



EAA Interview with James Shaheen Editor of *Tricycle* Magazine

Although American interest in Buddhism goes back to the New England Transcendentalists, it is probably accurate to assume that at no time in U.S. history have so many Americans claimed to be attracted to the religion. *Tricycle* Magazine undoubtedly has played a role in this trend. This aesthetically well-done and often lively Buddhist quarterly began in 1991 and has attracted a wide variety of readers. Each issue contains material by practitioners, celebrities, scholars, and leading Buddhist theologians here and abroad. In the interview that follows, Editor-in-Chief James Shaheen was kind enough to share his thoughts with us on *Tricycle* and Buddhism in American popular culture. Readers who would like more information on *Tricycle* are encouraged to visit their Web site at www.tricycle.com.

Lucien: *James, could you please provide our readers with some information on your background. How did you become interested in Buddhism? What kinds of activities have you pursued before assuming your present position?*

James Shaheen: I'm forty-four years old and was raised Catholic in Los Angeles. Although I certainly have plenty of respect for the religion of my birth, Buddhism made very practical sense to me, and I eventually began to practice both Vipassana and Zen meditation. Initially, I suppose what appealed to me most about Buddhism is that one is asked to verify the truth of the Buddha's teachings for oneself. The Buddha, in fact, asked us not to accept something as true just because he said it, but to test what he taught against our own experience.

I earned a bachelor's degree in comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, and left graduate school at Columbia to begin work in book publishing. I later took an interest in magazine publishing. Before coming to work at *Tricycle*, I worked for five years on the editorial staff at *Forbes*. I suppose you could call taking a job at *Tricycle* a bit of a U-turn. Before I took founder Helen Tworikov's place as editor in August of 2001, I was *Tricycle*'s publisher.

When I came to *Tricycle* in 1995, my knowledge of Buddhism was limited to the few books I'd read, and to what I'd picked up from a few college survey courses. I was hired to work on the publishing side of the office—advertising, circulation, direct mail, that sort of thing—but because I had an editorial background, I sometimes found myself with a pile of editing to do. We're a small staff, and we pitch in wherever we can. I was quickly drawn to the teachings, and soon found myself going on retreats and spending a lot of my free time learning about what the Buddha taught.

Lucien: *Please inform us of the early history of Tricycle. What were the initial goals of its founders? How, if at all, have they changed over the years?*

James Shaheen: *Tricycle* was launched in 1991 by Helen Tworikov and a few of her friends, with the professional advice of our founding publisher, Lorraine Kisly. They began work around Helen's kitchen table, with an initial investment of \$5,000! It wasn't until 1996 that *Tricycle* found a proper home of its own.

Tricycle's mission initially was to disseminate the *dharma*, or Buddhist teachings. At the time, the general public seemed to have only a vague notion of what Buddhism was. Some thought it was an obscure cult, never suspecting it was a 2,500-year-old tradition, or that it might speak to their lives now. But since then, a lot has changed. People are no longer asking, "What is Buddhism?" Rather, they're asking, "What's the Buddhist take?" on a particular subject. So the landscape has shifted somewhat, especially with the proliferation of Buddhist centers and the growing number of practitioners. Our mission hasn't changed, it has expanded. Not only do we attempt to disseminate the *dharma*, we also work to serve as a reliable guide for what's going on out there, and to continue to develop educational programs outside of the magazine.

Lucien: *I am aware that the publisher of Tricycle, the Buddhist Ray, Inc., is a not-for-profit educational corporation. What, in addition to publishing Tricycle, does the organization do to promote Buddhist teachings in the U.S.?*

James Shaheen: We host Change Your Mind Day, a day of free meditation instruction from practitioners of various Buddhist traditions in parks around the country. We began hosting the event nearly ten years ago in Manhattan's Central Park, but since then, we've gone national. More than forty groups around the

country—and a few abroad—host Change Your Mind Day now, from Anchorage to Philadelphia. As in the time of the Buddha, teachings are offered out of doors and free of charge. We also have a program called *Tricycle Teachings*—we partner with various dharma centers to host more formal Buddhist teachings; and to date, we have published ten books.

Lucien: *I read somewhere that initial demand for Tricycle was much higher than the publishers expected? If this is correct, why was there so much “pent-up” demand for Buddhism within American culture?*

James Shaheen: Our first press run was intended to be 5,000. We ended up printing 17,000. We now print more than 60,000 copies of each issue. I can’t say for sure what accounts for pent-up demand, except to point out that until *Tricycle* appeared, there were no independent, non-affiliated Buddhist publications out there—and as far as I know, that’s still the case. There were several community newsletters, but none that offered an open forum to the many schools of Buddhism represented in this country. I guess the number of Buddhist practitioners had reached a critical mass—or at least there were enough of them to support a magazine, and they had developed a voice, or many voices.

Lucien: *Even though Buddhism is a world religion, its origins are soundly Asian. How do you balance the Asian and now indigenous American perspectives on Buddhism in Tricycle? How do you see Asian and American perspectives on Buddhism playing out in the larger culture?*

James Shaheen: The first Buddhist teachers in this country, of course, came from Asia. Many of those who left Japan had left in search of greener pastures, minds less steeped in the conventions of traditional Buddhism, and they were very open to Western students. Those who left Tibet, on the other hand, left involuntarily, and carried with them a mission to preserve their culture. Like their East Asian counterparts, they attracted many Western students. The Vipassana movement was brought by teachers from Southeast Asia, and has grown quickly in numbers.

In all three cases, I would say these groups are well represented in the pages of *Tricycle*, as are Korean, Chinese, Pure Land, and traditional Southeast Asian teachers of Western students. Another group—Asian immigrants and their descendents—practice their respective Buddhist traditions as they were practiced in Asia—although not entirely, of course. Living in America necessitates changes in the lifestyle of any immigrant group. This group grew up Buddhist, and certainly does not look to us for guidance, inspiration, or information. But that may be changing as children of the more recent Asian immigrants have begun to contribute to the magazine. Soon we will be running a portfolio of a photographer who left Vietnam at an early age and is now working in New York City. And not long ago, we ran a moving profile of a young Cambodian refugee and his family’s struggles. Both practice Buddhism as they learned it in their native countries; at the same time, they have brought their Western education and experience to bear on their worldview.

Buddhism in this country is not monolithic, and I doubt we can attract Buddhists of every type. I would say we’ve appealed primarily to the Western practitioner and those Asian teachers

who teach Westerners. That is not to say that we do not include the traditional teachings; we do, and they form the bedrock of our editorial content.

Lucien: *Although Tricycle is certainly the highest profile popular Buddhist periodical, in the last decade or so we have seen famous musicians embrace Buddhism, big-budget movies produced with Buddhist themes, and traveling groups of Tibetan monks sell out venues in small and medium cities. What kind of positive and negative effects do you think this accentuation on Buddhism in the popular culture is having on the religion itself and its practice here?*

James Shaheen: It’s true that Buddhism has been taken up by popular culture. In fact, we ran a special section in one issue called “Hollywood: Can it Save Tibet?” It dealt with Hollywood’s love affair with Tibet, and the popularization of Buddhism and its consequences.

I can’t say whether the effects of popularization have been harmful. I can say that it is not something that anyone has any control over. It’s possible that some people have been introduced to Buddhism in the most superficial of ways and then have gone on to develop a deep practice, which is a good thing. On the other hand, there is always the risk of distorting the teachings, but the teachings themselves are incorruptible, so it doesn’t concern me especially. I would hope that people would take a closer look if they’re interested in what the teachings have to offer.

Lucien: *As you know, virtually all of our readers teach either humanities or social sciences at the middle school, secondary, and undergraduate levels. What do you recommend to our readers whose task is to introduce basic concepts about Buddhism to young people in formal educational settings?*

James Shaheen: I suggest that they read a good, basic primer such as Walpola Rahula’s *What the Buddha Taught*, and to understand that, like Christianity, there are many different schools of Buddhism, and they are as diverse as the cultures they represent. For instance, Rahula’s book comes out of the Theravada tradition, which is prevalent in Southeast Asia, and so it’s going to have that bias. But it does give the fundamentals of all Buddhist traditions, and the Buddha’s basic philosophy. Nowadays, there are plenty of books to choose from.

Lucien: *Our major objective at EAA is to assist teachers and young people to learn more about the continent that contains almost 60 percent of the world’s population. How can teachers utilize popular cultural interest in Buddhism to increase student understanding of Asia?*

James Shaheen: It may be interesting to look at popular representations of Buddhism—and the Asian cultures portrayed along with them—and then to separate fact from fiction. That way, students learn about both Asian culture and our own preconceptions of it.

Lucien: *James, thank you very much for the opportunity to do this interview.*

James Shaheen: My pleasure. ■