

# Intro to Buddhism in the US

## Week 8: American Dharma

The Center at Belvedere  
Charlottesville, VA

Link to extended readings and slides:<https://parusanalytics.com/introbud2023/week-eight.html>

2 March 2023

# Usual groveling caveat covering all of the material that follows...

Chinese Premier Zhou En Lai when asked in 1972 about the significance of the 1789 French Revolution: "It's too early to tell"

[okay, he thought the question referred to the French student protests in 1968, but it's a good one-liner...]

Is American convert Buddhism all old well-educated  
wealthy white people?

Uh, not really...

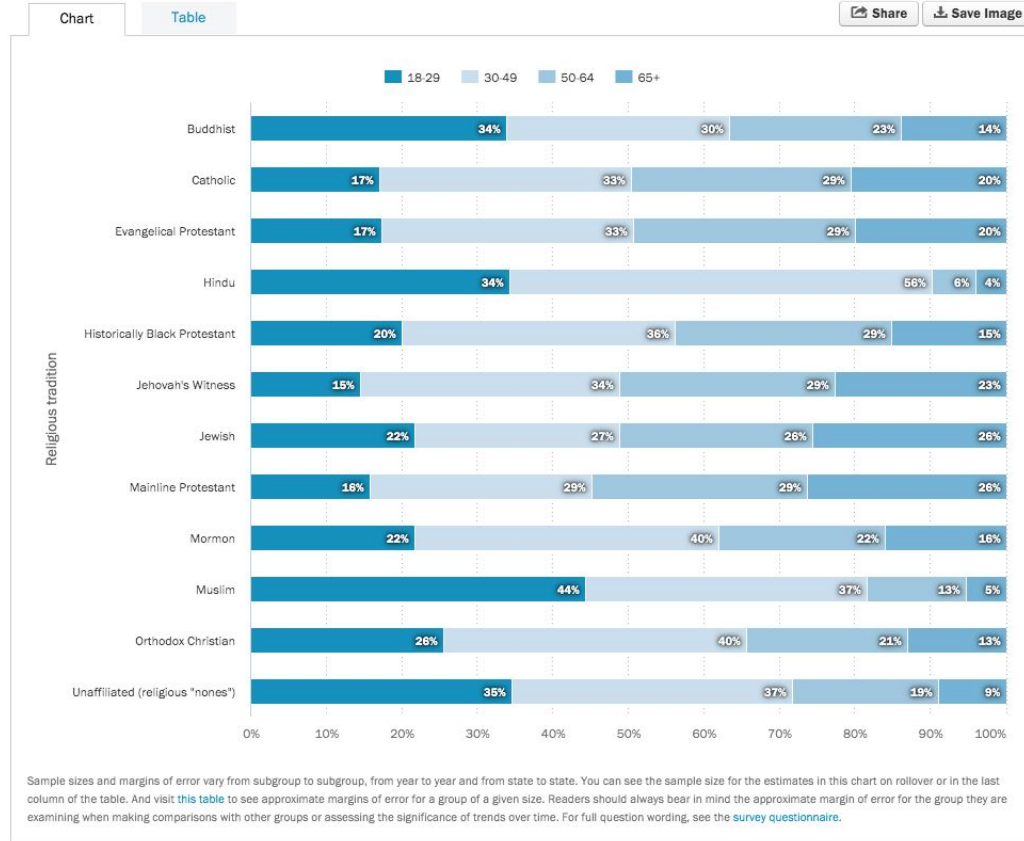
**TABLE 1. Median Age of Religious Groups**

	<b>Median Age</b>
<b>All Americans</b>	<b>47</b>
White evangelical Protestant	56
White Catholic	54
Unitarian/Universalist	53
White mainline (non-evangelical) Protestant	50
Black Protestant	50
Jehovah's Witness	49
Jewish	48
Latter-day Saint (Mormon)	47
Orthodox Christian	42
Hispanic Catholic	42
Hispanic Protestant	39
Unaffiliated	38
Buddhist	36
Hindu	36
Muslim	33

Source: PRRI 2020 American Values Atlas.

## Age distribution by religious group

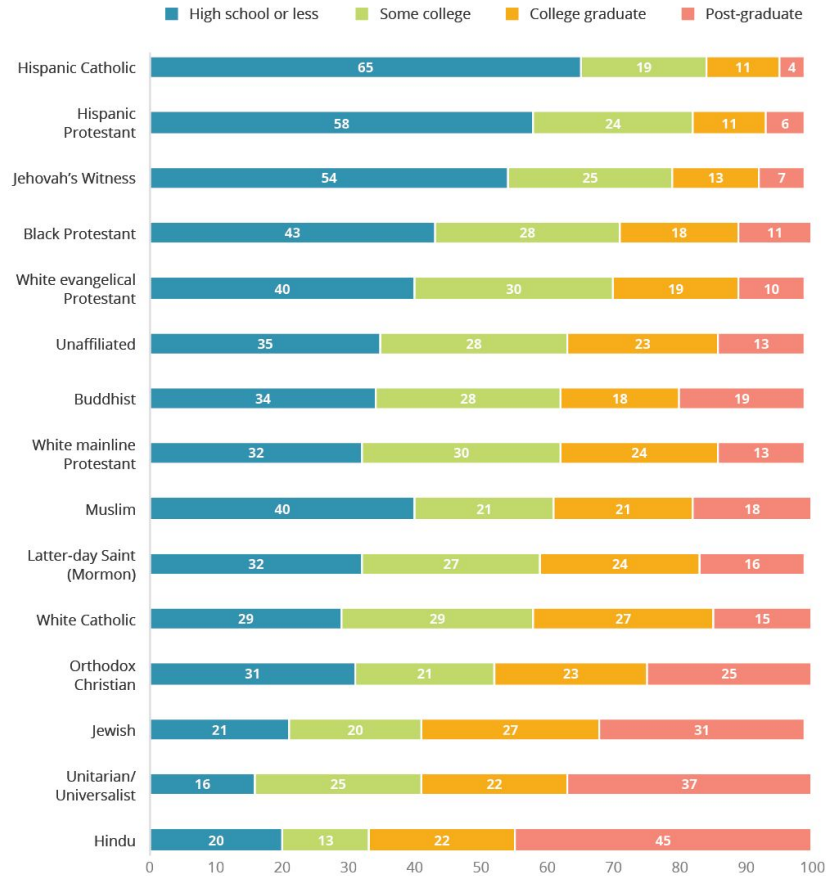
% of adults who are ages...



Source: <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/age-distribution/>

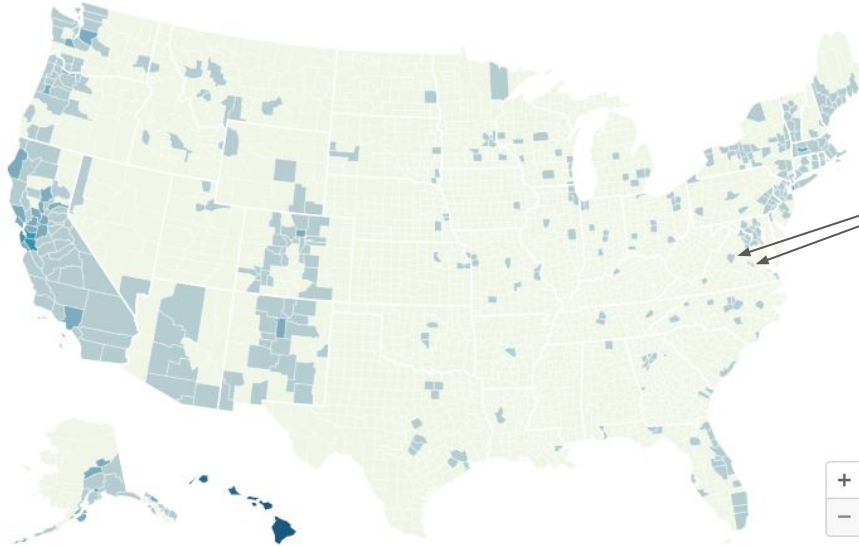
**FIGURE 5. Educational Attainment, by Religious Affiliation**

Percent who are



Source: PRRI 2020 American Values Atlas.

## Buddhist Identity, by County



You are here [mostly]:  
2% for:  
Albemarle County  
Henrico County  
Richmond City

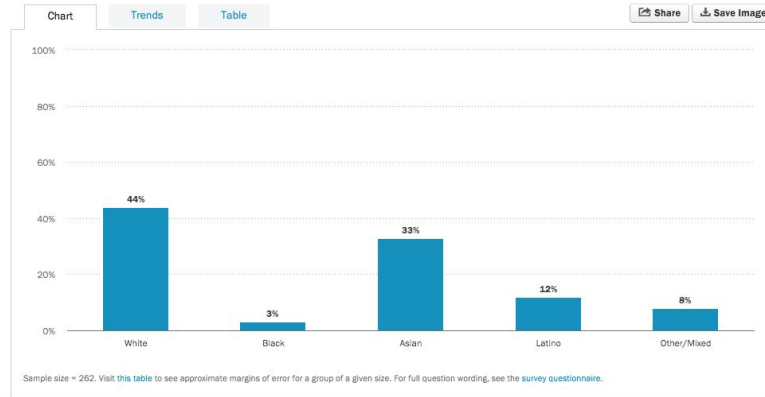
Source: PRRI 2020 Census of American Religion. • Created with Datawrapper

- Buddhist Americans make up 1% of the U.S. population as of 2020.
- Buddhist Americans are primarily concentrated in Hawaii and the West Coast, particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area. The 10 highest concentrations of Buddhist Americans in counties with more than 10,000 residents are:

Source: <https://www.prii.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/>

## Racial and ethnic composition among Buddhists

% of Buddhists who identify as...

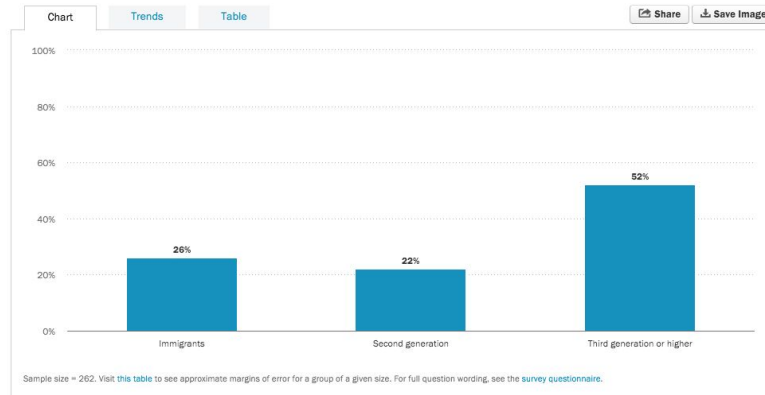


COMPARE: [RACE/ETHNICITY BY RELIGIOUS GROUP](#)

LEARN MORE: [RACIAL AND ETHNIC COMPOSITION, WHITE](#)

## Immigrant status among Buddhists

% of Buddhists who are...



## Belief in God by religious group (2014)

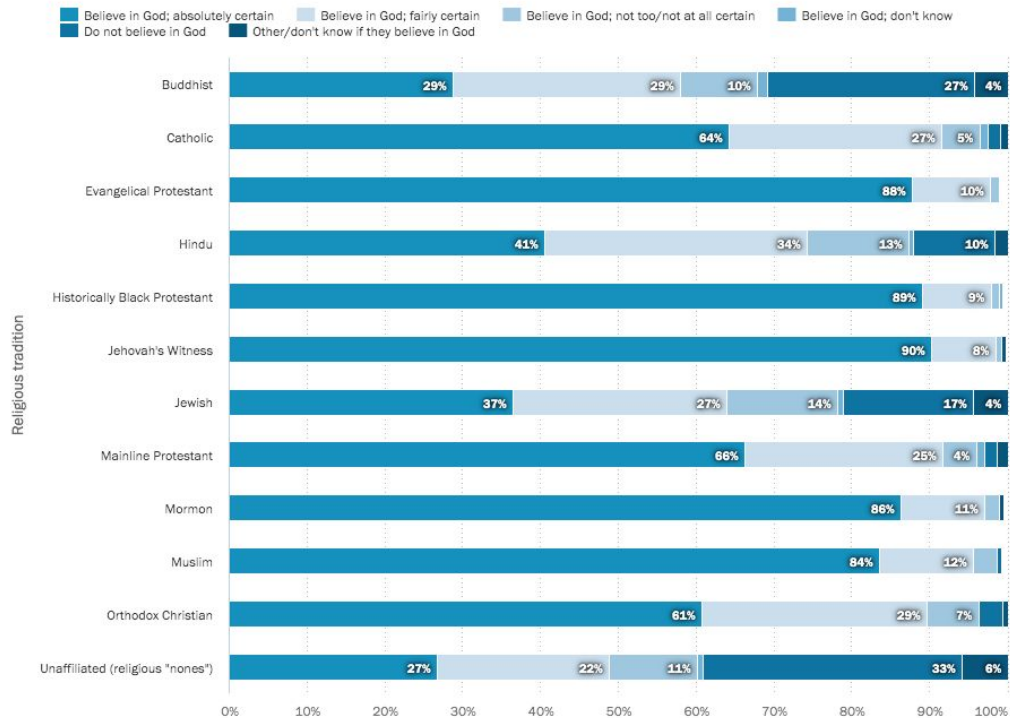
% of adults who say they...

Chart

Table

Share

Save Image



Sample sizes and margins of error vary from subgroup to subgroup, from year to year and from state to state. You can see the sample size for the estimates in this chart on rollover or in the last column of the table. And visit [this table](#) to see approximate margins of error for a group of a given size. Readers should always bear in mind the approximate margin of error for the group they are examining when making comparisons with other groups or assessing the significance of trends over time. For full question wording, see the [survey questionnaire](#).

# Two successful transitions

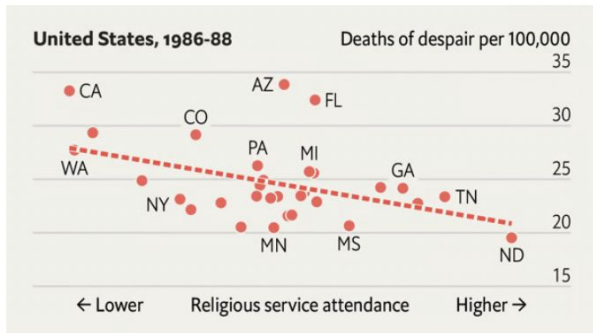
- Women in leadership positions
  - This has the further effect of spinning off many major US groups from the Asian lineages. Though in some cases the Asian groups have adapted.
  - This isn't just a Buddhist issue: last week (late Feb-2023) the largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, expelled its largest church, Saddleback, over the issue of women ministers
- Probably related to the above, the initial proliferation of sex scandals seems to have subsided and institutional guardrails are in place, if doubtlessly still imperfect
  - This is important: e.g. the political power of the Catholic Church in Ireland was utterly destroyed in a single generation by the issue
- Expanding beyond white elites
  - For starters, Asian experience has always been there but per Week 3, was ignored until recently
  - A combination of the IMCW experience with "affinity groups" detailed in Gleig, and simply investing in some training, major proliferation of national-level Black teachers in the past decade.
  - New Black teachers generally have at least experience in maintaining churches: "when we're building sanghas, there's going to be more chanting and more potlucks"
  - This said, very substantial pushback from some, well, aging well-educated wealthy whites currently in power in the sanghas: see Larry Yang reading from first week

# Two current American experiments

- Post-Christian transition, lagging Europe by a few decades
- Social media
  - a.k.a. "anger, greed, and delusion"
  - But conversely, due to the web virtually the entire Buddhist corpus and tens of thousands of talks/videos and hundreds of courses are now available

# Inter-generational challenges

- Decline in positive institutional religious experience is much greater in the post-Boomer generations. Asian-American Buddhist institutions are seeing the same decline in attendance as Christian churches
- The original Gen-X/Y/Z "electronic sangha" experiments failed, per Gleig.
  - COVID-era remote sanghas, which are typically small (e.g. 25 people fit on a Zoom screen) may be more successful
- Proliferation of approaches that may tend to emphasize their differences: again, USA is the first place in history where Theravadan, Mahayana and Vajrayana approaches are represented more or less equally
- Is deep meditation practice appropriate for someone under 25? (when the prefrontal cortex is finally connected, as car rental companies recognized early on...)

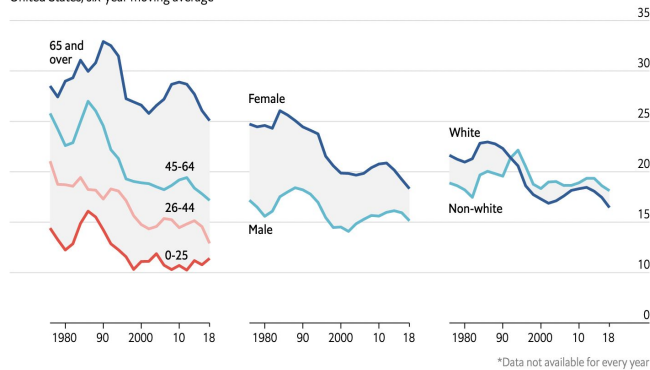


## Places with high religious participation have fewer deaths of despair

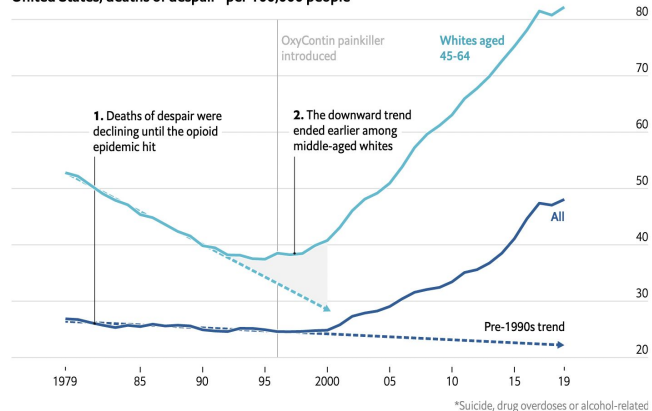
The loss of social capital, as well as opioids, explains rising middle-aged mortality

Source: *The Economist*,  
23-Feb-2023

Share attending religious services at least once a week, %  
United States, six-year moving average\*



United States, deaths of despair\* per 100,000 people



Strikingly, the study found that private prayer was not linked to lower deaths of despair. This suggests that the risk reduction stems not from belief, but rather from the interpersonal connections that organised religion provides. Although secular groups like charities or labour unions also produce such “social capital”, the *JAMA* authors say that faith-based networks provide unusually potent protection. ■

*Chart source: “Opiates of the masses? Deaths of despair and the decline of American religion”, by T. Giles, D.M. Hungerman and T. Oostrom, NBER, 2023, working paper*

"My mind is a bad neighborhood that I try not to go into alone."

Anne Lamott

# Soteriology 101 [USA edition]

Anglican (and pretty much everything before Calvin)	"We have guns, and many men..."	Just do what we say, everything will be fine
Presbyterian	Calvinism	Humans are hopelessly "depraved"; salvation is only through the grace of God and there is nothing whatsoever you can do to affect God's decision, which in any case is predetermined
Methodist	Arminianism	Human free will, particularly faith, has an effect on salvation [whew...]
Baptist	Calvinism or Arminianism: you decide	[but we can get picky about the sacraments...]
Unitarian/Universalist	Universalism	Eventually all persons are saved

# and yet...

all except by definition Unitarians, accept

The Trinity, the fallenness of  
humanity, the death of Christ as an  
atonement for sin, the physical  
resurrection of Christ, salvation is  
by grace through faith, the  
inspiration and authority of  
Scripture, the Second Coming

This is quite similar to the Dalai Lama's assertion that any approach that accepts the precepts, dukkah, annica (impermanence), and annata (no self) is legitimately Buddhist (e.g. Bön)

# Differences between Christianity and Buddhism: the top six

Cosmology	Omniscient and omnipotent creator God who is central to the entire experience	South Asian cosmology but it's not particularly important
Afterlife	A permanent soul experiences one life, then heaven or hell (with eventual resurrection for those saved)	An impermanent soul experiences indefinite number of rebirths ( <i>samsara</i> ) but can be released by nirvana
Absolution of sins	Possible through acceptance of Jesus	None: law of karma is inescapable
Fundamental human nature	Flawed due to original sin	Good due to Buddha nature
Central practice	Devotion	Meditation
Divinity of founder	Jesus is the son of God	Buddha is simply an enlightened human

# Christianity and Buddhism: some other quirks

Monasticism	Relatively late development (>450CE) and disappears in Protestantism	Central from the beginning and remains so; monastic rules (Vinaya) are foundational texts
Geographical spread	Limited to historical boundaries of the Roman Empire until >1550CE. Then expands but using European models	Multiple major cultural transitions, with major distinctions (e.g. China: Mahayana); also largely dies out in some places
Foundational texts	Fixed >350CE and relatively compact. All groups accept essentially the same texts but disagree on interpretation	Thousands of pages with major additions in Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions long after the time of the Buddha
Religious wars and state-persecution of heretics	Common. Last British execution for blasphemy was 1697; N. Ireland "Troubles" killed 3500 from 1970-2000	Rare. Though violence against other religions is more common: Sri Lanka, Myanmar
Prophetic and apocalyptic movements	Continuous	Rare

# But some commonalities...

- Core ethical principles are quite similar, though Buddhism is arguably stricter about speech (notably gossip) and certainly about intoxicants
- Evolution of the role of women, alas, seems similar, with initial acceptance (Jesus certainly; authentic letters of Paul mostly; Buddha only kicking and screaming) then smacked down by the patriarchy over the next few centuries, then regaining power and often becoming central (Pentecostalism; contemporary US convert Buddhism) in the post-industrial period
- Non-Jeffersonian: Angels and saints are to similar devas and bodhisattvas. Various Marian cults and apparitions (Lourdes, Guadalupe) are similar to Quan Yin and/or Tara. The embodiments of evil—Satan and Mara—are similar, and in both present temptations that must be overcome before the individuals begin teaching
- Some elements of meditation and/or chanting practice seems very similar, though it is generally monastic in Christianity
- More generally, the mystical experience (per writings in both, e.g. Teresa d'Avila) are far more convergent than the orthodox established practices
- Both Jesus and the Buddha wander in the wilderness before teaching, though the Buddha does so for a much longer time
- Both Jesus and the Buddha defy norms of social stratification and welcome outcasts, though arguably Jesus was working much further down in the pecking order
- Jesus and the Buddha had contentious relations with the religious authorities of their day, though of course the Buddha did this for a much, much longer period, and generally from a position of greater authority as his monastic sangha gained power and wealthy patronage; Christianity takes centuries to achieve this
- Curiously, both have three major branches—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant for Christianity; Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana (Tibetan) for Buddhism. So which we add Sunni, Shi'a and Sufi for Islam. All branches of Buddhism have a large number of Protestant-like internal variations, differentiated both geographically and philosophically; none have maintained the coherence of Roman Catholicism
- Sermons and homilies should be 20 minutes. So should dharma talks. Only Catholic homilies consistently follow this advice, though industrial-age Protestants with services that are 60 minutes plus or minus 30 seconds are also pretty reliable.

# Gleig's core elements of Western convert Buddhism

These are based on the work of Rick Fields (1942-1999), maybe the book *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Bm in America* (1992)

- lay movement
- focused on intensive meditation practice
- incorporates Western psychology/therapy
- shaped by feminism
- values social engagement/justice
- democratic approaches to power and authority

but is missing

- devotion, gratitude and ritual: not only drops the Asian but doesn't develop its own
- lack of strong communal institutions (again, contrasted to Asian-American)

# A few likely challenges in developing a US Buddhism[s]

- Per earlier, the proliferation of available models
- Generational transition in Insight and with Tibetan diaspora
- Zen seems to have already done this
- Accepting non-material aspects, particularly rebirth and karma, maybe devas and bodhisattvas, vs a materialist "Jeffersonian" Buddhism (still keeping the ethics, dukka/annata/annica, and psychological model of Abhidhamma and Satipatthana/Anapasati suttas)
- Connections with secular mindful approaches, notably MBSR, which also ethics and philosophical approaches

# Mainstreaming of core Buddhist practice: Little Zen Calendar

23.02.21

"When you rest in quietness and your image of yourself fades, and your image of the world fades, and your ideas of others fade, what's left? A brightness, a radiant emptiness that is simply what you are."

Adyashanti

[contemporary Bay Area teacher born Steven Gray in 1962 in Cupertino, CA and started in Zen]

23.02.27

"Trust yourself. At the root, at the core, there is pure sanity, pure openness. Don't trust what you have been taught, what you think, what you believe, what you hope...Deeper than that, trust the silence of your being."

Gangaji

[born Merle Antoinette Roberson (Toni) in Texas on June 11, 1942, and grew up in Mississippi. Wikipedia: "She took [Buddhist Bodhisattva](#) vows, practiced [Zen](#) and [Vipassana](#) meditation, helped in a Tibetan-Buddhist-style meditation center, and began a career as an [acupuncturist](#) in the [San Francisco Bay area](#)."] ]

[both rejected formal Buddhist approaches and embarked on their own. Albeit so did every other Buddhist lineage founder, starting with the Buddha...]

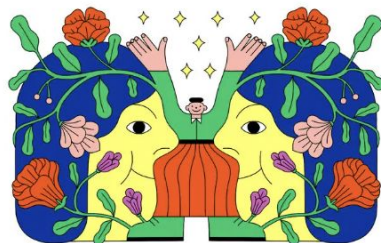
# Mainstreaming: *New York Times* 2-Mar-2023

OPINION  
ROSS DOUTHAT

## The Return of the Magicians

March 2, 2023, 5:00 a.m. ET 5 MIN READ

[Douthat essay eventually devolves into a discourse on ChatGPT...]



Cristina Spanò

**The Opposite of Schadenfreude Is Freudenfreude. Here's How to Foster It.**

5 MIN READ

## Asian and Asian American Oscar Nominees Reflect on a Record-Setting Year

Many actors and other artists of Asian descent are up for statuettes. The Times talked to some of the contenders about their work.

7 MIN READ

Hint: It's also called "mudita" and is one of the four brahmaviharas, which have been around in South Asian systems for at least 2600 years

# Development of Buddhist charitable organizations

**FOOD  
ASSISTANCE**



**EDUCATION**



**WOMEN'S  
EMPOWERMENT**



**SUSTAINABLE  
AGRICULTURE**



**CONSCIENTIOUS  
COMPASSION**



Tackling Global Hunger at Its Roots

**BGR NEWS**



Take Buddhist Action to Feed the Hungry



BGR Provides Emergency Grants in Sri Lanka, Haiti, and Myanmar



Nourishing and Educating Girls in Lima, Peru



## SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM

**Being With Dying** – Professional Training Program for Clinicians to learn essential tools for taking care of the dying with skill and compassion.

**Chaplaincy** – Visionary two-year program to serve individuals, communities, the environment, and the world.

**Socially Engaged Buddhist Training** – A year-long training program for those who wish to train in Engaged Buddhism.

**G.R.A.C.E.** – Training to allow compassion and resilience to emerge in the process of interacting with others.

**Nomads Clinic** – Annual month-long pilgrimage to Nepal providing medical and humanitarian aid.


**Prison Outreach Project** – Teaching meditation as a means of ending the cycle of addiction and violence.

**Street Ministry Project** - Bearing Witness Street Retreats and Service Projects. Meditation and meals included.

## NEUROSCIENCE

**Varela Symposium** – (Formerly "Zen Brain") Core faculty of neuroscientists, philosophers, and contemplatives explore timely topics at personal and global levels.

Source: <https://www.upaya.org/programs/>



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### caregivers

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### volunteers

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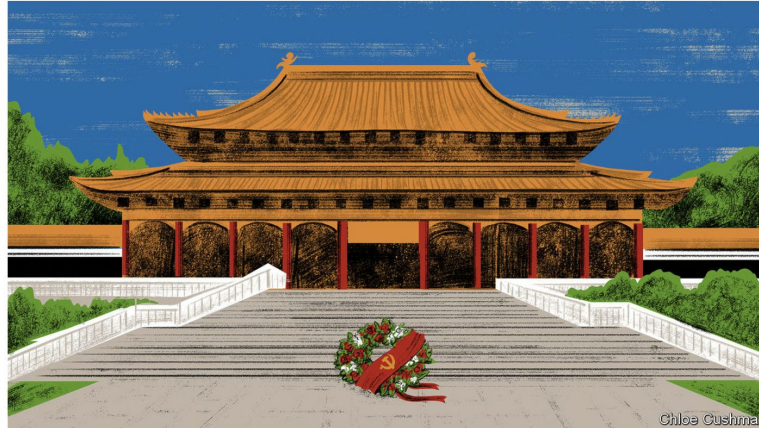
### partnerships

We pursue better caregiving through partnering with networks of inspired people and organizations.

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# China is losing Taiwanese hearts and minds

A Buddhist master's death robs China of a champion in Taiwan



Feb 16th 2023

Save

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WHEN CHINA'S Communist Party detects a chance to woo hearts and minds, it is ready to send its cadres to incongruous places. On February 12th such a mission brought dozens of senior officials to the mist-shrouded Dajue Temple, on a wooded hilltop in rural Jiangsu province. Despite the vows of atheism that bind all party members, the officials bowed their heads alongside dark-robed monks and nuns in joint homage to Master Hsing Yun, the founder of a Buddhist order with many followers on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. He died this month, aged 95.

"From his place of exile in Taiwan, the monk began to amass followers, eventually recruiting millions with a vision of Buddhism that emphasises practical acts of charity over esoteric theories. By the late 1980s his fame brought invitations to the mainland and meetings with leaders in Beijing."

[Most of the article, however, deals with the political complexity and compromises required to be accepted in both Beijing and Taiwan]

The Economist, 16-Feb-2023



Ligmincha Magyarország / Ligmincha organizations call you to give a hand

## LIGMINCHA ORGANIZATIONS CALL YOU TO GIVE A HAND

### Dear Practitioners and Friends,



The war in Ukraine has become a humanitarian crisis, families are falling apart, many are losing their homes, and more and more people are dying. Refugees are fleeing to Hungary as well and they need urgent aid and help. This tragedy and these events deeply affect everyone, we are all moved, saddened, and feel the urge to act, regardless of our religion or faith.

In this situation, Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche and Ligmincha are asking and encouraging all practitioners and friends to join the regular online common prayers, practices, and take action to help those who are in need.

As a religious organization, Ligmincha Hungary, with its available resources, makes every effort to provide support and assistance to those who need it the most. Our organization has only a few active people and we do not have a center yet, so we have decided to work directly with refugee care and aid organizations, primarily with the Baptist Charity Service, so we will start collecting and delivering offerings for them starting next week.

[https://ligmincha.hu/  
give-a-hand/](https://ligmincha.hu/give-a-hand/)

# Financial challenges

- How many mindfulness teachers can the US support?
  - probably more than we think: see yoga. Though continued mindfulness support is probably less needed than in yoga: "In the beginning my guru was my teacher, then the suttas were my teacher, then my mind was my teacher"
- How many retreat centers can the US support?
  - Arguably more than we've got, since most retreats are fully enrolled with long waiting lists
  - A number of large retreat centers are thriving after 40+ years so they've solved the generational succession problem, at least for now.
- Do convert sanghas get beyond borrowing space?
  - Hint from former treasurer of a university-town Quaker meeting: this costs money, though not as much as you might think
- What is the effect of massive levels of post-Boomer education debt and unaffordable housing on the above?
  - Specifically compared to the generations who constructed and later maintained the elaborate infrastructure of Christian churches and educational institutions

# Insight Teacher Crisis

In 40 years, IMS and Spirit Rock have trained, for the entire United States, roughly the same number of teachers and "community dharma leaders" as there are Christian pastors and other professionals (e.g. Christian education) in Albemarle County, Virginia.

As Ann Gleig points out, a disproportionate number of those teaching are Boomers, who are now slowing down but generally do not give up control

This is clearly unsustainable: it is Wile E. Coyote twenty feet past the edge of a cliff and afraid to look down



# Solutions to the teacher crisis - 1

## **Yoga model**

Drop most or all of the religious and ethical aspects and move to being a very popular and decentralized self-help movement: this is essentially the McMindfulness model

## **Electronic sangha**

Create sanghas from social media and apps: Gleig's book discusses in detail how the initial effort to do this failed, but with the vast experience gained during COVID, some newer models might work now

# Solutions to the teacher crisis - 2

## **House church/sangha-led/Quaker model**

Small self-organized groups with peer guidance rather than certified/ordained teachers; dharma comes from podcasts and other media, as well as participation in retreats and other events

## **Secular "Jeffersonian" Buddhism**

Drop the religious aspects but retain the ethics and possibly the underlying psychological/meditation models, resulting in something closer to a classical philosophical school such as Stoicism. Also tends to be more self-directed

# Solutions to the teacher crisis - 3

## **Divinity school/certification model**

Large scale—thousands of students in a multi-million-dollar operation—training using state-of-the-art communications media and advertising but still with individual remote mentoring. The most conspicuous Insight-oriented program costs about \$8000 for a two-year course, plus some additional costs for retreats, but comparable two-year training at the Harvard Divinity School would be \$35,000.

# Solutions to the teacher crisis - 4

   **Theosophy model**   

Entire approach largely dies out in a generation or two following the deaths of the charismatic founders. Christian Science movement followed a similar path around the same time, albeit with a slower decline due to wide institutionalization. Not a "solution" per se...

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosophy>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian\\_Science](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Science)

# Four dimensions model for US future development

## 1. Institutionalization/size

- Dunbar's numbers: 10-15 is limit for stable self-managed groups; 50-75 is limit with only informal leadership structures

## 2. Asian lineages vs syncretic "one dharma" approaches

## 3. Philosophical/rational vs spiritual/non-material

## 4. Degree of centrality of meditation practice

- Closely related will be the importance of retreat experience

Not all 16 combinations are equally likely, and some combinations could jell under one or more charismatic leaders and spread widely—model of the multiple US "Great Awakenings"—, though this has not occurred to date.

# All identifying as "Buddhist" will accept...

- Buddhist core: precepts, dukkha, anata, annica
- US diversity norms with respect to gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation
- In all likelihood, given the post-industrial environment, we'll see the continued development of charitable outreach of various sorts
- Therapeutic emphasis is likely to continue both due to the US spiritually-based "self help" tradition and due to MBSR and its spinoffs

# Open questions

- How to deal with the inter-generational issue
- Is the affinity group approach temporary, particularly given US demographic change towards a minority-majority configuration
  - [but doesn't every generation say ethnic identity is temporary?]
- Development of large formal institutions such as retreat and educational centers
  - Meanwhile silent retreats are a terrible way to build social capital, though their cost is quite comparable to annual meetings by Protestant churches
- Development of a monastic system: this has not worked to date in the US
- How important will European groups such as Plum Village be: are we looking at a "Western" model or a "US" model?: Except for Plum Village and Gaia House, there has been limited trans-Atlantic influence

# Macro macro observation

- Centralization over time and space exhibited by the Roman Catholic church is very exceptional (if rather successful...this model has also been successfully copied by the LDS/Mormons but they are almost unique)
- Pentecostal movement—single most rapidly growing religion globally—in contrast is highly decentralized (and at times radically inclusive with respect to gender, class, and ethnicity)
- Roman and Chinese model
  - Very visible state supported religion with a complex hierarchy
  - Under-the-radar magical "folk religion" for most of the masses (more or less how Christianity gets into the Roman Empire)
  - Philosophical schools for the elite (which is how Buddhism enters China)

These are combined on an individual basis: the last words of Socrates, the original Western rationalist, were “Crito, we owe a cock to Asklepios [the god of physicians] - Pay it and do not neglect it”