

Intro to Buddhism in the US

Week 7: Comparisons, continuations, and AMA

The Center at Belvedere
Charlottesville, VA

Link to slides: <https://parusanalytics.com/introbud2025/I2BUS25-week-7-slides.pdf>

1 April 2025
[yeah, yeah, inauspicious date...]

Public Talk by Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche
in Charlottesville at Unity Church



April 8, 2025

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Public Talk
by Tenzin Wangyal
Rinpoche
IN CHARLOTTESVILLE

Unity Church in Charlottesville is graciously hosting Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche for a public talk.

Location: Unity Church

Address: 2825 Hydraulic Rd,
Charlottesville, VA 22901

Time: 6:00–7:30 p.m.

The **Introduction to Buddhism** class, for which you registered and led by Phil Schrodt, Ph.D., and sponsored by **Serenity Sangha of Charlottesville**, will take place on Zoom on the four Mondays in **April: 7th, 14th, 21st, and May 5th, from 6:30 PM to 7:30 PM.**

The link for all of the meetings is

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89960790800?pwd=Jqbb6EZpiwJElbnakU69VjpCJjU1a3.1>

Week 1: Session 1 will explore how Buddhism developed and its modernization in Asia 2500 years later, along with its various paths to the United States.

Week 2: This session will cover core concepts such as suffering (*dukkha*), no-self, and impermanence, alongside essential lists in Buddhism like the Four Noble Truth, the Eightfold Path, the Five Lay Precepts, the Three Poisons, and the Five Hindrances.

Week 3: We will discuss various facets of the Mahayana tradition, including the China-based lineage of most Asian-American practices which include Zen, and the Plum Village/Thich Nhat Hanh tradition.

Week 4: This final week will delve into the Tibetan/Vajrayana tradition, which is particularly prevalent in the Charlottesville area, along with an "ask me anything" segment for any questions that may arise.

Phil's email, should you need to reach him, is **schrodt735@gmail.com**.

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...]

Pew Religious Landscape Study

- Latest: 2023-2024, following earlier surveys in 2017 and 2004
- Surveys 35,000 people, though still too small to get details on non-Christian affiliations: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism
- Primary findings
 - Decline of Christian identification and "None" have stabilized at around 60% and 30% respectively
 - No evidence of a "generational rebound": younger cohorts are not becoming religious
 - Mainstream white Protestant denominations continue to decline, 18% to 11%; Catholic, evangelical and Black Protestants are also declining. "Non-denominational" churches—presumably mega-churches and house churches—are increasing
 - 35% of adults have switched religions since childhood: it is no longer "sticky"
 - Decline among liberals (62% to 37%) is about three times that of conservatives (89% to 82%)

I find this stunning...

And large majorities of Americans have a spiritual, supernatural outlook. For example:

- 86% believe people have a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body.
- 83% believe in God or a universal spirit.
- 79% believe there is something spiritual beyond the natural world.
- 70% believe in heaven, hell or both.

Also 44% report praying at least once a day, and this is stable (though down from 58% in 2007)

That is, an overwhelming majority reject the elite assumption of a purely material world

Two assertions

The "many paths ascending the same mountain" applies to deep mystical practices but not to institutionalized practices, which differ radically.

Since the Protestant Reformation, there are many, many "Christianities" and these can vary radically, e.g. Five-Point Calvinism (Google it...) vs largely secular popular Unitarian-Universalism.

[Think Calvinism is only of historical interest? Two of the most powerful people in the Trump administration, Elon Musk (!!!) and Peter Thiel grew up in Calvinist white South Africa]

Ultimate comparative religion chart: I2BUS-2023

Standard trinitarian pagan cosmology (Sahlins)

"Hinduism"

neo-paganism and assorted New Age NRMs

Abrahamic/
monotheistic

Judaism

Christianity

Islam

Dualistic

Zoroastrianism

"Gnostic"

Manichean

Mysticism

Sufism

monastic practices

Religious Society of Friends

(Quaker)

Philosophical/
atheistic

Taoism

Confucianism

Buddhism

secular humanism

Stoicism and other

Greco-Roman

philosophical schools

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 they do exist, e.g. southern Vietnam in 20C

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

And some more commonalities...

- 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, Majayana, 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 rational/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...]

Financial challenges

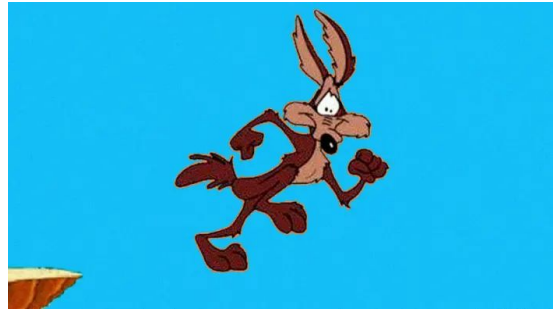
- How many mindfulness teachers can the US support?
 - probably more than we think: see yoga. Though continued mindfulness support is probably less needed than in yoga: "In the beginning my guru was my teacher, then the suttas were my teacher, then my mind was my teacher"
- How many retreat centers can 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 MBSR model

Electronic sangha

Create sanghas from social media and apps: Gleig's book discusses in detail how the initial effort to do this by Gen X/Z failed, but with the vast experience gained during COVID, "hybrid" sanghas seem to be very successful.

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 cost \$35,000.

Solutions to the teacher crisis - 4...not...

   **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

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 vs congregational (e.g. chanting) 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: will Boomers ever get out of the way (experience of Democratic Party is not reassuring...)
- 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

Open questions and speculative answers

- Will interest in therapeutic/secular mindfulness translate into increased interest in Buddhism, particularly among the "nones"?
 - Past US experience suggests "no"
- Per Rodney Stark's theories of a "marketplace" for religious ideas, are there missing niches that could be filled by a new synthesis
 - Possibly, though none seem to be on the horizon at the moment. Though they wouldn't be to a Boomer
 - Zen seems to me endangered due to the resource intensity, loss of interest in Japan, overlap with Theravada and Tibetan open awareness practice, and, of course, Zen Burgers
 - US religious movements generally tend to split rather than combine
- What is the long-term role of the electronic sangha?

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”