

# Introduction to Buddhism in the United States

Center at Belvedere  
Charlottesville, VA

2025 Edition

Week 1: Historical overview and modernizers

# A bit of background...

- Why I'm offering this course...again...
- About me...briefly...really...
- VSE Rule: you can express a sincerely held belief without intending to convert someone to that belief
  - VSE = "Varieties of Spiritual Experience", The Center, 2nd and 4th Thursday 2-4:30
  - Also at The Center: Barbara Martin's "Mindfulness meditation", 4:30-6:00 Tuesday for next eight weeks

## Links:

Course web site: <https://parusanalytics.com/introbud2025/index.html>

My email: [schrodt735@gmail.com](mailto:schrodt735@gmail.com)

*Lion's Roar* \$6/month subscription: <https://www.lionsroar.com/subscribe/>

*Tricycle* daily dharma: <https://tricycle.org/dailydharma/>



## An Introduction to Buddhism in the United States

**Philip Schrodt**  
**The Center at Belvedere, Charlottesville, VA**  
**Tuesday, 2:00 - 3:30**  
**7 Jan 2025 - 11 Feb 2025**

### **Course Description**

Buddhism is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States, albeit developing from a small base in areas outside of the West Coast, and Albemarle County not only has an unusually large number of people self-identifying as Buddhist—variously as a religion, spiritual approach, and/or philosophy—but is also host to some major international Buddhist institutions, including the Mind and Life Institute co-founded by the Dalai Lama, the Ligmincha International Bön Buddhist center at Serenity Ridge half an hour south of town, and UVA's world-class Buddhist studies and contemplative sciences programs. More generally, the U.S. is unusual in having all of the major approaches to Buddhism represented roughly equally, as well as providing an environment where teachings are now shared on tens of thousands of podcasts and videos, and where the generally secular spin-off of "mindfulness", based on 2,500-year-old Buddhist meditation techniques, is now ubiquitous.

This course will provide a systematic overview of Buddhist history, approaches, and practices from the perspective of the U.S. in the early 21st century. We will first review how Buddhism spread from northeast India through most of Asia and recently to the West, and the three major approaches: Theravada, Mahayana (best known through Zen, but also the basis of most of the 150-years of Asian-American Buddhism and the contemporary approach of Thich Naht Hahn), and Vajrayana/Tibetan. We will then look at common core concepts in the Buddha's teachings, discuss some of the variety of meditation practices currently practiced, review some of the most commonly encountered suttas (classical Buddhist



## Week 2: Fundamentals: The Four Noble Truths; The Eightfold Path; the precepts; dukkha, anata and annica

The all-too-common extent of understanding of Buddhism is some variant on "Life is suffering"—including a bumper-sticker variant not suitable for polite company—which tends to elicit the response "Like hey, that's a real downer man, why'd you want to believe that??" ⇒ end of discussion. Buddhism is in fact considerably more complex, but generally revolves around about a half-dozen core concepts—rather, collections of concepts—which I hope to at least introduce in 40 minutes

The wonderful people at *Lion's Roar* have put together many readings on each of these: pick a couple you find interesting and/or may wish to become more familiar with.

[More generally, like it hasn't become obvious by this point, *Lion's Roar* generally has one or more nice accessible paywall-free articles written by Buddhist practitioners—which will frequently give you quite a different perspective than articles by academics who don't have a practice—on virtually every concept, approach, person, and major texts: if you find these useful, send'em some dana to encourage this: coherent unbiased information is not free. I digress...]

- The Four Noble Truths. <https://www.lionsroar.com/what-are-the-four-noble-truths/>
- The Eightfold Path: the route for escaping suffering. <https://www.lionsroar.com/what-is-eightfold-path/>
- the Precepts: the guides to ethical behavior, per last week's discussion of Thich Nhat Hanh's list of fourteen "mindfulness trainings", which are apparently typical of a number of Zen extensions of the precepts: <https://plumvillage.org/mindfulness-practice/the-14-mindfulness-trainings/> but for this week the classical five: <https://www.lionsroar.com/what-are-the-five-precepts/>

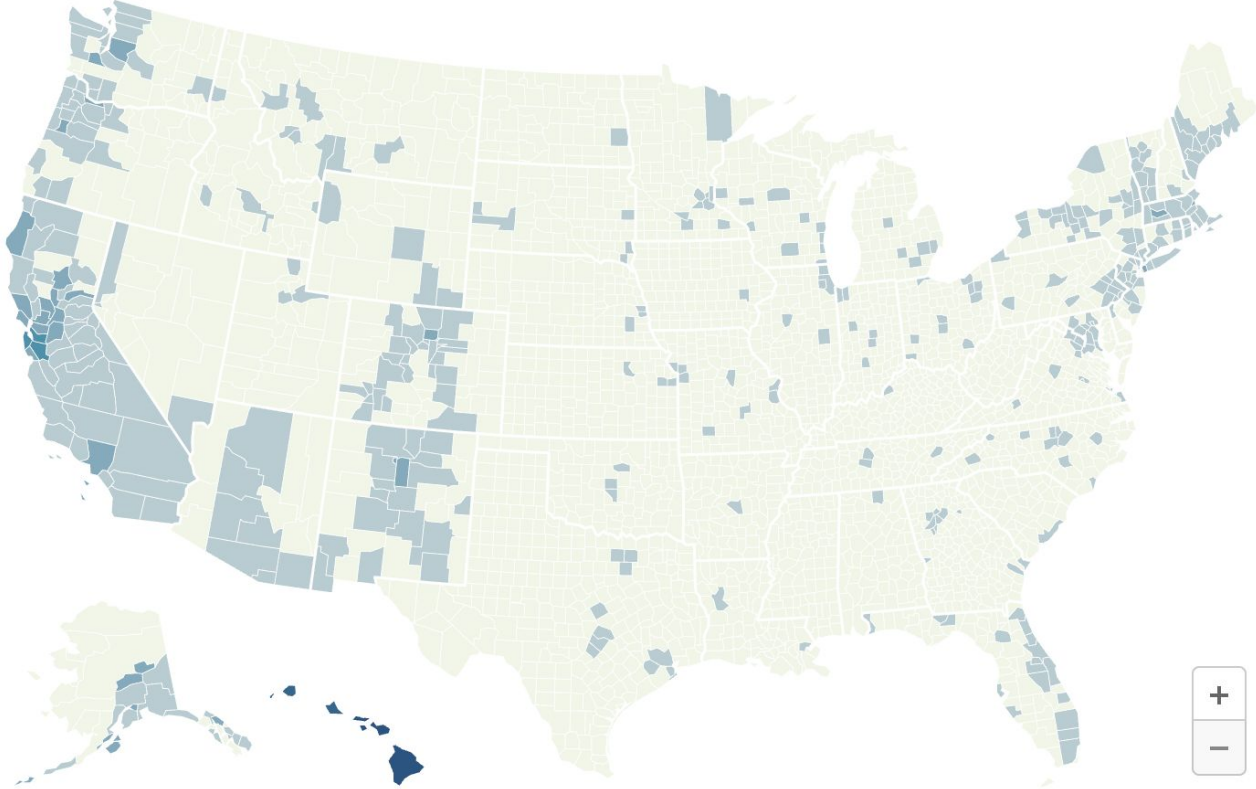
# Charlottesville is not typical (but we live here...)

- UVA Tibetan studies program and library is probably the best such academic program in the country (go Hoos...sorry Mr. Jefferson...)
- UVA Contemplative Studies Program
- UVA Division of Perceptual Studies
- Contemplative studies in UVA School of Nursing
- Mind and Life Institute (co-founded by Dalai Lama ca. 1991; focuses on integration of Buddhism and Western science)
- Serenity Ridge/Lingmincha International headquarters (Tibetan Bön Buddhism)
- Yogaville
- quite the assortment of local Buddhist sanghas (practice communities) in various traditions

# Do You Believe in Life After Death? These Scientists Study It.

Is reincarnation real? Is communication from the “beyond” possible? A small set of academics are trying to find out, case by case.

# Buddhist Identity, by County



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

# Urban Dharma (Asheville, NC)



# Outline of topics

- **WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE, HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF GLOBAL BUDDHISM, AND BUDDHIST MODERNIZERS**
- **WEEK 2: FUNDAMENTALS: THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS; THE EIGHTFOLD PATH; THE PRECEPTS; DUKKHA, ANATA AND ANNICA**
- **WEEK 3: THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA, THE PALI CANON, AND THE THERAVADAN TRADITION**
- **WEEK 4: MAHAYANA IN THE US: ASIAN-AMERICAN BUDDHISM AND ZEN**
- **WEEK 5: EARLY 21ST CENTURY US CONVERT BUDDHISM: TIBETAN/VAJRAYANA AND THICH NHAT HANH/PLUM VILLAGE**
- **WEEK 6: MULTIPLE MODES OF MEDITATION**

Philosophy or Religion?  
(since I know you are asking)

## Abrahamic—Judaism, Christianity, Islamic—characteristics of "religion"

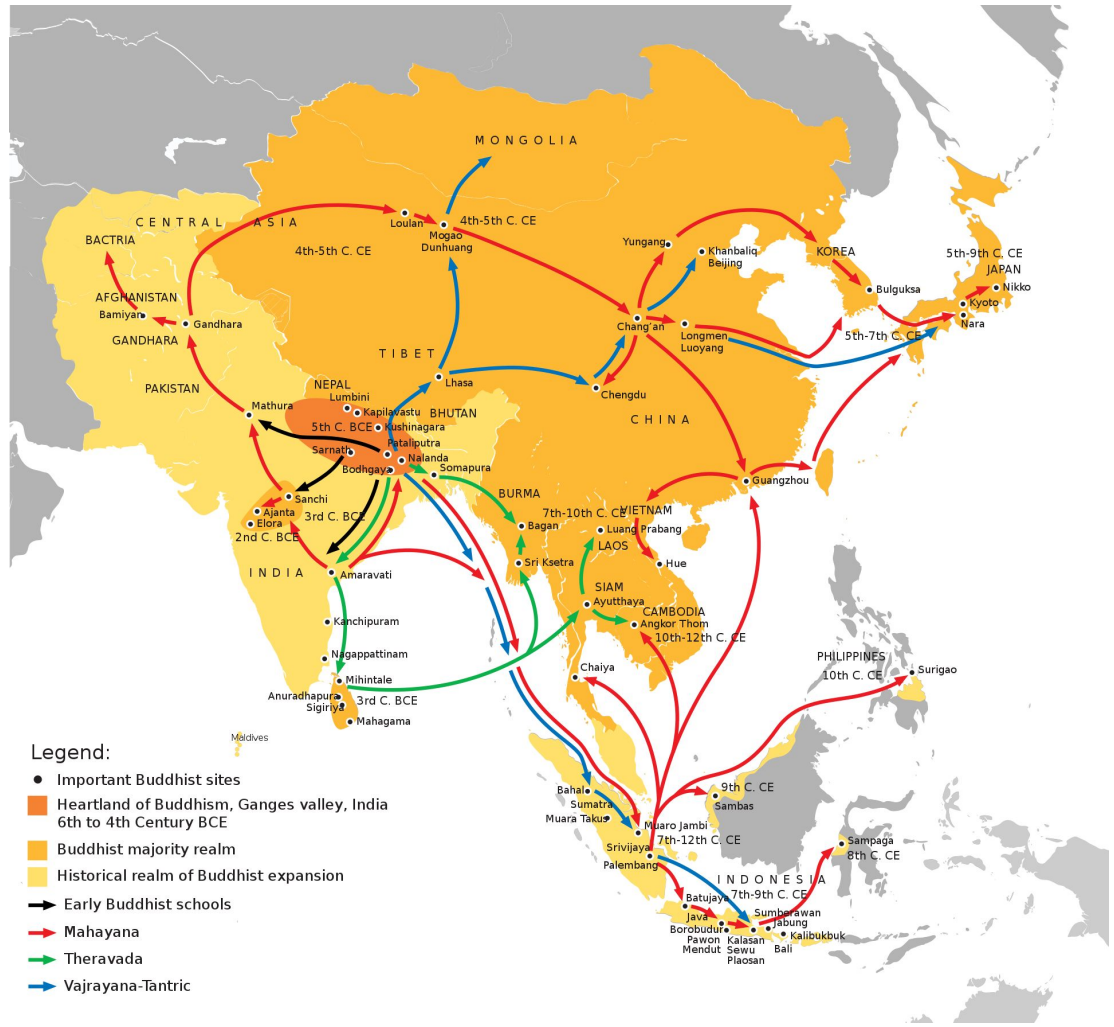
- A relatively short divinely inspired text
- A single omniscient and omnipotent creator god and a commitment to worship only that god
- Unambiguous rituals for being inside or outside the faith, and the assumption is one follows only a single faith (often with severe consequences if not doing so)
- The clear set of orthodox doctrine, albeit varying, sometimes quite radically within subgroups

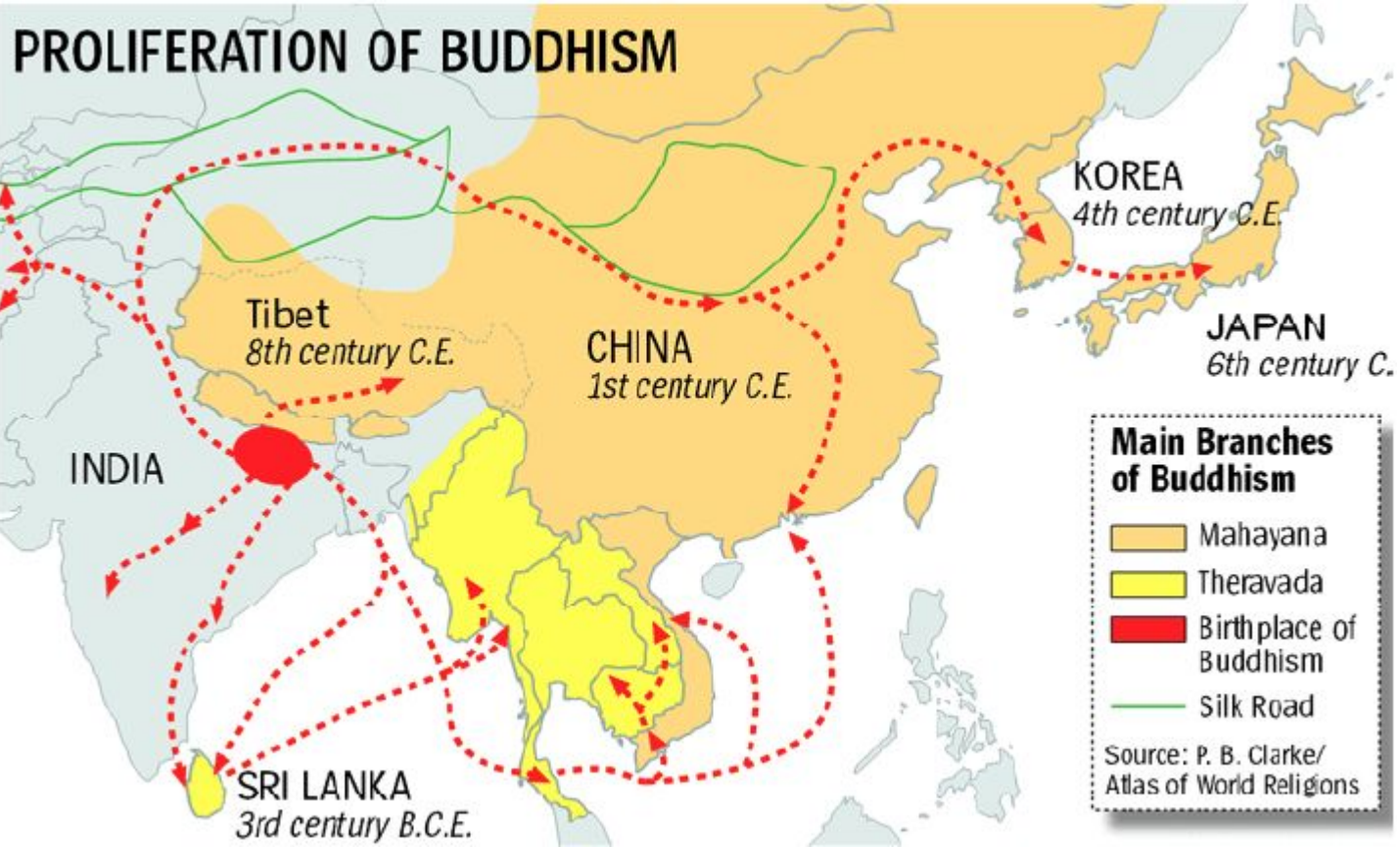
Buddhism has only the last of these

US IRS also adopts this framework

## But Buddhism has the *social* characteristics of religion

- well established multi-generational communities—"sangha" is one of the three jewels
- places of worship
- assorted rituals, including hatch/match/dispatch
- literatures: Pali Canon is about 5,000 pages; Tibetans are working on making 88,000 texts available
- very strong guides for living a moral life
- a very elaborate, though largely optional, cosmology





# Vocabulary

Axial Age (ca. 600BCE - 300BCE)

Gandhara (modern Pakistan)

Ashoka (268-232 BCE)

# Relevant Chinese dynasties

## Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE)

- First translations, early Buddhist schools probably around 100CE
- Development of paper

## Six Dynasties (220–589)

- arrival of Kumārajīva (334–413 CE); completed Sūtra Piṭaka

## Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589) and Sui Dynasty (589–618 CE)

- Beginnings of Chan (Zen)

## Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE)

- Xuanzang's journey to the west
- Height of Buddhist influence
- Tang state/neo-Confucism repression of 845

# "Modernity"

- Nation state as primary political actor
- Globalization of trade
- Scientific revolution and rationalism
- Industrial revolution and later "Green Revolution"
- Colonization peaking in 1880s followed by decolonization in 1950s-1960s
- Urbanization
- Secularization: "God is dead"

# Names: Modernizers

Burma: Ledi Sayadaw, Mahasi Sayadaw, S.N. Goenka (Indian)

Thailand: Rama IV (Mongkut), Ajahn Chah

Tibet: Dalai Lama

USA: Jodo Shinshu/Buddhist Churches of America  
Soka Gakkai (Nichiren)

Vietnam/France: Thich Nhat Hanh

# Diverse modes of introducing Buddhism to the U.S.

Asian coastal Mahayana	immigration of ethnic communities
Zen	small missions to large urban areas
Theravadan	US converts study in Asia and return to adapt and create large independent propertied institutions
Tibetan	large number of exiled monastics lead communities mostly still in the Tibetan traditions
Plum Village	Vietnamese exile to France then adopted by convert "house churches" in the US

# Major phases introducing Buddhism to the U.S.- 1

1820s to 1850s	New England transcendentalists	Intellectual leap from Protestantism was too great given the absence of teachers and good translations
1840s to 1920s	Asian immigration	Establishes permanent institutions but mostly in the US West and mostly remains in ethnic community
1880s to 1920s	Anti-materialist movements	With globalization, finally establishes solid understanding of Eastern spiritual approaches
1920s to present	Zen	Missionary efforts from Japan to urban areas, with "Beat Zen" becoming a cultural phenomenon (if barely Zen...) in the 1950s
1960s to present	Theravadan Insight Meditation	Young US "seekers" study with Asian modernizers in India, Burma and Thailand then return and establish US institutions

# Anti-materialist reaction 1880s to 1930s

- Spiritualism, focusing on upstate New York
- Some sympathetic colonialists begin to produce credible translations
- Theosophy: Helena Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott ("Buddhist catechism")
- Parliament of the World's Religions, Chicago 1893; Swami Vivekananda
  - These two lead to the establishment of vedanta movements in major US urban areas; the non-dual advaita vedanta philosophical approach (Rupert Spira, and sort of Eckert Tolle and Deepak Chopra) are contemporary manifestations
- Non-material speculations on consciousness: William James, Carl Jung
- "New Thought" mind-over-matter: Mary Baker Eddy/Christian Science, Neville Goddard, Edgar Cayce, many, many others to the present: *The Secret* is the best known contemporary variant

## Major phases introducing Buddhism to the U.S.- 2

1960s to present	Tibetan	Chinese suppression of Tibet in 1959 produces a large number of exiled monastics who found institutions in the West; Dalai Lama becomes a global figure
1980s to present	"mindfulness"	Jon Kabat Zinn adapts Theravadan meditation methods to Western-oriented therapeutic purposes
1980s to present	Expansion of Buddhist media	Massive increase of resources, first in print and then in Web-based media such as podcasts
2000s to present	Plum Village	Thich Nhat Hanh's modernizing experiments in France spread to US in small communities mostly through his writing
2020s to present	Remote sanghas	COVID restrictions lead to experiments with remote sanghas, which continue beyond COVID

# Can God Speak Through A.I.?

Modern religious leaders are experimenting with artificial intelligence, just as earlier generations examined radio, television and the internet.

6 MIN READ



Michael Starghill Jr. for The New York Times

*New York Times*, 3-Jan-2024