

# Meet a Teacher: Rev. Marvin Harada

The Bishop of the Buddhist Churches of America was born a Buddhist but didn't immediately know it was a path for him to follow.

By [Adrienne Bard de Palazuelos](#)  
[WINTER 2020](#)

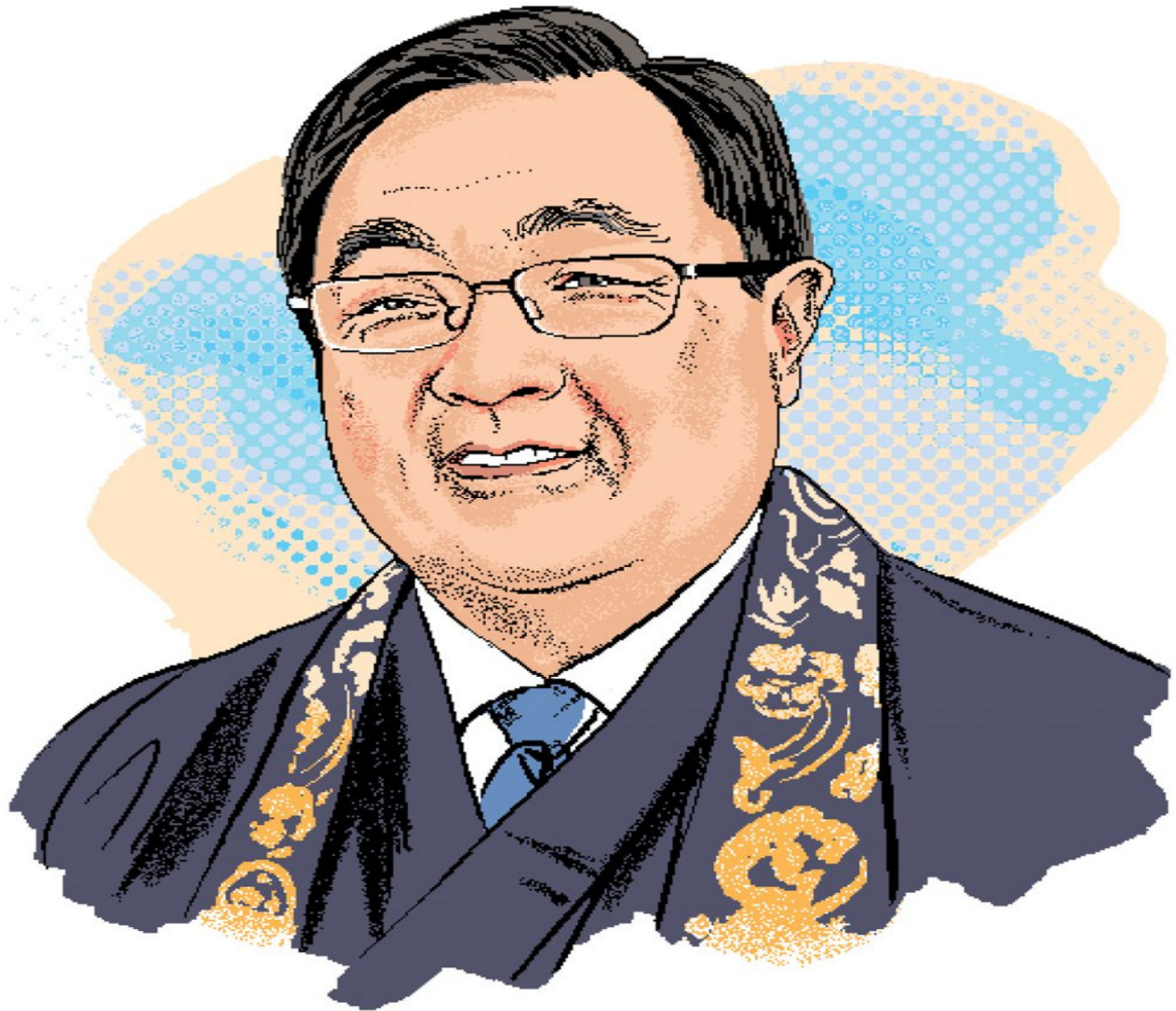


Illustration by Agata Nowicka

While Marvin Harada was growing up in rural eastern Oregon, Buddhism was the only religion he knew. “But it wasn’t really my own,” said Reverend Harada, a [Shin Buddhist](#) minister who was named bishop of the [Buddhist Churches of America](#) (BCA) in April 2020.

Rev. Harada is not used to his new title yet. It doesn’t seem to match the man on the Zoom screen, dressed in a yellow Hawaiian shirt and sipping a hot beverage from an oversized mug.

“Just call me Reverend Harada,” he said, chuckling.

Harada left his tiny hometown of Ontario to attend the University of Oregon in Eugene, where his roommate, a Christian who'd never met a Buddhist, bombarded him with questions.

"I couldn't win any arguments about religion because I really had no knowledge or understanding of Buddhism myself," said Rev. Harada. The lack he felt led him to explore the religion of his grandparents, Japanese farmers who came to the United States from Hiroshima and Yamaguchi prefectures in the early 1900s.

"I came to discover that Buddhism was a teaching and a path I could follow," said Rev. Harada, who ultimately majored in religious studies. He received a master's degree at the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley, California; there he discovered the book *Everyday Suchness* by Gyomay M. Kubose, who had founded the Buddhist Temple of Chicago in 1944. "I was very attracted to his way of teaching Shin Buddhism," said Rev. Harada, who later moved to Chicago to study with Kubose for nine months.

Kubose incorporated storytelling in his teaching—something Rev. Harada loves to do, whether in a talk, in his book *Discovering Buddhism in Everyday Life* (2011), or on the YouTube channel of Orange County Buddhist Church (OCBC) in Anaheim, California, where he served as minister from 1986 until he became bishop in 2020.

In a virtual dharma talk at the start of the coronavirus lockdown, Rev. Harada spoke about the spiritual strength that his 91-year-old mother, Ruth, developed after experiencing extreme poverty during the Great Depression and internment in a camp for Japanese Americans during World War II.

"In Shin Buddhism, anyone and anything can be a teacher to you," he told attendees. "A parent, a grandparent, a life experience, even something as harsh as being diagnosed with cancer."

My most pressing question for Rev. Harada is why BCA's places of worship are "churches" rather than "temples." He has the answer ready (apparently this comes up a lot):

"Most of our churches and even the national organization were formed during wartime. There was tremendous discrimination against Japanese Americans, so they were trying to show that they were American," he said, adding that BCA also adopted Christian titles like "reverend" and "bishop."

Rev. Harada himself believes that "church" may no longer be relevant.

"Sometimes I do fear a new person may not even visit us because it sounds so strange," he said. "A Buddhist church?"

The name doesn't appear to have kept newcomers away from OCBC, which opened 80 years ago mainly for Japanese American families. In recent years, people of other ethnic backgrounds have joined, making it one of the fastest-growing congregations in the United States. Currently about one-quarter of its members are other than Japanese descent, including many Latinos and Vietnamese Americans.

“One common question that we get from newcomers is ‘What do Buddhists believe?’” he said. “In Buddhism, to me, it’s not what we believe but what have we awakened to? We listen to the teachings and come to realization. . . . But Buddha himself said: don’t believe in what I say blindly, test it out for yourself.

[Adrienne Bard de Palazuelos](#) has been reporting from Mexico City for more than 30 years. She has written for *Time*, *Businessweek*, *People*, and *Bon Appetit*, and her radio reports are heard on CBS News stations.