

## Research Article

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*Buddhism and Ethnicity in Britain:  
The 2001 Census Data*

By

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*T*here have been several recent attempts to answer the deceptively simple question: How many Buddhists are there in Britain? Paul Weller (2001: 33) gives the lowest estimate as 30, 000, though he adds that the ethnic Chinese community may boost the overall figure to as may as 130, 000. Damien Keown (2003: 42) suggests that there are something of the order of 200, 000 Buddhists in Britain, most of whom are said to be Caucasian converts rather than Asian immigrants. Helen Waterhouse (1997: 14-19) gives the numbers of various Buddhist groups, but warns that overall figures may include either regular or casual followers, and so can be

misleading.

The UK 2001 Census seems to offer a definitive answer here by including a question on religion, and the responses gave two important headline figures for Buddhists in Britain. There were said to be 144,453 Buddhists in England and Wales (0.27757 percent of the population of 52,041,916), and 152,000 Buddhists in the UK as a whole (0.25855 percent of the population of 58,789,000).

These figures should be treated with caution. Over four million people (7.7 percent) chose not to answer the religion question, and their responses may have been different from those who did. The UK total figure given above reflects this, and is only accurate to the nearest thousand. The question was worded differently for those in Scotland and Northern Ireland, which may have had some effect. There will have been Buddhists who did not declare themselves as such, and non-Buddhists who claimed to be Buddhists. (Following a somewhat eccentric internet campaign, 390,000 people claimed their religion was Jedi Knight.) Waterhouse (2001: 122) also points out that even those who call themselves Buddhists will include both those with a full-time commitment, such as monastics and lay community members, and those who occasionally attend Buddhist groups or who only read about Buddhism.

Bearing all these warnings in mind, we can turn to the more recent "Religion by Ethnic Group" spreadsheet of

2001 Census data, which cross-tabulates the main religions with the main ethnic groups. This is based on the England and Wales figures given above, and is given in percentages, which I have translated into raw numbers in Table 1.

Table 1: Ethnicity of Buddhists in England and Wales

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Numbers</i>
White	38.79	56033
Mixed	3.22	4651
Asian or Asian British	9.64	13925
Black or Black British	1.04	1502
Chinese	23.75	34308
Other Ethnic Group	23.56	34033
All Buddhists in England and Wales	100.0	144,453

Figures for the UK as a whole may be derived by combining the percentages given above with the overall estimated figure; these are translated into numbers in Table 2, and rounded to the nearest hundred.

Table 2: Ethnicity of Buddhists in the UK

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Numbers</i>
White	38.79	59000
Mixed	3.22	4900

Asian or Asian British	9.64	14600
Black or Black British	1.04	1600
Chinese	23.75	36100
Other Ethnic Group	23.56	35800
All Buddhists	100.0	152,000

These figures may still give a misleading impression of accuracy. Perhaps expressing the data in narrative rather than tabular form, to reflect the possible margin of error, may be helpful to present an overall picture.

So we may conclude that the UK 2001 Census data indicates that in 2001 there were slightly more than 150,000 Buddhists in Britain, of whom almost 60,000 were white, about 35,000 were of Chinese origin, nearly 15,000 were Asian, about 5,000 were of mixed ethnicity, and fewer than 2,000 were black.

A further 35,000 said that they were from "Other Ethnic Groups." This may reflect differing perceptions of the term "Asian," where sub-categories were given for Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi, but not for other specific countries, which were lumped together as "Other Asian." Although nearly 12,000 Buddhists (8.09 percent) described themselves as "Other Asian," this seems a rather low figure for all the Thai, Sri Lankan and Burmese Buddhists in Britain — not to mention

smaller numbers of Korean, Nepali, Vietnamese and ethnic Tibetans. Perhaps many of these did not find their own ethnicity listed, and ticked "Other Ethnic Groups" rather than "Other Asian."

Much of the research on Buddhism in Britain has focussed on those who have been called "white Buddhists," though we can now see that there are also Buddhists who are neither Asian nor white. Perhaps a better term might be "convert Buddhists," though even this may become less appropriate as the children of "white Buddhists" grow up in families where Buddhism is the norm.

Whichever term is used, we can at least say with some confidence that there are about 60,000 ethnically European people in Britain who have converted to Buddhism, rather than coming originally from an Asian Buddhist background. This "top-down" figure from the Census data is very helpful when it is combined with the available "bottom-up" data from individual Buddhist groups and movements.

The three largest Buddhist groups in Britain — the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), Soka Gakkai (SGI) and the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) — have all been criticised for departing from Buddhist tradition in various ways, and it has been suggested that such neo-Buddhist movements are in some way taking over British Buddhism. The substance of such arguments is far beyond the scope of a brief article, but

the numbers of followers are revealing. Again estimates vary, but each of these organizations is said to have between 3,000 and 5,000 members or followers. Even if we use the higher figure here, the total of 15,000 is only a quarter of the Buddhists in Britain.

There are no comparable figures for the other Buddhist organizations in Britain, though they are certainly smaller than the FWBO, SGI and NKT. My own research indicates that there are now approximately 1,000 Buddhist groups in Britain, including substantial numbers of FWBO, SGI and NKT groups, and smaller numbers of Theravada, Zen, Tibetan, and other groups. However, many of these are small local groups with only a handful of members; the suggestion that each group has sixty members on average (bringing the total neatly up to 60,000) is wholly unrealistic, particularly as it ignores the Asian Buddhist community.

The conclusion here is that many Buddhists in Britain — perhaps even the majority of them — have no formal contact with a Buddhist group, and are either practising on their own or with friends, or perhaps visiting one or more Buddhist groups on an ad hoc basis. We may know how many "white Buddhists" there are in Britain; but we still do not know how many of them are practising in the Theravada, Tibetan, or Zen traditions, or as what might clumsily be termed "unaffiliated white Buddhists." Until the Census offers more detailed questions — or Buddhists keep membership records — such figures will remain elusively beyond the researcher's grasp.

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