Right away I need to acknowledge some challenges. Although Buddhism in Canada and the United States is very much a minority tradition, it’s also extremely diverse. Virtually all living forms of Buddhism found in Asia today also have a presence in North America or Hawaii. Therefore, it becomes difficult to say anything definitive about Canadian or American Buddhism. Furthermore, the experience and progression of the pandemic has been highly different based on regional factors, and we’re talking about an area of approximately 20 billion square kilometers. I’m just going to grab some case studies, mostly from Japanese-based Canadian and American Buddhist groups, that illustrate points I want to make about larger patterns and observations.

* Virus-based disruption of normal services

I’ve looked at dozens of examples from all regions of Canada and the United States. Every single one has experienced disruptions to normal services and programming, lasting anywhere from weeks to months. At certain points during the spring, all public on-site Buddhist activities in both countries had come to a complete halt. This includes regular Sunday services, weekly meditation classes, daily dana donations, funerals, and public teachings and empowerments. The pause button was hit, and, outside of certain monasteries with onsite residents who couldn’t be relocated, all Buddhist activity retreated to private homes or virtual spaces. For example, in mid-March the Zen Center of Los Angeles and the Toronto Buddhist Temple both declared that all services and activities would be suspended for six months, until mid-September. Many other temples followed a similar pattern.

* Shift to virtual programming

With the temples closed, the Internet’s importance became vastly magnified. Most Buddhist groups had at least a minimal web presence, but in most cases their Internet usage was designed to publicize or enhance their onsite offerings. Over the course of the spring and summer, a progression could be observed as temples moved from occasional Facebook posts, to livestreaming services held by solo monks, to virtual communal workshops and meditation sessions, to technologically-sophisticated videos specifically designed for remote consumption. The primary organizing principle at work here was replacement: Buddhist communities sought ways to do their usual activities virtually, rather than onsite, with as few changes as necessary. An example is the New York Buddhist Church, located at the worldwide epicentre of the pandemic. With their building closed to the public, Rev. Earl Ikeda and a helper began broadcasting Sunday services at 11:30am via Facebook. The format is identical to a pre-pandemic service—the only difference is the lack of other ministers and laymembers.

Of course, changes were nonetheless necessary. Unable to dance together, Japanese-American Buddhist communities created TikTok and similar versions of themselves doing the mid-summer Obon dances. The Houston Zen Center held an online meditation retreat, then concluded with the resident priest bowing to photographs of the participants propped against the zafus where they normally would have sat. Seeking a middle way between regular onsite services and pure cyber-Buddhism, a New Jersey temple has been holding weekly parking lot services in front of the worship hall.

* Using Buddhism to teach how to handle pandemic

Some Buddhist communities turned to their religious practices as buffers against the disease, but few if any preached that Buddhist practice alone could halt the pandemic or prevent individual infection. Instead, Buddhist temples became important sources of information dissemination about right hygiene and right distancing. Often Buddhist concepts or tropes were marshaled to instruct members on how to deal with the pandemic and protect the public health. For instance, the most popular liturgical element in Japanese-North American Buddhism is the Golden Chain, composed in Hawaii approximately 90 years ago. The largest Buddhist organization in Hawaii published guidance using the Golden Chain, seen on the left here, to teach social responsibility during the pandemic, as seen in the interpretative passages on the right.

Many organizations drew upon the paramitas or eightfold path to provide specific recommendations for hand-washing, masking, and similar actions, and meditation and similar ritual activities were widely extolled for their mental health benefits during forced confinement, job loss, and anxiety over health. A common metaphor references the Buddha as a physician, with the Four Noble Truths as his diagnosis and prescription for treating the illness of human suffering. This is then transposed into support for the medical system and systematic approaches to dealing with health issues.

* Using pandemic to teach Buddhism

A nearly universal response across all Buddhist groups has been to use the pandemic as a way of illustrating Buddhist ideas and principles. Buddhist leaders and commentators frequently use the ways in which our patterns and behaviours have changed during the pandemic to highlight the idea of impermanence, and note how suffering that results when we lose people, things, or activities that we were attached to.

* Reopening to new normal: changes to ritual

Most groups remain closed, but Hawaii, where infections remain extremely low, has gradually been returning to onsite services. However, these temples offer a glimpse into the future of American and Canadian Buddhism, and it is noticeably affected by the ongoing threat of COVID-19. Nearly every aspect of ritual and social gathering has been altered in some way—you can see several examples in the slides. And changes to ritual aren’t just cosmetic: when practices change, their meanings change too. For instance, when the temple is a place of caution and spacing, Buddhist practices that were about refuge and group identity are affected.

* Economic impacts of shutdown

Shuttering temples cut down on some costs, such as utilities, but on the whole expenses continued and ordinary revenue streams were shut down. In the Buddhist Churches of America, the Hompa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, and the Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Temples of Canada, summertime bazaars and Obon festivities normally raise a significant portion of their annual operating budgets. And weekly member donations are another important source of income. With buildings closed and services canceled, many floundered to find replacement funds. The BCA accepted a significant Payment Protection Program loan from the federal government, and made $5000 1% interest loans available to member temples. Meanwhile, the San Francisco Zen Center community projected a loss of $1 million for the initial months of the pandemic, and scrambled to create an online fundraiser. With massive job losses across North America, many can’t afford to provide extra funding to their Buddhist communities, and we should expect some temples to close permanently due to the pandemic.

* Power shifts related to skillsets

I hypothesize that a generational shift in power within some Buddhist communities will result from the pandemic and its effects. In the 1940s, when nearly the entire Japanese-North American Buddhist community was incarcerated in wartime concentration camps, the power shifted from first generation immigrant leaders to English-speaking second generation young Buddhists who more easily interfaced with the suspicious American and Canadian public, especially government and military forces. In a similar way, I note that the technological and social media savvy of younger Buddhists is being called upon to assist in the transition of rituals, Dharma talks, and religio-cultural activities into online spaces previously given anemic attention by temples. I believe this will result in a relative amplification of younger voices in the community and consequent heightening of attention to their attitudes, perspectives, and preferred issues.

* Survival, adaptation, rebuilding as Buddhist practices

I also note that community struggles are not only damaging to temple communities—they are also the raw materials from which communities are built and strengthened. The WWII incarceration was massively traumatizing, economically and socially devastating, and unjust. But without minimizing the suffering involved, we should note that it was also productive and useful in certain ways. It violently forced groups together and welded them through shared suffering and perseverance, such that generations have held regular reunions with their friends from the camps. Nostalgic camp swing bands continue to play at annual Buddhist gatherings, and former internment camps are now pilgrimage sites that attract visitors, memory, and meaning-making. The Buddhist Churches of America was reborn in the camps, taking directions that would last for the rest of the century. The experience of mass racial discrimination became a permanent community touchpoint for understanding and mobilizing against other injustices observed in North American society, such as homophobia and anti-Black racism.

The pandemic is the most disruptive and widespread single event that the temples have faced in the 75 years since the war ended. Once again they are thrown into chaos, and from that chaos and shared suffering there are clear signs of adaptation and response. Much is lost but also some things are gained. Buddhism promotes resilience as the challenge of maintaining Buddhism incites organizing, creativity, and purpose. As one Zen leader put it, “Six feet apart, we’re closer than ever.” People are learning to be together apart.