

Buddhism in Manitoba

Winnipeg Area

Buddhists in Manitoba primarily reside in or around Winnipeg. The Japanese-Canadian Buddhist community was established in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Mullens 2005) and resulted from the dispersal of the East Coast Japanese Canadian community at a time when they were being treated as enemy aliens. In 1984 the Mennonite Central Committee offered an apology on behalf of Canadian Mennonites to Japanese Canadians in recognition of the abuse they faced and benefits that the Mennonite community received as a result of the assignment of interned Japanese Canadians to farms throughout Manitoba and in other Western provinces.

The Manitoba Buddhist Temple was first known as the Manitoba Buddhist Church and was established in 1946. It was the religious and cultural centre for first and second generation Japanese-Canadians who were resettled in Manitoba from Western Canada during WWII and welcomed to remain in Winnipeg at war's end. Buddhist Japanese Canadians in Winnipeg believed that a church was essential for their moral, spiritual, social, and cultural development.

Hideo Nishimura, who was then a farm worker living in Emerson, Manitoba, became the first lay minister. Later, after studying in Japan, he became the full minister (Sensei) of the new church. An altar arrived in 1951 and by 1952 the church building was completed. The church offered a language school, a Dharma school, and regular



Figure 12: Wat Lao Xayarm Buddhist Temple in Winnipeg's North End

Sunday services. (Mullens 2005) It continues to survive through the efforts of a dedicated group of volunteers. (Manitoba Buddhist Temple)

Since its inception, the Manitoba Buddhist Church has been affiliated with the Buddhist Churches of Canada. At first, the Buddhist Churches of Canada chose to adopt an organizational model, building design, and style of services that builds on a Protestant church model; however, over time it has sought to return to an organizational culture that is more in keeping with its Japanese roots.

This began in 1955 when a national conference of Japanese Buddhists was held in Toronto. One of the outcomes of the meeting was a name change to Buddhist Temples of Canada and the Manitoba Buddhist Temple. The Manitoba Buddhist Temple and those temples and churches associated with the Buddhist Temples of Canada follow Jodo Shinshu Buddhism founded in Japan by Shinran (1173–1262). In 2008, a further change occurred: the Buddhist Temples of Canada changed its name to Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Temples of Canada (JSBTC). The Manitoba Buddhist Temple is a member of the national Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Temples of Canada. The JSBTC is affiliated with the Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha in Kyoto, Japan. The JSBTC celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2005 with 16 affiliated temples or churches in Canada.

Beginning in the 1970s, the Buddhist presence grew in Winnipeg and began to reflect greater diversity of linguistic and cultural origins that mirrored the changing national and provincial immigration patterns. First, several Tibetan families arrived in the early 1970s and were followed by Vietnamese refugees/immigrants fleeing the civil war in Vietnam and subsequently as immigrants through family reunification arrivals during the 1980s. The Vietnamese Buddhist community established the Chanh Dao Vietnamese Buddhist Association of Manitoba Inc. in 1988. The organization opened the Hai Hoi Temple in Winnipeg which is still functioning.

Sinhalese speaking Buddhist Sri Lankans began to settle in Winnipeg from the 1970s through the 1990s onwards. This soon led to the founding of the Theravada Buddhist Centre. Mrs. Radhika Abeysekera, a lay Buddhist who came to Canada from Sri Lanka with her husband and two children in the 1980s, was instrumental in these efforts. She and other Sri Lankans worked to establish the Buddhist Vihara Association. Upon arrival in Winnipeg, Radhika Abeysekera recognized the need for a Sri Lankan Buddhist sangha to provide religious instruction for her own family and other Sri Lankan Buddhists in Winnipeg. In the mid to late 1980s, the Manitoba Buddhist and Cultural Association (MBVCA) was established in Winnipeg, a first without a resident monk.



Figure 13: Buddhism lesson and shrine

Membership is predominantly comprised of individuals of Sri Lankan origins, but include Canadian members of other origins. (Mullens 2005).

Another Sri Lankan centre, the Mahamevanawa Buddhist Monastery, was founded in 1999 by the Ven. Kiribathgoda Gnanananda Thero. The Monastery and its Buddha Meditation Centre Winnipeg (BMCW) is dedicated to spreading Buddhist teachings and meditation in Manitoba. The Monastery is affiliated with other Mahamevnawa temples located in Sri Lanka and other places.



Figure 14: Shrine at the Manitoba Buddhist Vihara and Cultural Association

The main temple or mother temple for Buddhists is Mahamevanawa Buddhist monastery located on the outskirts of the town of Polgahawela in Sri Lanka.

There are three Buddhist temples serving the Chinese community and other Manitobans of various origins. Huasing Buddhist Temple on Cumberland Avenue is the largest. It is home to the Chinese Buddhist Association of Manitoba. Members come from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, and mainland China.

More recent additions to the Buddhist organizations are Chùa Hai Hoi Buddhist Temple, which serves the Vietnamese and Indo-Chinese community in Winnipeg, and the Wat Lao Xayarm Buddhist Temple in Winnipeg's North End, a Theravada Temple with Laotian cultural roots.

There are also small communities of Korean and non-culturally based Buddhist groups in Winnipeg that hold gatherings in family homes or community centres, but do not have sufficient numbers to establish centres that give them a public presence.



Figure 15: Huasing Temple Winnipeg

Thus, the history of Buddhist community development in Manitoba spans a little over a century with much of the growth experienced in the last few decades. In some ways, it is remarkable that, in this relatively short period of time, all the major forms of Buddha dharma have become rooted in this region of Canada and are being authentically practiced by Manitobans of various cultural origins and places of birth.

As well, Western Buddhist and Modern Buddhist sects such as the New Kadampa Tradition, Vipassanā (Insight), and Shambhala have developed a strong presence in Manitoba and Canada.

Beyond Winnipeg

Manitobans of Buddhist faith may be found throughout Manitoba, although the majority live in or near Winnipeg. One of the communities with a significant Hindu population beyond Winnipeg is Brandon.

Buddhism in Brandon

Buddhists, especially with Chinese origins, are known to have deep roots in the Brandon area. There is evidence that Buddhists began worshipping together as early as 1905 in Brandon. Buddhists came to Southwest Manitoba between 1896 and 1911. The 1901 census lists seven Buddhist families in Brandon with Chinese origins, who were identified as laundrymen. The data suggests that these seven families shared one or two laundromats in the downtown Brandon area. They also may have shared a home as was common for many Asian families at that time.

It is possible that the 1901 census did not include Buddhist men who worked for the railroad companies in the area. Such men had itinerant lifestyles and lacked a permanent home. It is likely that Buddhist railroad workers who lived in Brandon for brief periods of time could have been counted in other districts as they moved across Canada. Thus, there may have been significantly more Buddhists residing in the area once the railway was completed.

Today, Buddhists in Brandon practise meditation in their own homes, on a private level and, increasingly, as a group. Buddhists in Brandon, such as those that are part of the Westman Dharma Group, are connected to Winnipeg-based Buddhist organizations and temples, including the Manitoba Buddhist Temple. As well, there is a meditation group in Brandon that hosts meditation and modern Buddhism sessions in Brandon taught by the Kadampa Meditation Centre located in Winnipeg.

Buddhism in Manitoba: A Mixture of Traditional Asian Sects and Western/Modern Buddhist Schools

In Winnipeg, one can find several examples of traditional Buddhist temples or organizations representative of the main branches of Buddhism. These are often connected to specific ethnic or cultural groups. There are, however, also several examples of Western or Modern Buddhist centres and organizations. These include

- Soka Gakkai
- Shambhala
- Insight (Vipassanā)
- New Kadampa Tradition