Introduction to Buddhism in the United States

OLLI, Charlottesville, VA

2026 Edition

Week 1: Historical overview and modernizers

Motivation: How did we get from this (ca. 500 BCE)...



To this, at the magazine rack of the local CVS drugstore…



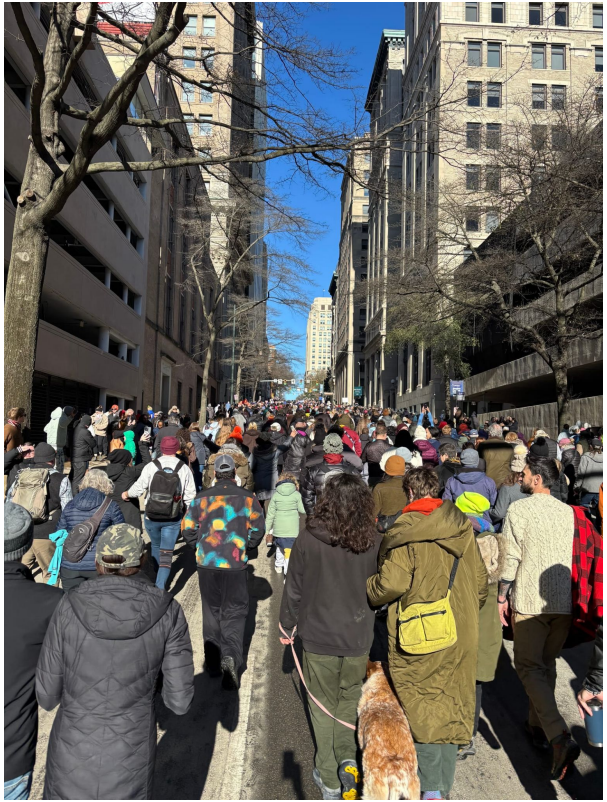
At CVS, these were subsequently supplanted by special issues on cannabis, then Taylor Swift, and lately *The Odyssey. Sic transit gloria mundi* or, in Buddhism, all composite things are impermanent

But also this: [Bible belt] Richmond, VA 3-Feb-2026

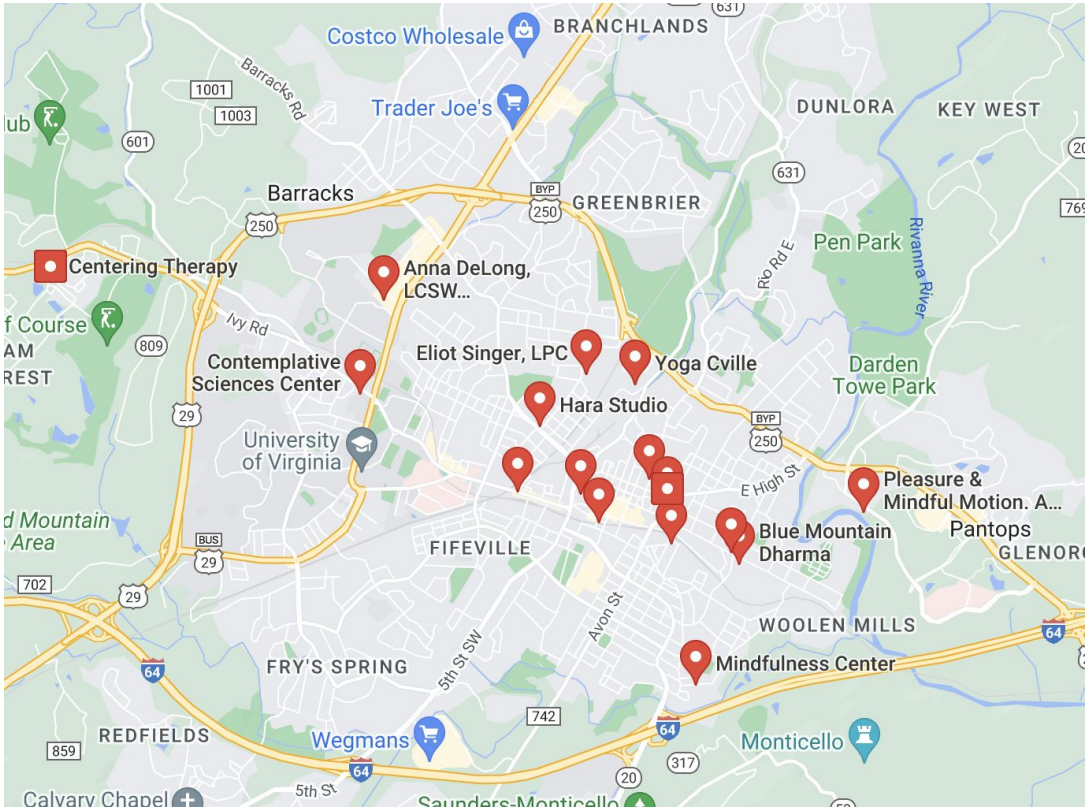




Estimated 10,000 people;
monks were from all of the
SE Asian Theravadan countries;
2300 mile walk for peace from
Ft. Worth TX to DC



And…Google map results for "mindfulness Charlottesville"



Psychology Today lists about 250 (!) therapists in CVille who incorporate "mindfulness" in their work.
https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/va/charlottesville?category=mindfulness-based-mbct

Some relevant biographical bits

- Liberal Protestant family background; fairly religious family and generally benign experiences with religion
- then 15 years Quaker, so a lot of Christian comparisons
- 15 years in a Theravadan/Insight sangha, though now junior woodchuck in a Plum Village (Thich Nhat Hanh) sangha
- Year-long Barre Center for Buddhist Studies course (but no formal lineage)
- Extensive meditation experience, if far less than some people. Around 100 cumulative days on silent retreat with teachers from various traditions, if mostly Insight
- Three years (175 sessions) guiding meditation and providing short "dharmettes" (teachings) on Zoom during COVID
- 35 years university teaching experience...sorry
- I'm trained as a social scientist and tend to see things in those terms: someone asked me why the Axial Age occurred when it did and I reflexively responded "iron farm implements"
- A brief professional bio: https://parusanalytics.com/about.html

Five caveats

- I'm not trying to convert you to Buddhism
  - starting with the fact there isn't really such a thing as "conversion" in Buddhism…
- VSE Rule: you can express a sincerely held belief without intending to convince someone of the reality of that belief
  - VSE = "Varieties of Spiritual Experience", now "Kindred Spirits", The Center at Belvedere, 2nd and 4th Thursday 2-3:30
- This is the departure lounge, not the baggage claim
  - Vastly more information to available on all of these topics, and even the course web site is just a starting point
- I will generally not be using generative AI to create content—I do use it for search—and any time I do I will label it as such
- And in reference to the many inevitable and quite legitimate questions on karma and rebirth…

The Zen teacher Hakuin (1685-1768) was visited by a samurai. Bowing respectfully, the warrior asked "Tell me, master, what happens after death"

"I have no idea," replied Hakuin.

"You have no idea," said the samurai, surprised. "But you are the greatest Zen master in all of Japan!"

"I may be a Zen master," answered Hakuin, "but I'm not a dead one."

Links:

Course web site: https://parusanalytics.com/introbud2026/index.html

My email: schrodt735@gmail.com

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

Tricycle daily dharma: https://tricycle.org/dailydharma/

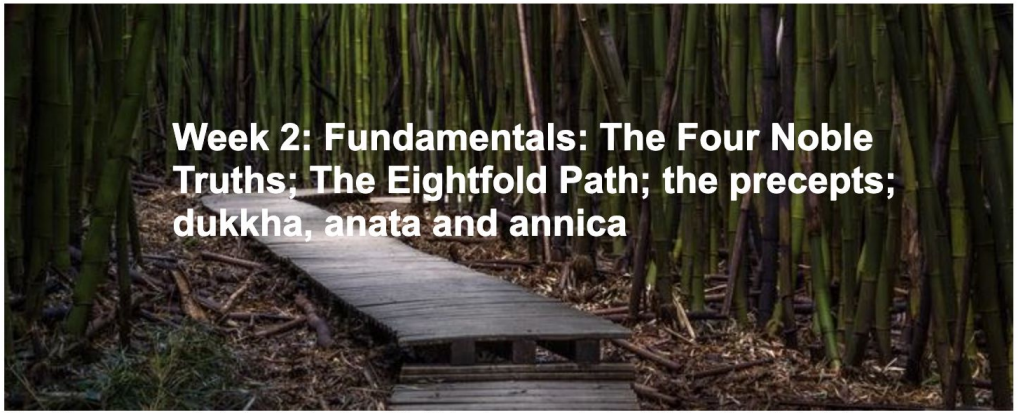


Philip Schrodt
The Center at Belvedere, Charlottesville, VA
Tuesday, 2:00 - 3:30
7 Jan 2025 - 11 Feb 2025

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, discussion some of the variety of meditation practices currently practiced, review some of the most commonly encountered suttas (classical Buddhist



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 an 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 (linked to Roshi Joan Halifax's Upaya Zen Center in New Mexico)
- 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)
- Seven Oaks Retreat Center/Insight Meditation Community of Washington (Tara Brach)
- Yogaville
- quite the assortment of local Buddhist sanghas (practice communities) in various traditions

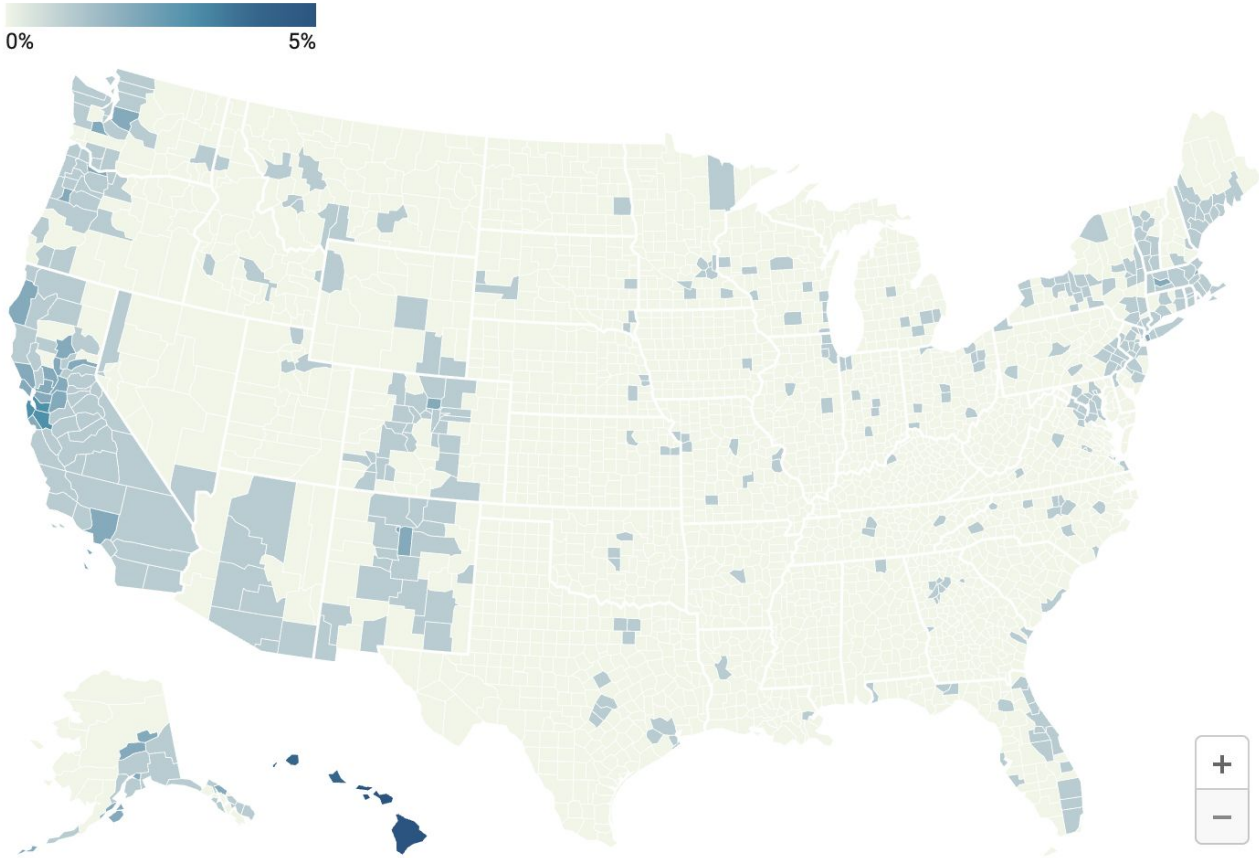


New York Times/Style (!?!) 3-Jan-2025



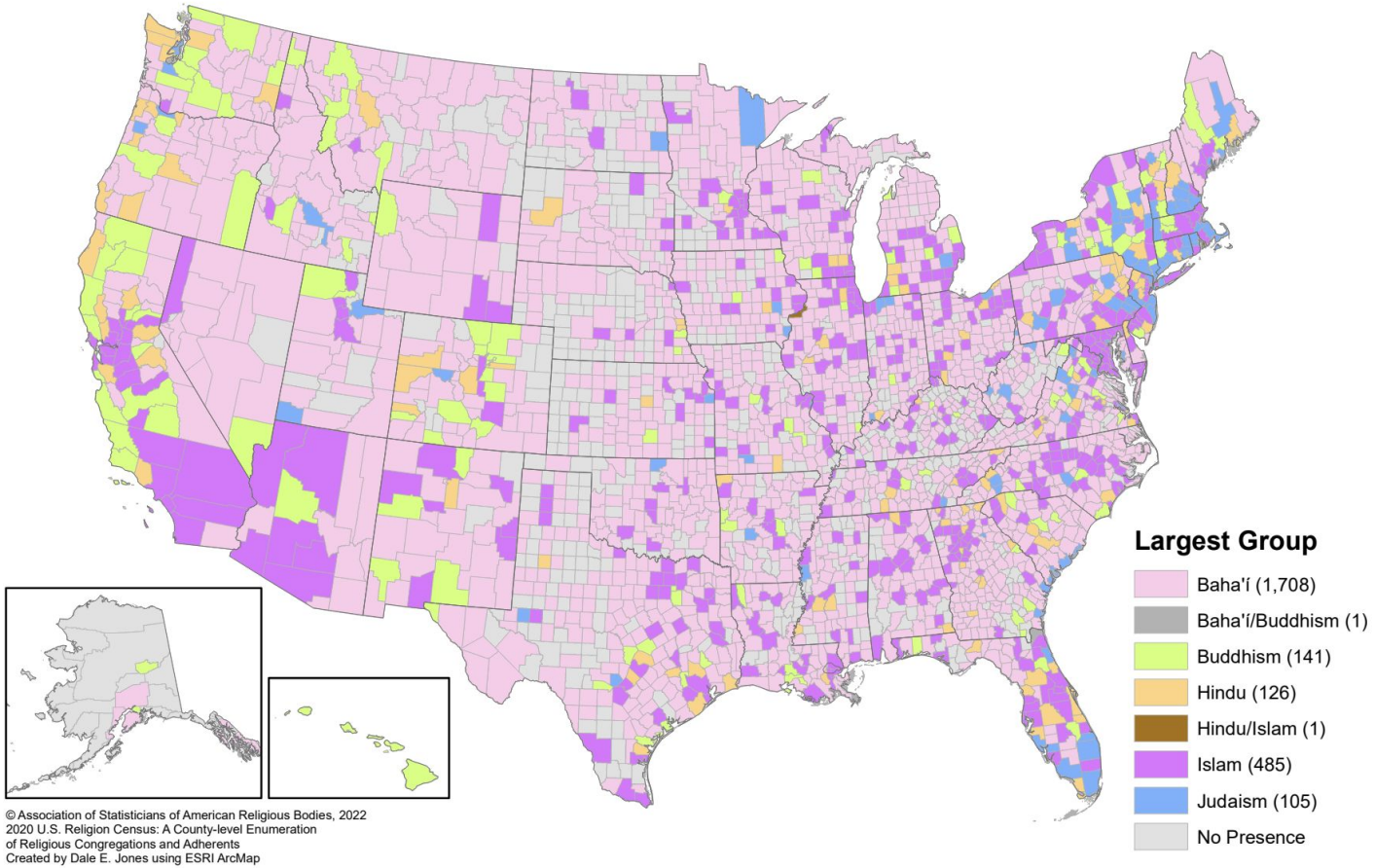
Bard College (New York) chapel, August 2024

Buddhist Identity, by County



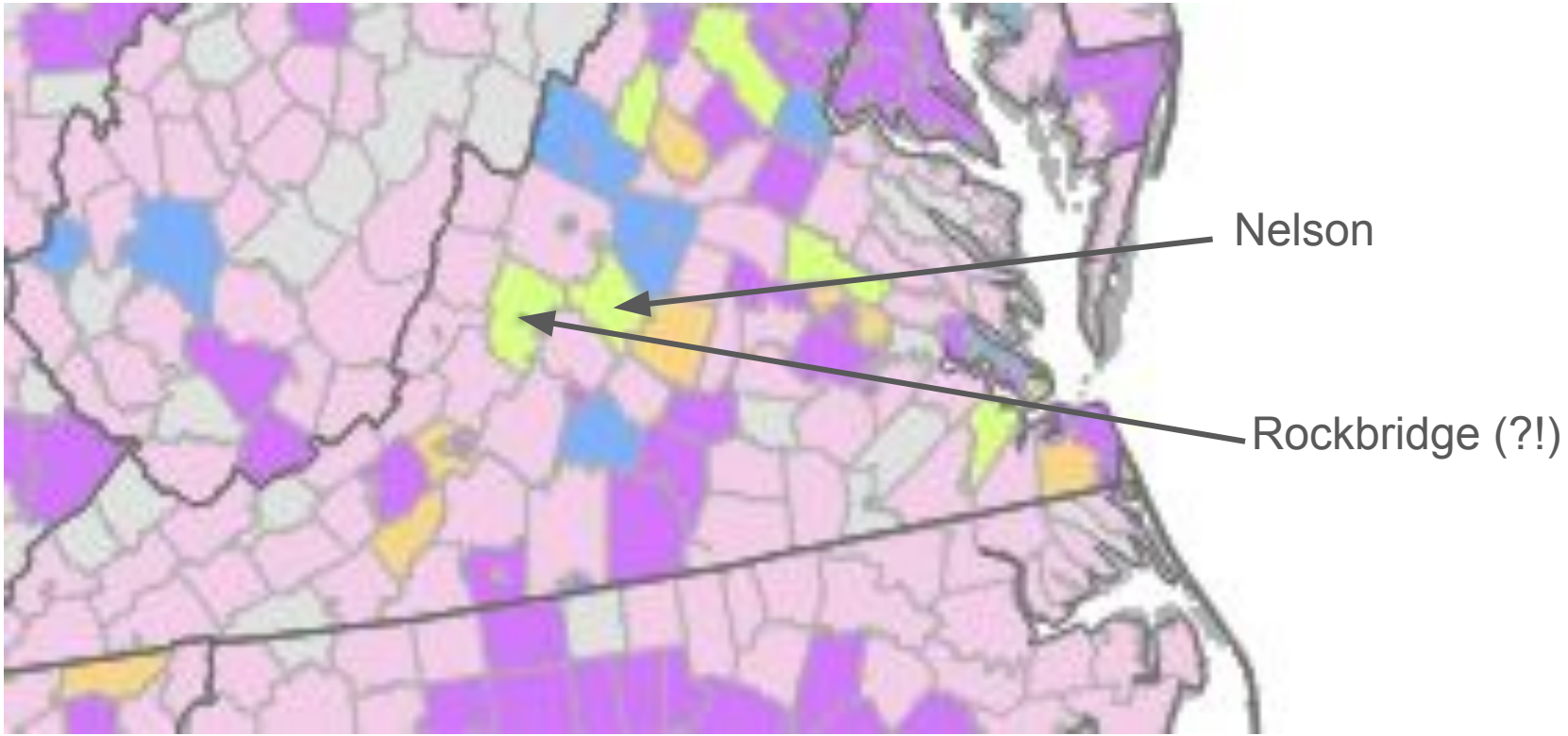
Source: PRRI 2020 Census of American Religion. • Created with Datawrapper

Largest Non-Christian Religion by County:
Based on Number of Adherents Reported in U.S. Religion Census 2020



© Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2022
2020 U.S. Religion Census: A County-level Enumeration
of Religious Congregations and Adherents
Created by Dale E. Jones using ESRI ArcMap

Zeroing in…



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 doctrines, albeit varying, sometimes quite radically, within subgroups

Buddhism has only the last of these

US Internal Revenue Service also adopts this framework in assessing whether something is a "religion" for purposes of tax deductions

But Buddhism has the *social* characteristics of religion

- well established multi-generational communities—"sangha" is one of the "Three Jewels"
- places of worship (less so in US convert communities)
- 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

A random theological encounter…

In a large used bookstore in Inverness, Scotland I chanced upon a two-volume, 1,100-page commentary on the New Testament book of 1st Peter

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1st Peter is 1,700 words—around 2-¾ pages—long

Ultimate comparative religion chart: I2BUS-2023

Standard trinitarian pagan cosmology (Sahlins)
"Hinduism"
neo-paganism and assorted New Age NRMs

Abrahamic/ monotheistic
Judaism
Christianity
Islam
West African "supreme deity" traditions such as Ifa

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

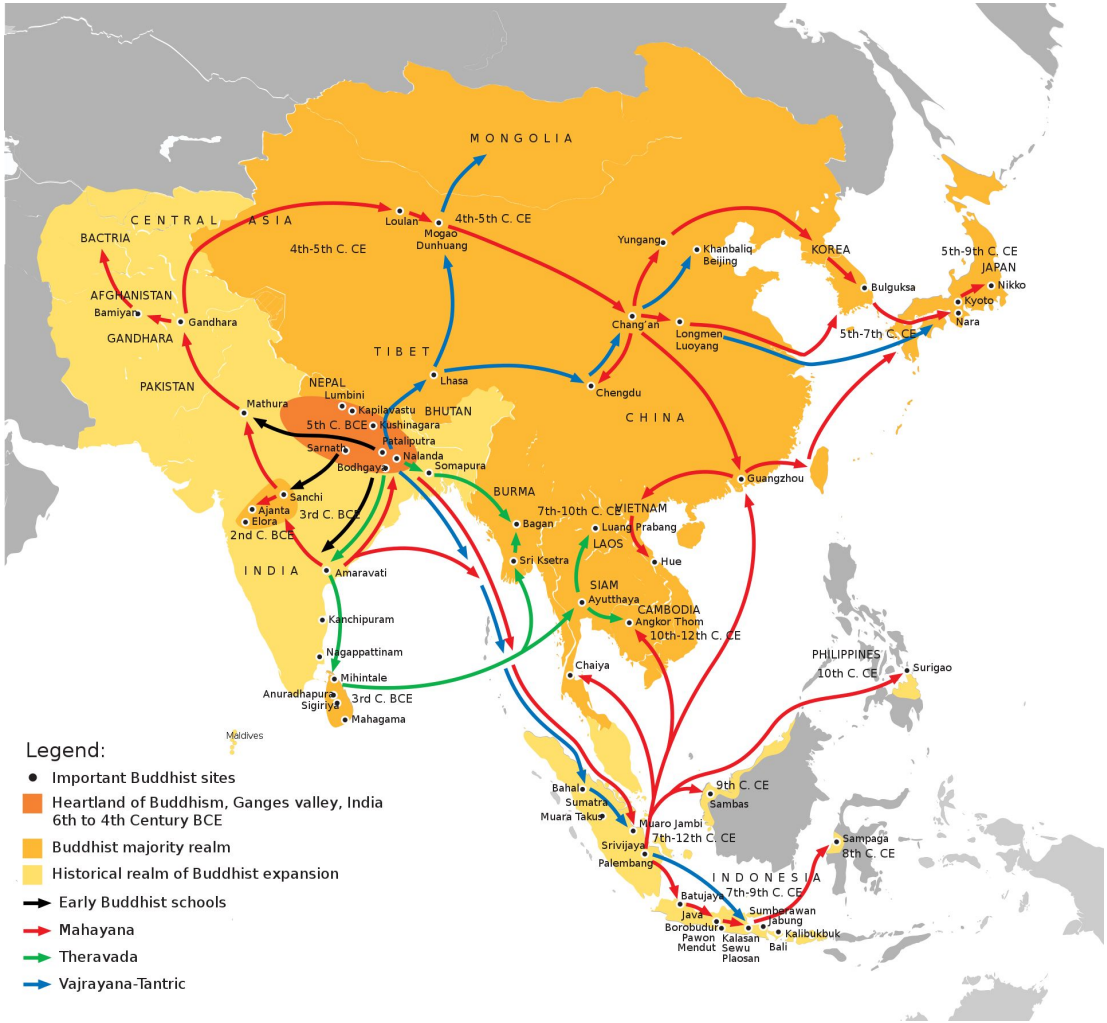
Sources of Buddhist diversity

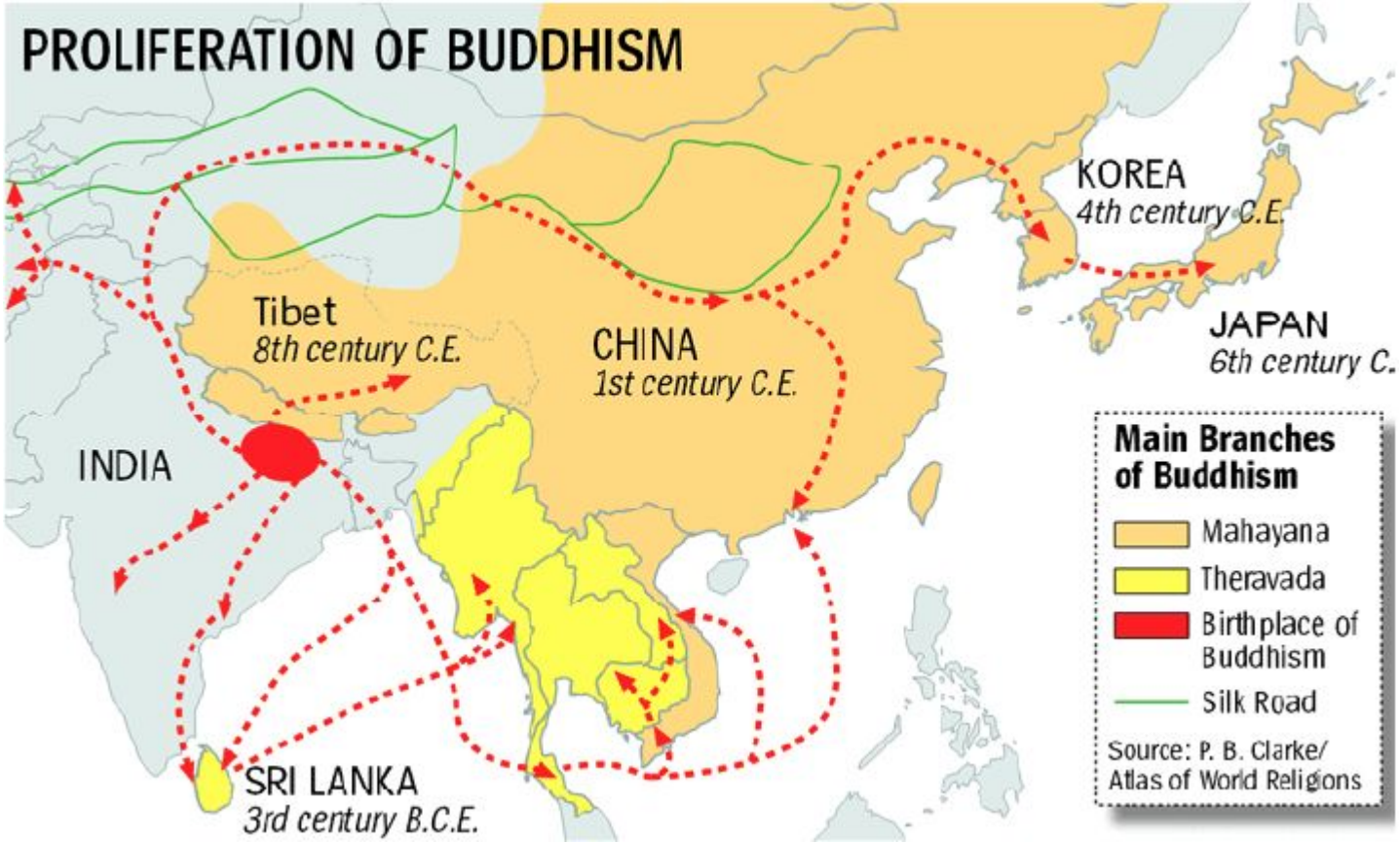
- Lack of a compact core sacred text
- Adaptation to local cultural traditions
    - Seven major transitions:
      India→China→Korea→Japan
      India→Sri Lanka and SE Asia, Tibet
      all-of-the-above→Vietnam, Europe and USA
- Continuum of practices along a monastic↔lay dimension
- Responses to modernity

But this can be found even in religions with an orthodoxy: 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	God is merciful and so eventually all are saved

On that note, time for questions and a break!


MONGOLIA
CENTRAL ASIA
BACTRIA
4th-5th C. CE
Loulan
4th-5th C. CE
Mogao
Dunhuang
Yungang
Khanbaliq
Beijing
KOREA
5th-9th C. CE
JAPAN
Bulguksa
Nikko
Kyoto
Nara
AFGHANISTAN
Bamiyan
Gandhara
GANDHARA
Chang'an
Longmen
Luoyang
5th-7th C. CE
TIBET
Lhasa
Chengdu
PAKISTAN
NEPAL
Lumbini
Kapilavastu
BHUTAN
Mathura
5th C. BCE
Kushinagara
Pataliputra
CHINA
Sarnath
Nalanda
Bodhgaya
Somapura
Guangzhou
BURMA
Sanchi
Ajanta
Elora
3rd C. BCE
2nd C. BCE
7th-10th C. CE
Bagan
VIETNAM
Luang Prabang
LAOS
Hue
Sri Ksetra
INDIA
Amaravati
SIAM
Ayutthaya
CAMBODIA
Angkor Thom
10th-12th C. CE
Kanchipuram
Nagappattinam
Chaiya
PHILIPPINES
10th C. CE
Surigao
Mihintale
Anuradhapura
Sigiriya
3rd C. BCE
Mahagama
Maldives
Bahal
9th C. CE
Sumatra
Sambas
Muara Takus
Muaro Jambi
7th-12th C. CE
Srivijaya
Palembang
Sampaga
8th C. CE
INDONESIA
7th-9th C. CE
Batujaya
Java
Sumbawan
Tabung
Borobudur
Pawon
Mendut
Kalasan
Sewu
Plaosan
Kalibukbuk
Bali
Legend:
Important Buddhist sites
Heartland of Buddhism, Ganges valley, India 6th to 4th Century BCE
Buddhist majority realm
Historical realm of Buddhist expansion
Early Buddhist schools
Mahayana
Theravada
Vajrayana-Tantric


PROLIFERATION OF BUDDHISM
KOREA
4th century C.E.
JAPAN
6th century C.
Tibet
8th century C.E.
CHINA
1st century C.E.
INDIA
SRI LANKA
3rd century B.C.E.
Main Branches of Buddhism
Mahayana
Theravada
Birthplace of Buddhism
Silk Road
Source: P. B. Clarke/ Atlas of World Religions

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

Pro-tip: memorize…

The "Frère Jacques" Dynasty Song

Most users on Chinese-Forums agree that adapting this nursery rhyme helps lock the sequence into your memory:

- **Shang, Zhou, Qin, Han** *(Shang, Zhou, Qin, Han)*
- **Sui, Tang, Song** *(Sui, Tang, Song)*
- **Yuan, Ming, Qing, Republic** *(Yuan, Ming, Qing, Republic)*
- **Mao Zedong** *(Mao Zedong)* [1]

Source: Google AI overview

"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"
- Humanism and individualism replaced collective identities

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

The explicit effort to remove "Asian superstition" from modern Buddhism arises in Asia, not North America!

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. In 2000s, more orthodox Chinese and Korean approaches become more widely available
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, continuing an older tradition of radical mystical movements, some communal, leaving persecution in Europe (Quakers and Mennonites most notably), and later indigenous (e.g. "Shakers")
- Some sympathetic British and French colonialists begin to produce credible translations
- Theosophy: Helena Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott ("Buddhist catechism")
- Parliament of the World's Religions, Chicago 1893; Swami Vivakananda
    - 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" (Mitch Horowitz's term) 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 Tibetan revolt 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 Korean Zen (Chan) 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 copious writing (100+ books)
2020s to present	Remote sanghas	COVID restrictions lead to experiments with remote sanghas, which continue beyond COVID

Leading us perhaps inevitably to…

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