

History of buddhism in america



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Thesis: Buddhism was introduced to America through asian immigrants and grew in popularity due to its appeal to minorities and women.

To understand Buddhism in America, studying the history and beliefs of Buddhism is essential. The Buddhist religion was founded 2500 years ago in India by Siddhartha Gautama. The founder of this religion was considered an extraordinary person but not viewed as a god, a stark contrast to many other faiths which acknowledge the presence of a supreme being. Although Buddhism originated in India, the religion became more influential in other parts of Asia, spreading mainly through trade routes. Buddhist relics have been found in China dating back to the Tang Dynasty and in Tibet dating back to the 11th Century. But it's prominence is especially evident in Japanese history. Core values of Buddhism can be found in the *Seventeen-Article Constitution*, a Japanese government document adopted in 604, stating reverence must be made to "...the Buddha, the Law, and the Priesthood."

The doctrine has over 300 million followers worldwide, thus considered as one of the major religions in the world. The ritual is most prominent in the East and Southeast Asia but also has influence in Europe and America. Buddhism followers do not have a supreme deity; instead, they fight to achieve a state of wisdom and peace. The word Buddha can be expressed as "enlightenment." Followers of Buddhism believe being enlightened can only be achieved through wisdom, morality, and meditation. Buddhism exists in different forms based on geographical areas. These forms include: Theravada Buddhism common in Thailand, Mahayana Buddhism prevalent in China and Tibetan Buddhism common in Tibet and parts of northern India.

Buddhism in America, Converts vs Immigrants

(Machacek, David W. "Immigrant Buddhism in America: A Model of Religious Change." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 5, no. 1 (2001): 64-84. doi: 10. 1525/nr. 2001. 5. 1. 64.)

History: (Masatsugu, Michael K. "" Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence": Japanese Americans, Dharma Bums, and the Making of American Buddhism during the Early Cold War Years." *Pacific Historical Review* 77, no. 3 (2008): 423-51. doi: 10. 1525/phr. 2008. 77. 3. 423.)

In 1965, due to modifications in the US national origins quota system, more people from Asian migrated to America. Buddhism was not introduced to America by a specific group of people, but rather, a multitude of different groups such as the Japanese, Chinese, and Sri Lankans. Many Americans have embraced the Buddhist faith either directly or indirectly by supporting some of its ideologies and philosophies. It is estimated that a quarter of American Buddhists have converted to Buddhism from Confucianism and other secular philosophies as well as larger religions including Christianity and Judaism. Buddhism comprises of a wide range of rituals, beliefs, and traditions. Even specific branches of Buddhism have many differences due to the vast cultural differences in the countries Buddhism is present in.

Buddhist practices from similar ethnic groups can also vary from family to family depending on how they are interpreted. Therefore, identifying whether a specific Buddhist practice in America stems from converts or immigrants is difficult for researchers who are interested in studying their

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lifestyle. In spite of this, there are many observable differences between the immigrant Buddhist and converts. The immigrant Buddhists observe their religious rituals as rooted in ancestral traditions. In this context, immigrant Buddhists follow a more strict route to Buddhism, as a result of many practitioners being born into the faith, many faith based rituals practiced by immigrant Buddhists may be unique to their family.

In contrast, American Buddhism comes in a variety of forms due to the incorporation ideologies and philosophies assimilated from other faiths.

Buddhism Appeal

There are many reasons why Buddhism appeals to different groups of people. For example, a form of Japanese Buddhism known as Soka Gakkai is popular among minorities. According to a survey done by the Soka Gakkai, more than half of its members belong to non European ethnic backgrounds. This is in part due to the special emphasis Soka Gakkai places on community. Although other forms of Buddhism may seek to recruit converts, Soka Gakkai placed special emphasis in doing so aiming to build a stronger community. Secondly, Soka Gakkai became popular among minority Americans because Soka Gakkai not only provided spiritual benefits to its practitioners, but economic benefits. Soka Gakkai temples in America were established by Japanese immigrants who mostly came to America for economic opportunity. This combined with the religion's strong value of community turned religious temples into language centers and job networking hubs. Due to segregation, many minorities in America during the 1960s suffered economic hardship. As a result, minorities came to Soka

Gakkai temples to take advantage of the temple's economic benefits and left with new exposure to Sokka Gakkai. Buddhism in America only continued to grow as evidenced in 1965 when Sri Lankans established Washington DC's first Buddhist shrine. The sacred place was accessible to everyone, including non Sri Lankens and English speakers. Buddhism has gained a large following in the US as evidenced by the creation of the Association of American Buddhists. The association was created to promote Buddhism through the ordination of monks, publications, and classes.

Buddhism and Women in America *combine with appeal paragraph*

(Thayer-Bacon, Barbara J. " CHAPTER 6: W/holistic Relations." Counterpoints 226 (2003): 153-82. <http://www.jstor.org.library.collin.edu/stable/42979532>.)

In the 1960s and 1970's many women converted to Buddhism to suppress the traditional American beliefs limiting women. These created a new form of Buddhism in Europe and America in both practice and thought. The rise of women and democratization is an important characteristic among the American Buddhist. The conversion of Americans to Buddhist in the 1960s and 1970s was occurring alongside the second-wave feminist movement. Although many women were drawn to Buddhism because of the gender-neutral teachings, traditional Buddhism has roots patriarchy such as the practice of female nuns being required to submit to their male counterparts. But in present society, many women in America have adopted a more modern form of Buddhism. The majority of Buddhist women have embraced

leadership roles such as in 2006 when Sister Khanti-Khem became the first Buddhist woman in American history to perform an ordination.

Conclusion

According to scholars, Asian Buddhist have been in the US for over five generations, and the ancestry rooted religious practice is popular in America. Buddhism religion has roots in all over American comprising of Immigrant Buddhists and the large group of converts Buddhists from other faiths. Buddhism originated in Asia and existed in different forms based on the geographical location. In American, Buddhism exists in different style based on the immigrant Buddhist and who they influence or convert them to Buddhism. Unlike Asia, Buddhism in America has specific traits which vary from ancient Buddhism ideologies and philosophies. Buddhist religious activities, philosophies, and ideologies attract a huge number of converts. However, other Buddhism styles are more evangelical because they seek members to join their religion. Buddhism has also played a vital role in education by having affiliation with universities and other educational institutions. Buddhism has also impacted leadership in women by giving them gender-neutral teachings.

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