

# Interest In Buddhism In U.S. Grows

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The room is quiet. Thin, fragrant smoke curls upward from an incense burner in front of an elaborate, ceiling-high shrine of gold. Then the pulse-quickening sound of a big gong quivers in the air.

As the vibrations fade away, the congregation rises and sings to the accompaniment of a piano or organ. The texture of the life to be, we weave in colors all our own, and in the realm of destiny, we reap as we have sown.

This is the beginning of a Buddhist worship service in America, and this week, there's a special tilt to the hymns and sermons dedicated to this ancient religion of love, wisdom and moderation.

It is 2,500 years old. Although various Buddhist branches differ in calculating the time, the anniversary is being generally observed around the world. In America it comes at a period of busy doings in Buddhism.

### Becomes Better Known

"Its truths are becoming better known in this country," said the Rev. Hosen Seki, pastor of the New York Buddhist Church and president of the newly formed American Buddhist Academy.

The academy has bought a site in Upper Manhattan, and plans to start a full-fledged school on Buddhism there next fall to train students as ministers (bhikkhus) and offer courses to Christian scholars.

There are now about 60 Buddhist temples in the United States, with about 75,000 members, most of them of Oriental ancestry, but in recent years, there has been a growing organization of Buddhists of Western ancestry.

### 100 Western Members

It's called the First Zen Institute of America. Its president is Dr. George Fowler, a University of Pittsburgh professor, and it has about 100 members spread across the country.

"Buddhism is definitely growing in this country," said Mrs. Mae Firkas, the institute's executive secretary. "Interest in it is increasing every day. We are expecting quite a significant future."

One of the world's major faiths, embracing a half billion Asians or about a fourth of the world's population, Buddhism has a brotherly affection for other great religions, such as Judaism and Christianity.

### Don't Try To Convert

"We don't try to convert," said the Rev. Mr. Seki, a soft-spoken, Japanese-educated minister, whose pretty, American-born wife, Satomi, plays the piano at his church. "We try to give light."

That "enlightenment" is what all good Buddhists seek — an awakening to reality that lifts them above selfish human desires — and allows them finally to merge, like raindrops slipping into the broad sea, into universal love and peace — "nirvana."

Generally, this is not considered a "heaven" populated by individuals, but a blending of self into a higher, overall existence — whose exact nature is unknown. To Buddhists, man goes through heaven and hell on earth before he attains it.

### Buddha Man, Truths

Despite widespread misconceptions on the point, believers do not consider the historical man, "Buddha," a god. Rather, it is the truths which he perfectly embodied — also called "Buddha" — which is the object of worship. The familiar Buddhist statues are not of the man, but symbols of the ideals.

The man was an Indian prince, named Siddhartha Gautama, who abandoned his luxurious surroundings, and after 49 days of meditation under a bo tree, promulgated his famous "four noble truths" and "noble eightfold path" to achieve them.

### Teaches "Middle Way"

Basically, this means following the great "middle way" — a mode of temperate conduct, that disavows both overindulgence and asceticism, and clings to pursuit of knowledge, compassion, diligence and integrity.

This path is believed to lead to acceptance of the fundamental truths — that human suffering is conquered only by conquering selfish desire.

To Buddhists, an ordinary human being doesn't reach this stage in a lifetime, but his deeds, thoughts and influence flow into the long cycle of death and re-birth — the "wheel" of unending cause and effect — the law of Karma.

### 54 Books Tell Rules

To expand these essentials, there are 54 books — 15,000 pages — of Buddhist scripture — the Tipitaka — that details the vast lore of Gautama's teachings, and the massive doctrine and rules of discipline that have evolved.

A body of scholars are now translating the entire work into English.

Like Protestant Christianity, Buddhism arose as a revolt against ritualism, and dogma and priestly authority.

In this country, there are four main Mahayan Buddhist sects — the "Shin-shu," with about 45 churches, the "Zen-shu," with 3, the Shin Gon-shu, with 7 and the Jyodo-shu, with 3.

### Sunday Services

The Rev. Mr. Seki, a minister of the major Shin-shu group, each Sunday sheds his weekday business suit and dons the black robe and string of beads of the traditional Buddhist bhikkhu.

About 50 members gather in his little church.

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