

*Buddhism in America*, by Richard Hughes Seager

reviewed by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [July 5, 2000](#) issue

Buddhism has entered North America in ways that are transforming both the Buddhist tradition and North American culture. Images of Buddhism have inundated advertising, sports, movies and politics. The Nobel Prize laureate Dalai Lama has become one of the icons of the age. Metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago and New York have significant Buddhist populations.

But while Americans are far more aware of Buddhism than ever before, very few have any concrete knowledge of the Buddhist communities in the U.S. in all their diversity. Richard Hughes Seager, associate professor of religious studies at Hamilton College, offers a very accessible survey. He introduces major Buddhist concepts and traditions, then offers a more detailed examination of the major Buddhist communities in North America. He concludes by discussing issues such as gender equity, social engagement and intra-Buddhist and interreligious dialogue. Seager also offers brief portraits of selected Buddhist leaders and occasionally suggests analogies to Christian experience.

The diversity among Buddhists has long puzzled outsiders and challenged scholars. Buddhism has always been extremely malleable; almost any generalization about Buddhist life and practice can be contradicted by some particular tradition. As Buddhism spread from northern India to Sri Lanka and to central, east and southeast Asia, it adapted and adopted many of the customs and practices of each culture. Thai Buddhists honor Hindu gods, Chinese Buddhists practice Confucian ethics and venerate Taoist immortals, Korean Buddhists consult shamans, and Japanese Buddhists bring their children to Shinto shrines for ceremonies of dedication.

It is not surprising, then, that Buddhists in North America should transform this ancient tradition yet again. Nonetheless, the process of inculturation poses the difficult question of how much of traditional Asian Buddhist practice must be maintained in its classical forms. The differences of opinion on this topic among immigrant communities, descendants of immigrants, and converts to Buddhism can be profound. North America has become a unique meeting place for different Buddhist traditions, many of which have never before had direct contact with each

other.

Abstaining from the philosophical issues of Buddhist thought, Seager seeks to describe the developments and conflicts in Buddhist life without taking sides in partisan debates. He distinguishes three main types of Buddhist communities: older immigrant communities that have already faced issues of Americanization and inculturation for two or three generations, recent immigrants, and converts.

Immigrants from Asia, who constitute the majority of Buddhists in America, face many of the same problems that earlier Christian and Jewish immigrants from Europe confronted, and they tend to go through similar generational shifts. The first generation retains vivid memories of and fidelity to the traditions of the home country, while their children are increasingly Americanized. As Buddhist communities have assimilated into the American mainstream, they have often found it hard to maintain a religious identity and they struggle with declining memberships and revenues. Nonetheless, the third and later generations of immigrant families often express renewed interest in the traditions of their ancestors and search for religious and cultural roots. Meanwhile, a constant stream of new immigrants brings ever-renewed ties to Asian communities.

Euro-American Buddhists from Christian or Jewish backgrounds come to the tradition free of memories of Asia and often adopt certain elements of Buddhist practice while neglecting or rejecting others. Euro-American Buddhists are developing a new form of lay Buddhism that stresses meditation practice for married people with careers in the world. There is little direct precedent for this model in Asia, where only monastics engage in serious meditation, and its long-range future remains an open question.