social justice, and creative work—are legitimated as potential sites for Buddhist awakening. An example of this integration was the discussions of the relationship between Buddhism and business at the 2012 Buddhist Geeks conference (Simon, 2012). Reflecting on how spirituality and economics might be brought together in more productive and transparent ways, participants explored both how Buddhist principles could be applied to business practice and how business models might help reform Buddhist communities. Further, speakers questioned the dualism between "the sacred and the profane" and advocated a more holistic approach that sacralizes worldly practices often excluded or seen as "un-Buddhist." Closely related to this move is the claim that individual awakening is not sufficient and that the goal of Buddhist practice needs to be liberation of the entire world. This affirmation of the world as both valid site and aim of Buddhist practice often draws upon and legitimates itself through recourse to a Tantric Buddhist hermeneutic, which is contrasted with the renunciate strand of Theravada Buddhism.

Finally, there is a strong sense that Buddhist Geeks represents a new generation of Buddhists—a generation that, unlike previous ones, is comfortable and fluent in both Buddhist and technological worlds. For example, the leading figures in the conversation between neuroscience and Buddhism are touted as "a new generation of contemplative hybrids" who are equally trained in both disciples (Bearer, 2013). In a related vein, participants on Buddhist Geeks recognize a "generation divide" and explain innovations, in part, as being produced by and reflecting this generational difference.[6] This new generation is seen as producing forms of Buddhism for the twenty-first century that draw on but are distinct from both traditional and modern Buddhism.

Beyond the Baby Boomers: From Buddhist Hippies to Buddhist Geeks

As noted, a common theme on Buddhist Geeks is the view that a new generation of Buddhist practitioners is emerging, a generation that is creating Buddhist models that are distinct not only from traditional Buddhism, but also from earlier iterations of American Buddhism.[7] In fact, it is the latter—specifically those Buddhist forms associated with the "baby boomer" generation—that Buddhist Geeks participants

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[6] See, for example, McLeod, 2013.

[7] By American Buddhism, participants are referring to what Jan Nattier labeled as "import or elite Buddhism," those specific American Buddhist communities which are populated by white middle-class Americans whose main interest is in Buddhist meditation practice. See Jan Nattier, 1998. The conflation of the term American Buddhism with these specific groups is problematic because, amongst other things, it ignores the fact that the majority of American Buddhists are actually immigrant Asian American Buddhists. See Hickey, 2010.

particularly seek to distinguish themselves from. There is considerable reflection on differences between Western Buddhists from the boomer generation and Generations X and Y and on how this "generation divide" has produced and shaped the Buddhist Geeks project. In particular, as the following examples demonstrate, much emphasis is placed on the shift from a counter-culture hippy mentality to an urban technologically savvy sub-culture mindset.

A popular Buddhist representative of Generation X is Lodro Rinzin, a teacher in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition who has appeared both on the Buddhist Geeks podcast and at the 2013 Buddhist Geeks conference. Rinzin explains that he wrote his playfully titled book, *The Buddha Walks into a Bar: A Guide to Life for a New Generation* because many of the Western Buddhist texts, written by boomer authors such as Pema Chodron and Jack Kornfield, were not always relevant to him as a younger practitioner. He sees the following main differences between 1st and 2nd generation American Buddhists. First, he claims that the 2nd generation has mentors from many different Buddhist lineages, which tends to generate a more pluralistic and less sectarian approach. Second, he observes that as a technologically immersed generation, they have an unprecedented ability to access dharma teachings and connect with other practitioners on the Internet. Finally, he notes that meditation is now more mainstream and is considered a pragmatic tool rather than "an eastern other worldly hippie-dippy thing" (Lodro Rinzin, 2013).

Rohan Gunatillake makes some similar observations in discussing how many of the technological innovations featured on Buddhist Geeks reflect a shift from a "hippy" to a contemporary design aesthetic. Gunatillake designed the "mindfulness-based" buddhify, an iPhone and Android cell application, which facilitates meditation practice in an urban environment. Users or "players" select one of four locations—travelling, walking, at the gym, or at home—and the app plays an audio-guided meditation, which is engineered specifically for that environment. Gunatillake designed buddhify after repeatedly having conversations with people who expressed an interest in Buddhist meditation but stated they either had no time for the common Western Buddhist retreat teaching formats and/or felt alienated from its association with "hippy or new age culture." He sees these obstacles or as indicating that the "aesthetic of meditation is broken" and claims that Buddhist meditation must be re-packaged if it is to attract a young urban demographic (Gunatillake, 2012).

Folk and Ingram also position the pragmatic dharma movement as offering an alternative to the type of Buddhism taught by the "hippy" baby boomer generations, particularly the American Insight movement. Ingram contrasts the focus on meditation technique in pragmatic dharma with what he sees as a more therapeutic emphasis on working through emotional issues found in the Insight community. Similarly, he describes his book, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha: An Unusually Hardcore Approach to Buddhism*, as, in large part, reflecting generational difference between Western Buddhists:

> It's the unrestrained voice of one from a generation whose radicals wore spikes and combat boots rather than beads and sandals, listened to the Sex Pistols

rather than the Moody Blues, wouldn't know a beat poet or early sixties dharma bum from a hole in the ground and thought that hippies were pretty friggin' naive. Not that we don't owe them a lot. It's also the unrestrained voice of one whose practice has been dedicated to complete and unexcelled mastery of the traditional and hard core stages of the path rather than some sort of vapid new age fluff or pop psychological head trip. (Ingram, 2012)

Attendees at the 2012 Buddhist Geeks conference echoed and added to the points made by key representatives such as Gunatillake, Rinzin and Ingram. In a lengthy 2012 pre-conference discussion thread on generational differences in Buddhism, for example, participants who identified as belonging to Generation X or Generation Y distinguished themselves from the preceding generation of Western Buddhists in the following ways: (i) they were more comfortable with technology and social media, which have made the dharma more accessible and democratized teaching structures; (ii) they wanted to combine traditional Buddhism and contemporary culture in more spiritually transformative ways; (iii) they were concerned with evolving spiritual practices as householders and translating spiritual experience into meaningful everyday activity; and (iv) they considered themselves as less naïve and more savvy, critical spiritual consumers than their predecessors. Interestingly, there was a notable absence of discussion about traditional forms of Buddhism and much more focus on responding to the limitations of "boomer Buddhism." As self-identified Generation Y-er, Horn put it:

I observed many things from older "spiritual" boomers who seemed really deep and profound in many ways, and then just not having a clue in many other ways (like relationships, or work, or whatever). These were members of my immediate family, as well as family friends. This definitely shaped my approach to Buddhist practice, and my overall skepticism of Buddhism, or any other general system, that tries to explain all aspects of human life. Actually, that's what gave rise to the Buddhist Geeks project—a questioning of what this stuff actually means, and where its limits are. Far from thinking that the Buddha, or any other person in history, has figured it all out, I very much see these as shifts in generations, now as in the past, as an evolution and development of greater awareness.[8]

Buddhist author, David Chapman who has been interviewed twice on the Buddhist Geeks podcast, offers a more comprehensive and sustained critique of the type of Buddhism produced by the boomer generation, which he labels as "consensus Buddhism" (Chapman, 2013). Chapman dates consensus Buddhism to the Western counter-culture encounter with Asian "modernized export Buddhism," particularly the early twentieth century Theravada Buddhist reform movement of Thailand and Burma, in the 1960s and 70s. It is based on the premise that there is a "core essence"—namely, meditative experience—to Buddhism and that disagreements amongst Asian Buddhist traditions should be dismissed as merely superficial cultural differences. This core essence is then fleshed out and framed with the values of late-twentieth century

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[8] Buddhist Geeks 2012 Pre-Conference Discussion thread on "generational differences." No longer available on-line.

America—such as inclusivity, individualism, and egalitarianism. Hence, consensus Buddhism, which is promoted mainly by Western Insight and Zen teachers, essentially consists of "meditation and liberal Western ethics," and promotes a therapeutic ethos over traditional Buddhist soteriological goals, or, as Chapman puts it, "emotional safety over enlightenment."

Chapman acknowledges that consensus Buddhism had value for the baby boomers, but problematizes it on the following counts. First, it does not recognize its own historic and cultural specificity and seeks rather to universalize its own values in promoting a "single shared universal vision" of Buddhism. This, somewhat ironically given its stress on inclusivity, has produced an exclusive form of Buddhism that has limited appeal outside of its Western middle-to upper class boomer participants. Second, in addition to being "an approach to Buddhism that has its own values, beliefs and methods," Chapman more contentiously characterizes consensus Buddhism as an "informal alliance or political movement that promotes this approach." He dates the beginning of 'consensus Buddhism" as a political movement to the 1993 conference of Western Buddhist teachers at Dharamsala during which, he claims, the boundaries of what was to be included in and deemed acceptable as Western Buddhism were erected by a select gathering of teachers. This, he laments, then led to a "hegemonic rule and deliberate suppression of alternative approaches."

For Chapman, then, the main problem with consensus Buddhism is that it has eradicated fundamental differences between traditional forms of Buddhism and has actively marginalized alternative forms of modern Buddhism. However, he sees clear signs that the hegemony of consensus Buddhism is beginning to crack. To begin with, he points to the discussion about generation differences at the 2011 Maha Buddhist Teachers' Conference at the Garrison Institute in which teachers from the boomer generation recognized that the younger generation of Buddhist teachers were forming their own distinct approach to Buddhism. Secondly, he points to the emergence of new forms of Western Buddhism—such as Brad Warner's Hardcore Zen, Ingram and Folk's Pragmatic Dharma and his own revisioning of Vajrayana Buddhism—that offer alternatives to consensus Buddhism and which he believes have more appeal to those from Generation X and Y.

Conclusion: From Buddhist Modernism to Buddhist Postmodernism?

In conclusion, I want to reflect on whether participants such as Chapman are correct in suggesting that we are hearing the death knell of Buddhist modernism and the heralding of a new stage in the transmission of Buddhism in the West. In an associated press article on the 2011 Buddhist Teacher's Council, differences between what were identified as the "pioneers" and the "NextGen" of Western Buddhist teachers were represented as signifying the divide between "traditional and innovative" forms of Buddhism ("At the Crossroads," 2012). Claiming earlier Euro-American adaptations as traditional is, however, a gross misrepresentation. Such forms are captured rather by David McMahan's (2008) recently refined category of Buddhist modernism, a historically unique form of Buddhism that has emerged as a result of a process of

modernization and reform that has been taking place in Asia and the West for over a century. As McMahan states, while Buddhist modernism is neither unambiguously "there" in classical Buddhist texts and lived traditions nor is it merely a fantasy of an educated white Western elite population. This new form of Buddhism has been fashioned by modernizing Asian Buddhists and Westerners deeply engaged in creating a Buddhist response to the dominant problems and questions of modernity (McMahan, 2008: 4–5).

In many ways, Buddhist Geeks can be seen as continuing the reformation of traditional Buddhism initiated within earlier Asian and Western forms of Buddhist modernism. First and foremost, it continues the scientific interpretation of Buddhism that is a defining characteristic of Buddhist modernism. Since the nineteenth century, Asian and Western Buddhists have commonly presented the Buddha as a rational empiricist and Buddhism as a religion that is compatible with science (Lopez, 2008 & Lopez, 2012). Buddhist Geeks extends and updates this scientific lineage through the translation of classical Buddhist teachings and practices into contemporary technological associated language and concepts. For example, many of the popular speakers on the Buddhist Geeks podcast and/or conferences are committed to integrating science and Buddhism and use scientific language to interpret and/or reframe classical Buddhism. These include former Buddhist monk and vipassana teacher Shinzen Young, who has collaborated with neuroscientists from UCLA and Harvard Medical School in order to chart how meditation affects the brain. In his 2011 Buddhist Geeks Conference keynote speech, "Towards a Science of Enlightenment," Young calls the Buddha "the first and greatest scientist of human happiness" and claims Buddhism can be improved upon by incorporating the insights of science (Young, 2013). The updating of the scientific lineage is also seen in the adoption of technological language and concepts that are likely to speak to a younger technologically savvy demographic. One example of this is Horn's refashioning of the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* or no-self and *vipassana* meditation through the lens of hacking, the illegal entry into and exploitation of a computer system. Horn compares the target critiqued by the doctrine of *anatta*––the illusory sense of a permanent, unchanging self––to "windowsME," a human operating system that is pre-programmed to have a mistaken but persistent sense of a solid, essential self and world. He then envisions meditation as a form of "mind-hacking," which is used to hack into and rewrite this illusory "windowsME," so that self and reality are experienced as they actually are: fluid, changing, and impermanent (Horn, 2013).

A second key feature shared with Buddhist modernism is a major emphasis on and privileging of meditative experience. A clear articulation of this is found in Folk and Ingram's pragmatic dharma, which is described by Ingram as a particularly goal-oriented approach to awakening, which draws from various meditative techniques across the Buddhist spectrum. One of the main claims of the pragmatic dharma movement is that there is not enough focus on meditative experience in Western Buddhist communities such as the Insight community. In an influential analysis on the category of "experience," Robert Sharf has targeted the modern emphasis on meditative experience as constituting the essence of Asian religions. He traces the

modern understanding of individual inner experience as the essential core of religion to Friedrich Schleiermacher's attempt to protect religion from Enlightenment critiques. This interior experiential model was adopted and applied to Asian religions by a handful of twentieth century Asian religious leaders, such as the Zen Buddhist scholar and polarizer D.T. Suzuki, who, in sustained dialogue with their intellectual counterparts in the West, promoted the experiential narrative in service of their own agendas. Sharf, however, questions the assumption that meditation experience is central to traditional Asian religious practice. He points out that while meditation might have been esteemed in theory, it did not historically occupy the dominant role in monastic and ascetic life that is sometimes supposed. For Sharf, the modern privileging of meditation is problematic because it ignores the equally important traditional Theravada aspects of ethical training, ritual and scripture (Sharf, 1998: 94).

While continuing major trends within Buddhist modernism, however, I argue that in other ways, Buddhist Geeks can be more usefully understood as responding to certain limitations of Buddhist modernism and displaying characteristics more associated with the postmodern than modern. The signifier postmodern has been the source of much debate and disagreement. Hence, I should qualify that I am using it in two ways here: (i) in terms of certain common characteristics associated with postmodern culture; and (ii) in terms of the distinct sociological category of "postmodern religion." Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979) advanced the seminal definition of the postmodern as an "incredulity towards metanarratives," claiming that the defining, absolute beliefs of the modern age, such as the Enlightenment project of continual human progress through reason and science, had been replaced by the emergence of a plurality of small and local competing frameworks of meaning. I argue that the Buddhist Geeks community demonstrates a postmodern sensibility in destabilizing Buddhism as a metanarrative or absolute system. This occurs on multiple levels from its pluralistic embrace of other discourses to its reluctance to exclusively identify with the signifiers "Buddhism" or "Buddhist." To begin with, Horn explains that the Buddhist Geeks project developed out of his conviction that neither Buddhism nor any other single system or discourse had all of the answers needed for the human predicament in the twenty-first century, and, in multiple places, he relativizes Buddhism as just one way amongst many to perceive or point to a much larger reality (Horn and Gunatillake, 2013). Indeed, both Horn and Gunatillake caution against holding a Buddhist identity too tightly and note that at times it can be unskillful to identify as a Buddhist. Furthermore, many 2012 conference participants preferred to label themselves as "hybrid" rather than Buddhist, and others wondered whether the term had become superfluous and even an obstacle to disseminating the pragmatic tools of the tradition to a wider audience.

Buddhist Geeks commitment to the pluralism characteristic of postmodernity is also clearly demonstrated by both its commitment to providing a nonsectarian platform to explore Buddhism and its production of nearly 300 interviews with a range of figures from fields as diverse as neuroscience, technology, business, social justice, and the creative arts as well as many of the major Buddhist lineages. Similarly, the eclectic DIY or hacking approach to Buddhism found within the community is illustrative of the creative bricolage approach that has marked much cultural and artistic production in

postmodernity.

Yet, at the same time as undercutting Buddhism as an absolute system, a main concern of Buddhist Geeks is to preserve the depths of Buddhist wisdom and to avoid the dilution of Buddhism to mere "stress reduction tools."[9] Popular speakers such as Willoughby Brittany and David Vago bemoan the "McMindfulness" approach that characterizes the dialogue between Buddhism and science and are promoted as being part of a new generation of scientists who are willing, unlike their predecessors, to talk openly about the wider ethical and soteriological context of vipassana meditation (Bearer, 2013). In calling for a serious engagement with classical elements of Buddhism, Buddhist Geeks has resisted the linear process of secularization seen in various Western assimilations of Buddhism such as the secular mindfulness movement. As the British broadsheet, *The Guardian* reports:

> For all the apparent novelty, it's striking how very Buddhist these geeks are. Whereas proponents of secular mindfulness have downplayed its heritage with medical, psychological and scientific language, making for friendly assimilation into healthcare, schools and workplaces, Buddhist Geeks make few compromises... Rather than aiming for mass appeal with a mainstream message, there's a reveling in esoteric knowledge that only the very committed and very geeky would aspire to. (Halliwell, 2011)

McMahan and Jeff Wilson (2009) have noted similar trends in their respective studies, which show Western adaptations of Buddhism increasingly demonstrate an interest in more traditional elements of the religion that were neglected in the modernization process. McMahan has further observed that within contemporary Buddhist modernism there has been a reclaiming of tradition and the appearance of various combinations of tradition and innovation alongside the existence of an increasingly detraditionalized Buddhism. As he points out, these various combinations of the traditional and modern, innovative and reconstructive are more characteristic of late or postmodern than modern conditions (McMahan, 2008:246).

Finally, in addition to displaying postmodern cultural characteristics, Buddhist Geeks also fits well into the more specific sociological category of "postmodern religion." According to Paul Heelas, postmodern religion is characterized by an intermingling of the religious and secular, a consumer approach, a willingness to combine high and low culture and draw from disparate frameworks of meaning, and is associated with postmodern forms of pragmatism and relativity (Heelas, 1998: 4–5). Similarly, in their exploration of different forms of postmodern spirituality, Lynne Hume and Kathleen Philips describe postmodern religion as being marked by fluid parameters, spiritual bricolage and inventiveness, the discovery of the sacred in unlikely places, and a sense of playfulness (Hume and McPhillips, 2008: xvi–xvii).

While clearly displaying postmodern characteristics, however, claims that Buddhist Geeks represent an absolute distinction between Buddhist modernism and

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[9] Horn, personal interview.

postmodernism should be tempered. As well as considering the places, such as the updating of the scientific Buddha lineage and the emphasis on meditative experience, which continue the major trends of Buddhist modernism, one might also want to question the status of Buddhist modernism as a metanarrative or total, comprehensive system, which Buddhist Geeks rejects. One might argue, for example, that Chapman's critique somewhat overplays the coherence of Buddhism modernism, which many also consider fragmented and lacking cohesion. Winton Higgins, for example, a major proponent of "Secular Buddhism," sees it as attempting to resolve incoherence of Buddhist modernism, which he describes as "a protean formation that accommodates elements as far afield as ancestral Buddhism and psychotherapies claiming the Buddhist brand" (Higgins, 2012:109). According to him, Buddhist modernism contains "inconsistencies at the levels of practice, doctrine and institutions" (Higgins, 2012: 111). Similarly, integral theory, which has considerably shaped the Buddhist Geeks project, has itself been critiqued for advancing a totalizing framework that is associated more with modern than postmodern projects (Ferrer, 2002).

Another area in which one might question the categorization of Buddhist Geeks as distinct from Buddhist modernism is in relationship to postmodernity's affirmation of difference and diversity, and its interrogation of the universal humanist subject. For example, whilst Buddhist Geeks does consist of a more intergenerational audience than typical convert Buddhist communities, I was struck by a lack of racial diversity at both the 2012 and 2013 conferences. There is also a distinct maintenance of the convert and immigrant divide that characterizes Buddhist modernism in the West. As a *Los Angeles Times* article on the first Buddhist Geeks conference noted, there was little discussion of the gap between immigrant and non-immigrant Buddhists or between new converts and Asian Americans whose Buddhism is part of a family heritage (Lansberg, 2012). It should be noted, however, that Buddhist Geeks has, at least, begun a conversation about racial diversity. They invited Kate Johnson to present on power and privilege in Buddhist communities at the 2013 conference and Horn acknowledged that this was an area that they needed to pay more attention to (Johnson, 2013). One can also hear a call for diversity in Chapman's critique of the homogeneity of consensus Buddhism with its overwhelmingly white and middle-class population. Much work remains to be done, however, if Buddhist Geeks are to birth and transmit truly alternative postmodern forms of American Buddhism. Otherwise for all of its considerable innovations, it risks reproducing the race and class dynamics of the preceding generation of white, middle-class American convert populations.

Finally, one might also reasonably argue that Buddhist Geeks is just too firmly grounded in modernist narratives of science and technology to be considered postmodern. A clear example of this is Young's aim to develop a "science of enlightenment," which will improve, if not completely replace the meditative maps found within Buddhism. Whilst is indeed indisputable that Buddhist Geeks reiterates the modernist narrative of progress through science, there are other discourses of technology in addition to the modernist one, and these alternatives are also glimpsed on Buddhist Geeks. In her landmark, *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway both critiques and celebrates the potentialities of technology in postmodernity. Although she

condemns the exploitative and exclusory nature of modern scientific discourses, she refuses "an anti-science metaphysics and demonology of technology." Haraway calls rather for a democratization of science, which will serve historically disenfranchised populations such as women and racial minorities, and advances the model of the cyborg as a new decentered postmodern subjectivity, which disrupts the boundaries on which modernity depends (Haraway, 1991). As Vincent B. Leitch notes, following Haraway, a number of cultural theorists have distinguished between modernist science and postmodern technoscience. Leitch attributes the postmodern eruption to the breakdown of boundaries between once distinct fields, or what he calls "a moment of mixed disciplines," and he characterizes technoscience as being rooted in "a pragmatic, positive, yet wary engagement with science and technology a la Haraway, emphasizing micropolitics and creative life-enhancing alternatives" (Leitch, 2004). Certainly Buddhist Geeks with its both/and commitment to Buddhist and technological narratives qualifies for this mixing of discourses and a number of common features of postmodern technoscience—the hybrid, the cyborg, the democratization of technology, and a questioning of the assumptions and boundaries of mainstream, hegemonic science—populate the Buddhist Geeks network, alongside the modernist narratives. More work, however, is required to differentiate and think through the relations between these competing models of technology and science on Buddhist Geeks.

Whilst the above considerations temper an absolute distinction between the Buddhist hippies and Buddhist geeks, I do, however, maintain that the term postmodern has real value in illuminating new developments in contemporary Buddhism. Buddhist postmodernism situates Buddhist Geeks as primarily in conversation with Buddhist modernism rather than traditional forms of Buddhism. It identifies participants as responding to and reacting against already Westernized and modernized forms of Buddhism rather than classical form of Asian Buddhism. Hence, it captures differences more accurately than terms such as "post-traditional Buddhism," or "modern Buddhism" that have also been used to describe Buddhist Geeks.[10] Furthermore, Buddhist Geeks has appeared alongside a wave of phenomena—such as the diversity current in the American Insight community (Gleig, 2013), critical race analyses of white privilege in American Buddhism (Cheah, 2011 and Hickey, 2010), intersectional, transnational feminist approaches to Buddhism, and Secular Buddhism (Higgins, 2012)—that are interrogating certain core assumptions and characteristics of Buddhism modernism. Taken together, I conclude such developments do suggest the emergence of a new and distinctly postmodern stage in the assimilation of Buddhism in North America.

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[10] It is also worth noting that the community, on the whole, has been receptive to my etic analysis of Buddhist Geeks as postmodern. They invited me to present my academic research at the 2013 conference. Ann Gleig, "From Buddhist Hippies to Buddhist Geeks" Buddhist Geeks Conference. University of Colorado, Boulder. August 17, 2013.

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