

A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of the American flag, showing the stars and stripes. The flag is draped and occupies the entire background of the cover.

BUDDHISM

THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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The Landscape of American Buddhism

In This Chapter

This chapter discusses the overall setting of the American Buddhist movement. It considers the issue of who may be considered a Buddhist in the American setting, how many Buddhists are present in America, and the various lines of transmission we can postulate for the various forms of Buddhism currently present.

Main Topics Covered

Who is a Buddhist in America?
How Many Buddhists are there in America?
Lines of Transmission from Asia

Who is a Buddhist in America?

The very first comprehensive book on Buddhism in America, Emma Layman's *Buddhism in America*, written in 1976, devoted an entire chapter to the question "Who are the American Buddhists?" She estimated how many Buddhists there were in America, where they lived, what they were like, what kind of education and jobs they had, what their personalities were like, how Asian American Buddhists compared to American "convert" Buddhists, and in the case of converts, what their prior religious affiliation was. What she did not consider was just how one determines who is an American Buddhist. Three years later, when I wrote my own book called *American Buddhism*,

I suggested that one of the traditional ways of identifying Buddhists in Asian countries—taking refuge and accepting the five vows of the laity—was probably an inadequate and even misleading approach when applied to the American scene.

In Colombo, Sri Lanka or in Hong Kong, if a person indicated that they “took refuge in the three jewels,” that is went to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha for refuge; and affirmed the five vows of the laity involving abstention from killing, stealing, inappropriate sexual activity, lying, and taking intoxicants; it was clear that they considered themselves exclusively Buddhist despite the fact that other religions were present in their culture and likely even exerted some influence on them. Unfortunately, in most cases circumstances are rarely this clear cut. In China, it is possible that someone might be nominally Buddhist, but also include Taoist and Confucian beliefs and practices in their religious life. Similarly, Japanese Buddhists might include Shinto traditions in their life as well, and the same situation exists in virtually every Asian culture where Buddhism flourished.

It shouldn't be surprising then that even two decades ago, American Buddhists defined themselves in an equal variety of quite radically different ways. Asian American Buddhists—who are sometimes called “cradle” Buddhists—brought the complex of identity problems mentioned above to their involvement in Buddhist practice in America. “Convert” Buddhists—most often of European American ancestry—found themselves struggling with potential multiple affiliations. Could one be Jewish and Buddhist? or Christian and Buddhist? If so, how did this so-called “ism-crossing” translate into individual religious life? One clever writer even coined a new word for Americans of Jewish ancestry who practiced Buddhism: “Jubu.” What seems clear is that the issue

of religious identity is complex for both cradle and convert Buddhists. To make matters worse, some organizations identified members as those who attended religious service, or meditation sessions, or were financial contributors, or attended lectures, or were even just casual visitors to the temple. To be sure, it was a very murky issue.

In the search for establishing some sort of “orthodoxy” in determining who is, and is not, a Buddhist in America, the problem is further complicated by the fact that all forms of Buddhism, from every Asian Buddhist culture, are present on American soil at the same time. This is the first time in more than 2,500 years of Buddhist history that this has occurred. In Asia, each culture only had to deal with its own variety of Buddhism. In other words, what works as the defining characteristic for the American convert followers of a Chinese Buddhist sect might not work for the American convert practitioners of a Buddhist tradition imported from Sri Lanka or Thailand; and neither of those sets of characteristics might work for the Asian American followers of those same traditions. Is there any solution at all?

My solution in 1979 tried to simplify the problem as much as possible. I am convinced that it remains correct and workable today, although some additional problems can now be noted, as we shall shortly see. If we define a Buddhist as someone who says “I am a Buddhist,” when questioned about **their most important pursuit**, we not only abandon our attachment to ritual formulas like the three jewels or five vows of the laity, that are neither workable nor even uniformly followed, but we also provide more than a little freedom for American Buddhist groups—a freedom in which they can develop a procedure that is consistent with their own self-image and mission. In other words, what appears initially as an

outrageously simplistic definition of Buddhist affiliation serves the double purpose of providing a new standard and a simple method of professing Buddhist commitment while at the same time imposing a renewed sense of seriousness on all Buddhist groups. It also acknowledges that not all of these “self-styled Buddhists,” necessarily join Buddhist communities. Some might practice their entire lives in isolation as solitary Buddhists. Equally, it doesn’t suppose to judge or evaluate the quality of an individual’s religious membership in a specific Buddhist community or even their commitment to the Buddhist tradition. These latter points, though, do have profound implications for an individual’s Buddhist practice, as we will see in the chapter on Buddhist practice.

This yardstick of self-identification does not compromise any specific tradition. but rather augments and accommodates the specific requirements of each. Sometimes, amidst constant inquiries about how to join particular communities, even well known and popular Asian Buddhist teachers tried to approach the problem with humor. During the initial summer of Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado in 1974, for example, one excited and interested woman, probably a fledgling would-be Buddhist, questioned Chögyam Trungpa—a Tibetan ex-lama in exile—following one of his evening lectures about what she had to do to be considered a Buddhist. He smiled broadly and said, “When you go into the hospital, on the admitting form, write Buddhist on the dotted line where it asks for religious affiliation.” Nonetheless, what the definition does not provide is some means for determining an “official” membership, which of course becomes a problem when one tries to actually count the numbers of Buddhists in America.

In more recent times, new interpretations

have sought to improve on earlier attempts to establish some sense of Buddhist identification in America. The most persuasive, by Thomas Tweed, simply changes the titles. He calls the cradle Buddhists “adherents;” and divides the convert Buddhists into one of two groups: self-identifiers and “sympathizers” (or sometimes, and more creatively, “night-stand Buddhists,” in view of the Buddhist books that are often placed next to their beds). For Tweed, the sympathizers are obviously less committed than the self-identifiers, but are no less a part of the Buddhist movement in America. In the end, virtually all the investigators and interpreters of American Buddhism affirm the hybrid nature of all religious commitments, and then conclude that Buddhists are those people who simply say they are Buddhists. It is both obvious and true. What is not so obvious is what religious choice the children of convert Buddhists will make in the future, and what religious choices the children of third, fourth, and fifth generation Asian American Buddhists will make as the recollection of their original practice dims and is replaced by their immersion in American popular culture, as evidenced by their common familiarity with items like the Beastie Boys song “Bodhisattva.”

How Many Buddhists are There in America?

Because the United States Census is prohibited from asking questions about religious preference, we will probably never have a completely accurate total of the current number of Buddhists—or members of any religion—in modern America. When the first researchers began gathering informal information at the beginning of the 1970s, most agreed there were no more than about 100,000 Buddhists, mostly composed of Asian immigrant Buddhists, in the United States.

Various American Buddhist groups, however, lobbied for public attention, and some even got it, by boasting high membership figures. The January 9, 1970 issue of Life Magazine, for example, suggested that 200,000 Americans had joined a sect of American Buddhism known as Nichiren Shōshū. Around the same time, another group called Buddhist Churches of America estimated around 100,000 members. Both figures were almost certainly inflated exaggerations.

The unreliability of membership estimates does not mean that the number of Buddhists in America was not growing, and growing rapidly at that time. A number of significant factors in post-1965 America were collectively coalescing to contribute to a huge explosion of Buddhist growth throughout North America. In the first place, there was a change in U.S. immigration law. In 1965 a number of amendments were added to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, making it significantly easier for individuals from war-torn Asian countries to find new homes in America. The impact was dramatic. The Chinese population, for example, increased 450 percent from its pre-1965 figure, to 921,000 by 1990. Moreover, similar results can be seen in the Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, Burmese, Sri Lankan, Laotian, Korean, and Japanese American communities. Second, a phenomenon known as the “counter culture” was sweeping the American landscape, and especially so among young people. The counter culture was described by influential writer Theodore Roszak to be “an exploration of the politics of consciousness.” Fueled by the writings of the literary group known as the “Beats,” books like Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* and *On the Road* glorified visions of a Buddhist-influenced way of living that sought to define a new American lifestyle. The counter culture fed off the social protest songs of composer-poets

like Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs, and sought to create a saner reality based on meditative reflection, social change, the elimination of personal suffering. Third, the American religious panorama, generally, was changing because of increasing secularization on the social front. Traditional religious groups within Christianity and Judaism were losing members fast, and many of these disenchanting members turned to alternative religions like Buddhism in their search for human fulfillment. In other words, the religious scene in 1970s America was an incredible “market” situation, and Buddhism had a very appealing product.

It wasn't until 1990 that figures based on actual research on the number of Buddhists began to appear. In 1990 a general survey on religious affiliation was conducted by Barry Kosmin and Seymour Lachman which suggested that American Buddhists constituted about .4 percent of the adult population in America (then presumed to be about 175.5 million people). If one factors in a similar percentage to accommodate the non-adult population, a figure of around one million Buddhists in America can be proposed. The popular media was quick to exploit this new information. Following the publication of their book *One Nation Under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society* in 1993, *Newsweek* magazine ran an article in its June 13, 1994 issue called “800,000 Hands Clapping,” and it was subtitled “Religion: America May Be on the Verge of Buddhadharma,” citing their findings.

In 2001, Barry Kosmin teamed with Egon Mayer to produce a new survey called the “American Religious Identity Survey” (ARIS). It was based on interviews with 50,281 people (slightly less than half the number of the 1990 survey). The preliminary results were reported in the December 24, 2001 edition of “USA Today.” The new

survey claims that the percentage of Buddhists now has risen to .5 percent of the adult population, yielding a growth in raw numbers of 169.5 percent. Even if one again factors in similar numbers for the non-adult Buddhist population, the overall result would conclude there are less than 1.5 million Buddhists in America. While it is significant that the survey notes Buddhists to have the second highest membership in the 18 to 29 age group: 56 percent (with Muslims being highest in this category at 58 percent), it certainly is not clear that these figures really are accurate.

Another approach based on actual research was that of Don Morreale. His *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America*, published in 1998 as an updated and expanded version of his earlier *Buddhist America: Centers, Retreats, Practices*, lists more than 1,000 Buddhist meditation centers in the United States and [Canada](#). If one added to this list the many Buddhist centers of non-meditative traditions, the total number of centers would be expanded considerably, possibly as high as 1500. Morreale also offers some interesting bits of information about the growth of American Buddhism during the second half of this century too. Of the more than 1,000 centers listed in his new volume, only about 2% (21 new centers) were founded between 1900 and 1964. By 1975, the number of centers had increased five-fold (117 new centers), and between 1975 and 1984 the total more than doubled (308 centers), and doubled again between 1985 and 1997 (616 new centers). Theravāda and Vajrayāna centers have approximately doubled in the last decade (from 72 to 152, and 180 to 352 respectively), while Mahāyāna groups have almost tripled (from 163 to 423). Moreover, Morreale has included a new category of center which claims no sectarian identification—creatively termed “Buddhayāna”—as a signal of the growing trend

toward Buddhist ecumenicity, and identified by Morreale as “poly-denominationalism.” This latter group has shown an almost ten-fold increase in the last decade (from 14 to 135 new centers). The above data, while interesting and impressive, suggests that a large-scale sociological study remains the scholar’s task for American Buddhism.

Scholars of Buddhism come to very different conclusions about the number of Buddhists in America. In the mid-1990s, Robert Thurman, a Buddhist Studies professor at Columbia University and a former Buddhist monk himself, told “ABC Nightly News with Peter Jennings” that there were five to six million Buddhists in the United States. Thurman was probably guessing, but by 1997, a German scholar named Martin Baumann postulated three to four million Buddhists in America, based on his own surveys and extensive research. Utilizing the comprehensive current research on immigrant Buddhist communities in the United States, it is quite likely that Baumann’s figure was correct for its time, and that there now may well be many more Buddhists on America soil. That makes American Buddhism as large as many prominent Protestant denominations.

Where are these Buddhist centers, and how does one go about finding them? Thirty years ago, apart from word of mouth information, the best bet was “The Yellow Pages.” Now one can utilize Morreale’s *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America*, which organizes the various American Buddhist centers according to their tradition of sectarian affiliation, and within each sectarian affiliation, on a state by state basis. Contact information is provided, as well as information (when available) about the teacher(s) and activities. In addition, there are many Internet sites which provide “locators” for American Buddhist groups. The best, and most stable of these is [DharmaNet International](#),

a site constructed and managed by Barry Kapke. [Buddhanet](#) also maintains a Guide to North American Dharma Centers, with specific listings for the various American Buddhist sectarian groups.

Lines of Transmission From Asia

Now that we have explored who can be considered a Buddhist in America, and how many Buddhists there might be in the United States, it is certainly appropriate to ask how they all got here. Are most Buddhists in America immigrants, the children of immigrants, American born converts to Buddhism? What is their racial background? Are they Caucasian (i.e., European Americans), African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans? How did all the various forms of Buddhism now present on American soil get here?

Most scholars agree that about 75 to 80 percent of the Buddhists in America are of Asian American descent, with the remainder being composed of American converts who are primarily of European American ancestry. There are certainly African American and Hispanic American converts to Buddhism, but their numbers appear to remain a small part of the overall convert community. In other words, the easiest way to conveniently identify all these groups is under the two broad headings of Asian immigrant Buddhists and American convert Buddhists. Unfortunately, these two main groups have not always communicated well with one another. In 1991, the editor of a soon-to-be-popular Buddhist magazine known as *Tricycle*, editorialized that “the spokespeople for Buddhism in America have been, almost exclusively, educated members of the white middle class,” and she suggested that Asian immigrant Buddhists “have not figured prominently in the development of something called

American Buddhism.” These remarks provoked an angry debate which has yet to subside, and for the most part, the members of these “two Buddhisms” practice in very separate communities.

Most recently, it has been suggested that a far more fruitful approach is to focus not on the ethnic/racial divide between the two Buddhisms, but rather on the function Buddhism plays in their respective lives. In that respect, in the Asian immigrant community, Buddhism serves an important function in maintaining the ethnic group’s sense of life and heritage. On the other hand, in the American convert communities, Buddhism provides an alternative religious identity, offering a worldview shift from the religion of their parents.

Because these various American Buddhist communities practice different forms of Buddhism, it is important to understand the lines of transmission from Asia, and there seem to be three distinct procedures by which this has happened. In one circumstance, Buddhism is imported from one country to another, in this case, from Asia to America. The catalyst for this is a “demand-driven” transmission; the host or new culture wants this tradition, and thus it is often called “Import” Buddhism. Sometimes it is called “Elite” Buddhism because its proponents (that is, the “importers”) have often discovered Buddhism through travel, or education. And they have sufficient leisure, and funds, to indulge their interest. Import Buddhism is usually associated with [Tibetan Buddhism](#), Zen, and Vipassanā (which will be described later). A second line of transmission is called “Export” Buddhism. It reflects the intent of an Asian Buddhist parent community to share its Buddhist teaching with individuals in other parts of the world. This sort of Buddhism moves throughout the world via missionary activities sponsored by the parent Buddhist community. As a result, it is often called

“Evangelical” Buddhism. The best known Export Buddhist group is Sōka Gakkai International (also to be described later), but a number of Chinese Buddhist groups also sponsor extensive activities. Finally, there is “Ethnic” Buddhism, or that form of Buddhism brought to America by Asian immigrants. One Buddhist scholar has identified this form of Buddhism as “Baggage” Buddhism, although the term has proved offensive and insensitive to many Asian American Buddhists.

To summarize, we have seen two Buddhisms—Asian immigrant Buddhism and American convert Buddhism—and three lines of transmission from Asia: Elite Buddhism which is imported to America, Evangelical Buddhism which is exported to America, and Ethnic Buddhism which arrives in America with the ongoing Asian immigrant population. In subsequent chapters, with an eye towards having a glimpse inside the spectrum of American Buddhist communities, we shall profile several American Buddhist groups, including an ethnic American Buddhist community, a meditative convert community, a non-meditative mostly convert community, and an activist community.

Key Points You Should Know

Although it is impossible to accurately estimate the total number of Buddhists in America, the number of Buddhists has risen dramatically following the 1965 change in immigration law.

Amidst the very many choices for determining the definition of Buddhist identity, the currently most accepted choice is “self-identification.”

There are currently two major types of Buddhists in America: Asian immigrant Buddhists

and American convert Buddhists.

There are three basic lines of Buddhist transmission to America: Elite or “import” Buddhism, Evangelical or “export” Buddhism, and Ethnic Buddhism.