

## The Dharma in the New Normal

By Tricycle

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**I**t's hard to say what the future holds for *Buddhism in the United States*. But the nonprofit Frederick P. Lenz Foundation hopes to find out at The Future of American Buddhism conference, which will take place June 2-5 at the Garrison Institute in Garrison, New York.

*Here, Lenz Foundation CEO Norman Oberstein and vice president Liz Lewinson talk with Tricycle about the four-day event, where Buddhist thinkers from across the country will gather to discuss the challenges facing the next generation of dharma students.*

### **Can you give us an overview of The Future of American Buddhism conference coming up this summer?**

**Norman Oberstein (NO):** After two years of the pandemic we have an opportunity to bring together the elements of the national Buddhist scene to consider the way Buddhism, meditation, the teachings, and the whole structure of the national movement has been impacted, and to contemplate what it really means. Our prior conferences have focused on the Buddhist or Buddhist-inspired charitable organizations in our own network, but to talk about the future of American Buddhism, we need to have a broader perspective. So, with the help of Naropa University, we put it in a context that cuts across all lineages and practice traditions, represents the geographic spectrum from coast to coast, and includes all types of organizations, whether it's a big sangha or retreat center, or a small community center. We decided to create a conference that is led by different people in the community, people in different age groups, ethnicities, racial groups, and schools. The idea is to bring these elements together to contemplate the future and how these various organizations can be most relevant in that future. Let's create conversations.

**The Lenz Foundation has been doing this for a while, and you might say it has a unique insight into the American Buddhist landscape by this point. What has changed over the years?**

**NO:** When we started out, this was strictly a white, middle-class affair. There were wonderful, talented people, but they were really from the same general backgrounds. All of this has morphed over the years, yet we're just at the beginning of that process. Secondly, when I started out, I was so surprised that Buddhists were all in their own little camps. While they were kind and respectful, they didn't cross over; they had their teacher, their lineage, and they did their own thing. Whether consciously or just because I had no background in it, I said, "Well, that isn't right, let's pull people together." It isn't just us. These communities are reaching out, recognizing each other, and finding a greater community out there, a different kind of Buddhist movement with people working together toward a common goal of relieving suffering and increasing awareness.

**Liz Lewinson:** I will add here that what has surprised and really delighted me is that the topic of meditation and mindfulness has become so mainstream. COVID-19, if anything, accelerated that even more. We subscribe to something that our founder, Rama, Dr. Frederick Lenz said: "Anyone who meditates is a Buddhist." It's a very broad definition. What he meant is that if you meditate and experience more levels of awareness, you're a seeker of some type. It goes with the territory. So we do give grants to a number of other religious or secular organizations that have embraced mindfulness and meditation.

*The conference will also feature free webinars in advance of the event date. See more at the [Frederick P. Lenz Foundation](#).*

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The Garrison Institute hosts a 2013 Lenz Foundation conference. | Photograph courtesy Lenz Foundation