

Appendix E / Buddhist Groups

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In 2009, The Institute for the Study of American Religion (ISAR) was asked to do a census of the American Buddhist Community, the first such attempt to do an assessment of the number of individuals who are affiliated with the burgeoning and now highly visible Buddhist religious facilities that have since 1965 appeared in every state of the Union. Responsibility for overseeing this project was accepted by Dr. J. Gordon Melton, ISAR's director, with the work on the census carried out by the ISAR staff. The effort was funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation through a request by the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) based at Pennsylvania State University.

American Buddhism burgeoned following the changes of the immigration laws relative to Asia in 1965. From relatively few centers based in the Chinese- and Japanese American communities, the whole spectrum of Buddhist organized life appeared through the 1970s and 1980s and has continued to grow as organizations from Eastern, Southeastern, and Southern Asia moved to establish centers to serve their members who had become residents of the United States. Simultaneously, a host of new American-based organizations were formed to serve non-Asians who had converted to the different forms of Buddhism. That process was accelerated by the high levels of sympathy found among non-Asian Americans for the plight of the Tibetan exiles who left their country following its annexation by the Peoples Republic of China and the special consideration given to Vietnamese who left their country after the end of the Vietnamese War.

As Buddhism emerged in strength in the United States, it was divided by language, ethnicity, and variant emphases in belief and practice. Buddhism has commonly been seen to exist in three major forms—Theravada (the dominant form in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia), Mahayana (the dominant form in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam), and Vajrayana, which some consider another form of Mahayana (the dominant form in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia). Both Theravada and Mahayana have spawned a meditative form which emphasizes the practice of meditation and the de-emphasis on theology. The Theravada form is termed Vipassana and the Mahayana form is known as Chan (China), Zen (Japan), or Son (Korea). That being said, a classification system of Buddhist groups can be created as follows:

- Theravada
 - Burmese
 - Cambodian
 - Laotian
 - Sri Lankan
 - Thai

- Mahayana
 - Chinese
 - Japanese
 - Nichiren
 - Shin
 - Shingon
 - Tendai
 - Zen
 - Korean
 - Vietnamese
- Vajrayana
 - Bhutan
 - Nepal
 - Mongolian
 - Tibetan

Estimates of the Buddhist population of the United States have varied, with some long-term knowledgeable observers estimating it to be as high as 3.5 million and most recently as high as 5 to 6 million. Polling has revealed much lower figures, the 2008 report of the Pew Forum, for example, suggesting that Buddhism had the allegiance of some 0.7 percent of the population, roughly a little more than two million followers. This ISAR approaches the problem in a different way as it focuses on reported membership and constituency of Buddhist groups. All of the known Buddhist groups in America were contacted by mail with telephone follow-ups with requests for information. Where information was not forthcoming, visits were made to multiple local centers of groups to establish an average size of local centers and an estimate made based on those observations and reports.

As a whole, Buddhist groups are just beginning to make counts of membership and support, part of a larger transition process to adapting to the volunteerism of American religious life. Of the major world religions, Buddhism has most clearly adapted itself to the denominational pattern of religions that tends to emerge in free societies, especially to the lack of any social assigning of religious status at the time of birth.

Theravada

Theravada Buddhism has been built immigration from Southeastern Asia, and the large communities of Sri Lankans, Thais, Cambodians, and Laotians have created national networks of temples. While spread around the nation, including the South, these temples are concentrated in urban/suburban areas along the West Coast and in the Washington-New York Corridor. These temples show a pattern of development over the last generation as new temples are formed by small groups of committed believers who meet in borrowed or rented facilities while land is secured and permanent temple facilities constructed. While such temples are commonly designed to serve the larger population of Asian Americans, a relatively small percentage (20 to 25 percent) constitutes the active membership.

The influence of Theravada Buddhism has been extended by the popularity of the Vipassana or Insight meditation movement, the primary form of Theravada to which non-Asian believers adhere. Vipassana is practiced

by hundreds of small sitting groups, many of which are part of one of half a dozen loosely affiliated networks, others independent and unconnected, and in a constant state of flux. As with other forms of meditation, Vipassana is taught in classes somewhat separated from its Buddhist religious roots. Those who master the technique may or may not continue the practice afterwards and may or may not integrate that practice into a more complete Buddhist life or self identify as a Buddhist.

Mahayana

The oldest segment of the American Buddhism is the Japanese American Buddhist community which dates to the formation of temples by immigrant workers in the 1880s in what is now the state of Hawaii. Prior to World War I, groups representing the major branches of Japanese Buddhism—Jodo Shinshu, Nichiren, Shingon, Zen—were formed, which the Honpa Hongwanji group of the Jodo Shinshu (represented by two organization, The Buddhist Churches of America and the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii) becoming the largest. Hawaii would become the only state with a Buddhist majority.

In the 1970s, the balance within the Buddhist community was upset by the radical growth of the Nichiren Shoshu through its educational arm, the Soka Gakkai. In the 1990s, the older temple-based Nichiren Shoshu organization and the Soka Gakkai separated, and the Soka Gakkai emerged as the singled largest Buddhist group in the United States (and a number of other Western countries). It currently reports more than 300,000 members, most non-Asians. It is the only Buddhist group with more than a quarter of a million members and one of only two with as many as a 100,000 members.

During the decade after World War II, Zen Buddhism emerged as a popular movement in the counter culture and has continued to expand steadily over the last six decades. The community is based in more than fifty Zen organizations in which relatively small local Zen centers (zendos) associate. Many Zen sitting groups meet regularly in borrowed or rented facilities. Though even the largest of Zen organization count their adherents in the thousands, the accumulated numbers of Zen adherents reach above a hundred thousand.

The next largest groups of Mahayana adherents come for Vietnam. The Vietnamese Buddhist community began with a single temple with a Vietnamese priest and a group of non-Asian followers in Los Angeles, but grew rapidly after the Vietnamese war. The immigrant community, concentrated in orange County, California, began to build temples in the 1980s and has emerged as the second largest segment of the Buddhist community. The network of more than 150 Vietnamese temples now has more than 100,000 adherents. A similar but smaller number of Korean temples associated with the Chogye order (the largest Korean Buddhist organization) also exists. Also, within the Vietnamese community, the monk Thich Nhat Hahn became a celebrity from his opposition to the Vietnam War, and after leaving his home country attracted a large international community around him and his teachings. In the United States more than 300 centers (almost all small sitting groups meeting in a member's home) has emerged.

Chinese Americans, most of whom have come to the United States from Taiwan and Hong Kong with smaller groups from Southeast Asia, form the largest body of Asian Americans. Like other Asian groups, the largest block of Chinese Americans appear to be unattached religiously or in Christians churches.¹ Yiguandao, a new religious movement that originated in China in the nineteenth century, the largest religious group in Taiwan is also significantly under-represented within the Chinese American community. That being said, the half-dozen larger Taiwanese Buddhist groups such as the Buddhist Compassion Tzu Chi Association, Foguanshan, Dharma Drum Mountain, True Buddha School, Chuan Tai, and the Amitabha Buddhist Societies have built national followings, and represent a significant portion of the current American Buddhist community.

Vajrayana

The Vajrayana community is represented internationally by Japanese Shingon (12 million), Tibetan (7 million), and lesser numbers of believers in Bhutan, Nepal, Mongolia and China. In the United States, the first (and for many decades the only) Vajrayana temples were several Shingon temples established in Hawaii and California. Then in the early 1960s, a small group of Mongolians migrated to the United States and established a temple in Howell, New Jersey. By this time, however, massive sympathy had been created for the plight of the tens of thousands of Tibetans who had left their country and resettled in northern India and Nepal. Tibetan lamas began arriving in the United states for extended visits in the 1970s and slowly began to settle permanently, especially after the Dalai Lama open an office for his Government-in-Exile in New York City.

Today, the Tibetan Buddhist community in America is significantly different from other Buddhist groups. Unlike the Vietnamese or Japanese, there is not a large community of Tibetans residing in the United States. Thus, the American Tibetan Buddhist community is built around more than sixty distinct organizations each of which is made up of non-Asian Buddhist converts and usually led by one or a few Tibetan teachers, though increasingly non-Asian teachers are gradually emerging. Each of the four larger Tibetan Schools (Gelugpa, Kagyupa, Nyingmapa, and Sakyapa) has established an American headquarters and created a network of small centers around the nation. The largest network is an independent Kagyu group established by Trungpa Rinpoche, the first lama to settle permanently in the United States.² That network, Shambhala International, is now headquartered in Canada.

The larger Tibetan groups have established temples and monastic centers, but the great majority of 600+ Tibetan Buddhist groups are small meditation and study groups that gather in borrowed and rented facilities. (There are also several Chinese Vajrayana temple associations, the largest being the Taiwanese-based True Buddha School, which has a half-dozen American temples.)

¹: The larger estimates of Buddhism in the United States are grounded in the belief that the great majority of Asian Americans from predominantly Buddhist countries are themselves Buddhists, but it appears that such belief is groundless, and that only 20 to 25 percent of the Chinese, Vietnamese and Southeast Asian American communities adhere to Buddhism even nominally.

²: Relative to membership, the largest Tibetan Buddhist group appears to be the New Kadampa Tradition which has developed a national following and now reports more than 20,000 members.

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The Tibetan groups also manifest a common organizational pattern into which many Asian American Buddhist groups fall. Most American Tibetan groups exist as the United States outpost of an international movement whose headquarters is located in Asia (or in a few cases in Europe). As such, the American branch is a minority segment of the group's international membership. Often, there is only one American center in a much larger international association.

A Growing Community

The Buddhist community exists on a growing trajectory, with tens of thousands of adherents coming into the country from Asia annually, and thousands of Americans turning to Buddhism especially in its Zen, Vipassana, and Tibetan forms.

Counting the number of Buddhists is complicated by the fact that few of the 200+ Buddhist temple networks and organizations make or keep records of membership. Thus almost all reported numbers are estimates. Many of the American based movements remain quite fluid, and the number of informal sitting groups for Buddhist meditation unknown. Some 200 Zen and Vipassana sitting groups meet weekly in the churches of the Unitarian Universalists with many members also being counted at members of the local congregation. No count has been made of the membership of the larger Asian American temple associations though visits to a selection of temples has yielded an average count on membership and constituency. Those numbers are somewhat distorted by the phenomenon of multiple temple attendance by many adherents. Special events by different temples in urban areas with more than one temple of the same group will attract the people from other temples and people who are not temple members but who will attend events at different temples during the year. This reported constituency numbers are increased by double counting.

That being said, an estimate on membership/constituency can be made:

Theravada	187,700
Vietnamese Mahayana	151,000
Japanese Mahayana	120,000
Soka Gakkai	286,516
Japanese Zen ³	17,770
Chinese	129,850
Other Mahayana	30,000
Vajrayana	55,000
Total	971,766

Thus the number of visible practicing Buddhists (including the nominally practicing) is about 900,000, or slightly less than half who identify themselves as Buddhists in the polls and far less than some of the recent estimates made by observers of the Buddhist community. Even with this sweep of the Buddhist community based on records accumulated over the last 40 years has most likely missed a few centers and organizations, but those missed have been accounted for by a somewhat liberal estimate of membership for many of the groups found. Thus it is believed

that the number presented is as accurate a count as can at present be made, and provides a foundation upon which future research on the American Buddhist community can proceed.

Submitted by: J. Gordon Melton

Editor's note: J. Gordon Melton provided the Religion Census data collection office a list of 215 Buddhist groups with 2,854 locations. In most cases, a total number of persons associated with each group were included. The number of persons associated with specific locations was often available. For groups or locations without identified totals, estimates were made based upon similar groups or locations. After these allocations, the total numbers of adherents reported in the earlier tables may differ slightly from the figures originally reported in the accompanying text.

³: The Pew survey indicates a much larger number of Zen adherents, but these seem to include not just the Japanese Zen practitioners, but also the Son and the larger numbers of Chan practitioners who most often describe their practice as Zen to outsiders.