



Spread of Buddhism in the West

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ABSTRACT

The 'come and see for yourself' attitude of Buddhism attracts many Westerners. They are not asked to believe in anything, but to follow the Buddha's advice of testing ideas first. Buddhist attitudes of peace, mindfulness and care for all living creatures have come to be the concern of many groups in the West. very few people in Europe or America would have known what the word 'Buddhist' meant unless they had been born in the last 50 years. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, a few Buddhist texts were translated into European languages. Thus Buddhist teaching came to be known to the European scholars. A few of them who were influenced by Buddhism, introduced Buddhist ideas into their own writings. Later, more and better European translations of Buddhist texts were made by the early part of the twentieth century, a large number of Buddhist texts had already been translated into English, French and German. This includes virtually the entire collection of Theravada scriptures as well as a number of important Mahayana texts.

KEYWORDS

Although Buddhism spread throughout Asia, it remained virtually unknown in the West until modern times (buddhanet.net, 2008). The early missions sent by emperor Ashoka to the West did not bear fruit. Knowledge of Buddhism has come through three main channels: Western scholars; the work of philosophers, writers and artists; and the arrival of Asian immigrants who have brought various forms of Buddhism with them to Europe, North America and Australia.

The 'come and see for yourself' attitude of Buddhism attracts many Westerners. They are not asked to believe in anything, but to follow the Buddha's advice of testing ideas first. With the growth of easy travel and communications, the West has been able to find out more about Buddhism in this century than ever before. The informality and emphasis on the practice of Buddhism appeal to many Westerners.

The Influence of Buddhism

Buddhist attitudes of peace, mindfulness and care for all living creatures have come to be the concern of many groups in the West. Buddhists believe that all things should be looked after: the earth, plants, birds, insects and animals. This is close to the feeling among many people in recent years that the human race should stop polluting the atmosphere and destroying the surface of the earth by cutting down forests.

Buddhism Travels West

Although the Buddha's teachings have been known in countries throughout Asia for over 2,500 years, very few people in Europe or America would have known what the word 'Buddhist' meant unless they had been born in the last 50 years.

Over a century ago people from France, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and other European countries began to travel in the Far East. Many of them returned with Eastern ideas, and so Europeans began to hear about Buddhism.

More recently, Buddhist people have moved to the West. Many of them have been refugees from conflict. Many Tibetans, for example, fled from their country after the Chinese takeover in 1959. The wars in Indochina in the 1950s and 1960s led many Vietnamese people to move to and settle in Europe, Australia and America. Other Buddhists from countries such as Thailand have established businesses in the larger Western cities. They have all brought their Buddhist beliefs to their new homes, and helped to set up Buddhist centres.

Introduction of Buddhism to Europe

In the eighteenth century onwards, a number of Buddhist texts were brought to Europe by people who had visited the colonies in the East. These texts aroused the interest of some European scholars who then began to study them.

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Growth of Buddhism in Europe

Before the beginning of the twentieth century, the study of Buddhism was confined mainly to scholars and there was not much practice of the teachings. Later, this pattern began to change. A number of Europeans felt that merely reading about Buddhism was not enough, so they travelled to the East to acquire firsthand knowledge of the Buddhist practices and to experience the monastic life.

In addition, Buddhist organisations were founded in the major cities of Europe. One of these, the Buddhist Society of London, was established in 1924. It is the oldest and one of the largest Buddhist organisations in Europe. These organisations helped the growth of interest in Buddhism through their meditation sessions, lectures and circulation of Buddhist literature.

By the early part of the twentieth century, a number of the Europeans, who had travelled to the East to study Buddhism, had returned. Some of them had become monks and they inspired and strengthened the Buddhist circles in Europe. They were soon joined by Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka and other Buddhist countries in Asia. In recent years, there has been a marked growth of interest in Buddhism in Europe. The membership of existing Buddhist societies has increased and many new Buddhist centres have been established. Their members include large numbers of professionals and scholars. Today,

the major Buddhist traditions of Asia such as Theravada, Pure Land, Ch'an (or Zen), Vajrayana and Nichiren Shoshu, have a sizeable number of followers in Europe.

Buddhism in USA

About one-in-seven Asian Americans (14 percent) are Buddhist. Buddhism is more common among some U.S Asian groups (pewforum, 2012). Roughly four-in-ten Vietnamese Americans (43 percent) and one-in-four Japanese Americans (25 percent) are Buddhist. Among Chinese Americans, 15 percent are Buddhist. Buddhists comprise no more than 6 percent of the other major U.S. Asian groups.

While Asian Americans make up a majority of U.S. Buddhists, roughly a third of American Buddhists are non-Asian; the Pew Forum estimates that 67 percent-69 percent of Buddhists in the U.S. are Asian. Since non-Asian Buddhists are not represented in this survey, the findings of the survey should not be interpreted as representing U.S. Buddhists as a whole.

Table-1
Buddhism among US Asian Groups

Types of Buddhism Among U.S. Asian Groups				
	-----Buddhists-----			
	U.S. Asians	Vietnamese	Chinese	Japanese
	%	%	%	%
Mahayana (including Zen)	13	7	11	28
Theravada	8	7	3	1
Jodo Shinshu (vol.)	7	3	2	30
Vajrayana (Tibetan)	5	3	2	1
Vipassana	2	2	4	*
Other	2	0	*	6
Just a Buddhist (vol.)	49	60	55	27
Don't know/Refused	15	18	24	6
	100	100	100	100
	n=526	n=233	n=101	n=128

2012 Asian-American Survey. Based on Buddhists. Q31u. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

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Almost half of Asian-American Buddhists (49 percent) do not specify a particular Buddhist tradition with which they are affiliated, describing themselves as "just a Buddhist." About one-in-eight Asian-American Buddhists (13 percent) say they practice Mahayana Buddhism (including Zen and other branches), 8 percent practice Theravada Buddhism, 5 percent identify with Vajrayana (or Tibetan) Buddhism, and 2 percent identify with Vipassana Buddhism. About one-in-ten Asian-American Buddhists (8 percent) volunteered that they identify with other traditions, including Jodo Shinshu Buddhism (7 percent).

Nearly six-in-ten Japanese-American Buddhists say they practice either Jodo Shinshu (30 percent) or Mahayana Buddhism (28 percent). By contrast, a majority of Vietnamese-American and Chinese-American Buddhists say they are "just a Buddhist" (60 percent and 55 percent, respectively). There were too few Buddhists in the other country-of-origin groups to analyze separately.

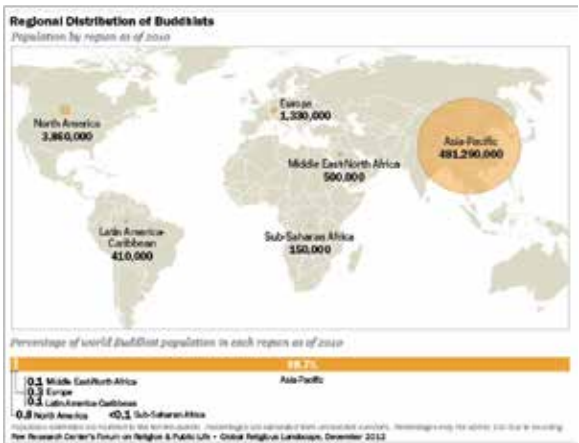
Status of Buddhism

There are about 488 million Buddhists worldwide, representing 7% of the world's total population as of 2010 (pewforum, 2012). The three major branches of Buddhism in the modern world are Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism and Vajrayana (sometimes described as Tibetan) Buddhism.¹² While affiliation with particular branches of Buddhism is not measured in most censuses and surveys, Mahayana Buddhism is widely believed to be the largest, because it is prevalent in several countries with very large

Buddhist populations, particularly China, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam. Theravada Buddhism, the second-largest branch, is concentrated in such countries as Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Sri Lanka, Laos and Cambodia. Vajrayana Buddhism, the smallest of the three major branches, is concentrated in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Mongolia. The Buddhist population figures in this study also include members of other groups that identify as Buddhist, such as Soka Gakkai and Hoa Hao.

The following Figure makes the position clear.

Figure-2
Distribution of Buddhists across Regions



Buddhism began in Asia, and the vast majority of all Buddhists (nearly 99 percent) still live in the Asia-Pacific region. Only two other regions – North America (3.9 million) and Europe (1.3 million) – have more than 1 million Buddhists.

Although the majority of Buddhists live in Asia and the Pacific, only about one-in-eight people (12 percent) in that region are Buddhists. About 1 percent of North Americans are Buddhists. In each of the other four regions, Buddhists make up less than 1 percent of the population.

All 10 countries with the largest Buddhist populations are in the Asia-Pacific region, and these countries collectively are home to the lion's share (95 percent) of all Buddhists. Half (50 percent) of the world's Buddhists live in one country, China. The largest Buddhist populations outside China are in Thailand (13 percent), Japan (9 percent), Burma (Myanmar) (8 percent), Sri Lanka (3 percent), Vietnam (3 percent), Cambodia (3 percent), South Korea (2 percent), India (2 percent) and Malaysia (1 percent).

Seven countries have Buddhist majorities: Cambodia, Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Laos and Mongolia.

Table-3
World Buddhist Population by Region

World Buddhist Population by Region			
	ESTIMATED 2010 BUDDHIST POPULATION	ESTIMATED 2010 TOTAL POPULATION	PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION THAT IS BUDDHIST
Asia-Pacific	481,290,000	4,054,990,000	11.9%
North America	3,860,000	344,530,000	1.1
Europe	1,330,000	742,550,000	0.2
Middle East/North Africa	500,000	341,020,000	0.1
Latin America/Caribbean	410,000	590,080,000	< 0.1
Sub-Saharan Africa	150,000	822,720,000	< 0.1
World Total	487,540,000	6,895,890,000	7.1

Population estimates are rounded to the nearest million. Percentages are calculated from rounded numbers. Figures may not add exactly due to rounding.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life • Global Religious Landscape, December 2012

Table-4
Ten Countries with the Largest Number of Buddhists

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	ESTIMATED 2010 BUDHIST POPULATION	PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION THAT IS BUDHIST	PERCENTAGE OF WORLD BUDHIST POPULATION
China	244,130,000	18.2 %	60.5 %
Thailand	64,420,000	93.2	13.2
Japan	45,820,000	18.2	9.4
Burma (Myanmar)	38,410,000	80.1	7.9
Sri Lanka	14,410,000	69.3	3.9
Vietnam	14,380,000	16.4	2.9
Cambodia	13,680,000	96.9	2.8
South Korea	11,060,000	22.9	2.9
India	9,250,000	0.8	1.9
Malaysia	5,050,000	17.7	1.0
Subtotal for the 10 Countries	460,420,000	15.3	84.5
Subtotal for Rest of World	20,920,000	0.7	5.5
World Total	487,340,000	7.1	100.0

Population estimates are rounded to the nearest thousands. Percentages are calculated from unrounded numbers. Figures may not add exactly due to rounding.
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