

yoga and rebirth in america: asian religions are here to stay

New movies, store names, and organizations herald a growing interest among Americans in Asian religions. Beyond the fads, sociologists are finding that these Eastern faiths, along with their practitioners and centers, play an increasingly important role in American spiritual life.



Photo by Thira Thiramongkol

Monks accept donations of new robes from lay members of Wat Monkoltempunee, a Thai Buddhist temple in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Thais, Laotians, Cambodians and other Asians and non-Asian Americans all attend Thai temples, about one-third of which have programs in English specifically for non-Asian Americans.

Every Saturday at a Thai Buddhist temple in the suburbs of Philadelphia, a Thai-born monk teaches a group of mostly European Americans how to meditate. Every Sunday, first-generation Thai immigrants gather in the same hall to chant, meditate, hear the Buddha's teachings, and donate money to the monks. Outside the temple walls, Americans meet Asian religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Shinto, Taoism and Confucianism when they watch movies such as *Little Buddha* and *Seven Years in Tibet* or read *The Tao of Pooh*, *Zen and the Art of Falling in Love* and *Yoga for Dummies*. They attend yoga classes and visit meditation centers in record numbers, wash with karma soaps, and eat nirvana chocolates. Although much of Americans' fascination with Asian spiritual-

ity seems like a fad that will soon fade, their involvement with these religions also can be serious and sustainable.

Research clearly demonstrates that there is more to Americans' recent interest in Asian religions than Madison Avenue's discoveries of mystical energy fields and reincarnation. While inclusion of Asian religions in advertising campaigns and store names is often superficial, national surveys and detailed sociological research show that Asian religions are a growing component of the American religious landscape. Asian religions are no longer practiced only by Asian immigrants and their families or European-American counterculturalists like the Hare Krishnas. According to a 2003 national survey designed by Robert Wuthnow, 30 percent of adult

Americans (63 million people) say that they are at least somewhat familiar with Buddhist teachings and 22 percent (45 million people) claim to be similarly familiar with Hindu teachings. More than half of the people surveyed (55 percent) said they had personal contact with a Buddhist and 50 percent had personal contact with a Hindu. Of course, some Americans have more encounters with Asian religions than others. People who are young, more educated, or live on the West Coast are more likely to have contact with Buddhists, for example.



A Chinese-Vietnamese Temple in Los Angeles, California. Asian religions are a growing and increasingly central component of the American religious landscape.

Sociologists have also studied the growing number of organizations and sites in which Asian religions are learned and practiced across the country. These settings include temples and ashrams (Hindu retreats) as well as alternative health clinics and yoga studios. While it is difficult to track the exact number of such centers nationally, there are now thousands of them ranging from small storefront halls to multi-million dollar buildings. New, too, are many specialized magazines and books such as *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* and *Hinduism Today* that have emerged in response to Americans' interest in Asian religions. The Berkeley, California-based *Yoga Journal*, founded in 1975, boasted 300,000 subscribers and nearly one million monthly readers in 2002—a 300 percent increase from just three years earlier. The number of books published about Buddhism in English also more than tripled between 1965 and 2000.

The recent burgeoning of Americans' fascination with Asian religions is rooted in increasing immigration, widening global networks, and changes in American religious and health care institutions. But the fascination dates back at least two centuries.

romantic and real origins

Before 1965, the Asian population in the United States was relatively small and concentrated in the West. American immigration laws at the turn of the 20th century restricted and later prohibited most Asian immigration. As a result, few 19th- and early 20th-century Americans learned about Asian religions firsthand. Instead, they relied on stories told by traveling Asian religious teachers and printed sources such as missionary reports. Consequently, non-Asian Americans curious about Buddhism, Hinduism, and other Asian religions often romanticized them and practiced them according to American and European visions (leading, for example, to the occult-oriented Theosophy and to the spiritualist Transcendentalist movement associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson). Texts and itinerant teachers continued to be the primary sources for Americans to learn about Asian religions through the mid-20th century.

These overly idealized also often incomplete or incorrect interpretations nevertheless forcefully shaped American counter-cultural and alternative lifestyle movements from the Beat writers to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (better known as the Hare Krishnas). Such home-grown interpretations continue to play a significant role in the ways that non-Asian Americans view and understand Asian religions.

Prior to 1965, Americans interested in Asian religions paid little attention to the existing religious communities and organizations built by Chinese, Japanese, Indian and other Asian immigrants who had largely come to the United States as laborers and endured discrimination. Rarely noticed by native-born Americans, Asian immigrants have been practicing their religions ever since their arrival. In 1906, for example, the U.S. Census counted 62 Chinese temples and 141 shrines. The visibility of Asian religions and the number of their organizations expanded vastly after changes in U.S. immigration laws in 1965 ended country-of-origin quotas. Between 1960 and 2000, the number of Asians in America increased tenfold to nearly 12 million people, or 4 percent of the American population (See "Are Asian Americans Becoming 'White'?" this issue). They have built Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian religious centers across the country where they gather for worship and support. Major cities like San Francisco, New York and Chicago remain popular homes for Asian religious organizations, but they have been joined in recent years by large cities like Houston, which has several Hindu and Buddhist temples, and smaller cities like Lowell, Massachusetts, which is home to several Cambodian Buddhist temples. Across the country,

Photo by Steve Gold



Photo by Thira Thiramongkol

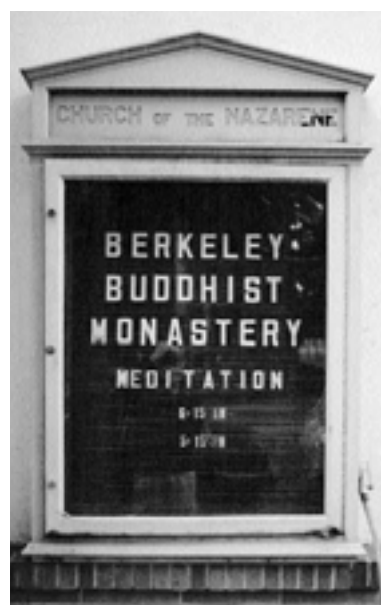
Thai women pour water on the Buddha to celebrate the Buddhist New Year at a temple near Philadelphia. The visibility of Asian religions and the number of Asian religious organizations expanded after U.S. immigration laws were changed in 1965 to end country-of-origin quotas.

these religious centers increasingly provide the organizational base from which immigrants and their children claim recognition as equal partners in a multi-religious America—for example, by lobbying to lead the opening prayers in Congress and by pursuing government funds earmarked for faith-based social service organizations.

translating the teachings

Asians and non-Asians alike, inside and outside of formal organizations, practice and teach Asian religions. Thai Buddhist temples, for example, increased from fewer than five in 1975 to more than 80 in 2000, and Buddhist centers teaching meditation more than doubled between 1987 and 1997. Thais, Laotians, Cambodians and other Asian- and non-Asian Americans attend Thai temples, about one-third of which have programs in English specifically for non-Asian Americans. Paul

Nich has described these immigrant Theravada Buddhist temples with programs in English as “parallel congregations.”



A former Church of the Nazarene is home to this Buddhist monastery. Spiritual explorations in the 1960s and the decline of mainstream Protestant churches brought many baby boomers into long-term involvement with Asian religious practices.

Asians and non-Asian Americans gather at separate times for separate rituals and practices, but under the guidance of the same monks. At a few temples, Asians and non-Asians are even beginning to gather side-by-side to hear simultaneous translations of the teachings in Thai and English. This mixing of Asians and non-Asian Americans also takes place at some Sri Lankan and Burmese Buddhist temples as well as at centers associated with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

Many Americans also participate in religious practices that developed within Asian religious traditions but are taught or practiced in other kinds of organizations. For example, Americans no longer only practice yoga in free-standing yoga studios or ashrams, and yoga has lost much of its connection with alternative or countercultural lifestyles. Now taught in American fitness and health organizations, often as a “stress

centers. One of us, Bender, found that many of the yoga teachers she interviewed in a large northeastern city teach in various locations and tailor their descriptions of yoga and its benefits accordingly. Although most try to tell their students, as one put it, that there is “more to yoga than breathing,” teachers consider the setting when deciding whether to include chanting, meditation or reading from classic yoga texts such as Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*. The option to teach yoga and other disciplines as both fitness and as devotional practice makes Asian religions available to a more varied American audience than ever before. But it also shows how practices considered religious by teachers may not be considered so by students. This is one way, also, that those practices are becoming less traditional as they spread to different parts of American society. Recent controversies in the national yoga community about the “authenticity” of new forms of yoga which downplay meditation (including “hot” or Bikram yoga and “power” yoga) point to the currently unsettled meaning of these practices. T’ai-chi, qigong, and various forms of meditation with roots in Asian traditions are undergoing similar transformations from religious to secular devotions as they are introduced to the national mainstream as part of Americans’ quest for health and fitness.

explaining the growth

Asian religions have spread largely because of new immigrants, global connections, and changes in American churches and health care. Not only has the number of Asians in the United States grown exponentially since 1965, it has done so especially in America’s urban cultural centers. Moreover, the newcomers are also more likely to be middle-class professionals than earlier generations of immigrants, giving them more influence on other Americans. The Wuthnow study found that of the 50 percent of Americans who have had contact with a Buddhist, the majority report that this contact occurred at their workplace, while conducting personal business dealings, or while shopping, implying that Buddhist practitioners (both Asians and non-Asian Americans) are well integrated into the American mainstream. The growing number of second- and third-generation Asian Americans in some regions of the United States have also led schools to note and teach their religious holidays in the classroom. Non-Asian-American children also learn about these traditions in the homes of their Asian-American friends. Some of this increased awareness of Asian



Photo by Pash Voynow, courtesy of the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center

A meditation class at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

management” technique, this religious practice is translated into a viable therapy for certain health problems. A growing number of managed care and health insurance plans even pay for yoga classes. Sociologists have not yet enumerated where yoga is taught and by whom, but our informal observations find it in public and private elementary schools, fitness clubs, retirement centers and corporate offices.

Although secular organizations teach yoga, many, if not most, yoga teachers train at explicitly Hindu or devotional yoga

theravada buddhism in america

Theravada Buddhism, the branch of Buddhism traditionally practiced in Southeast Asia, officially arrived in the United States in 1966 when its first permanent organization was started in Washington, D.C. Since then, temples and meditation centers have opened across the country and the number of people involved in them has grown exponentially. Today there are more than 80 such Thai Buddhist temples scattered across 29 states. Approximately 375 monks, born and trained in Thailand, live at these temples and lead the daily activities. In addition to hosting classes, festivals, and other gatherings, more than half of the temples support local community activities like cultural centers, inter-faith organizations and prison ministries.

One of the authors, Cadge, studied Wat Mongkoltempunee, a Thai Buddhist temple in the suburbs of Philadelphia, and the Insight Meditation Center, an organization started and attended primarily by non-Asian converts in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She found that Asian and non-Asian Buddhists at these two centers share basic ideas about the Buddha and his core teachings, but have adapted those teachings in many different ways. At Wat Mongkoltempunee, for example, regular activities include chanting, meditating, listening to talks by the monks, and the exchange of material goods and spiritual teachings between lay people and the monks. By donating to the temple, many lay people believe they will be reborn in a better life. Ideas about rebirth are largely absent from the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center where non-Asian lay teachers (not monks) see Buddhism as rooted in meditation and focus on ways that practitioners can bring that meditation and mindfulness into their daily lives.

Despite these differences, however, the two centers are adapting the Theravada Buddhist tradition to the United States in some common ways. Both centers teach that the Buddha told people to “come and see” and emphasize flexibility in their teachings and practices. Both centers are loosely bounded, rather than strictly hierarchical, organizations based largely on practices rather than beliefs. And questions about Buddhist identities are deemphasized at each organization.

religions develops directly from inter-faith dialogues, like the Catholic-Buddhist dialogue in Los Angeles, which includes Buddhist teachers and monks, Hindu priests, and other Asian religious leaders who typically have not previously mixed with representatives of Western religions.

Expanding global travel and communications have allowed Americans to supplement their reading about Asian religions with in-person instruction here and abroad. Asian-born teachers often visit the United States, like the Dalai Lama whose public teachings and writings have been central to the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in America. Numerous American-born instructors like early Theravada Buddhist teachers Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein have spent time in Asia and have returned there to continue to study over the years. Lay practitioners, some of whom are affluent, also travel with relative ease between Asia and the United States to attend retreats, hear teachings and visit sacred religious sites. For example, followers of Sai Baba, an Indian holy man with tens of millions of devotees, gather regularly at his ashram outside of Bangalore to catch a glimpse of him in *Sai darshan* (sacred viewing). Many Asian immigrants also regularly return to Asia



A storefront yoga center in Berkeley, California. Although yoga is taught through both religious and secular organizations, yoga teachers frequently train at explicitly religious centers.

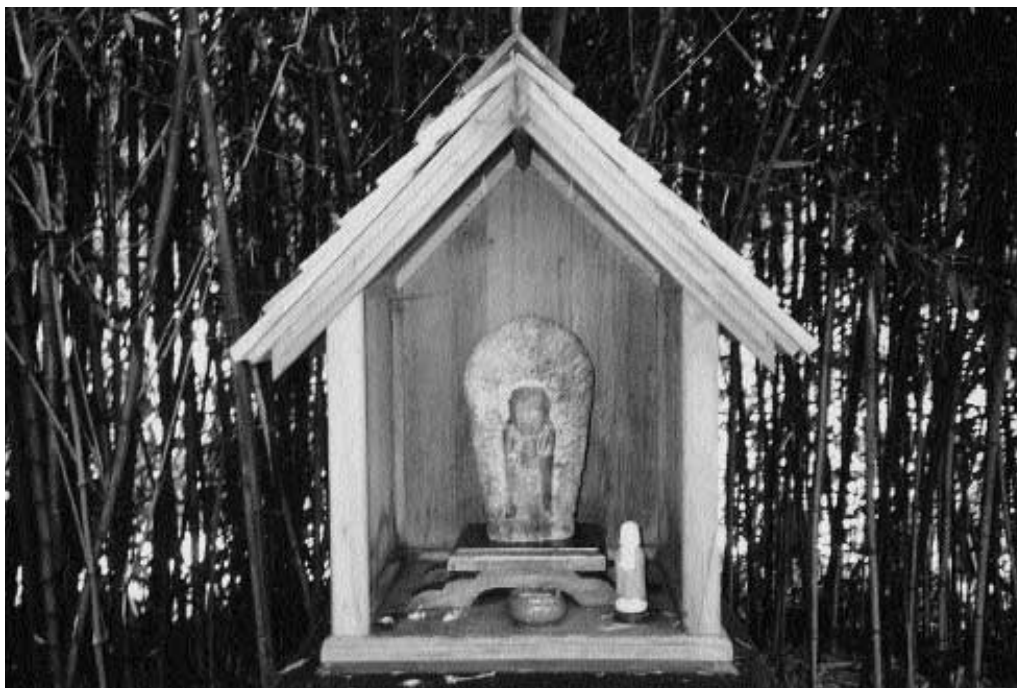


Photo by Stacey Caillier

One of many Buddhist altars on the grounds of the Green Gulch organic farm and Zen center in Marin County, California.

for particular life-cycle rituals, often developing and maintaining ties between their religious leaders in the United States and their home countries in the process. These new Asian immigrants, as well as American-born non-Asian practitioners, continue to facilitate the movement of Asian religions between Asia and the United States.

Finally, several ongoing changes in medical practices and institutions in the United States have propelled the spread of Asian religions in America. Alternative and complementary health and medicine, for example, is becoming increasingly established and integrated into traditional Western-style medicine. A 1997 survey published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, for example, reported that Americans made 629 million visits to complementary and alternative medicine providers, paying \$27 billion in out-of-pocket expenses. In addition, federal funds now support studies of whether these traditions work and the creation of university-based complementary health research and treatment centers at UCLA, Columbia, Harvard and other prominent institutions—all of which give new legitimacy to these practices and their practitioners. **Many complementary and alternative techniques, however, stem from Asian religious healing traditions, including acupuncture, traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurvedic medicine (an Indian healing system), and meditation techniques, rather than a faith tradition.** The increased popularity and acceptance of alternative medicine nonetheless intro-



Photo courtesy of Sarana Miller

A weekend yoga retreat at the Center for Mind Body Healing in Sonoma, California. A growing number of Americans have taken up yoga as a devotional practice or to reduce stress and improve their physical fitness.

duces Americans to Eastern ideas of spirituality and health, even if taught by acupuncturists and Ayurvedic healers.

Reorganization and reorientation of Western religions in America has also facilitated the emergence and popularity of Asian religions. The decline of many mainline Protestant churches and the continued religious curiosity of the baby boom generation led many spiritual seekers to Asian religions in the 1960s and many of them continue to experiment with Asian religions today. Some liberal Protestant and Jewish denominations have

also opened up to learning about non-Western religions through book groups, guest speakers, yoga, or meditation teachings that take place in their buildings. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, for example, members of a congregational church can attend a Wednesday evening laity-led meditation in the main sanctuary. The evening begins with readings from the Psalms, then proceeds to an hour-long meditation based explicitly on Buddhist techniques and ends with Communion. Anecdotal evidence from Christian and Jewish congregations suggests that congregations in urban areas that draw from more affluent populations are particularly likely to host such programs. One conservative Jewish congregation in San Francisco hired a rabbi who had previously headed the local Zen center, thereby exemplifying the local catchphrase, “Bu-Jews.” Some Christian and Jewish leaders have also become more open to using Asian beliefs in their own teachings. For instance, one ongoing inter-faith dialogue between Catholic, Buddhist, and Hindu nuns and monks, institutionalized in the group “Monastics in Dialogue,” has published books with titles like *Benedict’s Dharma*, explicitly linking the Benedictine monastic tradition to Buddhism. The increased openness of liberal Christian and Jewish leaders and organizations, coupled with the increased prevalence of Asian religious practices outside of formal Asian organizations, is a central reason that Asian spirituality has become so popular in recent years.

higher stages?

The shape, content, and practice of Asian religions in America has changed dramatically, particularly in the wake of post-1965 immigration. Some of this interest, like that displayed in advertising campaigns, is likely a fad that will soon



A Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Garden City, Kansas. Asian religious organizations are now found in both small and large cities and in all regions of the U.S.

yield to the next fashion. Beneath the fad, however, hundreds of organizations have emerged around Asian religions in America and millions of people have been exposed to Asian religious teachings and practices. All of this influence has and will likely continue to significantly shape American life. ■

recommended resources

Bender, Courtney. “Yoga in Contexts.” Unpublished manuscript, Department of Religion, Columbia University, 2003. Drawing on interviews with teachers in a large northeastern city, Bender examines how social class influences teaching styles and practices.

Cadge, Wendy. *Heartwood: the First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. This book reports Cadge’s research on two Theravada Buddhist communities.

Eck, Diana L. *A New Religious America*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001. This is a useful overview of how non-Western religions are practiced in different American contexts.

Numrich, Paul D. *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1996. This is a comprehensive study of how Asians and native-born white Americans are involved in a Sri Lankan temple in Los Angeles and a Thai temple in Chicago.

Reddy, Sita. “Asian Medicine in America: The Ayurvedic Case.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 583 (2002): 97-121. An overview of the history and transformation of Ayurveda, the classical South Asian medical tradition, in America.

Tweed, Thomas. *The American Encounter With Buddhism: 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992. This is a history of Buddhism’s popularity in 19th-century America.

Tweed, Thomas and Stephen Prothero. *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. These selections demonstrate the breadth and depth of the American encounter with Asian religions from 1784 to the present.

Wuthnow, Robert and Wendy Cadge. “Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States: Accounting for Americans’ Receptivity.” Unpublished paper, Center for the Study of Religion, Princeton University, 2003. This article examines the influence of Buddhists on Americans.