

Intro to Buddhism in the US Week 4
Mahayana in the US:
Asian-American Buddhism and Zen

The Center at Belvedere
Charlottesville, VA

Link to readings and slides:<https://parusanalytics.com/introbud2025/week-four-2025.html>

Residential Retreat Opportunity

Jewish-Buddhist Intersections: An Embodied Retreat with Trisha Stotler and Rabbi Robbie Schaefer

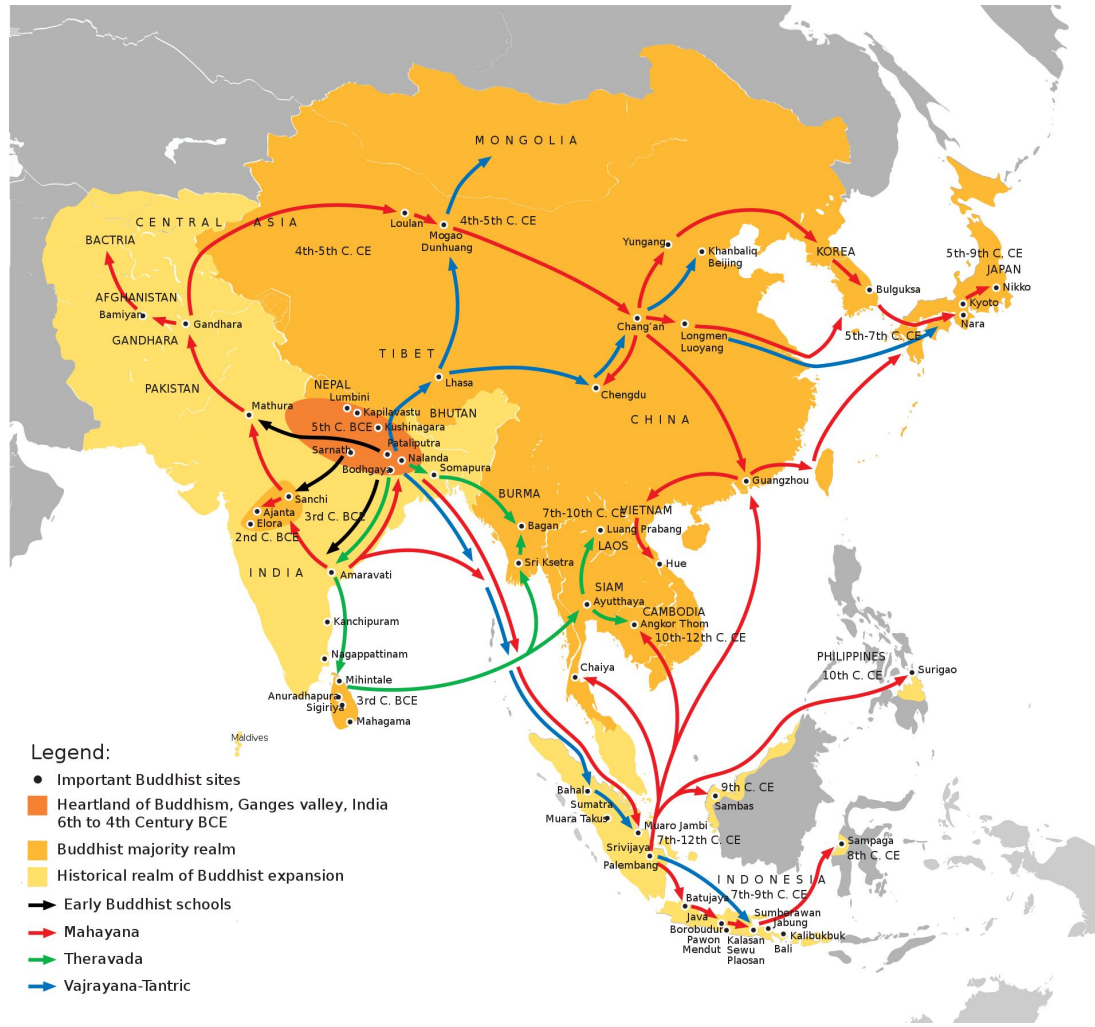
Thursday, March 27, 4 pm - Sunday, March 30, 1 pm, IMCW in Madison, VA

In the United States, people raised in the Jewish tradition make up a surprisingly large percentage of those who have either formally converted to Buddhism or who consider Buddhist practices to be an important part of their spiritual life. The areas of theological convergence in these two ancient traditions are remarkably vast, so perhaps it's only natural that the embodied practices of Buddhism would offer a unique place of refuge alongside the deep wisdom found in Judaism.

This residential retreat offers a space where the two traditions live vibrantly together. You'll discover a path that is alive, relevant and creative, both ancient and created anew in each moment. [Learn more and register here.](#)

Link: <https://imcw.org/event/?eventId=1583>

IMCW = Insight Meditation Community of Washington [DC]
location is Seven Oaks Retreat Center



Buddhism in China in first millennium CE

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 (602-664) journey to the west
 - This covers 629-645, including years of study at Nalanda University, returning with 657 Indian texts
 - On return he has the patronage of the powerful Tang Emperor Taizong (598-649) and later the Empress Zhangsun. Consequently the journey is thoroughly documented in contemporaneous records
- Height of Buddhist influence
- Tang state/neo-Confucism repression of 845

Buddhism is attractive in China

- Philosophically highly sophisticated with a literate elite supported by a robust economy; literacy is important given Buddhism's extraordinarily large (and ever increasing) set of texts
- Many Buddhist concepts are similar to Taoism—particularly the notion of balance—but the philosophical system has the sophistication of Confucism: ironically, it forms sort of a middle way between the two
- Moral principles were generally attractive to Confucians, who were skeptical of Taoism nihilism

But there are some serious cultural issues

- China has no tradition of supporting wandering ascetics: if you don't work, you don't eat
- Monastics renouncing the family means means irresponsibility to ancestors
- Reincarnation is hugely problematic in terms of traditional beliefs about ancestors
- It isn't Chinese

Core initial adaptations

- Bodhisattva ideal (along with an emphasis on compassion and on intrinsic Buddha-nature) over the arahat as the ideal
 - arahat is someone whose mind has completely escaped anger, greed, and delusion, and by implication they will escape rebirth/samsara in a small number of iterations
- Emphasis on Buddha-nature, so nibbana is not something to be achieved: instead it was already intrinsic and simply had to be recognized, like the sun above the clouds. This parallels Confucian views, particularly those of Mencius, that humans are intrinsically good.
- Focus on a small number of new sutras—the Heart, Diamond, and Lotus sutras—rather than the full Pali canon
- Aristocratic support for monasteries—eventually a serious weak point, as also occurs in India—as well as missionary efforts, e.g. to Vietnam, and, in all likelihood, monks engaging in practical magic on the Taoist model

Bodhisattva vows

Beings are numberless; I vow to save them.

Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.

The gates of the dharma are boundless; I vow to pass through them.

The Buddha Way is unattainable; I vow to attain it.

[this is one of countless variations]

Yet another quibble with translation:

"vow to save"—which has Christian connotations—might be better translated as "helping to cross over." There are numerous allusions to crossing over a river in the suttas—the Buddha was, after all, teaching in the plains of the Ganges river.

Look, a squirrel!

The Heart Sutra, one of the three fundamental Mahayana sutras, famously ends with the phrase

GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA.

"Gone, gone, gone to the further shore, completely gone to the further shore, awakened, amen ["svaha" is just a ritual phrase]

Alternative interpretations:

More loosely translated, it means this:

"You Brahmin priests with your fancy fire sacrifices aren't the only ones who get people to heaven. We can do it without killing animals and wasting trees. So there."

Richard Hayes, Religious Studies, McGill University

Allen Ginsberg's version:

"Gone gone totally gone totally gone over the top, wakened mind, So, ah!"

Lotus Sutra

Google AI summary:

"The Lotus Sutra, a central text in Mahayana Buddhism, teaches that all beings have the inherent potential to achieve Buddhahood, emphasizing the concept of "One Vehicle" where everyone can reach enlightenment through compassionate action and practice, regardless of their current state (PAS: also that consequently there are multiple paths, depending on where you are starting); it uses parables and elaborate imagery to convey the idea that the Buddha's life transcends ordinary perception, and that the ultimate goal is to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings, not just oneself. "

Due to this centrality, there are extensive commentaries and summaries on the Web. Also note that even pre-Web, this is far more accessible to a lay audience than the Theravadan texts

Asian-American Buddhism

Two phrases:

19th century, immigrant laborers, particularly those working on the Union Pacific railroad, and later as agricultural laborers in California and Hawai'i (independent before 1898), establishing [segregated] permanent communities. This ends with first the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, then the Immigration Act of 1924

20th century: Liberalization of Asian immigration and also refugees from Vietnam War and spinoffs; lots of this in our area

Perhaps not the best example from this period, if demonstrating the extent of acculturation (and the effects of the absence of cultural checks present in the home country) to the US: Wat Lao Buddhavong Laotian (Theravadan) temple in Fauquier County developed as a major cultural and religious center, but then got involved in all of the typical legal/financial/sexual messes US religious institutions get into—see Liberty University ca 2022, for one of many examples—though at least the sex was between adults and consensual. Seems to have settled down.

See:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/01/06/fight-tearing-apart-virginia-buddhist-temple-monk-arrested-worshippers-banned-their-parents-graves-questionable-loan/>



About Us

Learn more about Wat Lao Buddhavong.

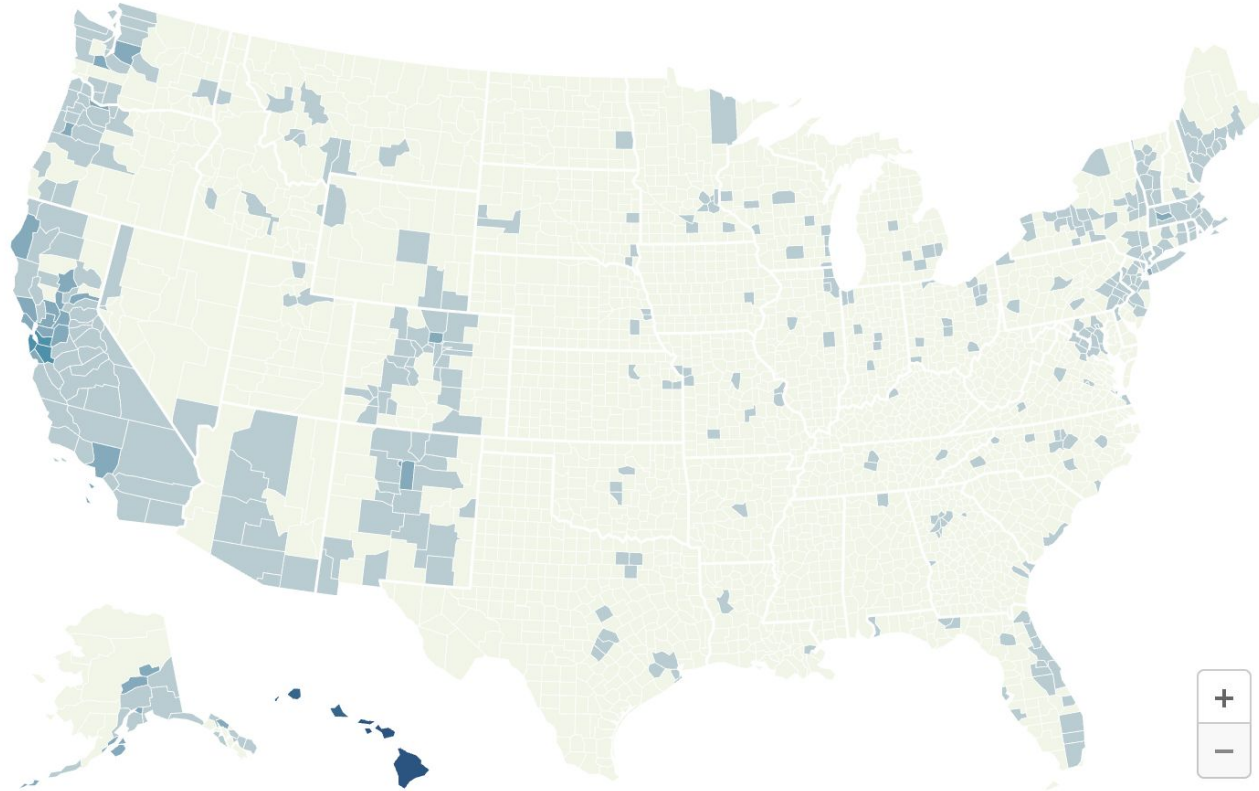
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Events

Our upcoming events for 2025

Buddhist Identity, by County



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

Pure Land/ Jodo Shinshu (typically called Shin)

Founder: Shinran Shonin (1173-1263)

Core: Trusting in the bodhisattva Amita Buddha, and chanting the nembutsu, *Namu Amida Butsu* in order to find your intrinsic Buddha nature which is hidden (sun above the clouds, etc). But in Shin this is just an affirmation, and involves a letting go (sound familiar?: salvation by grace) to just trusting in Amita

In Chinese Pure Land, the Buddhist practice of many of the 19th century immigrants from coastal China, it is more of a practice that leads to reincarnation in the Pure Land of Amitahba, and the nembutsu is a ritual practice.

Major institution: Buddhist Churches of America (currently 60 temples; originally founded in 1899 by Japanese missionaries providing for the Japanese expatriate community)

Nichiren/Soka Gakkai International

Founder was the Japanese monk Nichiren (1222-1282)

Practice focus on chanting *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* and study of the Lotus Sutra as well as the writings of Nichiren. As with Jodo Shinran, it is a lay, rather than monastic, practice

Soka Gakkai International is the major international outreach, as well as a major political force in Japan focusing on anti-corruption.

Nichiren made a major and quite successful outreach to the African-American community (e.g. Tina Turner) and is arguably one of the most multi-racial of any US religious organization

Why Are There So Many Black Buddhists?


A black practitioner struggling with the apparent lack of diversity in American Buddhism finds a vast multi-racial community at Soka Gakkai International.

By J. Sunara Sasser | OCT 16, 2018



Soka Gakkai International center in Chicago | <https://tricy.cl/2pQvXyh>

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Won Buddhism

Won Buddhism originated in Korea in 1916 when its founder, Master [Sotaesan](#) (Park, Joongbin 1891-1943), experienced a great enlightenment. He envisioned a practice for all people that emphasized equality between clergy and laity, between women and men, and among all economic classes and races with the founding motto:

With this Great Opening of Matter; Let there be a Great Opening of Spirit.
Sotaesan

Won Buddhism aims to revitalize and modernize Buddhism, to bring ancient Buddhist truth to contemporary society, and to use Buddhist teachings and meditation practice for practical and useful purposes.

With the teaching of the explicit acceptance of other religions, Won Buddhism leads the movement for inter-religious cooperation based on the Ethics of Triple Identity:

All religions and spirituality are based on a Common Source,
All human beings and all forms of life are interdependent as a One Earth Family and
All enterprises have a Common Purpose.

Source: <https://wonbuddhism.org/about/>

Zen

A phrase that is utterly pervasive in contemporary culture,
for better or worse.

Mostly worse.

Staples, check-out impulse buy, next to a pile of copier paper. Though innocent enough...

ZEN 2025

- 18-month calendar featuring six bonus months of July through December of 2024.
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28	29	30	31			

Contrary to what I said earlier, these are vegetarian....



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Zen Boneless BBQ Ribs 7.5

Zen Crispy Fried Chicken (6) 7.5

Zen Fried Chicken Legs (4) 7.95

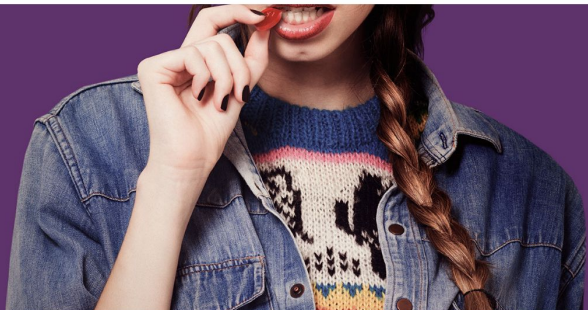
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November 3, 2023

Not vegetarian...though I suppose hospitarian....



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“Quit complaining and eat it! ... Number one, chicken soup is good for the flu, and number two, it’s nobody we know.”

Zen [Japanese] ← Chan [Chinese] ← jnana [Sanskrit: wisdom]

Chan is responding to

- Initially to the highly—as in "overly"—literate elite Chinese culture
- Eventually to the dramatic failure of the monastic approach vis a viz elites in the 845 neo-Confucian repression

Off to a rocky start, even before Zen Cannabis...

- The two cultures didn't fully understand each other, with the US firmly in the grips of various aspects of orientalism
- But Zen was also in a particularly odd place due to the Japanese response to being dissed by the White powers after WWI, with the Japanese military government preferring a state-sponsored Shinto to the potentially independent Zen monasteries. So, e.g. Barbara O'Brien's book on a thousand-plus years philosophical currents in Zen skips this period almost entirely
 - Paraphrasing the Japanese response to the Treaty of Versailles (1919): like hey, we backed the winning Allied side, and we kicked Chinese and Russian ass in the 1900s, so we're a major power, right?. No? Just inferior yellow people? Then we'll seriously screw your entire system....
- Popularized in 1950s by writings of D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts (Anglican...) and then the Zen Center of San Francisco by Shunryu Suzuki (see tensions with Asian community, above...)
- Subsequently, multiple generations did get sufficient experience—again, this takes years of dedicated practice—to get past these.

Zen is not

- Antinomian, particularly with respect to sex and drugs. See "Mardi Gras"
- Crazy wisdom
- Devoid of literature, though this characterization goes back to the Song dynasty because Chan rejected the Confucian-influenced focus on rational mastery of a large literature
- Whatever you want it to be...well, except when it is, sort of...
- Exclusively focused on instant enlightenment
- Open question (opinions differ...arguably these were useful corrections to Beat Zen but too early for a more mature Zen of, say, Bernie Glassman. If present in many of our Boomer dorm rooms...) on some popular literature, most famously
 - Robert Pirsig. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974)
 - Peter Matthiessen. *The Snow Leopard*. (1978)

Zen is

- Mahayana (hence Upaya, Zen Hospice, and Zen Peacemakers)
- Very substantially simplified, particularly compared to Golden Age philosophies
- Teacher-student relationship (and hence lineage) is very important. Which becomes a weakness as virtually every major urban Zen center has experienced one or more sexual abuse scandals by major teachers
- Incredibly disciplined and austere: Upaya. Precepts are supposed to be hugely important
- But still relatively flexible: angel Kyodo Williams "What I like about Zen is once I'm ordained I can do whatever I want"

Highly recommend this source for both Zen and Mahayana philosophical debates:

Barbara O'Brien. *A Concise History of Zen from the Buddha to the Modern World*

Wisdom outside of the scriptures

A Chan master speaking with a young monk. The master says "I have nothing to teach you." The young monk is wide-eyed and stunned. Scratching his head, he asks: "But, Master, if you have nothing to teach me, why am I learning from you?" The master smiles and says "You are learning from me until you realize I have nothing to teach you."

from "You Are Already Enlightened", Gilbert Gutierrez, pg 62 *Lion's Roar* Nov-2022

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

"This magnificent refuge is inside you. Enter. Shatter the darkness that shrouds the doorway. Be bold. Be humble. Put away the incense and forget the incantations they taught you. Ask no permission from the authorities. Close your eyes and follow your breath to the still place that leads to the invisible path that leads you home." from *The Interior Castle*

<https://medium.com/wholistique/a-quiet-mind-reflects-our-higher-self-bf782d98a89f>

Or this one...

On the feast of St. Nicholas [in 1273, Thomas Aquinas] was celebrating Mass when he received a revelation that so affected him that he wrote and dictated no more, leaving his great work the *Summa Theologiae* unfinished. To Brother Reginald's (his secretary and friend) exhortations he replied, "The end of my labors has come. All that I have written appears to be as so much straw after the things that have been revealed to me." When later asked by Reginald to return to writing, Aquinas said, "I can write no more. I have seen things that make my writings like straw."

Aquinas died three months later while on his way to the ecumenical council of Lyons.

<https://www.catholic.com/qa/when-st-thomas-aquinas-likened-his-work-to-straw-was-that-a-retraction-of-what-he-wrote>

Approaches to practice

Soto

Just sitting—shikantaza—without an object of meditation: this is similar to Theravadan "open awareness" and Tibetan dzogchen. Soto was the approach used by D.T. Suzuki and various California Bay area Zen centers such as Tassajara and the San Francisco Zen Center. Considered "farmer Zen" by the Renzai...

Renzai

koan practice (in addition to conventional meditation); relatively rare as it is incredibly teacher-intensive though it is common in popular culture:

"Two hands clap and there is a sound, what is the sound of one hand?" Hakuin (our aforementioned buddy who wasn't a dead Zen master at the time)

""What is your [original face](#) before your mother and father were born?"

Extensive set of koans were developed in the Chan tradition during both the Tang and Song dynasties—which is to say, the practice survived the suppression of monastic Buddhism—with the US versions generally intermediated by Japan.

Approaches to enlightenment

Barbara O'Brien's book deals extensively with these: there is a big debate about whether this is gradual or sudden, and to the extent that "peak experience"—which is very real, but people seem to have little control over it beyond making yourself "accident prone"—is the same as enlightenment.

Any of the following approaches could find ample justifications in the literature (which accounts, in part, for the volume of Zen literature)

- E is all but impossible and takes many lifetimes: blind turtle; Buddha's thousands of lifetimes before awakening
- E, particularly in the sense of peak experience, is possible but spontaneous
- E is sudden/instantaneous and can be achieved through systematic methods (most of Zen; certainly koan practice)
- E is incremental and is achieved progressively (Tibetan)
- E is incremental and is achieved through ever-increasing "glimpses"

Social service/engagement

Zen Peacemakers: <https://zenpeacemakers.org/>

Founded by Bernie Glassman; among its activities are "bearing witness" at sites of various forms of injustice, including Auschwitz, which was liberated exactly 80 years ago yesterday. Glassman founded the Greyston Bakery in a poor area in Yonkers in 1982; it is now a \$14M/business (thanks in part to being a supplier Ben and Jerry's) employing 75 people.

Upaya Zen Center: <https://www.upaya.org/>

Roshi Joan Halifax, a student of Glassman and who has close links to the UVA School of Nursing. Current focus is training Buddhism hospital chaplains, of which there are only seven certified in the US

Zen Caregiving: <https://zencaregiving.org/>

For many years the San Francisco Zen Hospice Project until they lost their lease [caution landlords: the wheel of karma moves slowly but inexorably...I digress...]