



A REPORTER'S GUIDE TO  
**Buddhism in America**

By **Bill Aiken and Clark Strand**

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# Introduction

## *The Many Faces of Buddhism in America*

In Koreatown, Los Angeles, shaven-headed Asian monks sit before a colorful altar housing a golden statue of the Buddha, chanting an ancient prayer in sonorous tones.

In suburban Washington, DC, an African-American mother sits before the family altar, rings the bell three times, and together with two slightly fidgety young children begins reciting the Lotus Sutra.

In upstate New York, an assortment of businessmen, artists, college students, and city workers begin a weekend retreat at a Zen center sitting silently on rows of low black cushions.

In Atlanta, a Unitarian Church sponsors its own *dharma* session devoted to study of the Buddha's teachings and some guided meditation.

These are but a few of the diverse faces of Buddhism in America.

With roots going back to the 6th Century BCE, Buddhism is one of the oldest of the world's religions, and with its growing influence and appeal in many corners of American society, it is also among the most modern.

The purpose of this guide is to provide a very basic outline of the Buddhist tradition, show how that tradition has come to a diversity of expressions here in the US today, and provide a brief summary description of each of the major schools of Buddhism. Our goal is to provide a rough roadmap that we hope will enable the journalist to place the individual practitioner or local Buddhist community into the larger context of this great religious and philosophical tradition.

# What do we mean by Buddhism?

Buddhism begins with the enlightenment of a man named Siddhartha Gautama, who lived in the northeastern part of the Indian subcontinent more than five centuries before the Common Era. The term Buddha means “One who has experienced awakening” or “One who is awake.”

Throughout his life, the Buddha taught and guided many people to achieve their own awakening to the true nature of life, create inner peace and act compassionately toward other living beings. His teachings and example form the root of what we now know as Buddhism.

Today, the term Buddhism covers a wide range of religious doctrines, values, practices and rituals. Due to the variety of nations and peoples among whom Buddhism has taken root, there is also a diversity of social and cultural expressions.

The common thread that unites these expressions is a reverence for the Three Treasures of Buddhism (also known as the “Three Refuges” or “Three Jewels”) which are: the *Buddha*, the *Dharma*, and the *Sangha*.

## The Three Treasures

*Buddha* – The Buddha or “Awakened One” may refer specifically to the historic Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived in India in the Sixth Century BCE. For many, however, Buddha refers equally to “Buddha Nature,” the awareness and compassion that is considered to be the very essence of all living beings.

*Dharma* – **Dharma** literally means the path, the way, or the nature of reality. From a Buddhist viewpoint, *dharma* refers mainly to the liberating truth that the Buddha realized, and then to the teaching offered by the Buddha as a way toward this realization. The body of teachings includes the *Sutras*, or teachings of the Buddha; the *Vinaya*, or monastic rules of conduct; and the *Abhidharma*, or commentaries on the sutras by subsequent Buddhist masters. Included are such fundamental concepts as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. In general, the Buddha’s Dharma is presented not as a doctrine to be believed, but rather as a liberating truth to be lived.

*Sangha* – Sangha literally means “assembly” or “gathering” and is similar in meaning to congregation. It refers to those communities of practitioners who seek to live in the light of the teachings of the Buddha. These communities may be monastic, lay, or mixed.

### The Four Noble Truths

1. Life invariably entails pain, anguish, stress, or dissatisfaction. In the Buddhist tradition, this is often referred to as *dukkha*.
2. The cause of *dukkha* (pain, anguish, stress or dissatisfaction) is the deluded craving in all forms.
3. The cessation of *dukkha* can be found through the relinquishment and abandonment of deluded craving.
4. The path leading to the cessation of *dukkha* (and attaining enlightenment or Buddhahood) can be achieved through a method known as the Noble Eightfold Path.

### The Eightfold Path

*Sila* (virtue)

1. right speech
2. right action
3. right livelihood

*Samadhi* (mental cultivation)

4. right effort,
5. right mindfulness
6. right concentration

*Panna* (wisdom)

7. right view
8. right resolve

## About Buddhist Streams, Schools and Sects

Within a few centuries after the Buddha's passing, differences of interpretation and practice arose within the Buddhist community that—coupled with differences in culture—have led to the diverse expressions of Buddhism that we see today.

In Asia, Buddhist schools are generally identified as belonging to one of three major streams or traditions:

**Theravada** – “Teaching of the Elders” is prevalent among the monastic traditions of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (except Vietnam)

**Mahayana** – “Great Vehicle” is prevalent throughout China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam

**Vajrayana** – “Diamond Vehicle” is prevalent in Tibet

Numerous communities and organizations have arisen out of these traditions, usually due to social and political factors. Buddhism remains decentralized with no single central leader or organization for the Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana traditions. Nor is there any central pilgrimage site or unifying ritual besides taking refuge in the Three Treasures. Buddhism has a long history of diversity and tolerance, and for the most part, has managed to avoid holy wars and conflicts with other religions.

In America, the three main Buddhist traditions are well represented among the various temples and communities that dot the US Buddhist landscape.

## Who are the Buddhists in America?

No precise figures are available, but most agree that there are around two million Buddhists in the US. The majority (about 65-70%) are what might be called ethnic Asian Buddhists. They belong to an ethnically identified temple (Singhalese, Thai, Laotian, Chinese, etc.), and services are usually conducted in their native language. These groups serve as important centers for social adjustment and cultural preservation, not unlike the churches that flourished with the influx of Roman Catholic immigrants in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In contrast to this group are the other 30-35%, identified as Western or “convert” Buddhists. Buddhist practice among Western Buddhists has been steadily on the rise, and since the 1960’s many communities have formed. Often these communities would start out with an Asian teacher and a gathering of American students. Over the years, however, many evolved into Western-style religious communities characterized by more egalitarian leadership structures, less emphasis on ritual, more women in leadership roles and a greater emphasis on social engagement.

While these Western-born practitioners tend to come from well educated, upper middle-class backgrounds, some groups—like Soka Gakkai—are more socially diverse with significant numbers of African-American and other minorities represented.

What follows is a survey of the most popular Buddhist groups in the US.

# Theravada

The “Teaching of the Elders” is the oldest and most traditional of Buddhist expressions. Theravadan Buddhism holds the distinction of maintaining a direct line of monastic ordination dating back to the time of the Buddha.

This is the tradition practiced mainly in the Asian-based temples and monasteries from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia. These communities exist in a symbiosis of mutual support between monks and laypersons. The monk’s role is to exert himself in the three areas of discipline, meditation, and wisdom, and to offer support to the community in the form of teaching or other services. The

layperson’s traditional role has been to acquire karmic merit through making offerings of support to the monks through financial and other donations, and through supporting religious festivals.

However, in recent years the laity has become more engaged in meditative practice and in the practical leadership of their religious communities, and more Westerners have been ordained in that tradition. This has come about in part because many of the senior monks at these temples are not fluent in English.

## Contact:

Thanissaro Bhikkhu  
Abbot Metta Forest Monastery  
P.O. Box 1409  
Valley Center, CA 92082  
(619) 813-8461

# Vipassana

Rooted in the Theravadan meditation tradition, Vipassana or Insight Meditation, has been taken up by many Western practitioners. The emphasis on the lay person's individual practice through ten-day (or longer) retreats, has made this form of Theravadan Buddhism, more accessible to non-ethnic Buddhists.

The meditative practice usually begins with the practice of the awareness of breathing that is the gateway for cultivating the four foundations of mindfulness: 1) awareness of body processes

and movements; 2) awareness of one's sensations; 3) awareness of one's mental states; and 4) awareness of the mental objects that form one's thoughts.

## Contact:

The Insight Meditation Society  
1230 Pleasant St.  
Barre, MA 01005  
[www.dharma.org](http://www.dharma.org)

Gyano Gibson, PR &  
Communications Director.  
Phone: (978) 355-4378 ext. 280.  
Email: [gyanog@dharma.org](mailto:gyanog@dharma.org).

# Lotus Buddhism

Along with the New Testament, The Bhagavad-Gita, and the Qur'an, the Lotus Sutra has been regarded as one of the four most influential religious books in the world. Considered the quintessential Mahayana sutra, the Lotus advances a view of universal salvation through awakening to one's "Buddha nature," the wisdom and compassion inherent in one's life. It emphasizes the role of the *bodhisattva*—a follower of the Buddha who carries out compassionate action in this world—and preaches an egalitarian message whereby all people, regardless of gender, social or economic circumstances, can reveal their enlightened or "Buddha" life.

The practice of Lotus Buddhism was revived in 13th Century Japan by the reformist monk Nichiren, who condensed the devotional practice of the Lotus into the chanted phrase *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, making it accessible to all.

There are many forms of Lotus and Nichiren practice. The best known in the United States is the Soka Gakkai International, a lay-based community, whose emphasis is on demonstrating the benefits of Buddhist practice through the vehicle of one's daily life. Among American Buddhist groups, SGI has had unique success in attracting a diverse ethnic following.

## Contact:

Soka Gakkai International - USA  
606 Wilshire Avenue  
Santa Monica, CA 90401

Ian McIlraith, Communications  
Director  
310-260-8950  
[www.sgi-usa.org](http://www.sgi-usa.org)

# Zen

Perhaps the most pervasively popular word in society's Buddhist lexicon, the term 'Zen' has been used in conjunction with everything from cologne to motorcycle maintenance.

In reality, the term 'Zen' is the Japanese pronunciation of a Chinese character (Ch'an), which in turn is drawn from the Sanskrit *dhyana*, meaning meditation. It aptly describes the essence of this school of Buddhism, which is: sitting with one's back straight, mindful of one's breathing, silencing the mind with focused awareness in the here and now.

An apt description of the Zen tradition comes the following maximums attributed to the legendary Zen patriarch, Bodhidharma:

*A special transmission outside of the scriptures.*

*Not relying on words or letters.*

*Pointing directly to the human mind.*

*One sees into one's nature, becoming Buddha.*

Within this practice tradition there are diverse approaches, with some seeing enlightenment coming in a sudden flash of understanding, while other schools take a more moderate approach of gradual cultivation.

Zen has come to the West mainly through numerous Japanese and Korean teachers and their authorized heirs, creating a wide number of Zen communities of different lineages. One notable characteristic of Zen practice is its non-doctrinal, strictly meditative approach. This has made it popular among practitioners of other faiths, like Christianity or Judaism, who often seek the experience of mindfulness and attentiveness without leaving their own spiritual background or community.

## Contact:

Zen Mountain Monastery  
P.O. Box 197  
Mt. Tremper, NY 12457  
Tel. (845) 688-2228  
FAX (845) 688-2415  
e-mail: [zmmtrain@mro.org](mailto:zmmtrain@mro.org)

# Tibetan and Tantric Buddhism

Mention Tibetan Buddhism and the image that comes to mind for most is the Dalai Lama, a monk in the *Geluk* school of Tibetan Buddhism. Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 and the leader of the Tibetan people in exile, he has come to be seen by many as the face of Buddhism.

What we know today as Tibetan Buddhism is actually four different Buddhist schools (*Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Geluk*), each of which reflects a complex blend of Tibetan culture, the indigenous *Bon* religion, and the teachings of the Buddha.

Characteristic of practice in the Tibetan tradition is the employment of ritual actions involving combinations of bodily gestures (*mudras*), recitations of sacred words (*mantras*) and the visualization of deities (*mandalas*)

Through these rituals, practitioners seek to manifest enlightenment in their present form. This practice must be carried out in the context of a committed and devoted relationship with an authorized *lama* or teacher.

## Contact:

Tibet House Cultural Center  
22 West 15th Street  
New York, NY 10011  
212-807-0563  
[www.tibethouse.org](http://www.tibethouse.org)

Shambhala  
1084 Tower Road  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
B3H 2Y5, Canada  
(902) 425-4275  
[www.shambhala.org](http://www.shambhala.org)

# Pure Land Buddhism

The Pure Land School may be the most popular form of Buddhism in the world, practiced as it is throughout Japan and China. With its reliance on Other Power, it is the form of Buddhism that most closely resembles Christianity. Despite this, it is not well known in the West, even though there are numerous (mostly ethnic) Chinese, Vietnamese and Japanese Pure Land Temples throughout the United States.

Traditional Pure Land teachings emphasize the three elements of Faith, Vows, and Practice as the condition for attaining the ultimate goal of rebirth in the Pure Land, which is seen by adherents either literally or as a pure state of mind.

Great emphasis is placed on faith, through which practitioners acknowledge their “human foolishness (or *bonbu*), and trust in the salvific power of Amitabha Buddha who appears in the Sutra of the Buddha of Infinite Light. This Buddha has vowed to save all living beings who take faith in him and enable them, upon their death, to be reborn into his Pure Land.

The core practice of this school is to keep the name of the Buddha in mind. This is accomplished through the devotional recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name.

## Contact:

Buddhist Churches of America  
(Japanese)  
1710 Octavia Street  
San Francisco, CA 94109  
415-776-5600  
[www.buddhistchurchesofamerica.com](http://www.buddhistchurchesofamerica.com)

His Lai Temple (Chinese)  
3456 S. Glenmark Dr.  
Hacienda Heights, CA 91745  
Tel: 626-961-9697  
[www.hsilai.org](http://www.hsilai.org)

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

While the information in this guide comes from a variety of sources, we would especially like to acknowledge *Experiencing Buddhism: Ways of Wisdom and Compassion* by Ruben L.F. Habito (Orbis Books, 2005) which provides an excellent resource for those looking for a somewhat more in-depth survey of Buddhist practice in America.

*Founded in 1960, Soka Gakkai International-USA is an American Buddhist denomination that promotes individual happiness and world peace through the practical application of Nichiren Buddhist principles. As lay believers and engaged Buddhists, Soka Gakkai International's 12 million members worldwide strive to improve their lives by living with confidence, creating value and contributing to the well-being of their friends, families and communities.*

*Soka Gakkai International-USA has more than 90 centers located throughout United States. For more information about Soka Gakkai International-USA, go to its website at [www.sgi-usa.org](http://www.sgi-usa.org).*

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