

TEMPLE

BUDDHISM IN ASIAN AMERICA

Photographs and Text by RE O'Malley

OM

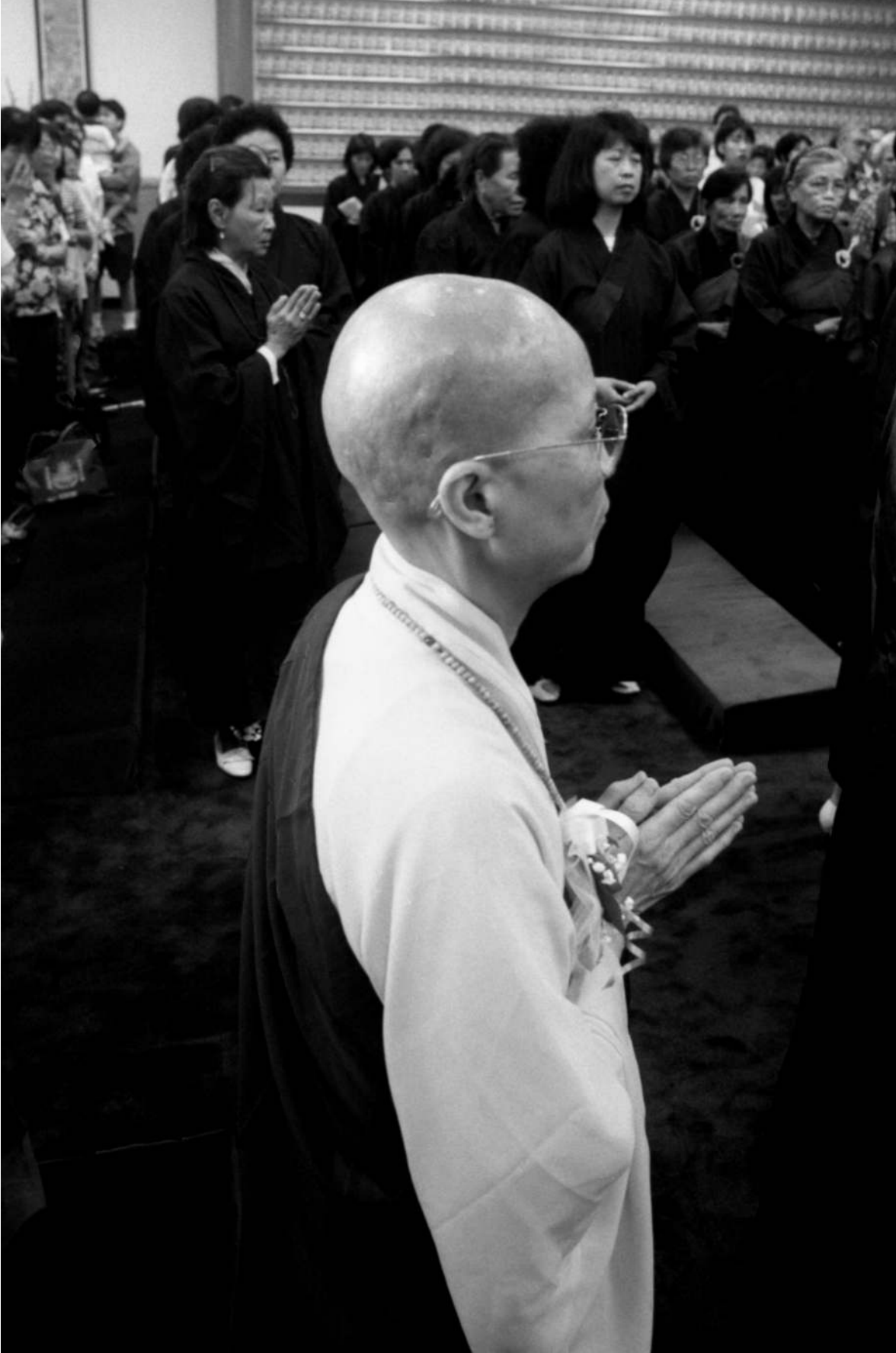
Copyright © 2026 RE O'Malley

RE O'Malley is a writer and photographer based in Massachusetts. He is the author of *Dragon Bay: Stories from a Chinese Village*, and *Neighborhood: Stories from Boston's Chinatown*.

SIX BUDDHIST COMMUNITIES

1989-2025

*BOSTON, LOWELL, CHELMSFORD,
QUINCY, MASSACHUSETTS*



JUST SOUTH OF BOSTON, in the city of Quincy, Mass., a group of mostly Chinese women chant Buddhist texts and make offerings of incense at the Thousand Buddha Temple.

Further north, at the Trairatanaram Temple in Chelmsford, Mass., Buddhists from the U.S.'s second largest Cambodian community chant sutras and prepare food offerings for temple monks and ancestors.

In the Roslindale section of Boston, families gather at the Chua Vietnam Temple to chant sutras, hear sermons, and eat lunch together.

In their previous lives, these temple sites provided a range of services in the local community. Before their revival as temples, one site was an auto repair shop, another was the home of a fraternal organization, a third was a function hall.

Now they have been transformed to serve the spiritual needs of the area's Asian immigrant communities.

There are now Chinese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Buddhist temples, among others, in the Boston area.

And while the core principles of Buddhism are shared by Buddhists from around the globe, the practice of each ethnic group is rooted in a specific form of Buddhism.

One of the world's major religions, Buddhism in America



attracts practitioners who were raised as Buddhists in Asia and America or have discovered it later in life. Buddhists believe that human experience is rooted in suffering and that suffering or unsatisfactoriness is caused by desire.

To overcome suffering, practitioners learn to control their desire and purify their minds by following the Buddhist path of right thoughts and right actions.

The Buddhist temples around Boston are associated with either the Mahayana or Hinayana (Theravada) schools of Buddhism — the two primary forms of Buddhism in Asia.

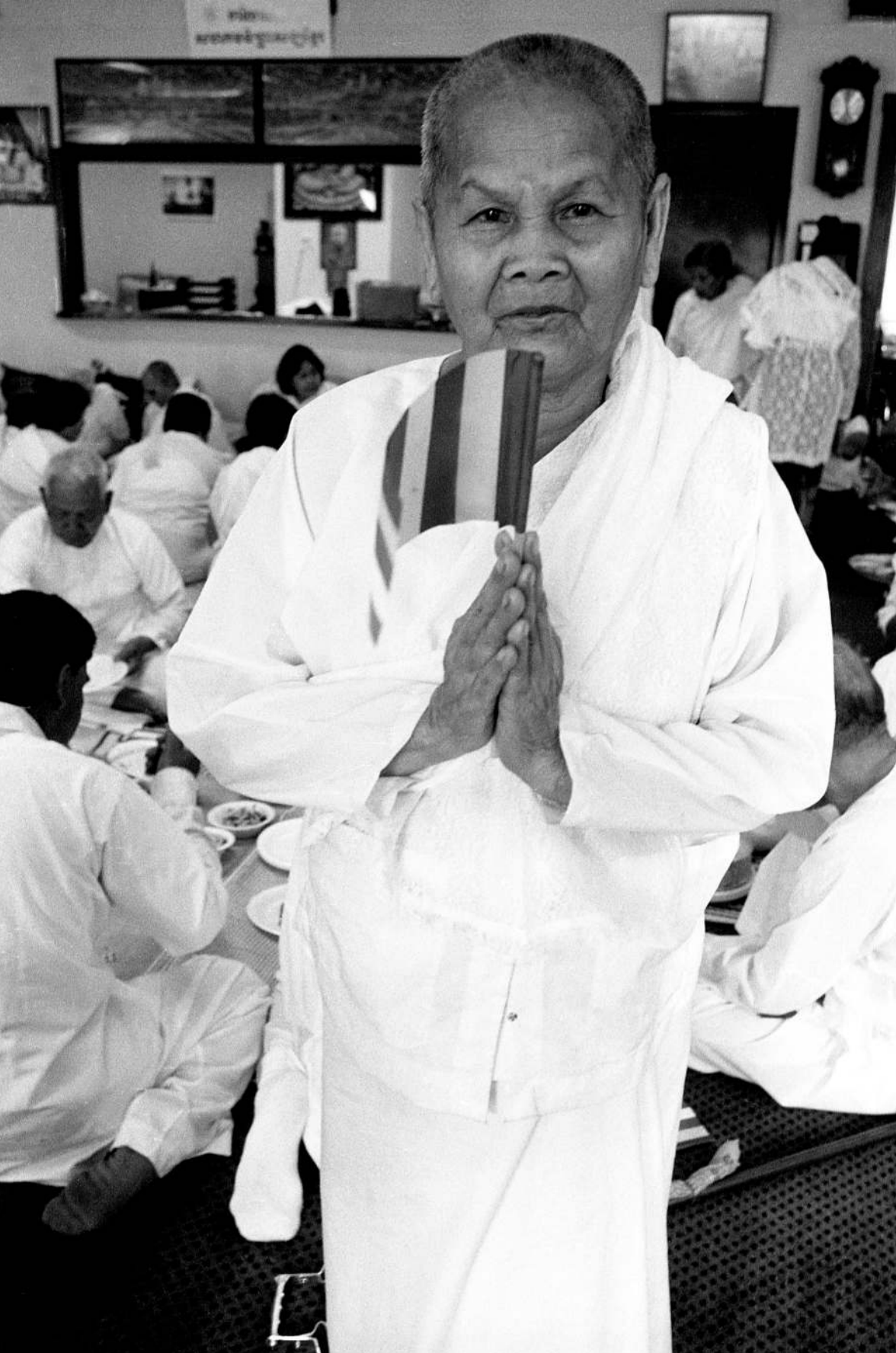
And while the area's Asian Buddhist temples are largely attended by members of the ethnic group that founded them — just as certain Roman Catholic churches were founded by particular European ethnic groups — each temple also attracts a small number of non-Asian practitioners.

Cultural and language differences encourage immigrants to seek out temples organized by members of their own ethnic group. In addition to serving as the sites of spiritual practices, these temples allow Asian immigrants to come together to share the food, culture, and traditions of their native lands.

In contrast to immigrant Buddhists, native-born Buddhists tend to practice with more diverse groups and often place more emphasis on meditation practice.



The Cambodian Temples



The Trairatanaram Temple, Chelmsford, Mass.

The Cambodian Buddhist community has been gathering at the Trairatanaram Temple in Chelmsford since 1985.

The community converted a former Knights of Columbus Hall to build the original temple. In later years, they constructed a new temple building on land adjacent to the original building.

The Theravada form of Buddhism practiced at the temple emphasizes the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts.

People who take the Three Refuges seek protection in the Buddha, the Sangha (community of monks), and the Dharma (the Buddhist teachings).

People who follow the Five Precepts vow to abstain from killing, stealing, lying, intoxication, and sexual misconduct.

Morality and the need for self-control are the basis of the Cambodian practice, which includes chanting, reading sutras, and meditation.

Before practicing meditation, says one practitioner, it's important for a person to have morality. "You cannot have a deep practice without that," he says.

Weekly ceremonies include the chanting of sutras (Buddhist teachings) by the monks and the offering of food and other gifts as merit to the monks and ancestors. The ceremony is often followed by a communal meal in the temple.

