Intro to Buddhism in the US
Week 6: Methods of meditation

OLLI, Charlottesville, VA

20 October 2026

Link to extended readings and slides:https://parusanalytics.com/introbud2026/week-six-2026.html

"Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of voice, but out of chaos."
Mary Shelley

Same challenge of exile, polar opposite outcomes

Tibetan: preserve and reproduce the classical approach

- Arguably, Shambhala was a modernizing effort that failed despite extensive institutionalization, nor does NKM appear to be taking off here

Thich Nhat Hanh/Plum Village: create an entirely new modern approach

Distinctive aspects of US religious experience

- No established religion, despite periodic attempts at this
- Relatively little government suppression of religion except early Mormons and [extensively] native American religion
    - Mob violence has been common: Catholics, Chinese Buddhists, Jews (e.g. Charlottesville 2017), Black churches
- Highly successful transplanting of refugee religions: Quakers, Mennonites/Amish, Baptists, Irish Catholics, Jews, Tibetan Buddhists
- Establishment of large and distinctive new religious movements: Mormons, Christian Science/"New Thought", Pentecostal, quasi-monastic intentional communities (assorted utopia socialist, Oneida, Shakers, Twin Oaks (now secular)), non-denominational mega-churches
- Four major forms of Buddhism—Theravadan, Mahayana Chan/Zen, Mahayana Pure Land, Vajrayana—represented more or less equally
- At present, extensive electronic environment, including Zoom sangha, podcasts/videos, and apps

The future

Based on this, the single most likely outcome in the coexistence of multiple forms of Buddhism for the foreseeable future.

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 beyond a non-denominational "One Dharma" approach. 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 Theravadan and Tibetan open awareness practice, and, of course, Zen Burgers and the legacy of Beat Zen
- US religious movements generally tend to split rather than combine; they can also die out

One approach…



PERSONAL REFLECTIONS
MAGAZINE | FEATURE

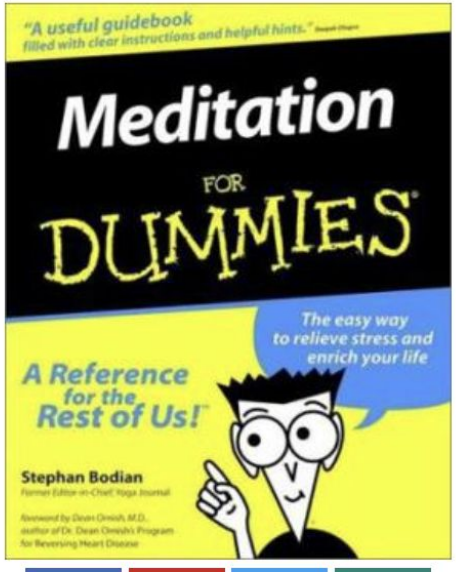
Always Lie When Someone Asks If You Meditate

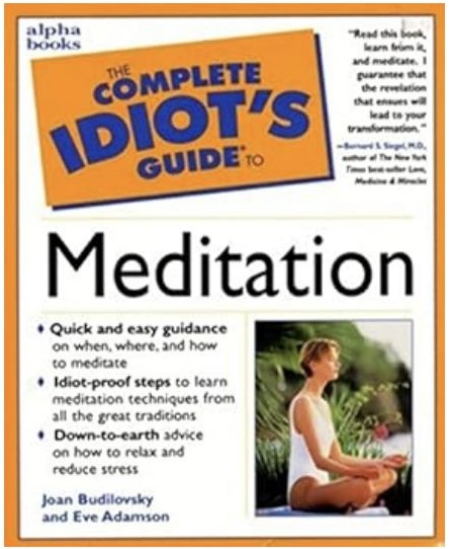
Outline of presentation

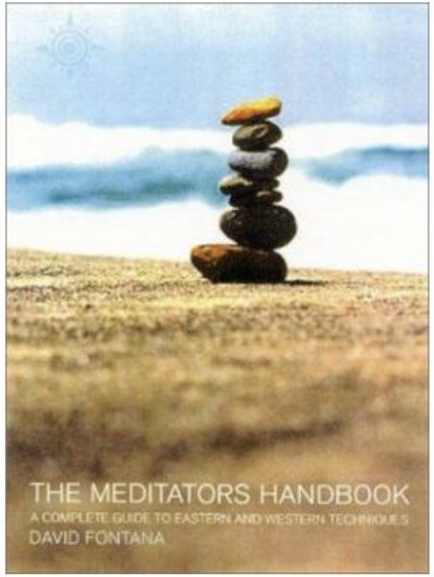
- How we [Boomers+] got here in the US
- Monkey and elephant approach with numerous elaborations
- Some known benefits
- Some cautions which have been known for 2500 years but seem to be coming as a surprise now
- Things I hope will be studied more

As with a piece of classical music, in many of these slides we will be resolving the class to the opening key (or at least to now familiar motifs)

Many paths


"A useful guidebook filled with clear instructions and helpful hints."
Meditation
FOR
DUMMIES
The easy way to relieve stress and enrich your life
A Reference for the Rest of Us!
Stephan Bodian


alpha books
THE COMPLETE IDIOT'S GUIDE TO
"Read this book, learn from it, and meditate. I guarantee that the revelation that ensues will lead to your transformation."
Meditation
Quick and easy guidance on when, where, and how to meditate
Idiot-proof steps to learn meditation techniques from all the great traditions
Down-to-earth advice on how to relax and reduce stress
Joan Budilovsky and Eve Adamson


THE MEDITATORS HANDBOOK
A COMPLETE GUIDE TO EASTERN AND WESTERN TECHNIQUES
DAVID FONTANA

CVS magazine rack, summer 2017



CVS magazine rack, fall 2026



Table 2. Types of meditation practices reported.

Type of practice	Dominant (% of sample)	Lifetime (% of sample)	At onset (% of sample)
concentration (*śamatha*, mindfulness of breathing, breath counting)	30 (50%)	57 (95%)	20 (33%)
insight (*vipassanā*, noting, open monitoring)	27 (45%)	48 (80%)	20 (33%)
body scan (including Goenka *vipassanā*)	4 (7%)	33 (55%)	5 (8%)
other insight practice (analytical meditation)	2 (3%)	25 (42%)	1 (2%)
zazen: breath counting	9 (15%)	28 (47%)	9 (15%)
zazen: "just sitting" (*shikantaza*)	12 (20%)	30 (50%)	8 (13%)
kōan	6 (10%)	15 (25%)	3 (5%)
loving kindness (*mettā*) or compassion	6 (10%)	49 (82%)	2 (3%)
tonglen	1 (2%)	28 (47%)	0 (0%)
nature of mind practice (*dzogchen*, *mahāmudrā*)	6 (10%)	28 (47%)	4 (7%)
Vajrayāna preliminary practices (*ngondro*)	5 (8%)	19 (32%)	8 (13%)
visualization practices	5 (8%)	20 (33%)	7 (12%)
mantra recitation	1 (2%)	25 (42%)	1 (2%)
other	3 (5%)	9 (15%)	8 (13%)

"Dominant" refers to the top two most frequently practiced types of meditation in the practitioner's lifetime. "Lifetime" refers to the types of meditation reported as being practiced during the practitioner's lifetime. Because most practitioners engaged in multiple types of meditation during the lifetime, the total percentage exceeds 100%. "At onset" refers to the top two most frequently practiced types of meditation around the onset of meditation-related challenges or difficulties. See S3 File for dataset.

https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176239.t002

Original article link: https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0176239

Three Christian reflections

“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.”

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), *The Interior Castle*

Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou will feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord.

George Fox, founder of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

(1624-1691)



The Spiritual Exercises

The Spiritual Exercises are a compilation of meditations, prayers, and contemplative practices developed by St. Ignatius Loyola to help people deepen their relationship with God. For centuries the Exercises were most commonly given as a "long retreat" of about 30 days in solitude and silence. In recent years, there has been a renewed emphasis on the Spiritual Exercises as a program for laypeople. The most common way of going through the Exercises now is a "retreat in daily life," which involves a monthslong program of daily prayer and meetings with a spiritual director. The Exercises have also been adapted in many other ways to meet the needs of modern people.

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Mother Teresa was once asked about her prayer life.

The interviewer asked, “When you pray, what do you say to God?”

Mother Teresa replied, “I don’t talk, I simply listen.”

Believing he understood what she had just said, the interviewer next asked, “Ah, then what is it that God says to you when you pray?”

Mother Teresa replied, “He also doesn’t talk. He also simply listens.”

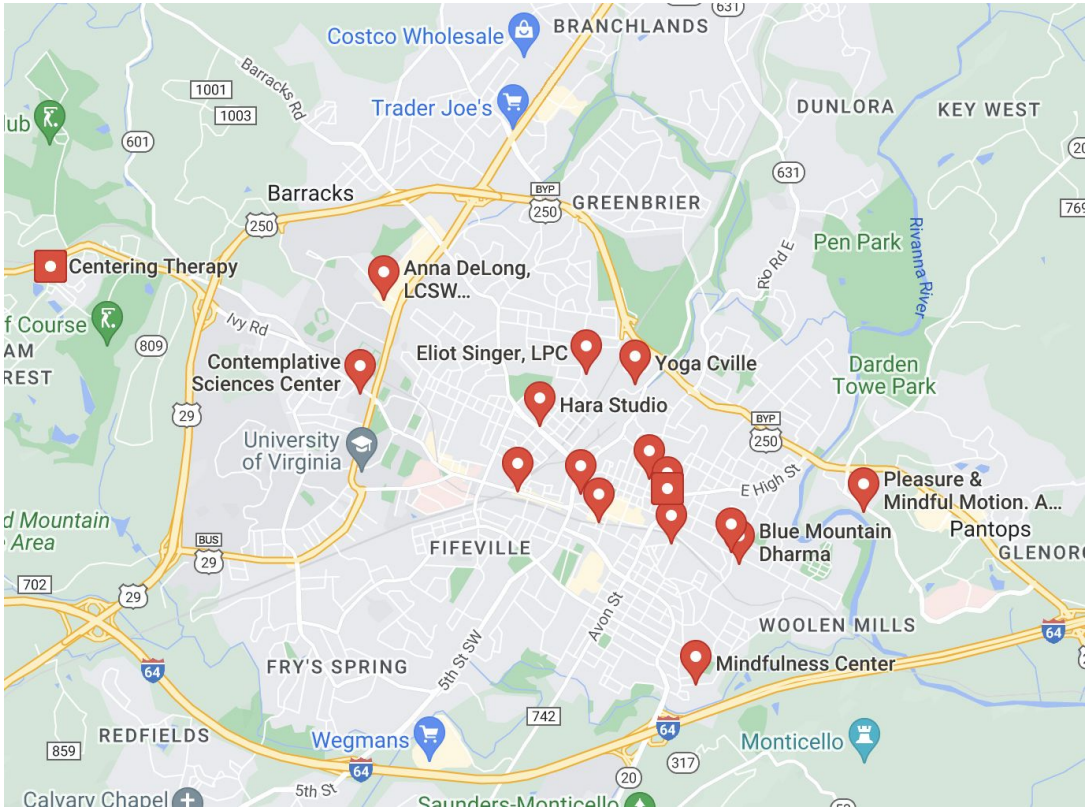
There was a long silence, with the interviewer seeming a bit confused and not knowing what to ask next.

Finally Mother Teresa breaks the silence by saying, “If you can’t understand the meaning of what I’ve just said, I’m sorry but there’s no way I can explain it any better.”

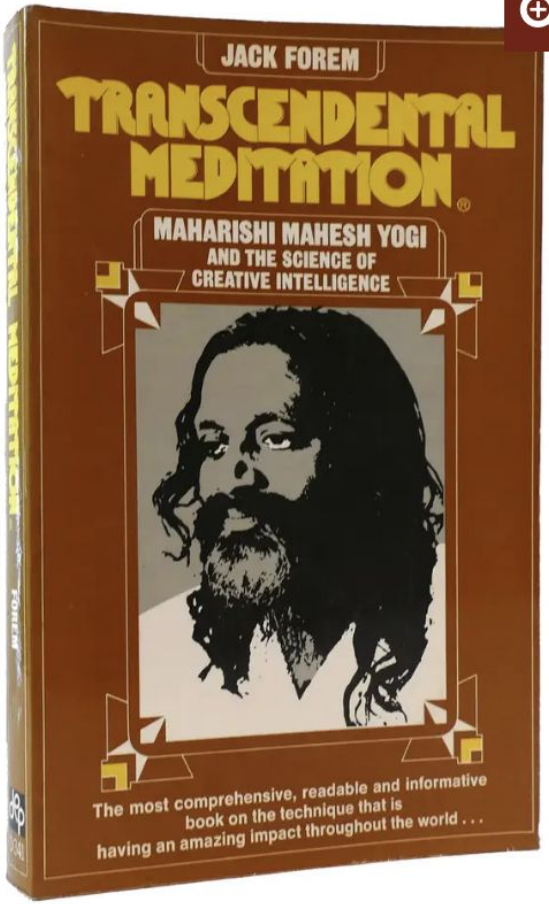
http://praylikeagourmet.com/thoughts/mother-theresa-and-prayer/

How we got here
[USA 1960-2010 version]

Google map results for "mindfulness Charlottesville"



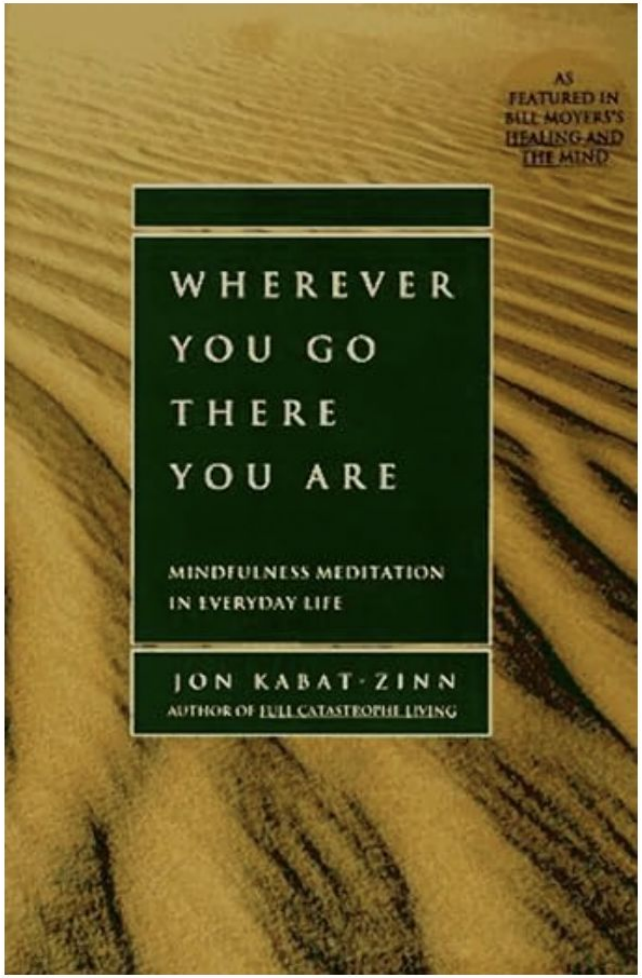
Psychology Today lists about 250 (!) therapists in CVille who incorporate "mindfulness" in their work.
https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/va/charlottesville?category=mindfulness-based-mbct


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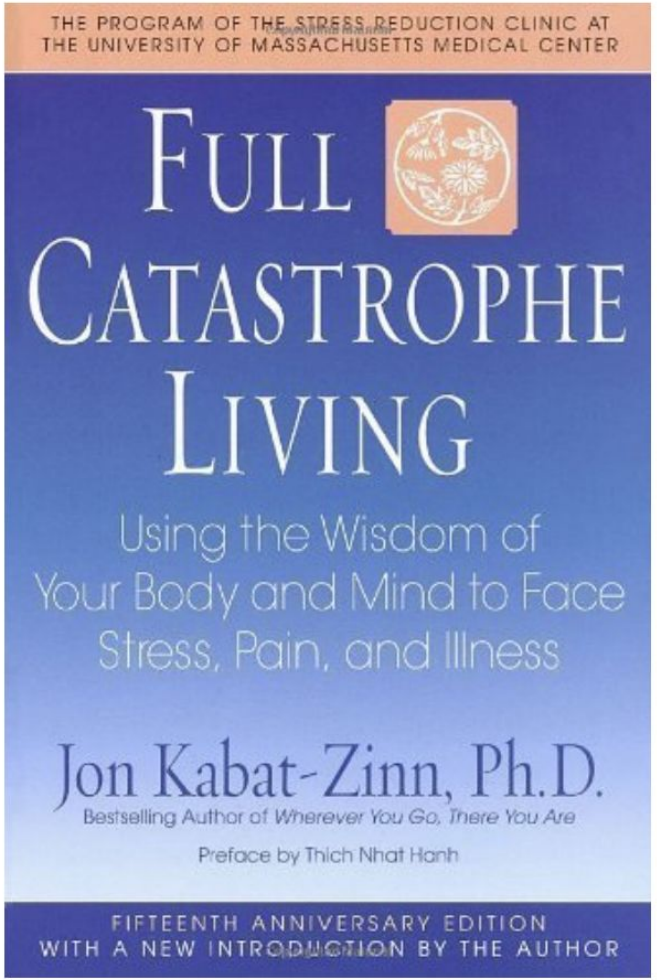



BURMA
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AS FEATURED IN BILL MOYERS'S HEALING AND THE MIND
WHEREVER YOU GO THERE YOU ARE
MINDFULNESS MEDITATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE
JON KABAT-ZINN
AUTHOR OF FULL CATASTROPHE LIVING

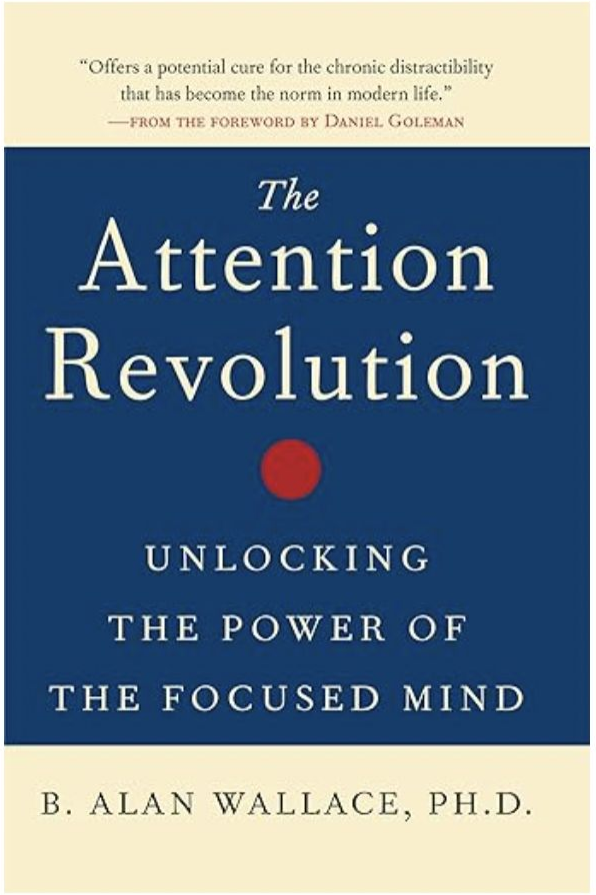
1991


THE PROGRAM OF THE STRESS REDUCTION CLINIC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL CENTER
FULL CATASTROPHE LIVING
Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness
Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D.
Bestselling Author of Wherever You Go, There You Are
Preface by Thich Nhat Hanh
FIFTEENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION
WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

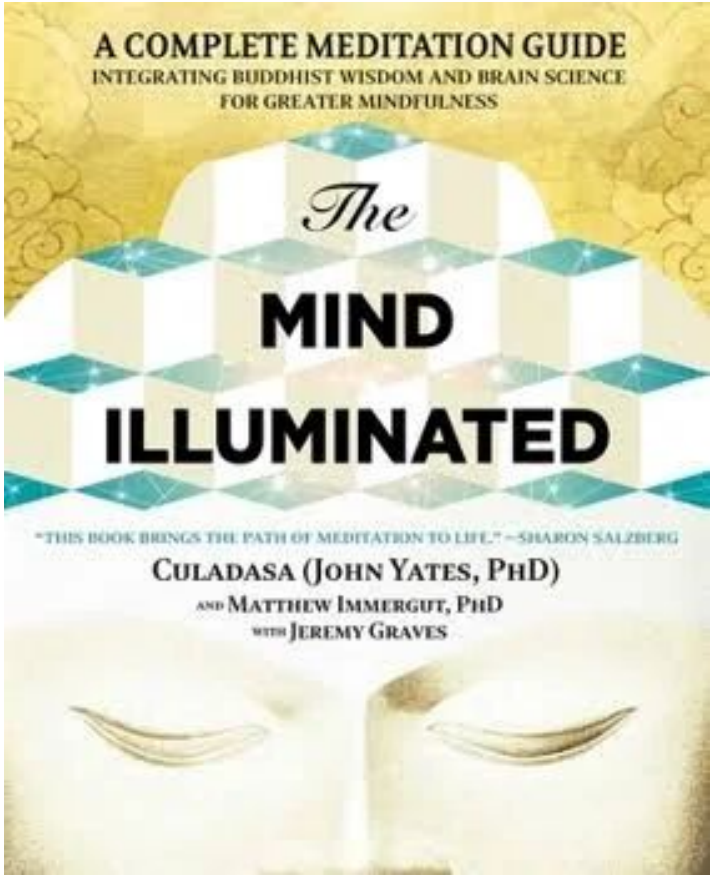
1994

One fairly common approach…




"Offers a potential cure for the chronic distractibility
that has become the norm in modern life."
—FROM THE FOREWORD BY DANIEL GOLEMAN
The
Attention
Revolution
UNLOCKING
THE POWER OF
THE FOCUSED MIND
B. ALAN WALLACE, PH.D.

2006


A COMPLETE MEDITATION GUIDE
INTEGRATING BUDDHIST WISDOM AND BRAIN SCIENCE
FOR GREATER MINDFULNESS
The
MIND
ILLUMINATED
"THIS BOOK BRINGS THE PATH OF MEDITATION TO LIFE." ~SHARON SALZBERG
CULADASA (JOHN YATES, PHD)
AND MATTHEW IMMERGUT, PHD
WITH JEREMY GRAVES

2015

A simpler framework

- Quiet the mind, balancing attention and flow
- Focus awareness
- Let's go exploring!



Final comic strip in *Calvin and Hobbes,* 31-Dec-1995

A simpler framework

- Quiet the mind, balancing attention and flow
- Focus awareness
- Let's go exploring!

- Wise effort
- Wise attention (samadhi)
- Wise mindfulness (vipassana)

[three elements of the Eight Fold Path, the fourth of the "Four Noble Truths", ca.500 BCE]

Quieting the mind: Susie Harrington (Spirit Rock teacher)

Your thoughts are like watching a train go past. There are boxcars full of exciting objects—look, circus animals! Then there are boxcars just full of "stuff". Albeit sometimes stuff you'd rather not see. And then empty boxcars. And finally, with the flatcars, no boxcars at all, though the train is still there.

Quieting the mind: Satipatthana* Sutta

- You exist in a physical body that interacts via the senses with a physical world (rupa), and the mind (for example daydreaming and rumination) is also one of the senses
- You almost unavoidably classify sensations and emotions as positive, negative, or neutral (vedana). The challenge is to stop here, otherwise…
- You begin to processing these (sanna)
- Then you bring in associated memories and more complex emotional states (sankhara)
- Then you are fully into the experience and you've completely lost the meditation (experiential consciousness or vinanna), though this is okay if it is just in the present moment

These are the *khandas*, typically translated as "aggregates", another less-than-helpful convention IMHO

*Google spell-checks "Satipatthana". Also that sutta is a whole lot more complicated than just this: Bikkhu Analayo has written several books on it.

Emptiness

"To have nothing in mind is noble. To have no skill and no knowledge is supreme. No abiding, no hermitage, comes next"
Basho [Zen poet, 1644-1694]

Highly influential exposition was by the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna, ca. 200 CE

note per last meeting (of the Center's Varieties of Spiritual Experience group in 2024), this characterizes some near death experiences (NDEs)

Awareness and no-self (annata)

Core idea: when you say "I hate myself", who is the "I" and who is the "self"?

"I was in the midst of meditating and something was out there watching.
I said "Who are you?" It replied, "Who is asking?"
I think this was in the *Last Whole Earth Catalog* [1971] and the original reference was probably to a psychedelic experience rather than meditation, which was still quite undeveloped at that point

This concept has been brought forward to contemporary popular culture by Eckhart Tolle and Deepak Chopra among others



Substrate consciousness

This is a common concept in Indian philosophy, not just Buddhist, and is the ground state when all distracting mental activity—specifically the default mode network and sensory inputs—have been [largely] removed. Various descriptions:

- radiant clear consciousness;
- clarity, vividly aware
- empty, clear/clarity
- bliss, luminosity and non-conceptuality
- your mind in its natural state
- very stable

This is distinct from "primordial /universal consciousness", which is far harder to attain but is probably what is accessed through peak experience and may or not be similar to Jungian "collective consciousness"

Default mode network—"DMN" as in "damn!"—is what the brain does when not focused on a task: daydreaming, ruminating on the past and future, general "wandering." Only popularized and studied extensively since around 2000.

B. Alan Wallace

Substrate consciousness is what you carry forward in the seconds after your final breath and final heartbeat: it is the carrier of karma.

This is the objective of "awareness of awareness", which is reasonably accessible with systematic effort. Other more or less similar terms—caveated by the gazillion discourses over 1800 years arguing they aren't similar—are dzogchen, Mahamudra, choiceless awareness, open awareness, shikantaza (Zen)

[to my knowledge, no meditative practice systematically results in the "tunnel of light" NDE. Which is interesting on multiple dimensions…]

[Bruce] Greyson scale of typical features of NDEs

- sensation of leaving the body
- mind functioning more clearly and rapidly than usual
- sensation of being drawn into a tunnel or darkness
- brilliant light, sometimes at the end of the tunnel
- sense of peace, well-being, and/or unconditional love
- sense of having access to unlimited knowledge
- “life review” or recall of important events in the past
- preview of future events yet to come
- encounters with deceased loved ones, or other beings generally identified as religious figures

https://med.virginia.edu/perceptual-studies/our-research/near-death-experiences-ndes/

Hey, how do we know this "substrate" continues after death???

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.

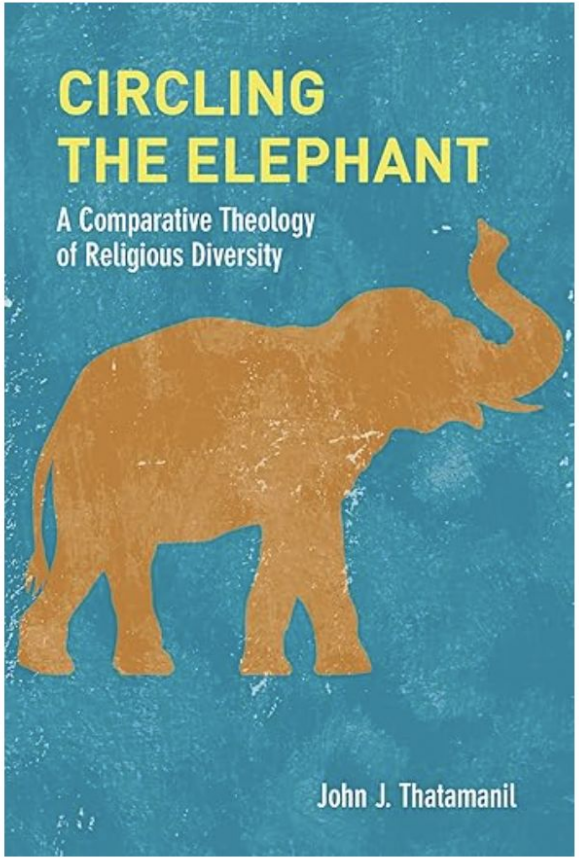
"You have no idea," said the samurai, surprised. "But you are the greatest Zen master in all of Japan!"

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

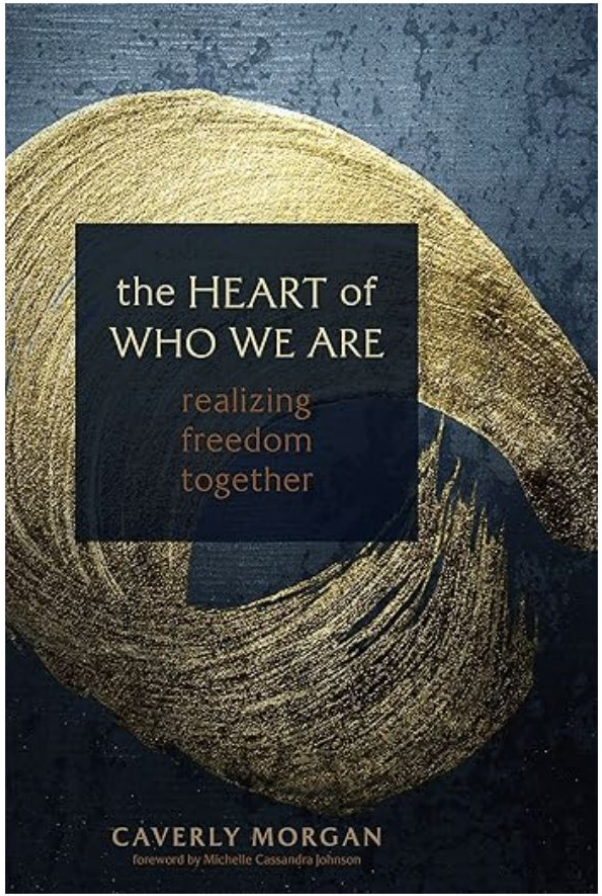
"The universe is not only stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we *can* imagine."

Variously attributed to J.B.S. Haldane, Arthur Eddington, Albert Einstein and Werner Heisenberg

Theological equivalent:
"The divine mystery is inexhaustible"
John Thatamanil (contemporary Christian theologian)


CIRCLING
THE ELEPHANT
A Comparative Theology
of Religious Diversity
John J. Thatamanil

2020



2022

"The most important thing teenagers say they learn from meditation practice is 'I am not my thoughts'"
Caverly Morgan, founder, *Peace in Schools*, and hometown CVille girl-made-good

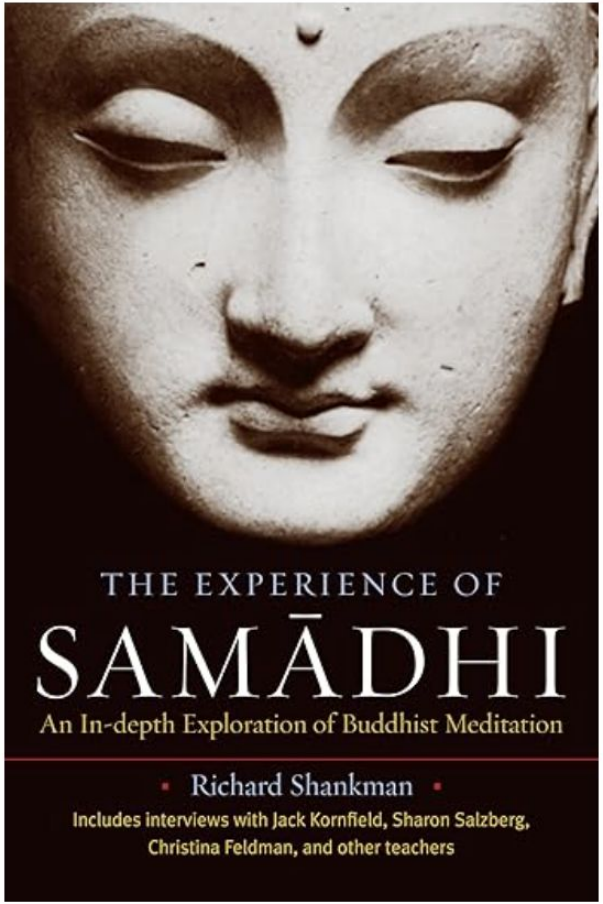
Two approaches to meditation

Sustaining: find a workable and stable practice and just get the benefits—discussed below—from this. Take the occasional break from the racoons-in-a-dumpster of your default mode network.

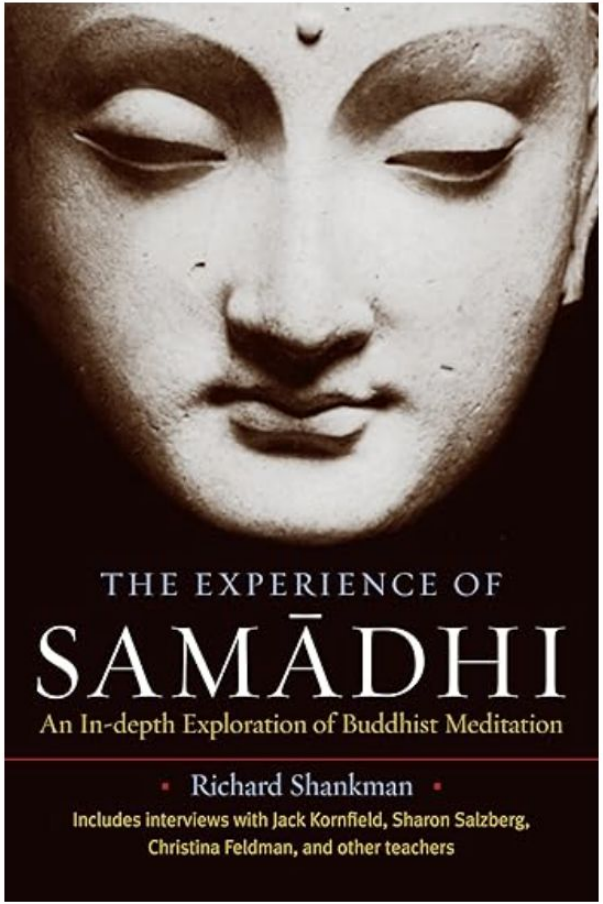
Progressive: systematically develop a series of practices over time…likely a very long time

Characteristics of advanced samadhi: "calm abiding"

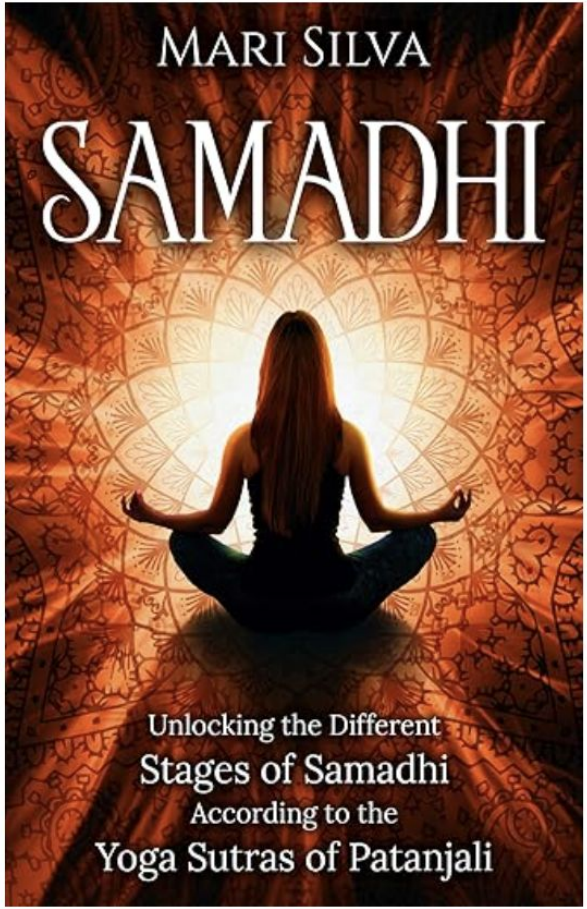
- Lucid (i.e. not spaced out)
  [For spaced out, try a 20 oz. double IPA or a 10 mg THC gummy…a boring task, inadequate sleep and/or jet lag also pretty reliably produces this…]
- Stable
- Empty
- Non-conceptual
  consequently teachings can only point, if that, in the general direction. This has not prevented tens of thousands of texts being produced over thousands of years. Including in Zen. Particularly in Zen.
- Pleasant


THE EXPERIENCE OF
SAMĀDHI
An In-depth Exploration of Buddhist Meditation
Richard Shankman
Includes interviews with Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg,
Christina Feldman, and other teachers

2008


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Christina Feldman, and other teachers

2008


MARI SILVA
SAMADHI
Unlocking the Different
Stages of Samadhi
According to the
Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

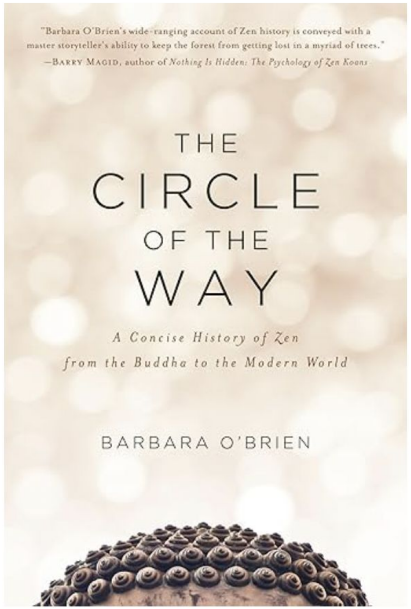
2020

Hindrances/distractions as described in the suttas

1. Sensual Desire: attractive thoughts generally (yes, sex, but could also be a new car, restaurant, NetFlix comedy, shiny objects etc.)
2. Ill-will: aversion and unattractive thoughts generally
3. Sloth and Torpor:
   Unlike the Rule of Benedict of Nursia (ca. 600 CE), mindfulness meditation is not intended as a 1,500 year experiment in elite sleep deprivation!
4. Restlessness and Remorse/regret
   Default mode network is really good at generating these. Instead, "abandon all hopes for a better past"
5. Doubt [!!!]

Fundamental paradox of progressive approaches

Exerting effort to attain progressive states makes them harder to achieve

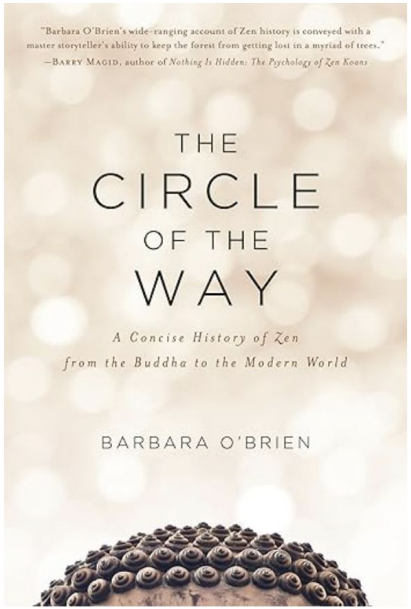


"The paradox going through the entire history of Zen is the fact that exerting effort towards enlightenment makes enlightenment more difficult"
Barbara O'Brien

2019

Fundamental paradox of progressive approaches

Exerting effort to attain progressive states makes them harder to achieve



"The paradox going through the entire history of Zen is the fact that exerting effort towards enlightenment makes enlightenment more difficult"
Barbara O'Brien

"The more you tighten your grip, Tarkin, the more star systems will slip through your fingers"
Princess Leia Organa, *Star Wars IV: A New Hope*

2019

Two of the many, many other reflections on this point

So long as one does not become simple like a child, one does not get divine illumination. Forget all the worldly knowledge you have acquired, and become as a child, and then you will get the divine wisdom.

Ramakrishna (1836-1886)
Ramakrishna was originally from a Vedic (Hindu) tradition but developed interests in Sufi and Christian mysticism, He is best known as the guru to Swami Vivekananda (1869-1902) who would become hugely important/influential thanks to the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, for many in the West the first introduction to South Asian approaches, and in 1894 founding the Vedanta Society in NYC which then spread more generally in the US

As British scholar Peter Harvey puts it in *An Introduction to Buddhism*:

"Learning meditation is a skill akin to learning to play a musical instrument: it is learning how to “tune” and “play” the mind, and regular, patient practice is the means to this. Progress will not occur if one is lax, but it cannot be forced. For this reason, meditation practice is also like gardening: one cannot force plants to grow, but one can assiduously provide them with the right conditions, so that they develop naturally. For meditation, the “right conditions” are the appropriate application of mind and of the specific technique being used."

https://www.lionsroar.com/10-steps-to-tame-the-elephant/

A whole lot more reflections on practice (tl;dr)

Huy Lye, Urban Dharma, Asheville, NC

"Go into the forest, sit beneath a tree" is Pali for "turn off your devices."

(Pali is the language of the Theravadan Buddhist scriptures)

"We have too much knowledge, not enough first-hand experience. And plenty of distractions, and not enough patience."

"Meditation is very boring until it isn't."

Urban Dharma…sigh…



Make your body and mind pure and peaceful, without any discriminative thinking at all. Sit properly with the body erect. Regulate the breath and concentrate the mind so it is not with you, not outside of you, and not in any intermediate locations. Do this carefully and naturally. View your own consciousness tranquilly and attentively, so that you can see how it is always moving, life flowing water or a flittering mirage. After you have perceived this consciousness, simply continue to view it gently and naturally, without it assuming any fixed positions inside or outside of yourself. Do this tranquilly and attentively, until its fluctuations dissolve into peaceful stability. This flowing consciousness will disappear like a gust of wind. When this consciousness disappears, all one's illusions will disappear with it, even the [extremely subtle] illusions of bodhisattvas of the tenth stage.

Daman Hongren, 5th patriarch of Zen, 601-674 CE

Don't be a hitchhiker, catching a ride with whatever thoughts come along. Be like a kestrel, hovering motionlessly as it faces the wind, slightly adjusting its wings and tail feathers to respond to changes in the currents of the air. Be a gracious host amid unruly guests.

Alan Wallace, *The Attentiveness Revolution*

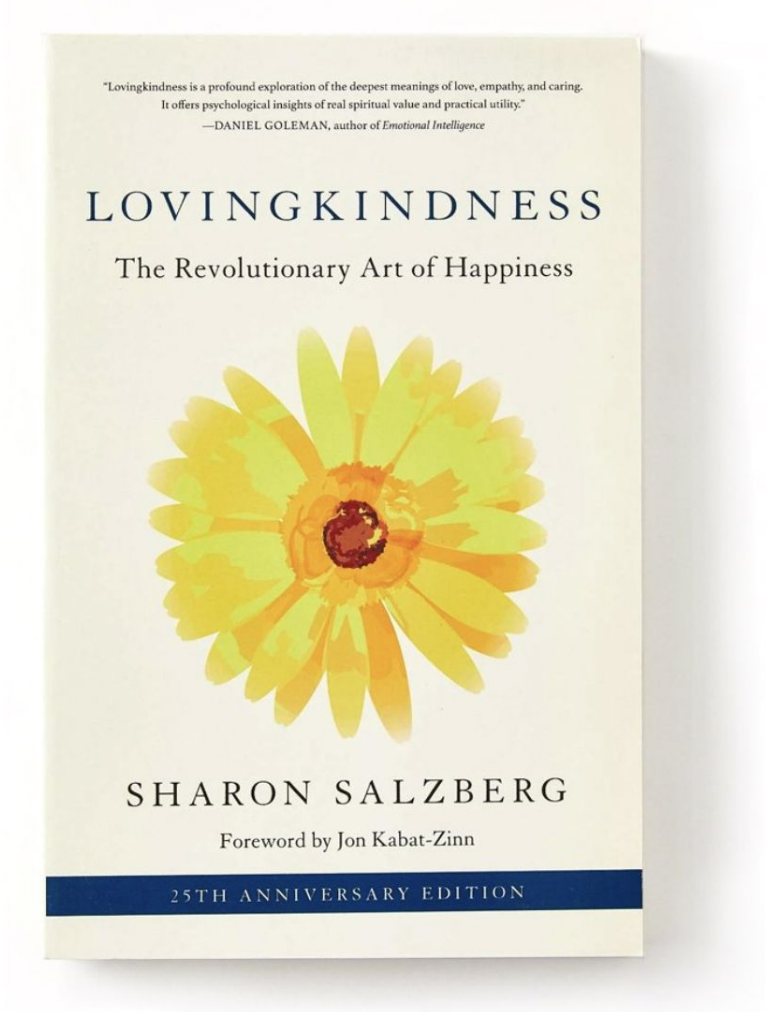
"In the beginning my guru was my teacher. Then the suttas were my teacher. Now my mind is my teacher."

Observation: this, plus competition for attention and resources, accounts for much of the opposition by conservative Christian groups to meditation: most Christian theology assumes that humans are fundamentally flawed and hence letting your mind lead you will only result in bad outcomes. Buddhism, in contrast, assumes that humans have a 'Buddha nature' that is positive and meditation can reveal this, just as the sun is revealed when clouds go away. Arguably this disagreement on human nature, not theism, is the greatest difference between Christianity and Buddhism.

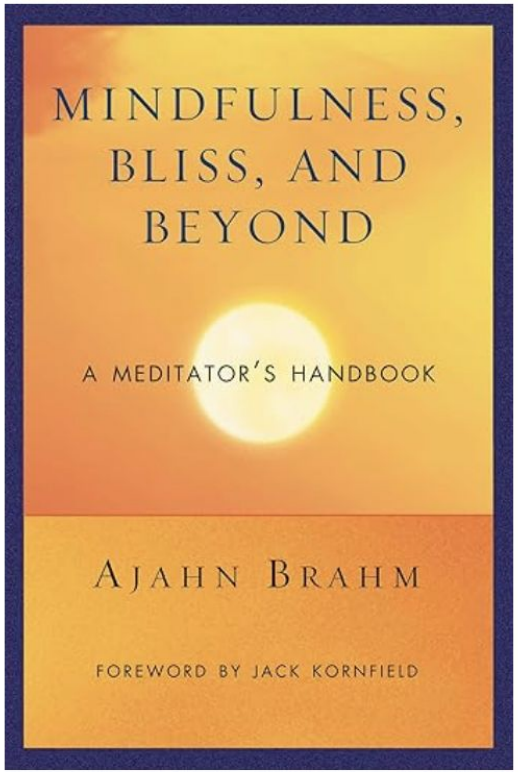
"Progress in meditation occurs by accident; make yourself accident-prone."

Three more common approaches in contemporary Western Buddhist practice

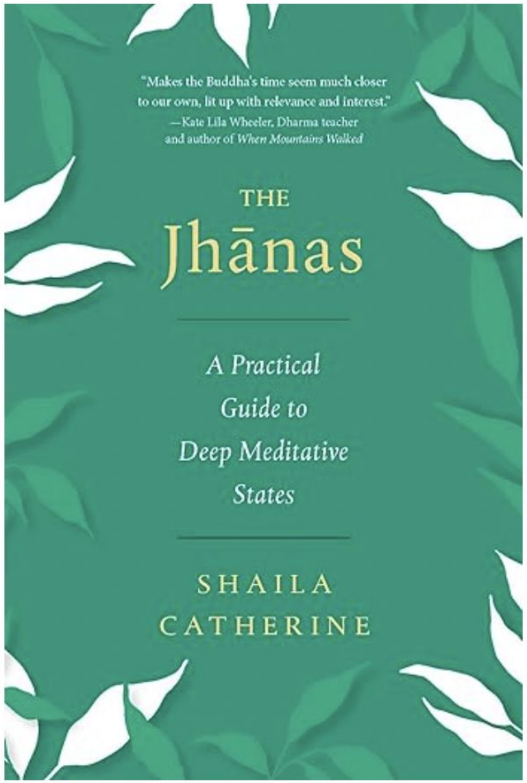
which I'm guessing I'm not going to have time to talk about…



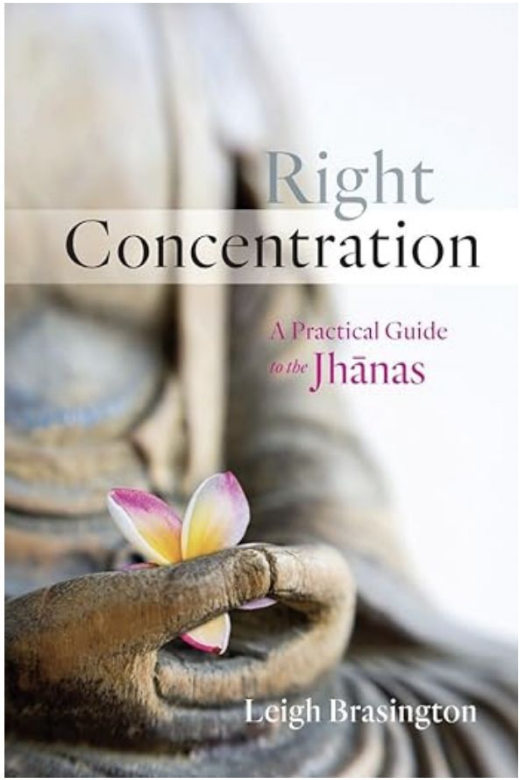
Sharon's seminal book, originally released in 1995 and re-released in 2020, with a Foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn



2006



2008, 2024



2015

Lucidity Without Limit

Dream yoga, says Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, is a practice of changing our waking life. He shares the four foundational practices of this powerful mind training.

By Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche









Serenity Ridge Retreat Center, Nelson County

Positive effects of practice

The Brahmaviharas

- Compassion (karuna)
- Lovingkindness (metta; New Testament *agape*)
- Empathetic joy (mudita)
- Equanimity (upeka)

You know you have a solid meditation practice when your significant other says "Dear, have you been forgetting to meditate?"

"Meditation is beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle, beautiful as it continues."

Gil Fronsdal, Insight Meditation Center of Redwood City, CA,
paraphrasing Pali suttas

Altered Traits



Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS

Daniel Goleman & Richard J. Davidson

2017

"This book has the potential to change the reader's life forever."
—George Saunders, author of *Lincoln in the Bardo*



"One of the most inspiring books I have ever read." —Pema Chödrön

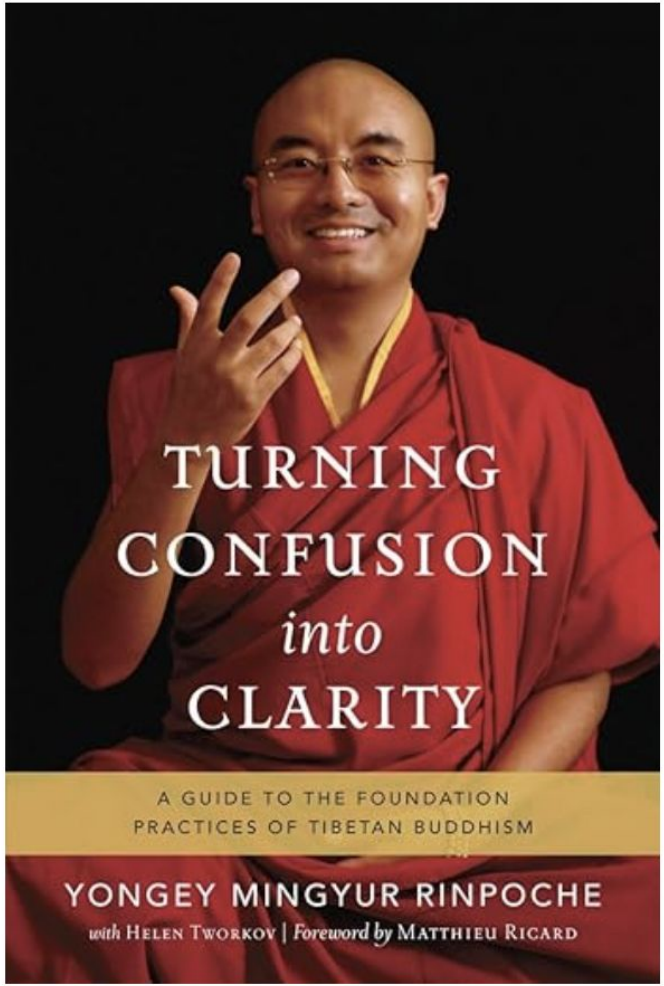
IN LOVE WITH THE WORLD

A Monk's Journey Through the Bardos of Living and Dying

YONGEY MINGYUR RINPOCHE

Author of the *New York Times* bestseller The Joy of Living

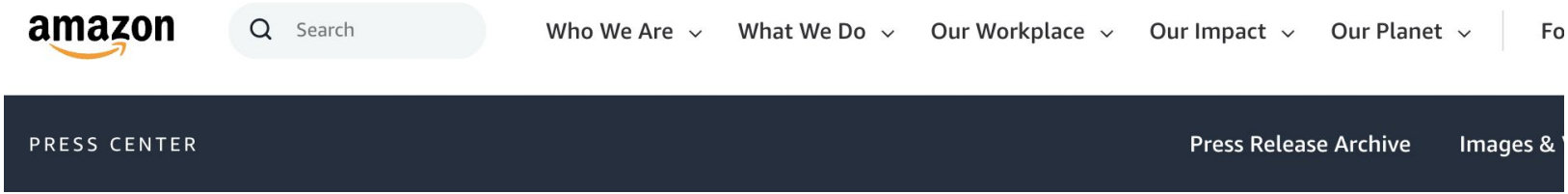
with Helen Tworkov


TURNING
CONFUSION
into
CLARITY
A GUIDE TO THE FOUNDATION
PRACTICES OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM
YONGEY MINGYUR RINPOCHE
with Helen Tworkov | Foreword by Matthieu Ricard

Cautions

- McMindfulness (critique ca. 2013): methods that have been popularized and secularized to the point where they are no longer effective. But…250 therapists in CVille think mindfulness can be useful…
- Industrial mindfulness: "We want our employees to meditate so they become passive sheep who won't unionize even when we are literally killing them with unhealthy workplaces". See: most of Silicon Valley, and Amazon in particular

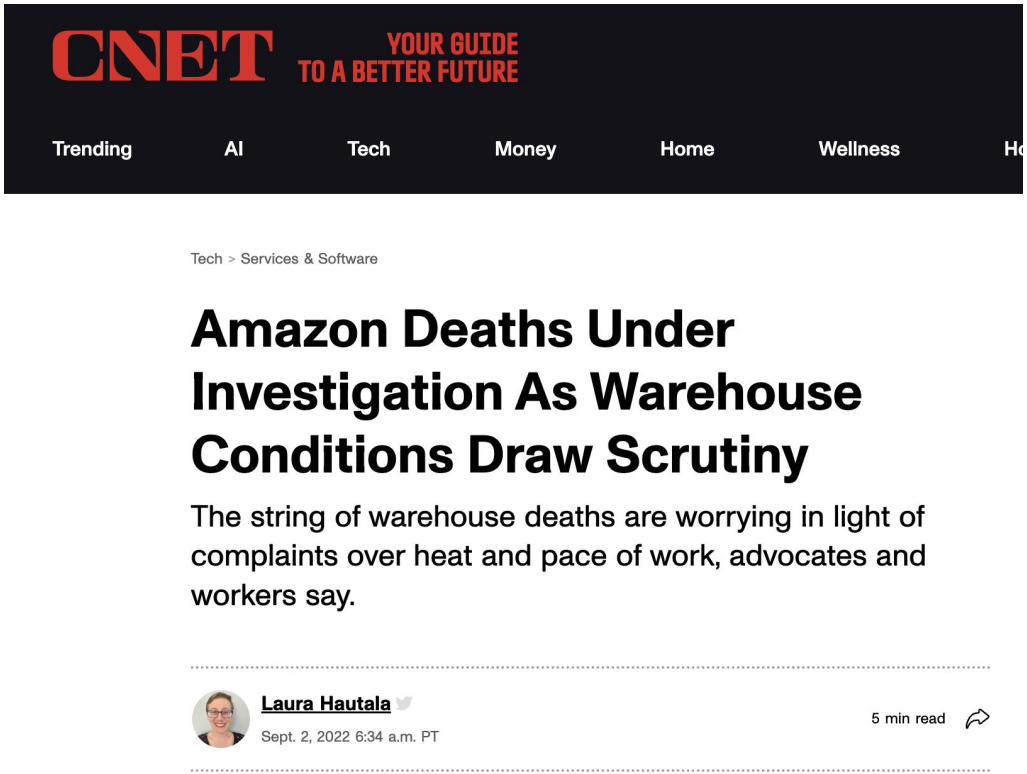
Theory



May 17, 2021

From Body Mechanics to Mindfulness, Amazon Launches Employee-Designed Health and Safety Program called WorkingWell Across U.S. Operations

Implementation



Cautions

In advanced (and much less commonly, routine) practice, weird stuff can start happening…come for the peace of mind, stay for the paranormal…

- orthodox advice is not to pursue this: most written guides by orthodox (and/or historical) teachers working without a profit motive, have extended cautions
- more generally, it is very important to ease into practice, particularly retreats



1940



More seriously, it seems, some pretty difficult stuff: "Kundalini psychosis" is a thing

- Generally this occurs when people have preconditions such as psychotic episodes and/or substance use: retreats try to screen for this but, well, people lie.
- But this can occur in some intensive practices *without* drugs or other preconditions! Key may be "intensive": there are some teachers who claim to have found overly intense "shortcuts" apparently not noticed in the 2500 years of orthodox practice and these can lead to harmful effects
- A friend who is a clinical therapist recommended I Google "kundalini psychosis" and well, OMG…
    - Kundalini is a very intensive practice: problems seems to arise when people try to do it without a teacher
    - As noted last week, this is a reason some teachings are kept secret and a reason for concern about proliferation of meditation apps and videos
    - UVA DOPS yet again: one of the first articles (1994) in my Feb-2025 Google search was by DOPS's NDE researcher Bruce Greyson, also citing Kenneth Ring's pioneering NDE work: apparently these are linked in the Kundalini theories
- This has generally not been cited as a concern for the classical progressive approaches going beyond mindfulness, which proceeds very slowly and typically with a teacher, though there are some concerns

A couple recent reviews of negative outcomes

Fundamental issue: we have gone from a situation where meditation was practiced by a small number of people in controlled monastic settings to where it is tried by about 50% of people, and 20% have a regular practice.

Atlantic Monthly, Sept-2026: Olga Khazan "The Dark Side of Mindfulness", https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/2026/09/meditation-willoughby-britton-downsides/688474/, a followup on the work of Willoughby Britton in the form of an interview

- Meditation is neutral, and more commonly helpful, to about 90% of people who try it
- In about 10% of people, however, it can have negative effects, some quite strong and lasting. These are usually but not always associated with intense practice. Dissociation and hallucinations are most common. Note that some controllable forms of dissociation are the objective of some practices.
- Teachers, particularly those with a financial interest, aren't taking this seriously

Reviewed in the Fall-2026 *Tricycle* Meditation Sickness: A Sourcebook on the Dangers of Buddhist Practice, edited by C. Pierce Salguero. University of Hawai‘i Press.

- Similar points to the above but with a strong historical perspective: these dangers have been pointed out since the very beginnings of Buddhism. E.g. Hakuin suffered severe "Zen sickness" before becoming a master.
- Practice in the absence of a teacher, and in the absence of traditions, is sort of like taking drugs you don't know the source and quality of (which, alas, people do all the time…)

Table 2. Types of meditation practices reported.

Type of practice	Dominant (% of sample)	Lifetime (% of sample)	At onset (% of sample)
concentration (*śamatha*, mindfulness of breathing, breath counting)	30 (50%)	57 (95%)	20 (33%)
insight (*vipassanā*, noting, open monitoring)	27 (45%)	48 (80%)	20 (33%)
body scan (including Goenka *vipassanā*)	4 (7%)	33 (55%)	5 (8%)
other insight practice (analytical meditation)	2 (3%)	25 (42%)	1 (2%)
zazen: breath counting	9 (15%)	28 (47%)	9 (15%)
zazen: "just sitting" (*shikantaza*)	12 (20%)	30 (50%)	8 (13%)
kōan	6 (10%)	15 (25%)	3 (5%)
loving kindness (*mettā*) or compassion	6 (10%)	49 (82%)	2 (3%)
tonglen	1 (2%)	28 (47%)	0 (0%)
nature of mind practice (*dzogchen*, *mahāmudrā*)	6 (10%)	28 (47%)	4 (7%)
Vajrayāna preliminary practices (*ngondro*)	5 (8%)	19 (32%)	8 (13%)
visualization practices	5 (8%)	20 (33%)	7 (12%)
mantra recitation	1 (2%)	25 (42%)	1 (2%)
other	3 (5%)	9 (15%)	8 (13%)

"Dominant" refers to the top two most frequently practiced types of meditation in the practitioner's lifetime. "Lifetime" refers to the types of meditation reported as being practiced during the practitioner's lifetime. Because most practitioners engaged in multiple types of meditation during the lifetime, the total percentage exceeds 100%. "At onset" refers to the top two most frequently practiced types of meditation around the onset of meditation-related challenges or difficulties. See S3 File for dataset.

https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176239.t002

Original article link: https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0176239

Cautions

Reducing social anxiety also reduces inhibition on unskillful behavior: "total jerk who claims to be enlightened". Buddhist texts *constantly* emphasize the need to ground practice, and to hold teachers accountable, to a very solid ethical foundation (*sila*). This is another serious risk of purely secular practice.

Speaking of which, if things start feeling creepy and cult-like, they probably are.

Though if your Christian fundamentalist friends say things are a cult, that carries little weight

Wrapping up
[really…]

Where I wish we had more research

- A much more complete map of systematically accessible altered states of consciousness
    - Tibetans probably have done this more thoroughly and systematically than any other tradition but much of it is inaccessible; this could gradually change

Altered states of consciousness

- Dreamless sleep
- Dreams
  - Freud, Jung
  - lucid dreaming
- Flow: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (muh·hay·lee chik·sent·mee·hai·ee)
- Peak experience: Maslow
  - "...a highly valued experience which is characterized by such intensity of perception, depth of feeling, or sense of profound significance as to cause it to stand out, in the subject's mind, in more or less permanent contrast to the experiences that surround it in time and space."[4]
- Psychedelics, shaministic states
- Near death experiences

ASC's apparently accessible through systematic meditation practice not focusing on a deity

- access concentration/one-pointedness (turning off the DMN?)
- the jhanic sequence (ten day retreat for experienced meditators can usually get this)
- the samatha sequence (monkey-elephant) and emptiness but this takes a *lot* of work, like years
- countless variations—see *Visuddhimagga* (ca. 450 CE)—on visualization practices, from the simple (nimita) to the fabulously complex (Tibetan mandala and deity visualization)
- probably as many variations on mantra and chanting practice
- meditative flow induced by dance, music, etc. This probably overlaps with some shaministic practice
- lucid dreaming
- peak experience, though no indications anyone has figured out a reliable way to get this

Where I wish we had more research

- Effects of various forms of meditation in the range of 500 to 2000 hours
- Effects on practice of depending on remote teachers, sanghas (communities), and learning materials (notably video and apps)
- Relationship between altered states of consciousness induced by psychedelic drugs and those obtained with meditation done without drugs
    - Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind (2018), This is Your Mind on Plants (2021)*
    - We're finally getting much more research on this due to some clear therapeutic applications of some psychedelics, notably for the treatment of addiction and PTSD.

In regard to the many books referenced here…

In regard to the many books referenced here…

Don’t Read, Meditate!

A Dutch Theravadin on the Abhidhamma and the paramount importance of practice in developing insight.

By Herman Schreuder | JAN 15, 2024

Final word[s]…really…

"All things are impermanent. Practice with diligence."
Last words of the Buddha

[one of several zillion renditions of the same two thoughts]

Steve Jobs-style slide

Oh, wow!

Supplementary material

Some comments on retreats based on my experience - 1

- These can have a really dramatic effect on your practice, and this is sustained for a while. If you can afford it, one or two week-long retreats a year work well
- There is quite a bit of variation depending on the lineage, and the retreat description should give a lot of background. Retreats with popular teachers tend to be over-subscribed.
- Ease yourself in: a ten-day retreat is very long for a beginner, so try some two or three day retreats first. Please be honest in answering the questions on the screening questionnaire. In particular, retreats can seriously mess with therapy
- Even silent retreats are not absolutely silent (unless they are): there is time for questions and for individual and group interviews, and dharma teachings
- Most retreats provide time and space for structured movement—yoga, qi qong—and require some light work

Some comments on retreats based on my experience - 2

- Food is almost always vegetarian and the evening meal is probably quite light. Most places are pretty flexible about snacking
- Most retreats simplify sensory input: located in the middle of nowhere, no devices, intoxicants, sex, talking, meat, interactions (but some). Renunciation is a form of liberation. Cold turkey on devices can be a huge thing now.
- Two types of people you don't want on retreats
    - Those who have been told it will be good for them
    - Those who are only there because it is a requirement for their mindfulness training certification
- You end up in an altered state—schrooms—but it fades. Be really, really careful if you are driving.

Advice on meditation (not included in interests of time)

1. Find out what works, and keep in mind this will almost certainly change over time: you change your practice as a snake sheds its skin. More generally, if things aren't working, or stop working, experiment
2. Expect change…unexpectedly. Progress occurs by accident and to a degree all you can do is make yourself accident prone
3. Daily, or something reasonably approximating it, is good. Most people, it seems, set aside a specific time (often first thing in the morning), though I don't.
4. Retreats are really good assuming you can get a good match with the teacher and the style of retreat (IMS retreats are quite standard in format). But ease in.
5. Sangha is good until it isn't

Advice

1. Look for long-term maps but not necessarily a guru
2. Speaking of which, if things start feeling creepy and cult-like, they probably are. Though if your Christian fundamentalist friends say things are a cult, that carries little weight
3. Most of the styles of meditation seen in popular culture are just preparatory: you'll get past that pretty quickly
4. Most teachers I know have practiced in multiple lineages, and this is usually true in Asia (albeit this tended to be multiple teachers since the number of available lineages was limited unless one was willing to travel a long way)
5. All things are impermanent; practice with diligence

A few observations on current challenges and possible transitions for Buddhism in the US

(which I'm almost certainly not going to have time for)

Challenges

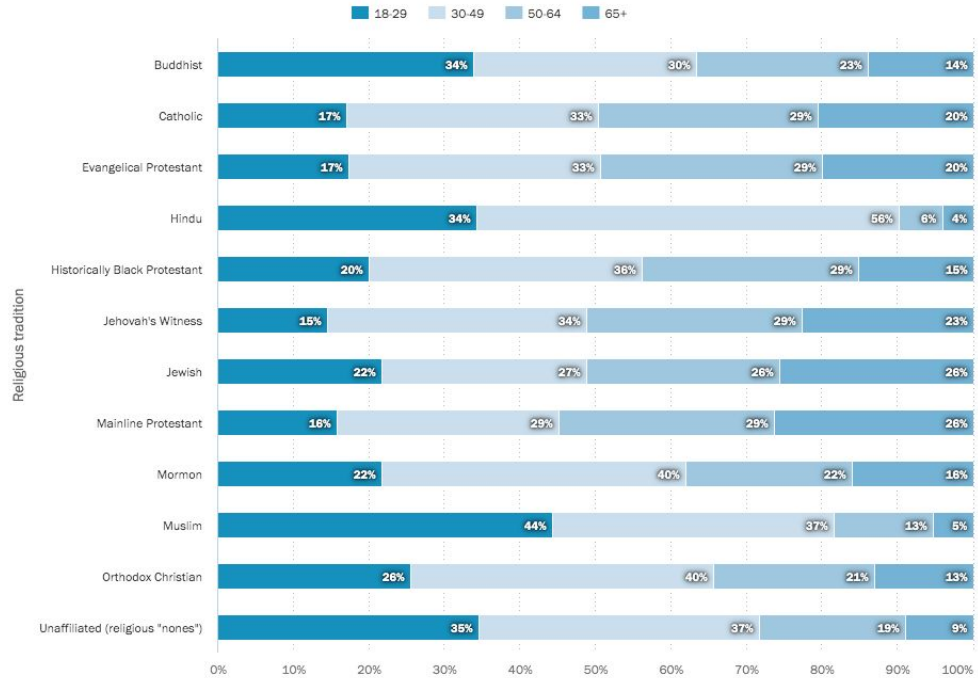
- Generational transition in leadership, which is already well underway with the original Asian modernizers, and is necessarily approaching the first-generation US teachers
    - Dalai Lama could be particularly important, though probably not, and Yongey Mingyur rinpoche is already filling his niche as a Western celebrity
- Fate of ethnic Asian "churches", which are seeing the same decline as mainstream Protestant denominations
- Going beyond the "wealthy white affinity group" model
    - This seems to be going well in a new generation of teachers, who are also disproportionately LGBTQ+
    - Cost of retreats remains a serious constraint, though many individuals with a strong Christian practice will spend comparable amounts of resources and time
    - Lack of a robust "business model" for both teachers and facilities: there are [possibly] more Christian professionals in CVille/Albemarle than in all of IMS; there is also competition from secular therepeutic mindfulness

Age distribution by religious group

% of adults who are ages...

Chart | Table

Share | Save Image

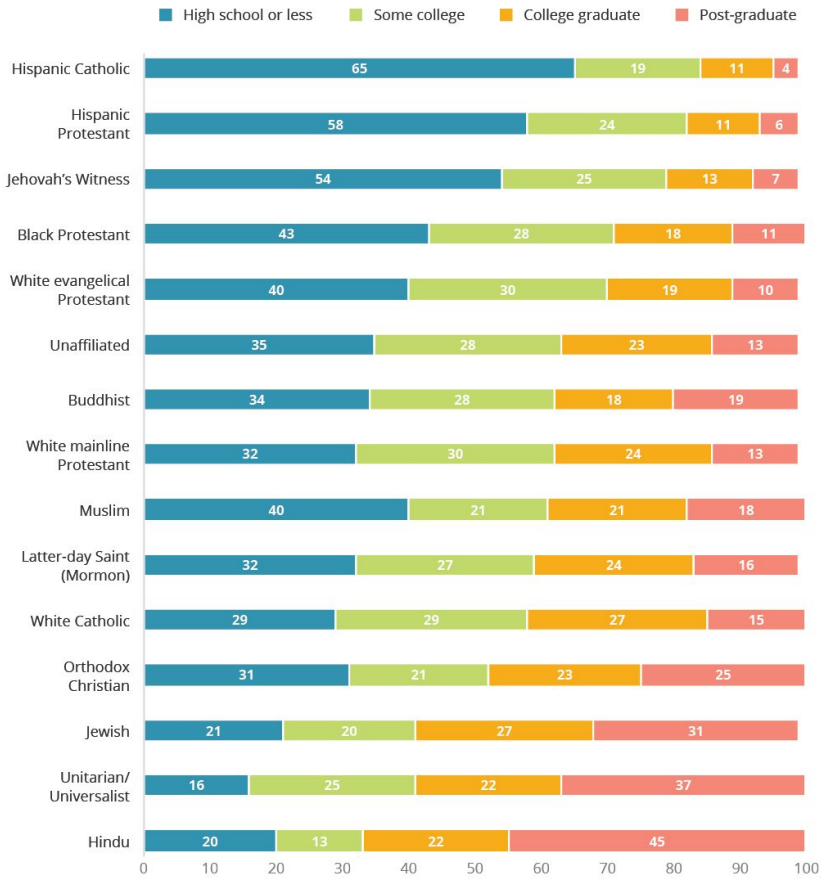


Sample sizes and margins of error vary from subgroup to subgroup, from year to year and from state to state. You can see the sample size for the estimates in this chart on rollover or in the last column of the table. And visit this table to see approximate margins of error for a group of a given size. 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.

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.

Open questions and speculative answers

- Given its very diverse roots in many forms of Buddhism, and [to date] the disestablishment clause of the Bill of Rights, there is no reason to expect a single "US Buddhism", just has many forms of Christianity, including some new ones (LDS, Pentecostalism, non-denominational mega-churches), co-exist
    - That said, a non-denominational "One Dharma" approach may gain traction
- Will interest in therapeutic/secular mindfulness translate into increased interest in Buddhism, particularly among the "nones"?
    - Past US experience suggests "no". The proportion of self-identified "nones" has also stabilized following decades of growth
- What is the long-term role of the electronic sangha? What about apps?
- 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 Theravadan and Tibetan open awareness practice, and, of course, Zen Burgers
    - US religious movements generally tend to split rather than combine

Leading us back to where we began…

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