



***Diverse Practices and Flexible Beliefs among  
Young Adult Asian American Buddhists***

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**Abstract:** The increasingly criticized “two Buddhisms” dichotomy in scholarly and popular literature bifurcates American Buddhism into two separate groups: white converts who are focused on meditation, and Asian immigrants who engage in devotional practices. This paper builds on critiques of the “two Buddhisms” model by demonstrating the importance of attending to generation as a factor of analysis when studying American Buddhists. Specifically, this study analyzes the diverse practices and nuanced beliefs of twenty-six young adult Asian American Buddhists from a diverse range of ethnic and sectarian backgrounds. In their open-minded attitudes toward a wide range of Buddhist practices and multivalent interpretations of various Buddhist beliefs, these young adults challenge simplistic representations of Asian American Buddhists and present an inclusive vision of Buddhism that embraces nuance, ambiguity, and change.

**Keywords:** Buddhism in America; Asian American Buddhist; young adult; generation

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## Introduction

In studies of American Buddhism, Asian American Buddhists are typically situated within a “two Buddhisms” typology that posits “two distinct and mutually isolated brands of Buddhism practiced by groups composed largely of Asian Americans, on one hand, and Euro-Americans, on the other” (Tanaka, 1998: 287). Contrasting sets of appellations are used to differentiate these two types of Buddhism/Buddhists,<sup>1</sup> including Asian/Western, devotional/rational, traditional/modern, and ethnic/convert (Tworkov, 1991; Nattier, 1995; Numrich, 1996; Fields, 1998; Prebish and Tanaka, 1998; Tanaka, 2000; Coleman, 2001; Gregory, 2001; Lawton, 2001; Prebish and Baumann, 2002; Numrich, 2003; Seager, 2012; Todd, 2012). Within this schema, we are told that “Western” and “white” Buddhists—two categories that are, unfortunately, frequently conflated—focus on meditation practice in keeping with their rational and modernist bent, while “Asian” and “Asian American Buddhists”—again, two distinct labels that are often conflated—are said to prefer the more traditional and devotional rituals of chanting and

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<sup>1</sup> As David Machacek (2001: 65) astutely points out, these typologies are not always clear about “whether it is the Buddhism or the Buddhist that is being classified.”

bowing. It is uncomfortably easy to guess which group is more likely to be denigrated as “superstitious” and which is more likely to be celebrated as “scientific.”

These racialized dichotomies contribute to what Arun, the pseudonymous young adult Asian American Buddhist writer behind the blog “Angry Asian Buddhist,” calls a “stereotypology of Asian American Buddhists” (2014). Illustrating his point with links to several examples in the popular media, Arun challenges homogenizing representations of Asian American Buddhists as, *inter alia*, those who tend to “carry a more supernatural bent” and “focus [their] energies into holidays and spiritual beliefs instead of meditative practices” while attending temples that are “just ethnic social clubs”—characterizations that fit a “superstitious immigrant” trope (*ibid.*).<sup>2</sup>

Though Charles Prebish’s 1979 coining of the term “two Buddhisms” was meant to differentiate between “two completely distinct lines of development in American Buddhism” based on organizational stability, the heuristic has become, to his surprise, strongly racialized (Prebish, 1993: 187). Interestingly, this racialization is used to both praise and critique the “two Buddhisms” model. Paul Numrich, a proponent and defender of the model, believes it brings useful attention to preexisting racial inequalities in American Buddhism (Numrich, 2003: 65–67). Critics of the model, on the other hand, argue that it serves to perpetuate these very racial inequalities by obscuring the racism, Orientalism, and white privilege/supremacy that underpin the model’s logic (Quli, 2009; Hickey, 2010; Cheah, 2011; Spencer, 2014; Bao, 2015).

Critics of “two Buddhisms” deploy a range of arguments. For example, placing Asian and white Buddhists into antithetical categories essentializes both groups and erases people who fall outside the model’s binaries, such as African American Buddhists and Asian American convert Buddhists. White Buddhists who prefer “devotional” practices or Asian American Buddhists who are more “rational” are not accounted for—or, for that matter, Buddhists of *any* racial background whose practices and beliefs include a mix of both “types.” Furthermore, the “two Buddhisms” model promotes double standards that exempt white Buddhists from being labeled “ethnic”<sup>3</sup> or being expected to practice a form of Buddhism that matches their ethnicity,<sup>4</sup> and from always being identified by their immigrant status.<sup>5</sup> These critiques are largely based on theoretical reflections as well as empirical evidence from surveys and ethnographies of older immigrants of

2 Jane Iwamura (2010) offers a trenchant analysis of the racialized stereotypes underpinning visual representations of another trope that Arun brings up: the “Oriental Monk” figure.

3 Jiemin Bao (2015) challenges the label of “ethnic” temples with its connotations of monoethnicity by detailing how members of a Thai temple in Silicon Valley are of multiple ethnic and even racial backgrounds. Other scholars also comment on the diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds of those at the “ethnic” Buddhist temples where they conducted fieldwork (Lin, 1999; Yang and Ebaugh, 2001: 279; Perreira, 2004).

4 Americans of Filipino, Indian, and Indonesian heritage—as majority Catholic, Hindu, and Muslim populations, respectively—certainly undermine this ethno-religious assumption for Asian American Buddhists.

5 Martin Baumann (2002: 53–54) questions the use of the immigrant label, often seen as “a term of social and political exclusion,” to describe the children and grandchildren of Buddhists from Asia who emigrated to the US.

specific Asian ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Burmese (Cheah, 2011), Japanese (Spencer, 2014), Korean (Suh, 2004), Sri Lankan and Thai (Numrich, 1996), and Taiwanese (Chen, 2008)).

Another important point raised by the authors of these ethnographic studies is the absence of young adults at the Asian American Buddhist communities where they conducted fieldwork, suggesting that temples may not be the optimal place to search for this demographic.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, young adult voices from American Buddhists of *any* racial background are not easy to come by. When interviewed about what motivated her to gather voices from an emerging generation of young Buddhists in the West for her anthology *Blue Jean Buddha*, Sumi Loundon explains: “I was lonely... the book gave me a community of [other young] dharma peers” (Bowen, 2011). To find young American Buddhists, Loundon reached out to the children of adults at a meditation retreat center, who then connected her to other young adult Buddhists across the country.<sup>7</sup>

In this article, I build on critiques of “two Buddhisms” by considering generation as a factor of analysis along with race. While some scholars (e.g. Spencer, 2014: 38) have commented on the importance of applying a generational lens to American Buddhism, studies that reflect sustained attention to this key dimension remain a lacuna in the literature. I argue that considering the experiences and perspectives of young adult Asian American Buddhists (YAAABs) as a panethnic, pan-Buddhist group further reveals the limitations of the “two Buddhisms” typology. Specifically, I demonstrate that the diverse practices and nuanced beliefs of twenty-six YAAABs challenge reductionist representations of Asian American Buddhists as not meditating, engaging exclusively in “ritual” or “devotional” practices such as making offerings at temples (Prebish, 1999: 63), and belonging to the “parent tradition of their community” as “Buddhists by inheritance” (Loundon, 2001: 215). Prebish himself has conceded that “Buddhism in America is incredibly diverse and no longer seems to fit into the neat typologies of previous decades” (2006). This article highlights some of this present-day diversity by foregrounding the perspectives of YAAABs. This focus also serves to counter the marginalization of Asian American Buddhists, who are underrepresented in popular and scholarly literature despite being the racial majority within American Buddhism.<sup>8</sup>

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6 For example, Wendy Cadge (2005: 15) finds “no automatic second generation” at a Thai temple and meditation center near Philadelphia; the average age of her interviewees is 45. Sharon Suh (2004: 53–56) comments on the lack of participation by second-generation and college-age members at a Korean Buddhist temple in Los Angeles. Carolyn Chen (2008: 36) observes that one of her field sites, a Taiwanese Buddhist temple in Southern California, struggles to attract youth to its religious education programs. Only a small number of the 407 Shin Buddhists surveyed by Anne Spencer (2004) are below the age of 30 (personal communication).

7 Approximately one-quarter of the teenage and young adult contributors to *Blue Jean Buddha* are of Asian heritage, compared to one-third of the contributors to Loundon’s follow-up anthology *The Buddha’s Apprentices*.

8 More than two-thirds of American Buddhists are of Asian heritage (Pew Resesearch Center, 2012: 33).

## Methods

Asian Americans hail from more than forty countries and speak over 150 languages and dialects, forming a “community of contrasts”<sup>9</sup> characterized by difference as much as, if not more than, similarity. In a similar vein, the presence of a mind-boggling variety of Buddhist groups leads many to speak of plural Buddhisms in America. Thus, the category of “Asian American Buddhist” encompasses people from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and Buddhist persuasions. Given that the categories “Asian American” and “Buddhist” contain enormous diversity and lend themselves to definitional ambiguity,<sup>10</sup> combining the two creates an even more complicated construct: Is “Asian” a geographic or racial category? Do “sympathizers,” to borrow Thomas Tweed’s (1999) expression, count as “Buddhist”? “Young adult” is also a slippery term with nebulous boundaries, making it even more difficult to pinpoint precise parameters for “young adult Asian American Buddhist.”

Aware of the definitional ambiguities inherent in each of the identifiers of “young adult,” “Asian American,” and “Buddhist,” I opted for considerable latitude when recruiting interviewees for this project: I defined “young adult” as someone between the ages of 18 and 39 (though I ended up interviewing a couple “young at heart” participants in their 40s); “Asian American” as anyone living in America of full or partial Asian heritage, regardless of immigrant status; and “Buddhist” as anyone engaged with Buddhism without requiring self-identification with the label of “Buddhist.”

These definitional ambiguities, along with the lack of representative databases of Asian American Buddhists, dissuaded me from attempting a random sampling method for my research on YAAABs. I was interested in compiling not a *sample* but “a *set of cases* with particular characteristics that, rather than being ‘controlled away’, should be understood, developed, and incorporated into [my] understanding of the cases at hand” (Small, 2009: 14, emphasis added).

Existing studies of Asian American religions are dominated by a congregational analysis model, which itself reflects a shift from earlier denominational approaches within the sociology of religions more broadly. In a review of the literature on the religions of post-1965 American immigrants, Wendy Cadge and Elaine Ecklund (2007) argue for more macro- and micro-level studies as a corrective to this overfocus on local religious organizations as a unit of analysis. This study takes up their call to examine “more micro contexts focused on individuals’ experiences outside of religious gatherings” (ibid., 2007: 360), an approach that is arguably more apropos of a study that aims to investigate the range of ethnicities and Buddhist affiliations that can fall under the umbrella of “young adult Asian American Buddhist.” Thus, I do not focus on a single Buddhist group or organization in this study.

<sup>9</sup> I borrow this phrase from the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (2011).

<sup>10</sup> For example, a recent US Census report includes Iran and Turkmenistan in its definition of Asia (Gryn and Gambino, 2012), while another excludes these countries in its definition of “Asian” (Hoeffel et al., 2012).

Taking a cue from the networked and decentralized approach Sumi Loundon used when seeking contributors for her anthologies, I set up a website with a call for participants in January 2013. I also introduced my project to potential interviewees at various Bay Area Buddhist conferences and events, including the March 2013 TechnoBuddha conference for young adult Buddhists in Berkeley, California. To further expand my pool of potential interviewees, I asked each participant to recommend other YAAABs to contact for the project at the end of our interview. Some interviewees could not recommend any names; at the other extreme, a couple interviewees recommended more than a dozen individuals. As such, a limitation of this study is that certain networks are likely to be overrepresented.

The Angry Asian Buddhist (a.k.a. Arun), with whom my master's thesis advisor put me in touch via email at the start of my project, took the initiative to write a blog post encouraging people to contact me for an interview or to share about the project with their networks. The importance of social media in recruiting interviewees for this project is fitting for a generation marked by rapid advances in digital technology. About half of my twenty-six in-person interviewees initiated contact for an interview, having heard about my project online or through word of mouth. Given this multipronged, multimodal approach to recruiting interviewees, I do not know the exact number of people who considered completing an interview with me, thus making it impossible to calculate the response rate.

Though digital technologies played an important role in connecting me to potential participants, I conducted the first set of face-to-face, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews entirely in person from December 2012 to September 2013. Interview locations were selected based on convenience for participants: we met in cafes, college campuses, Buddhist temples, and homes in both the San Francisco Bay Area (twenty-two interviews) and Southern California (four interviews). I followed up with these interviewees by email if I needed to clarify any points.

A limitation of conducting interviews in this manner is that I was not able to observe these YAAABs' practices and communities in situ. Had I attempted this fieldwork component, however, I would have found myself traipsing from Southern California to Northern California to France to Uganda, going to dozens of temples and meditation centers, meeting Buddhist teachers and dharma friends of different ages and races/ethnicities—and this would have been in order to follow just one of my interviewees. For those whose Buddhist lives are less community-oriented, I would have had to peer over shoulders to watch dharma talks on computer screens, or plant myself in bedrooms with makeshift meditation corners and personalized home altars.

All twenty-six in-person interviewees granted me permission to audio-record their interviews. Interviews ranged from 1.5 to more than 5 hours, and averaged ~2.5 hours each. I subsequently transcribed the more than seventy hours of conversation from the audio files and draw on these transcripts throughout this paper. I perused these transcripts multiple times to search for common themes and patterns to supplement

the more quantitative observations of the particular sections of the interview analyzed in this article, which I elaborate below. When quoting interviewees, I stay as closely as possible to the original, though for the sake of readability I have edited out fillers such as “um” and “like” and made minor corrections and grammatical changes without the use of square brackets.

My extensive interview protocol consisted of seven sections with questions about interviewees’:

1. Cultural and religious backgrounds
2. Buddhist practices (with an interactive card-sorting activity)
3. Buddhist beliefs (with an eighteen-question survey)
4. Buddhist communities
5. Opinions about the representation of Buddhism in America
6. Responses to four different viewpoints about Asian American Buddhists
7. Suggestions for other interviewees, questions for other Asian American Buddhists, and questions about me and my research project

This article is based on an analysis of sections #2 and #3 above. It is worth noting that to accommodate requests from YAAABs who were unable to complete an in-person interview due to geographic distance or scheduling difficulties, I adapted the in-person interviews to an email format and conducted a second round of sixty-three email interviews in summer 2014. These interviews did *not* include the card sort and survey, so the data from these respondents are ancillary to this paper. I draw sparingly on these email interviewees in this paper insofar as they help illuminate the results from sections #2 and #3 of my twenty-six in-person interviews.

In order to learn about YAAABs’ religious practices and beliefs, I designed an interactive card-sorting activity about Buddhist practices and a survey about Buddhist beliefs to provide a common framework for comparison across interviews.<sup>11</sup> Open-ended, semi-structured interview questions following each activity gave interviewees an opportunity to express the reasoning behind their choices in both the card sort and the survey. For the card sort, each person was given a stack of cards labeled with practices associated with Buddhism and asked to sort these practices into two columns, separating those they had done from those they had not. In addition, participants were asked to rank the practices they had done based on the current importance of this activity in their life, and to rank the practices they had not done based on their interest level in trying them. For the survey, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with eighteen different statements related to Buddhism on a scale of 1 to 7 (see Appendix 1).

In choosing which practices to list on the cards and which statements to put on the surveys, I inevitably impose my own frameworks of interpretation. It is arguably impossible to create an objective, comprehensive list of Buddhist practices and beliefs; my lists are not intended to be neutral or complete. This study serves as a preliminary

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<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to the late Amy Frohnmayer Winn for the idea of using a card-sorting exercise, a method she employed in her psychological research on young adults with Fanconi anemia.

inquiry into the beliefs and practices of Asian American Buddhists. My aim is not to offer statistically representative data, but to provide a glimpse into the remarkable heterogeneity of this understudied group, and to model an alternate methodological approach that can supplement the surveys and temple-based ethnographies commonly used in studies of American Buddhists.

## Results and Discussion

### *Interviewee Demographics*

The twenty-six YAAABs I interviewed in person range in age from 19 to 41: most are in their 20s and 30s, with an average age of 28. Fourteen identify as male and twelve as female.<sup>12</sup> Only three of the participants are married and none have children.

Nine interviewees are ethnically Chinese, four are of Japanese ancestry, and four identify as Vietnamese.<sup>13</sup> Three people are of mixed heritage and the remaining trace their ancestry to Southeast, South, Central, and West Asia.<sup>14</sup> Many ethnicities are missing—Burmese, Korean, Sri Lankan, Thai, and Tibetan, to name a few—but the group is nonetheless quite diverse.<sup>15</sup> Eighteen of the twenty-six interviewees use an Asian language to communicate with family and (less frequently) for work purposes; of the

12 It is important to acknowledge that there is a spectrum of gender identities, though all participants in this particular group identify as either male or female.

13 The fact that Chinese are the largest group of interviewees may not be surprising, given that the largest Asian origin group in America is Chinese (Pew Research Center, 2013, viii). The six largest Asian American groups are Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese, though religious identities vary with these groups: “about half of Chinese are unaffiliated, most Filipinos are Catholic, about half of Indians are Hindu, most Koreans are Protestant and a plurality of Vietnamese are Buddhist. Among Japanese Americans, no one group is dominant: 38% are Christian, 32% are unaffiliated and 25% are Buddhist. In total, 26% of Asian Americans are unaffiliated, 22% are Protestant (13% evangelical; 9% mainline), 19% are Catholic, 14% are Buddhist, 10% are Hindu, 4% are Muslim and 1% are Sikh” (ibid., 8).

14 The range of ethnic self-identifications is evident in participants’ listed ethnicities on a demographic form I asked each interviewee to complete. I have grouped these self-identifications under seven categories for ease of comparison.

#### Chinese

“Asian” (2)

“Chinese”

“Chinese-American” [with a hyphen]

“Chinese American” [no hyphen]

“Chinese Indonesian”

“Han Chinese (Taiwanese-American)”

“Taiwanese”

“Taiwanese/Chinese”

#### Japanese

“Japanese” (3)

“Japanese American”

#### Vietnamese

“Vietnamese” (4)

#### Mixed heritage

“Asian/Caucasian”

“Half Asian”

“Chinese/Ashkenazi”

#### Southeast Asian

“Cambodian”

“Laotian American”

#### South Asian

“Indian”

“South Asian (Indian)”

#### Central and West Asian

“Iranian”

“Turkmen”

15 Of the participants of mixed heritage, one is half-Korean and another is half-Filipino. Korean Buddhists in the US are vastly outnumbered by Korean Christians, a phenomenon Sharon Suh (2004) outlines in her book *Being Buddhist in a Christian World*.

remaining eight, several are learning the language of their heritage and/or have basic proficiency in that language.

While some interviewees practice a more “privatized”<sup>16</sup> form of Buddhism, the number of Buddhist temples and meditation centers that these twenty-six interviewees have attended far exceeds the total number of interviewees. The “types”<sup>17</sup> of Buddhism that they associate themselves with also cover a tremendous range, and are not always consonant with their ethnic background—for example, interviewees of Chinese ethnicity did not necessarily (or exclusively) practice Chinese Buddhism.

Three of the interviewees are undergraduate students, while the remainder are working or pursuing post-undergraduate education. The high level of educational attainment of this group is not representative of all young adult Asian Americans, though popular media might lead us to expect otherwise.<sup>18</sup> Greater attention to considerations of class, education, and socioeconomic background is needed in future studies of YAAABs; regrettably these were not key factors of analysis in my study. However, it is important to clarify that although my twenty-six in-person interviewees are all college-educated, they do not come from uniformly high-income backgrounds: though I did not explicitly ask questions about socioeconomic status, stories about their economic hardships as children of immigrant and refugee parents, and as young adults seeking to become more established in their careers, surfaced during the interviews.

### *A Generational Lens*

Peter Gregory (2001) considers the “taxonomical” question of how to categorize American Buddhists to be “one of the central tasks facing researchers [in the field of American Buddhist studies] today” (239). When I ask Anthuan,<sup>19</sup> a Vietnamese American graduate of the Buddhist chaplaincy program at the University of the West, how he would tackle this task of categorizing American Buddhists, he acknowledges Charles Prebish, Jan Nattier, and other scholars who developed “two Buddhisms” before declaring that this model can no longer keep pace with newer generations of American Buddhists. He insists, “Even if you just research within Asian American Buddhists, there’s huge diversity... We’ve moved beyond the immigrant versus convert categories.” Reflecting a generational consciousness, he envisions a “next wave” of Buddhists that is “something that young adults could align with—not your parents’ Buddhism, not your grandparents’ Buddhism.” As part of this “next wave,” Anthuan predicts that two

16 I borrow this term from Tanaka (2007).

17 Or lineages, schools, branches, etc. Interviewees’ ways of referring to this concept vary, with some considering themselves “just Buddhist.”

18 Jane Iwamura (2012) criticizes the tendency media’s to perpetuate a problematic “model minority” stereotype by pointing to how tagging Asian Americans as “the best-educated, highest-income, fastest-growing race group in the country” only serves to “[obscure] sharp disparities within a highly diverse population.”

19 Throughout this article, I respect the stated anonymity and confidentiality preferences of my interviewees. Thus, some names are real and others are pseudonyms. For consistency, I use only first names when referring to interviewees, though some gave permission for their full names to be used. Unless noted, these names refer to in-person interviewees rather than email interviewees.

Buddhists from disparate racial and geographic backgrounds could sit down and have something in common—a vision that the “two Buddhisms” model largely precludes.

Noel,<sup>20</sup> a Filipino American convert Buddhist and former classmate of Anthuan’s, also takes generation into consideration when responding to the question of how he would categorize American Buddhists:

Many Asian people might say, “I’m first-generation American or I’m third-generation American.” I think we can use this for Buddhism. By indicating a “generation,” one could still value one’s Buddhism (just like a first-gen American is as much an American as a fifth-gen American), but it also gives insight where a person falls in the induction of Buddhism in one’s life and background. I might call myself a first-generation Buddhist. Someone from Japan might call herself a multi-gen Buddhist, indicating her family’s long history and tradition.

Noel’s generational focus offers a corrective to another shortcoming of the “two Buddhisms” model: a lack of attention to the dimension of time. By dividing American Buddhists primarily into racial categories, the “two Buddhisms” model tends toward positing static identities. Thus, first-generation Asian American immigrant Buddhists are lumped together with their children, grandchildren, and so forth—and all of them are rendered indistinguishable from Asian Americans who convert to Buddhism—while white baby boomer Buddhists are equated with white millennial meditators.

An astute reader will notice that the concept of generation takes on three senses in the two paragraphs above:

- A. The generation an individual is born into, which draws attention to the unique historical circumstances of that era;
- B. How many generations an individual’s family has lived in the US, which draws attention to the ways immigrant generations are distinct; and
- C. The number of generations of Buddhists in an individual’s family, which draws attention to religious transmission as a factor of analysis.

These generations need not be identical: for example, a fourth-generation Japanese American can be a “first-gen” American Buddhist. To avoid ambiguity, in this article I spell out “generation” when applying it to the more common sense of immigration status and use the shortened form “gen”—e.g. “second-gen” instead of “second-generation”—when referring to the Buddhist-related sense described by Noel. In this article, I consider the perspectives of a diverse group of Asian American Buddhists that includes (A) millennials skewed toward the older side of their generation and younger

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<sup>20</sup> An email interviewee.

Generation Xers<sup>21</sup>; (B) first- to fifth-generation Asian Americans; and (C) first-gen (or “convert”), second-gen, and multi-gen<sup>22</sup> American Buddhists by Noel’s definition.

### *Buddhist Practices Card Sort*

*That was fun... and hard!*, exclaimed several participants after completing the card-sorting exercise. Each interviewee had been given an alphabetized stack of cards to sort.<sup>23</sup> Some interviewees sorted the cards with aplomb, while others painstakingly puzzled over where to place each one. Columns, clusters, arcs, and lines of cards emerged before my eyes. The layouts—some compact and others sprawling—are reminiscent of signatures, each bearing the distinctiveness of its signer. These signatures cannot convey the full complexity of these young adult Asian Americans’ Buddhist practices, but they do reveal something about the contours of their religious lives.

The fact that the Buddhist practices listed on the cards lend themselves to divergent interpretations, along with the lack of standardization in the way the cards were arrayed, made it difficult to quantitatively analyze the results from the card-sorting activity. Ultimately, I found it helpful to map out each participant’s sorted cards by stratifying the practices into multiple levels<sup>24</sup> within the “have done” and “have not done” columns. This method is far from perfect: Some participants have done almost all of the practices, making it difficult to rank the few remaining practices in the “have not done” column. Others find it difficult to rank practices that they see as interconnected, overlapping, and/or equally important, and thus choose multiple cards for their top and bottom rows in the practices that they had done. These “top” clusters contain as many as nine cards, thereby complicating comparison with participants who rank their cards in one long vertical line. The discussion section after the activity was therefore indispensable for gaining insight into how interviewees relate to these Buddhist practices, and factors greatly into my discussion of the card sort activity below.

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21 By contrast, sociologists of religion have focused on Baby Boomer and older Gen X American Buddhists. For example, the average age of Wendy Cadge’s (2005: 15) interviewees is 45. Of the twenty-five women Sharon Suh (2004: 53–56) interviewed, only two are under 40, while the majority of the twenty-five men are above the age of 40. The fifty Taiwanese American Buddhists and Christians that Carolyn Chen (2008: 12) interviewees range in age from 35 to 55; all but two are married.

22 Here I refer to number of generations of being Buddhist *in America*. Thus, second-gen YAAABs are 1.5- or second-generation immigrants raised by Buddhist parents who immigrated to the US. The prototypical example of “multi-gen” American Buddhists are Japanese American Shin Buddhists who have been living as Buddhists in America for multiple generations.

23 Namely: academic studies of Buddhism, attending ceremonies, bowing, celibacy, chanting/recitation, community service, copying sutras, home altar, listening to Dharma talks, meditation (movement/walking), meditation (seated), offering donations, ordination, pilgrimage, prayer beads, reading about Buddhism, relic worship, repentance, retreats, studying sutras, talking about the Dharma, taking precepts, taking refuge, vegetarianism, and volunteering at a temple/center. At the bottom of the stack was an “Other” card. “Home altar” and “prayer beads” are unique in that they are objects that other practices can map onto (for instance, one can chant at a home altar or meditate with prayer beads). The practices also differ along the dimension of time: some practices, such as ordination and pilgrimage, are special occasions rather than regular occurrences.

24 Top, upper (when applicable), middle, lower (when applicable), and bottom levels.

### Respecting diversity

The young adult Asian American Buddhists I interviewed have engaged in an impressively diverse array of Buddhist practices. All but three participants placed more cards under the “have done” than the “have not done” section. Several are surprised to discover how many practices they have done, as this is their first time enumerating their Buddhist practices in this manner. One person has done every practice except one; no one in the group has the opposite profile of having only done one practice. Every participant has done community service, seated meditation, and offering donations. Bowing, listening to dharma talks, and reading about Buddhism are close runners-up, with 25 of 26 participants indicating that they have done each one. Other practices that the vast majority of these YAAABs have done include attending ceremonies, chanting/recitation, and movement/walking meditation (24 of 26 participants for each); as well as vegetarianism and volunteering at a temple or center (23 of 26 participants for each).

Seated meditation is in the upper portion of approximately two-thirds of the arrangements, indicating its importance to many of the YAAABs that I interviewed. This contradicts characterizations of Asian American Buddhists as non-meditators. Those who practice meditation often mix different techniques from multiple Buddhist traditions. Some interviewees even expand the definition of meditation to include activities such as repentance and copying sutras, thereby challenging the reduction of meditation to mindfulness as is often seen in popular media.

It is noteworthy that a third of interviewees place meditation in the middle or lower portion of their layouts, indicating that though they have done meditation before, it is not among their most important Buddhist practices. The four Jodo Shinshu Buddhists I interviewed do not place a strong emphasis on meditation. As Landon explains, “we don’t focus on that in our sect of Buddhism,” though he finds meditation and yoga beneficial for mental and physical health. Ratema, a second-gen Cambodian Buddhist, learned seated meditation in a non-Buddhist context—through a nonprofit program serving Southeast Asian youth—and does not consider it to be an important part of her Buddhist practice: “meditation is different than the Buddhism I practice or my family practices.” These examples suggest that as meditation becomes increasingly mainstream among this generation, second-gen and multi-gen YAAABs may be exposed to these practices, even if they come from Buddhist traditions that do not emphasize the practice. My interviewees’ levels of engagement with meditation practices fall along a spectrum, suggesting that defining young adult Asian American Buddhists as either meditators or non-meditators obscures a more complex reality.

Were these YAAABs to adhere neatly to the expectations of “two Buddhisms” model, they would be engaging exclusively in more “ritualistic” practices such as bowing, chanting, ceremonies, and relic worship—which were all listed among the cards they sorted. Yet, as with meditation, their engagement with these four practices varies. In discussing these purportedly more “devotional” practices, participants convey mixed emotions: confusion about their meaning, respect for their origins, as well as resistance to being labeled as “superstitious” for engaging in these practices.

Several interviewees express discomfort with the “relic worship” card because they do not associate the word “worship” with Buddhism. Three of the Shin Buddhist participants mention “paying respect” to relics on the altar but, as Landon insists, “it’s not like Christ on the altar,” rejecting etic comparisons of Shin Buddhism to Christianity.<sup>25</sup> Brandi, a second-gen Taiwanese American Buddhist explains how her fear that “relic worship” will be negatively judged impacts her willingness to be open about doing the practice: “It sounds fishy to me. But then at the same time, you know, I think stupas mostly have relics in them, and certainly I’ve related to those as objects of devotion. So I’d say, yes, I’ve done that... but at the same time it’s a practice that I wouldn’t want to tell people right away that I do.” These comments may reflect a Buddhist modernist bias that pressures those “who engage with ritual practices [to] speak as apologists” (Ng, 2001: 257). We might consider this need for apologetics to be a negative consequence of “two Buddhisms” that disproportionately affects Asian American Buddhists, who are marginalized as non-Christians *and* are much more likely to be considered “superstitious” than white convert Buddhists—a “double bind of marginalization” (Iwamura et al., 2014: 5).

Indeed, among my broader pool of eighty-nine interviewees, such apologetics emerged as a recurrent theme in our conversations. Some YAAABs spoke of being reluctant to openly identify as Buddhist because they perceived themselves as unable to articulate the practices and tenets of their faith as they saw Christians doing. Others are, like Brandi, wary of being judged or dismissed, by both Christians and “mainstream” white Buddhists alike, as “unreflexive” or “superstitious.” These concerns reveal the personal impact that racialized stereotypes have on Asian American Buddhists, a topic that merits further study. Of course, self-censorship is not the only response to such stereotyping—as evidenced by the outspoken “Angry Asian Buddhist blog”—but it is a facet worthy of consideration when designing research concerning this population. Had I opted for a “pay respect to relics” instead of a “relic worship” card, the card sort results and ensuing discussions around Buddhist practices may well have been different. Had I required self-identification as a Buddhist to be a prerequisite of participating in my research project, I would have missed the valuable perspectives of YAAABs who are ambivalent around identifying as “Buddhist” and/or reluctant to “out” themselves as Buddhist.

Many interviewees are also wary of negative associations with other devotional practices that are generally considered to be the province of “Asian immigrant” rather than “white convert” Buddhists. Clarissa, a Chinese American who came to Buddhism after being raised Christian, describes her “contentious relationship” with bowing because of its “connotations of Asian submissiveness.” Michael, a second-gen YAAAB who practices in multiple Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist communities, has corrected others’ misperceptions of bowing as “idolistic” by reframing the practice as a way to reduce ego and attain equanimity. He is saddened when Buddhist ceremonies are dismissed as

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25 Michael Masatsugu (2008: 446) comments on how Shin Buddhism has been “criticized for its similarity to the Christian concepts of faith and redemption by the Christian God.”

inferior to the more “philosophical” aspects of Buddhism. As with bowing and chanting, Michael hopes ceremonies can be recognized as a legitimate form of Buddhist practice: “what I deeply hope is that people at the very minimum acknowledge that there is a ritual component in Buddhism... And, for me personally, it’s quite important, because that was what I was built up from.”

Michael might be heartened to learn how people like him are the reason Andy, a second-gen Taiwanese American Buddhist, went from dismissing Buddhist ceremonies to appreciating them. Andy notes, “I played off the ceremonies as just Chinese superstition, and as unnecessary to Buddhism... but after talking with some other Buddhists, I realized, this is as much of Buddhism as everything else is. This is how they found Buddhism. So I can’t just throw it away and disrespect it.” This attitude of open-mindedness and respect is a hallmark of my interviewees’ engagement with Buddhism. In embracing the heterogeneity and diversity of Buddhist practices rather than insisting that “authentic” Buddhists must engage in a single practice such as meditation, these YAAABs push back against reducing Asian American Buddhists to devotional or “superstitious” practices.

#### Multivalent interpretations

In discussing the card-sorting activity, interviewees provide a range of interpretations for each practice. Many interviewees ask for clarification around the meaning of “relic worship” and “repentance,” while some do not understand “taking refuge” and “taking precepts.” “Pilgrimage” evokes a kaleidoscope of meanings: visiting Buddhist sites in India, journeying to sacred mountains and temples in China and Japan, or even visiting Vietnamese Buddhist temples in San Jose. Interviewees variously define “ordination” as monastic or lay, temporary or permanent. One Vietnamese American participant interprets it to mean the ceremony of receiving a Buddhist name upon birth, while an Indian American interviewee defines it to mean the more involved process of ordaining within his Soto Zen community. Many interviewees connect the practices of “community service” and “volunteering at a temple/center,” along with “donations” and “vegetarianism,” with secular settings instead of, or in addition to, Buddhist contexts. “Donations,” whether in the form of money, food, flowers, time, or skills, take many forms in the religious lives of these YAAABs and include but also extend beyond giving to Buddhist temples or monastics. Many interviewees associate “repentance” with Christianity and offer alternate interpretations of the concept through a Buddhist lens. Monique, a Taiwanese American who grew up in a Mahayana Buddhist community, eloquently describes how her relationship to repentance shifted over time from a practice associated with guilt to an act of reflection, gratitude, and renewal:

At a certain point I thought of it as a very Catholic kind of thing. Like, oh, these are all the sins that I’ve done, and I’m terribly sorry... Now it feels like a kind of cultivation of my subjectivity: trying to re-look at the way I see myself, and what brings me to everything that I am now... I feel a sense of gratitude for the

kindness of people... that with all of the mistakes that I've done, the world is so good to me.

This example is one of several cases where my interviewees distance themselves from notions of “sin” and punishment—which they associate with Christianity—and reinterpret “repentance” to align with Buddhist concepts of karma and compassion. These examples show that the meaning behind key terms in Buddhist practice are context-dependent and individualized, thereby hinting at the limits of surveys that do not include a qualitative interviewing component where participants can explain their interpretations of the key terms used within the survey.

Overall, these young adults profess an accepting attitude toward the breadth of Buddhist practices listed on the cards—even those they have not done or that they do not consider essential. Lack of personal interest in a practice does not preclude them from recognizing its potential value for others, or even for themselves sometime in the future. Michael urges his fellow Buddhists to “widen your scope... Never have a closed mindset, because that’s really not what Buddhism is about.” Kiet, a second-gen Vietnamese American Buddhist, concurs, citing the metaphor of 84,000 Dharma gates as a “symbol of the fact that there are infinite ways to practice Buddhism.” These perspectives pluralize the possibilities of Buddhist practice, whereas the “two Buddhisms” model tends to constrain them by assigning a limited number of practices along racialized lines. My interviewees also tend to emphasize the constantly evolving nature of their individual Buddhist practices, suggesting that reducing a Buddhist to a specific practice, such as “meditator,” may fail to adequately account for this dimension of change over time.

### *Buddhist Beliefs Survey*

As with the card-sorting activity on Buddhist practices, interviewees identify many nuances when discussing their answers to the survey regarding their Buddhist beliefs. As seen in Appendix 1, the viewpoints interviewees were asked to respond to range from doctrinal statements (“there is no eternal self or soul”), to cosmological assertions (“There are Buddhas in other worlds besides our own”), to personal beliefs (“I should convert other people to Buddhism”). Some YAAABs query unfamiliar terminology and raise semantic issues; others add clarifying points or revise specific statements. Adam, a first-gen interviewee of mixed Filipino and non-Asian heritage, notes that “the statements are loaded based on your understanding of what the terms mean, and you can have different understandings of what terms mean in different contexts.” As an example, he remarks on his “unconventional notions” about the meaning of being “reborn” and what constitutes a “realm” in response to statement #7.

Interviewees often come up with creative interpretations in response to the survey statements rather than adhering to what they consider to be a more “orthodox” and/or textually based Buddhist understanding. Many emphasize the importance of experiential understanding, seeing skepticism and doubt as a healthy attitude that can coexist with faith or devotion. For example, Sarvin, an interviewee of Iranian

heritage who was raised Zoroastrian and became interested in Buddhism in high school, finds some of the statements difficult to rank because, as he puts it, “there are understandings that I take upon with a degree of trust or faith from somebody who has had a deeper realization [such as the absence of an eternal self, Buddhas in other worlds, and hell realms], but it’s not something that directly influences my being and my day-to-day life in such a way that I would be able to say, this is a firm conviction.” He adds, “there’s an element of questioning things within the tradition, or being told to have a skeptical mind and not take things completely blindly.” Many other interviewees also express appreciation that there is room for interpretation and doubt in Buddhism. This interpretive freedom is on full display in my interviewees’ responses to the various survey statements, as described below.

### Debates and deliberations

The many caveats and stipulations my interviewees raise indicate that they prefer to add nuance to Buddhist statements rather than take them at face value. This is evident even in the first survey statement, “The goal of the Buddhist path is to attain enlightenment.” While most participants tend to agree, several argue that the bodhisattva path is an exception, as bodhisattvas delay their personal enlightenment for collective enlightenment. Adam circles “completely agree” in response to this statement, but in explaining his choice afterward surprises me with an explanation that supports completely *disagreeing* with the statement: “enlightenment is a concept, and a concept is not what the Buddhist path is meant to attain.” Another interviewee wonders if *non-Buddhists* can be enlightened, suggesting that enlightenment might not be exclusive to Buddhism as a religious goal. That a basic concept such as “enlightenment” evokes multiple meanings suggests that survey questions about something as complex as religious belief are best paired with qualitative interviewing methods. This helps highlight nuances and contradictions that can be missed with simple yes-or-no/multiple-choice answers or numerical scales.

These YAAABs do not shy away from challenging doctrinal statements, as the lively debates around the statement “there is no eternal self or soul” attest. I expected the group to unanimously agree with the teaching of not-self (*anattā*), one of the three marks of existence in Buddhism. Instead, my interviewees offer a wide range of responses, from agreement because the truth of impermanence precludes the possibility of an eternal self or soul, to disagreement because they experience continuity in their personal experience, to ambivalence because they have not yet realized this doctrinal truth in an experiential manner themselves. Clarissa acknowledges that the issue is contentious before explaining her rationale for agreeing: “I think it’s more beneficial to think that there’s less of a self.” Monique recognizes the teaching as orthodox, but also points to “ideas of something eternal in certain parts of Mahayana Buddhism” such as the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine on Buddha-nature. Even the statement “there is suffering, a cause of suffering, a cessation of suffering, and a path to the cessation of suffering,” which most interviewees identify as an articulation of the four noble truths,

is not immune to dissent—a few interviewees express doubt that it is truly possible to end suffering.

These YAAABs are also flexible in their interpretations of rebirth, another foundational Buddhist doctrine on which they offer differing perspectives. Some accept a literal definition of rebirth, while others prefer to understand it in psychological or metaphorical terms. While reincarnation is, for second-gen Vietnamese American Buddhist Lân, “something that I learned in the past that I still believe in,” his perspective on the matter has shifted over time: a belief in reincarnation was rooted in his upbringing, but he has become more focused on his present life over the years and now prefers to believe that “we are reborn every day.” Sarvin’s views on rebirth have also shifted, but in the opposite direction, as he has become more inclined to believe in past and future lives. Given the hybridity and fluidity of these perspectives, it is difficult to say whether this group of YAAABs is more “modernist” or “traditionalist.” They therefore point to the limitations of Martin Baumann’s suggestion that divisions between immigrant/ethnic and convert/white Buddhists be supplanted by a “traditionalist” versus “modernist” schema around Buddhists’ beliefs and practices (2002: 52). How does one make sense of a YAAAB who, for instance, understands rebirth through a psychological lens while having no problem with the idea that bodhisattvas answer prayers? Are they modernist or traditionalist?<sup>26</sup>

Overall, interviewees are more focused on the implications of rebirth than whether it is objectively true or scientifically provable. For Ethan,<sup>27</sup> the notion that “anyone out there could be your mom from a previous life” is an important framework for increasing compassion. Sumit, a first-gen Buddhist of Indian heritage, interprets the statement to refer to psychological states rather than physical rebirth, but also thinks belief in literal rebirth would not dramatically change the way he already lives. Like Ethan, he advocates for a compassionate understanding of rebirth that does not cause fear in people who believe in it. These attitudes evince an ethics of care focused on a consequentialist rather than deontological ethics. Monique takes a both/and approach on the matter: “I think that it’s highly possible that we have multiple lives, that reincarnation does exist. But at the same time, I find it’s also really useful to look at the ways in which my mind states arise and then pass away, within a day.” These responses exemplify the “nuance in ambiguity” that Supraja, who was raised by Hindu parents of Indian heritage, appreciates about Buddhism.

Opinions about the statement “Buddhas and/or bodhisattvas respond to one’s prayers” recall the discussions on more “devotional” practices, such as bowing and relic worship, during the card sort activity. Some interviewees like the idea even if they cannot confirm it; others somewhat agree but focus more on personal actions/karma; others do not understand, but nonetheless respect their parents’ belief in praying to Buddhas and bodhisattvas; and still others find praying to be psychologically helpful even when

<sup>26</sup> Natalie Quli (2009) calls this dichotomy into question by highlighting the Orientalist logic that underpins it.

<sup>27</sup> To protect his identity, I do not provide demographic details for this interviewee.

things don't ultimately go their way. Many interviewees prefer to see Buddhas and bodhisattvas as models/teachers/guides rather than wish-granting gods "who have a hand in our fate." For instance, Adam holds a more psychological understanding of Buddhas and bodhisattvas as "aspects of your own mind." Brian<sup>28</sup> and Lân have in recent years moved from a literal understanding to a more psychologized one akin to Adam's. Monique, by contrast, has moved away from "a modern Western scientific mentality that I don't buy into as much as before. I was a bit surprised to say that I do agree—I don't know if I would've said that five years ago, or if I'll say that five years from now." Marissa offers yet another interpretation from a lay Shin Buddhist perspective: since all people can be Buddhas, asking *any* person for help could fall under the purview of this statement. Once again, it is difficult to say whether these YAAABs are traditional or modernist in their approach to Buddhism. Even after accounting for "generation," there is a lack of consensus. For example, second-gen YAAABs Brian and Lân share Adam's perspective while second-gen Buddhist Monique does not.

Statement #13, "I owe a debt to my parents that can only be repaid through Buddhist practices,"<sup>29</sup> also elicits a wide range of reactions. Some are confused or surprised by the notion. Others point out that there are many ways to repay their debts to parents. Still others connect filial obligation more to culture or "just being a good person" than to Buddhism. For Sumit, Buddhist practices can actually be a source of tension with his Hindu parents, who worry he will become a celibate monk. Reflecting on their unique positionality as sons of first-generation Buddhist immigrant parents, four of the young adults I interviewed did feel a strong resonance with this statement. Kiet, who sees being filial to parents as one of the highest virtues in Buddhism, remarks, "This is especially true for me; maybe not for other people... Buddhist practice is what my parents always wanted me to do." His viewpoint reflects an awareness of the diversity of beliefs and practices among American Buddhists. Michael, who points out that sometimes repayment can take more physical or literal forms such as money, employs Buddhist practices when wishing for his mother's well-being and, in a reversal of the expectation that second-generation Asian American Buddhists inherit their practices and beliefs from their parents, "guides her into learning more about Buddhism." For Brian, Buddhist practices are "probably one of the few things I can probably maintain from my parents," whose Buddhist faith sustained them "through the hardship of dodging bullets" in Laos. The fact that Brian was raised Laotian Buddhist but primarily attends a Korean Buddhist temple is an example of Asian American Buddhists connecting with Buddhists of other Asian ethnic backgrounds, even when their forms of Buddhism may differ. The view that "disparate Buddhist immigrant groups [are unlikely] to forge a shared Asian-American and Buddhist identity" (Seager, 2012: 271) is increasingly questionable when factoring in a new generation of Asian American Buddhists: many of the YAAABs I interviewed regularly interact and/or feel a sense of solidarity with Asian American

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28 A second-gen Laotian American Buddhist.

29 Reiko Ohnuma (2006) explores this theme through examining several versions of the story about the founding of the Buddhist nuns' order.

Buddhists of other ethnic backgrounds. This once again underscores the importance of taking generation into consideration in studies of American Buddhism.

### Embracing open-mindedness

One survey statement generates a striking level of consensus: most interviewees strongly disagree with the statement “I should convert others to Buddhism.” Many associate the word “convert” with Christianity and contrast it with Buddhism. “Converting people to Buddhism is not the goal of Buddhism,” insists Kiet, and even the two Jodo Shinshu ministers I interviewed agree. Several interviewees have been on the receiving end of attempted conversions to Christianity and do not want to emulate these proselytizers. Many associate the word “convert” with force or unwanted pressure and even “poor ethics.” These young adults are willing to share, discuss, and encourage others to explore Buddhism, but are reluctant to apply the word “convert” to these efforts. Oliver, who has been part of a Christian evangelical group in the past, explains, “my way of talking about Dharma is just sharing the wisdom, and then it’s up to people to take that where they want to take it.” Clarissa, who has “suffered a lot from the Christian community really trying to impose itself on me,” recalls meeting a Buddhist woman who shared how her Christian sister was antagonistic toward her faith, but felt that Buddhists would be much more accepting of family members of other faiths. While this may not always be the case, it speaks to Buddhism’s popular image as “tolerant” and “peace-loving” rather than “violent” and “fanatical,” as Robert Wuthnow and Wendy Cadge note in their survey on the scope of Buddhism’s influence in America (2004: 365).

These values of open-mindedness and inclusivity are also reflected in responses to the statements “Buddhism is a religion” and “All forms of Buddhism are equally valid.” The general consensus among my interviewees is that Buddhism should qualify as a religion, but should not be constrained by that definition in order to accommodate those who view Buddhism as *only* a philosophy of mind or a way of life and *not* a religion. Sara, a second-gen Vietnamese American Buddhist, explains that “for my parents, I think it’s very fully a religion, and not a philosophy. For me, it’s kind of in between... Saying ‘somewhat agree’ is my acknowledgement that it means different things to different people.” Many interviewees also value making room for different viewpoints in debating whether all forms of Buddhism are equally valid.

This vision of inclusivity is also evident in interviewees’ tendency to disagree that it is better to practice Buddhism as a celibate monastic than as a layperson.<sup>30</sup> In their responses, these young adults once again show awareness of Buddhism’s diverse forms, pointing out that there are non-celibate monks in Japan and Korea and noting that different Buddhist groups may emphasize monasticism to varying degrees. Overall, these YAAABs emphasize the values of nondiscrimination and accessibility, advocating that all people, monastic and lay, should be able to practice Buddhism.

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30 The relative unimportance of ordination and celibacy from the “practices” section highlights the fact that none of the twenty-six young adults interviewed for this study were celibate monastics, a group of Asian American Buddhists that deserves further study.

For these young adults, Buddhist belief is, like their spiritual practices, an evolving process. Many highlight the provisional nature of their survey answers. One participant remarks, “it’s funny, I see how paradoxical I am. They’re good questions because they make me realize the things that I feel ambivalent about... I’m a bit surprised by some of my own responses. And I might answer differently in a year or two—but this is fine for now.” As a group, my interviewees relate to Buddhist beliefs as a field of possibilities rather than a normative code. Adhering to orthodox Buddhist understanding is less important than making room for a diversity of viewpoints.

Thus, these YAAABs subscribe to universal truths while allowing others to hold to their own universal truths—a stance of humility and, it would seem, paradox. A cynic might write this off as starry-eyed relativism, but I would argue these young adults are not saying that all belief systems are equally valid but rather pointing out that it is ethically problematic to foist one’s own beliefs onto others. They believe that aggressive proselytization may ultimately undermine Buddhist beliefs more than it supports them. If converting people to Buddhism is not the goal, the content of what Buddhists believe, while important, may be secondary to *how* they came to embrace these beliefs, and how these beliefs continue to evolve.

If this group of young adults was purely “devotional” or “traditional,” as Asian American Buddhists are often characterized, we might predict more uniform responses to survey statements that indicate a prioritization of merit over meditation, a strong belief in karma and rebirth, and so forth. The survey data do not fit these expectations, however. If we instead declare this group to be highly “rational” or “modernist,” we might expect a rejection of anything “supernatural” such as buddhas in other worlds, bodhisattvas who respond to prayers, karma and rebirth, etc. Yet the survey results are mixed, again troubling the binary structure of the “two Buddhisms” model.

The wide-ranging responses to the survey statements summarized in this section illustrate a willingness among young adult Asian American Buddhists to debate doctrines rather than treat them as received truths. If a group of twenty-six young adult Asian Americans are not univocal in their Buddhist beliefs, we can only imagine how much more diversity would emerge from discussions with an even larger group.

## Conclusion

In the detailed attention paid to the Buddhist practices and beliefs of a group of YAAABs, this article presents a glimpse of how this next generation of American Buddhists informs, nuances, and challenges our understandings of American Buddhism. The YAAABs interviewed for this project offer an alternative to searching for binary labels with which to characterize Buddhist practice and belief.<sup>31</sup> In doing so, they demonstrate how “Asian American forms of religious belief and practice ‘betwixt and between’ Asia and America emerge as neither fully one nor fully the other” (Yong, 2006: 24). Instead of forcing themselves into these ill-fitting binaries, they promote a different approach

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<sup>31</sup> For one perspective on how to escape such “dialectical binds” within a Buddhist context, see Kalmanson (2012).

of careful listening to individual experiences, envisioning a Buddhism in which there is room for interpretation and appreciation for nuance and ambiguity.

Going against the conventional narrative of “two Buddhisms,” this article shows that for young adult Asian Americans, Buddhist practices and beliefs are not simply a matter of straightforward inheritance. First, we cannot assume that all Asian American Buddhists were raised Buddhist. Several of my interviewees were raised in atheist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and secular households. Unfortunately, the vast majority of literature on American converts focuses on the experiences of white converts. Second, those who *are* raised Buddhist have varied relationships to their parents. We cannot naively assume a vertical, unchanged transmission of religion and culture: recall Michael guiding his mom to learn more about Buddhism. To better understand the experiences of Asian American Buddhists, we must consider how these familial relationships, typically portrayed as vertical and hierarchical, are affected by a variety of horizontal relationships—especially with Buddhists of other ethnicities and races, Asian American Christians, and Buddhist representations in the media that often valorize “mainstream” white, meditating Buddhists over their purportedly ritualistic/devotional/superstitious Asian “immigrant” counterparts. Lisa Lowe argues,

[T]he making of Asian American culture may be a much less stable process than unmediated vertical transmission of culture from one generation to another. The making of Asian American culture includes practices that are partly inherited, partly modified, as well as partly invented: Asian American culture also includes the practices that emerge in relation to the dominant representations that deny or subordinate Asian and Asian American cultures as “other” (1996: 65).

The young adult Asian Americans I interviewed are living examples of what Lowe calls “the process of critically receiving and rearticulating cultural traditions in the face of a dominant national culture that exoticizes and ‘orientalizes’ Asians” (ibid.). In their diverse Buddhist practices and nuanced Buddhist beliefs, they refuse to allow Buddhism in America to be reduced to a cultural war between the figure of the “passive, silent, insular, and largely disengaged” (Masatsugu, 2008: 427) Asian American Buddhist and the implied counter-figure of the active, vocal, open-minded, engaged white convert Buddhist. YAAABs are active agents shaping their Buddhist practices and beliefs, not passive recipients of timeless and unchanging traditions.

This study is a modest contribution to the pressing need for more in-depth empirical studies about Asian American Buddhists. In-depth ethnographies of young Asian American Buddhists would be welcome, and would pair well with the methods demonstrated in this study. Though helpful, surveys such as the Pew Forum’s 2012 report on Asian American religions must be supplemented by in-depth qualitative research if we are to better understand the complexity and richness of the religious lives of Asian American Buddhists. The YAAABs in this study emphasize the importance of considering the multifaceted nature of religious expression, rather than imposing external standards to measure religiosity.

Finally, the generational model described earlier in this paper can also be fruitfully applied to American Buddhists who are not of Asian heritage. While I am advocating for generational considerations as an important factor of analysis, other important variables, including race, class, and gender, should not be ignored. Ideally, our categorizations of American Buddhists would be robust matrices of multiple important variables rather than simplistic bifurcations along any single variable.

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### Appendix 1: Buddhists Beliefs Survey

The table below lists each of the eighteen statements in the “Buddhist beliefs” survey that I administered to my twenty-six in-person interviewees. The range and average (rounded to the nearest tenth) of participants’ responses for each statement is also given, based on the following scale:

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
←	←	←	←	←	←	←
Completely disagree	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree	Completely agree
←	←	←	←	←	←	←

Statement	Range	Average
#1: The goal of the Buddhist path is to attain enlightenment.	4–7	5.8
#2: It is possible to attain enlightenment in this life.	2–7	5.7
#3: One cannot attain enlightenment without meditating.	1–7	4.3
#4: Living beings cannot “attain” enlightenment; they are already enlightened.	1–7	3.9
#5: There is no eternal self or soul.	1–7	4.5
#6: Living beings are reborn again and again.	1–7	5.0
#7: Living beings are reborn into different realms, including heavenly, human, animal, and hell realms.	2–7	5.1
#8: There is suffering, a cause of suffering, a cessation of suffering, and a path to the cessation of suffering.	1–7	6.2
#9: The ethical quality of my actions affects my well-being in this life.	1–7	6.5
#10: The circumstances of my present life are partially determined by my actions in previous lives.	1–7	5.0
#11: The circumstances of my future life will be partially determined by my actions in this life.	1–7	5.2
#12: It is better to practice Buddhism as a celibate monastic than as a lay person.	1–6	3.2
#13: I owe a debt to my parents that can only be repaid through Buddhist practices.	1–7	4.0
#14: Buddhas and/or bodhisattvas respond to one’s prayers.	1–7	4.1
#15: There are Buddhas in other worlds besides our own.	1–7	5.0
#16: I should convert other people to Buddhism.	1–5	2.6
#17: Buddhism is a religion.	3–7	5.5
#18: All forms of Buddhism are equally valid.	3–7	5.5