

Appendix G: Buddhist Groups

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 enumerate this population.. Dr. J. Gordon Melton oversaw this task. 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. Following this successful census, the U.S. Religion Census asked him to replicate this count for 2020.

American Buddhism burgeoned following changes of U.S. immigration laws 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 established centers. Simultaneously, a host of new American-based organizations were formed to serve non-Asians who had converted to the different forms of Buddhism.

As Buddhism grew in the United States, it was divided by language, ethnicity, and variations in belief and practice. Buddhism has commonly existed in three major forms: Theravada (the dominant forms in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia), Mahayana (the dominant forms in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam), and Vajrayana, which some consider another form of Mahayana (the dominant forms in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia, and Japan). 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).

The effort to enumerate U.S. Buddhists classified them as follows.

- Theravada
 - Burmese
 - Cambodian
 - Laotian
 - Sri Lankan
 - Thai
- Mahayana
 - Chinese
 - Japanese
 - Nichiren
 - Shin
 - Shingon
 - Tendai
 - Zen
 - Korean
 - Vietnamese
- Vrajayana
 - Bhutan
 - Nepal
 - Mongolian
 - Tibetan

Japanese (Shingon)

In the early 21st century began, estimates of the U.S. Buddhist population ranged from 2 to 6 million. ISAR has attempted to identify the Buddhist population through more than 200 Buddhist groups (each group analogous to a Christian denomination).¹ The ISAR sought to contact all known U.S. Buddhist groups by mail or phone. If failing to make contact, ISAR staff visited centers to estimate their size.

Buddhist groups do not prioritize counts of adherents. At the same time, Buddhism has clearly adapted itself to the denominational pattern of religious organization 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 continues to be built largely by immigration from Southeastern Asia (though an increasing percentage of adherents were born in America). Communities of people of Sri Lankan, Burmese, Thai, Cambodian, and Laotian heritage 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 have shown 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 Buddhism, 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.

As of 2020, there were 26 Theravada groups in the United States.

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, with the Honpa Hongwanji group of the Jodo Shinshu (represented by two organizations, 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.

¹ For a complete list and description of the 200 distinct Buddhist groups operating in the United States, see J. Gordon Melton, *The Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religion*. (9th ed.: Detroit: Gale/Cengage Learning, 2016).

In the last decades of the 20th century, 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 remains the only Buddhist group with more than a quarter of a million members and one of only two with as many as 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 since then. 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 organizations count their adherents in the thousands, the accumulated numbers of Zen adherents reach above 100,000.

The next largest groups of Mahayana adherents come from 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 in the wake of the Vietnamese war and the fall of Saigon. 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 loose 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 (1926-2022) became a celebrity from his opposition to the Vietnam War. After leaving his home country, he attracted a large international community around him and his teachings. In the United States, more than 400 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 appears to be unattached religiously or in Christians churches.² 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. 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, are present 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. In the early 1960s, a small group of Mongolians migrated to the United States

² The larger estimates of Buddhism in the United States were 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.

and established a temple in Howell, New Jersey. By this time, 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 comprising non-Asian Buddhist converts and usually led by one or a few Tibetan teachers (with only a few resident in the United States), though increasingly non-Asian teachers (who do reside in the United States) have emerged. 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 has been an independent Kagyu group established by Trungpa Rinpoche, the first lama to settle permanently in the United States.³ That network, Shambhala International, now headquartered in Canada, has been disturbed by a series of scandals involving sexual misconduct by its leadership, that has led to a departure of an undetermined number of members in recent years.

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 dozen American temples.)

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.

The rapid growth of the East- and Southeast-Asian American community, including those with traditionally Buddhist majorities, is the most important current contributor to the growth of Buddhism in the United States. While the U.S. population increased by approximately 7 percent in the past decade, the increase in the Asian population, as seen in the table below.⁴

³ 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.

⁴ Figures have been taken from data provided by the Pew Research Center's Fact Sheets on Asian American, posted at <https://www.pewresearch.org/topic/race-ethnicity/racial-ethnic-groups/asian-americans/>.

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Population	2010	2020 estimate	%Growth
US Population	309,327,143	331,449, 281	7
Burmese	100,000	180,000	80
Cambodian	277,000	339,000	22
Chinese	4,010,000	5,399,000	35
Japanese	1,316,000	1,498,000	15
Korean	1,707,000	1,908,000	11
Laotian	277,000	339,000	21
Sri Lankans	45,000	56,000	24
Thai	238,000	343,000	41
Vietnamese	1,737,000	2,183,000	29

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 through the decade 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.

Nevertheless, we were able to estimate membership and constituency as below. Specifically, we continued to monitor Buddhist groups through the past decade, and, in late 2019, sought to survey these groups either by visits to their Internet sites or direct phone contact. The COVID19 pandemic did hamper these efforts, but, as 2022 began, contact by phone significantly improved, and field research of the Hawaiian groups by one of the ISAR staff became possible. By the spring of 2022, as the deadline for this project approached, a minority of the groups still had not opened their offices and we were unable to reach them for comment on their assessments of current adherents. In those cases, we had to make

an informed estimate of growth through the decade or list the group as unresponsive. In cases in which the membership is largely of Asian Americans, we estimated growth based upon estimates of the formation of new temples and centers of activity, and the overall growth of the ethnic group in the general population.

The number of visible practicing Buddhists (including the nominally practicing) is now estimated to be slightly more than a million, or slightly less than half who identify themselves as Buddhists in the most recent 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