

## [Is Buddha Awakening U.S.?](#)

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## Is Buddha Awakening U.S.?

Taoists, Shintoists and Six Million Buddhists Run 600 Temples And Monasteries, Enriching America's Inner Landscape

The Saivite Nepali prince took a final glance at his beautiful wife asleep with their child, rose from bed, walked out of his palace and vowed to find the Truth. For six years he roamed as a hermit, fasting and meditating. Then, on his 35th birthday, at dusk, near Benares, he spread a mat under a fig tree, assumed the "lotus" posture and stilled his mind like a hummingbird poised mid-air. Consciousness expanded, a golden light suffused his body and he entered the Great Peace. In that supreme experience, he saw a "glittering net that unfolds across the universe" infinitely sacred and uniting all life. That singular sadhu became known as the Buddha, the "awakened one," and his reformist teachings-stressing compassion, simplicity, moderation, meditation and spiritual mindfulness-became the essence of Buddhism. For 2,600 years, saffron-robed monks carried it to most of Asia as the original light prised into three rays: Theravada, more monastic and conservative; Mahayana, more liberal and lay-oriented (the source of Zen); and Tibetan Vajrayana, the most esoteric

In the 1820s, the Buddha's path wended into San Francisco as the first wave of Chinese reached "Gold Mountain," as America is called. By 1875, there were 400 "joss houses" in California-usually incense-soaked, top-story dens, crowded with ancestral relics, little lacquered Buddhas and dusty sutra scrolls.

That's all changed. Today, spectacular, multi-million dollar Buddhist centers-from New York to California-energetically proclaim the Dharma, Buddha's teachings. Once so exclusively ethnic, Buddhism now counts Joan Baez, Tina Turner, Richard Gere and Christopher Reeves (yes, Superman) as part of its burgeoning global family.

Buddhism's resurgence, accomplishments and attraction in the US (it is also Europe's fastest growing faith)-is welcome news for Hindus who are also establishing themselves and know their sister faith's success helps insure their own.

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Buddhism's strong rise reflects not only a global interest in Asian spirituality, but also its 170 years on American soil. While Chinese Buddhists were bringing Buddhism to the Pacific Coast, Western Orientalists on the East Coast were busy imbedding it into the American academic psyche. Transcendentalist Henry Thoreau fell in love with the Lotus Sutra, translated and published much of it. In 1960, two brilliant Buddhist authors, Roshi Suzuki and Alan Watts, made Zen a household world and opened the door for Westerners to become Buddhists, not just study its message.

In 1978, a wave of immigration began from the Indochinese countries-Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma and Taiwan-bringing in one decade over a million Buddhists. Hundreds of small temples sprang up and two types of Buddhists emerged-"Asian" and "Western." Asian Buddhists bond by language, tradition, ritual. Western Buddhists bond more by philosophy and gravitate toward teachers that filter out the Asian elements and nurture the Dharma in a more universalist framework.

Clearly the most impressive development in Buddhism in America is the appearance of multi-million-dollar "Buddhist learning complexes" like the 488-acre City of 10,000 Buddhas north of San Francisco, the 30-million dollar Hsi Lai Temple near Los Angeles and the 125-acre Chuang Yen Monastery in New York. Unlike small shrines, these giant complexes are total repositories of the Dharma-with modern facilities, translating and publishing departments, year-round lay and monastic training programs-promoting traditional Buddhism on an unprecedented scale. Their greatest strength is a growing staff of well-educated, disciplined monks and nuns. The marked rise of nuns to positions of spiritual leadership-with the encouragement of the Dalai Lama-is dissolving much of the stigma that historically surrounds their elevation to high religious office.

Other Oriental faiths like Shintoism and Taoism are also on the upsurge. Rev. Yau of the Ching Chong Taoist Temple, San Francisco, emigrated to the US after his master received a divine message to send him there in 1977. A new Taoist temple he oversees in Houston, Texas, recently built a large school to educate their youth in religion and Chinese culture.

Many feel Buddhism's presence in America is part of a greater divine plan to spiritualize the materialistic giant. In the 8th century, the Tibetan Master Padmasambhava prophesied: "When the horses go on wheels, when the iron bird flies, my people shall scatter all over the world and my teachings shall come to the land of the red face." The American public's great affection for the Dalai Lama seems part of this vision. And, it is worth noting that before Christianity arrived in the US, a million Native American Indians had long nurtured a spiritually Asian outlook, especially the connectedness and divinity of all things. In this sense, today's rise of Buddhism-and other Asian faiths-in America seems more the bloom of an old tree than the import of something new.

(A valuable resource for this article was Buddhism in the US, a radio script by Pamela Michael and Sue Supriano.)

## Bhikshuni Yifa

"When my parents found out I had decided to become a nun, they were so sad they locked me up for two months. I was only 20 then and a law student at the prestigious Taiwan National University. My father so much expected me to be a lawyer and then a judge. At that time, monks in Taiwan were illiterate and Buddhism was considered superstition. So my father had this negative image. Some of my professors threatened me, "If you become a nun, you can't come to this school!" "Ridiculous!" I replied and went to the Dean and said, "Show me this law No nuns allowed! I think I must have been a monk or nun in my last life."

Reverend Yifa is an ordained priestess/nun, a disciple of Master Fo Hsing Yun, the spiritual leader of one of the world's most dynamic Buddhist institutions with multi-million dollar centers that train monks and lay Buddhists in everything from theology to art, culture and the sciences. His largest US center, where Rev. Yifa visits often, is Hsi Lai Temple, near Los Angeles. Master Yun believes an educated clergy at this time is essential for the growth of Buddhism and wants a Buddhist University in America of the caliber of Yale or Harvard. "So they needed someone with a PhD," laughs Rev. Yifa in an interview with Hinduism Today. With a law

degree in hand, she went to University of Hawaii and got an MA in Religious Studies. "It was there in Hawaii I got a letter from my father saying how proud he was of me," Rev. Yifa remarks. Then her Master sent her to Yale University where for five years she has lived as a nun-wearing her robes and shaven head and meditating daily-getting her PhD so she can serve as a professor/founder of her Master's new university. "Today, if you don't have a degree people say you aren't smart. So I got degrees and pretend to be smart," she says mirthfully. "But the most important thing is to serve. That is why I became a nun-to give faith back to the people."

Although Buddhism historically celebrated the highly learned monastic-the sprawling Nalanda Buddhist university was once the intellectual plexus of North India-the monastic tradition has suffered in recent years as parents take pride in sending their brightest children into lucrative worldly occupations, rather than religious life. Hence Buddhist monasteries have lost some of the spiritual/intellectual brilliance that so long empowered them. Reverend Yifa- and more like her-is boldly reversing this pattern and also dignifying the life of a nun. "When I look around-although Buddha welcomed women in the sangha-women have historically been a small part of this tradition. In Tibet, there are virtually no nuns. Only in China were there some. But today, when Buddhism is getting strong again, I see so many nuns who are quite outstanding. In my home monastery in Taiwan where I first trained, there were only 100 nuns when I started. Today there are 1,000. Monks are the minority!"

## Visit to Dharma Realm

Reported by Smita Patel

Passing through the golden- arched gateway into the 488-acre Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas was like entering another world. "I was blown away," my companion Michelle Nguyen, a 20-year-old Vietnamese Buddhist, admitted later. All around us were rolling hills, flowers, trees, 70 buildings, birds, peacocks, nuns walking shyly in the distance bowing before a large Buddha with fresh offerings of fruit and incense. The place was immaculate.

This "City" is unusual, conceptually nothing most Hindus are familiar with. It's a monastery, a temple, a Buddhist research and translation institute, an international Buddhist convention center, a California-accredited school (grades 1-12) and a Buddhist University offering degrees. It's unsalaried staff of teachers and administrators is 30 Buddhist lay persons and 100 monks and nuns-mostly Chinese,

but many of other nationalities. Half of the 150 students come from Chinese Buddhist families who live nearby. The other 50% are non-Chinese from local families who love sending their kids to a school where they learn virtues like compassion, respect for elders and how to meditate an hour a day!

It is a little amazing. But this sprawling lay/monastic educational/religious matrix is not new and has bigger and far wealthier precedents in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The mind behind this Buddha oasis is Master Hsuan Hua of the Wei-Yang lineage.

The community is strictly divided, men live on one side of the city and women live on the other. The Hall of the Ten Thousand Buddhas is open to both.

We visited the Instilling Goodness Primary School and the Developing Virtue Secondary School. The students were so bright and well-behaved. The classrooms were like any classroom-desks, an American flag-but in the corner a picture of the Buddha hung over the black board. When teacher Teri Nichols entered the room, the students rose and bowed to her. Students and teacher greeted each other in Chinese. (All students learn Chinese.) "In this place a bad person can become a good person," Heng Jing a novice nun from Thailand, shyly shared with us.

As we prepared to leave, two lilting voices drew us back to the Buddha Hall. This time it was packed with people bowing and praying. Two nuns chanted. Their pure, soulful voices and the haunting rhythm clung to me as we drove away from this magical Buddha abode.

## Shinto, USA

For millennia, Shintoism has inspired the Japanese' special love of beauty, refinement and their deep vision of nature as sacred. Many of Japan's 100,000 shrines are in serene forests, beside waterfalls or on mountaintops. Shinto has been, in fact, so Japanese, it never envisioned itself on foreign soil. But today, there are 3 Shinto shrines in America. Rev. Ochiai is the resident priest of the Tsubaki Grand Shrine, in Stockton, California. Though his main congregation is Japanese-with an encouraging show of teenagers- "70 percent of those who attended our last ceremony were Westerners." He recently helped officiate the opening of a shrine at the Rocky Mountain Dharma Center (photo right) in Colorado. For literature write:

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