

CHAPTER 5

BUDDHISM

“He will deliver by the boat of knowledge
the distressed world”

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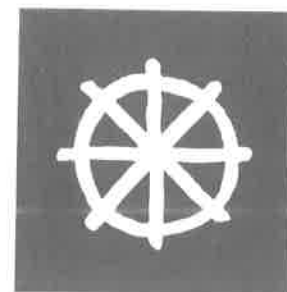
About the same time that Mahavira was teaching the Jain path, the man who became known as the Buddha preached another alternative to the ritual-oriented Brahmanism of India. The Buddha taught about earthly suffering and its cure. Many religions offer comforting supernatural solutions to the difficulties of earthly life. Early Buddhism was quite different: It held that liberation from suffering depends on our own efforts. The Buddha taught that by understanding how we create suffering for ourselves we can become free.

The effort involved in having to take responsibility for our own happiness and our own liberation may seem daunting and unlikely to attract many followers. On the contrary, the Buddha's teachings spread far and wide from India throughout Asia, becoming the dominant religious tradition in many countries. The Buddha's teachings have been meaningful to some as a profound system of philosophy and to others as a system of religious practice or way of life. As Buddhism spread to new lands, it took new forms, often reflecting earlier local traditions. These new forms might include devotional practices, mystical elements, and appeals to the various Buddhas and bodhisattvas for protection and blessing. Now, more than 2,500 years after the Buddha's death, the path that he taught is attracting considerable interest in Western countries, where its psychological and meditative aspects are often emphasized.

The life and legend of the Buddha

Although the Buddha was apparently an historical figure, what we know about him is not documented in any way, but is derived from stories passed down over time through generations of followers. His prolific teachings were probably not collected in written form until several hundred years after his death. In the meantime, they were apparently transmitted orally, chanted from memory by monks, groups of whom were responsible for remembering specific parts of the teachings.

Only a few factual details of the Buddha's life have been retained. While stories about his life are abundant in authorized Buddhist texts, these stories were never organized into a unified canonical biography. Extant complete biographies of the Buddha date from four centuries after his passing. These texts venerate the Buddha as a legendary hero, and were written by storyteller



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poets rather than historians. An example of such a sacred biography is Asvaghosa's famous epic, the *Buddhacarita* (Acts of the Buddha), probably composed in the second century CE.

The one who became the Buddha (a generic term meaning "Awakened One") was reportedly born near what is today the border between India and Nepal. He was named Siddhartha Gautama, meaning "wish-fulfiller" or "he who has reached his goal." It is said that he lived for over eighty years during the fifth century BCE, though his life may have extended either into the late sixth or early fourth century. His father was apparently a wealthy landowner serving as one of the chiefs of a Kshatriya clan, the Shakyas who lived in the foothills of the Himalayas. The family name, Gautama, honored an ancient Hindu sage whom the family claimed as ancestor or spiritual guide. His mother Maya is said to have given birth to him in the garden of Lumbini near Kapilavastu. The epics embellish his birth story as a conception without human intercourse, in which a white elephant carrying a lotus flower entered his mother's womb during a dream. He is portrayed as the reincarnation of a great being who had been born many times before and took birth on earth once again out of compassion for all suffering beings.

According to legend, the child was raised in the lap of luxury, with fine clothes, white umbrellas for shade, perfumes, cosmetics, a mansion for each season, the company of female musicians, and a harem of dancing girls. He was also trained in martial arts and married to at least one wife, Yashodara, who bore a son. Despite this life of ease, Siddhartha was reportedly unconvinced of its value. As the legend goes, the gods arranged for him to see "four sights" that his father had tried to hide from him: a bent old man, a sick person, a dead person, and a mendicant seeking lasting happiness rather than temporal pleasure. Seeing the first three sights, he was dismayed by the impermanence of life and the existence of suffering, old age, and death. The sight of the monk piqued his interest in a life of renunciation. As a result, at the age of twenty-nine Siddhartha renounced his wealth, left his wife and newborn son (whom he had named Rahul, meaning "fetter"), shaved his

The region where Siddhartha grew up is in full view of the high peaks of the Himalayas.



TIMELINE

Buddhism

c.5th century BCE	Life of Gautama Buddha
c.258 BCE	Indian King Ashoka embraces Buddhism, spreads it outward
c.200 BCE–200 CE	Development of Theravada in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia
c.29 BCE	Pali Canon written down in Sri Lanka
c.50 CE	Buddhism carried to China and then Southeast Asia
1st century	Development of Mahayana Buddhism; spread of Perfection of Wisdom scriptures
c.2nd century	Asvaghosha writes <i>Acts of the Buddha</i>
c.150–250	Life of Nagarjuna, who develops “emptiness” philosophy
c.550	Buddhism enters Japan; becomes state religion of Korea
589–845	Peak of Chinese Buddhism
600s	Songtsan declares Buddhism the national religion of Tibet; Ch’an School begins in China
700s	Buddhist monasteries established in Tibet; Thai Buddhism begins
845	Persecution of Buddhism begins in China
1079–1153	Life of Milarepa
1198	Nalanda University destroyed; Buddhism disappears in India
1200–1253	Life of Dogen, who spreads Zen Buddhism in Japan
1222–1282	Life of Nichiren; Pure Land and Nichiren sects founded in Japan
c.1300–1500	Buddhism declines in Korea, succeeded by Islam in Indonesia
1700s	Colonial occupation of Sri Lanka, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam
1893	Buddhist missionaries star at World Parliament of Religions, Chicago; Western study of Buddhist literature begins
1956	Revival of Buddhism among India’s “Untouchables”
1959	Dalai Lama escapes to India; persecution of Buddhism in China and Tibet
1960s on	Rise of Engaged Buddhism
1970s on	Popularity of Buddhist ideas and practices in the West
1989, 1991	Nobel Peace Prizes to Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi
1998	Full ordination of 135 nuns from 23 countries
2011	Aung San Suu Kyi freed from house arrest in Burma (Myanmar)

head and donned the coarse robe of a wandering ascetic. He embarked on a wandering life in pursuit of a very difficult goal: finding the way to total liberation from suffering.

Many Indian sannyasins were already leading the homeless life of poverty and simplicity that was considered appropriate for seekers of spiritual truth. Although the future Buddha later developed a new spiritual path that departed significantly from Brahmanic tradition, he initially tried traditional methods. He headed southeast to study with a brahmin teacher who had many followers, and then with another who helped him reach an even higher mental state.


Unsatisfied, still searching, Siddhartha reportedly underwent six years of extreme self-denial techniques: nakedness, exposure to great heat and cold, breath retention, a bed of brambles, severe fasting. Finally he acknowledged that this extreme ascetic path had not led to enlightenment. He described his appearance after a long and strenuous period of fasting:

Because I ate so little, all my limbs became like the knotted joints of withered creepers; because I ate so little, my protruding backbone became like a string of balls; because I ate so little, my buttocks became like a bullock's hoof; because I ate so little, my gaunt ribs became like the crazy rafters of a tumbledown shed; because I ate so little, the pupils of my eyes appeared lying low and deep in their sockets as sparkles of water in a deep well appear lying low and deep.¹

Siddhartha then shifted his practice to a Middle Way that rejected both self-indulgence and self-denial. He revived his failing health by accepting food once more and began a period of reflection. On the night of the full moon in the sixth lunar month, it is said that he sat in deep meditation beneath a tree in a village now called Bodhi Gaya, and finally experienced supreme awakening. After passing through four states of serene contemplation, he recalled all his previous lives. Then he had a realization of the wheel of repeated death and rebirth, in which past good or bad deeds are reflected in future lives. Finally, he realized the cause of suffering and the means for ending it. After this experience of awakening or enlightenment, it is said that he was radiant with light.

According to legend, Siddhartha was tempted by Mara, the personification of evil, to keep his insights to himself, for they were too complex and profound for ordinary people to understand. But the Buddha compassionately determined to set the wheel of the Dharma in motion and began by teaching in Sarnath, in the Deer Park. He then spent decades walking and teaching ever-increasing groups of followers all over northern India. The Enlightened One's teachings and personality were apparently so compelling that many people were transformed simply by meeting him. Gradually he became known as "Shakyamuni Buddha," the "sage of the Shakya clan." Out of the abundant and varied scriptures later attributed to Shakyamuni Buddha, historians agree on the validity and centrality of a core of teachings that became known as the **Dharma** (in the Pali dialect: *Dhamma*)* that he taught: the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Three Marks of Existence, and other guidelines for achieving liberation from suffering.

* Buddhist terms have come to us both in **Pali**, an Indian dialect first used for preserving the Buddha's teachings (the Buddha himself probably spoke a different ancient dialect), and in **Sanskrit**, the language of Indian sacred literature. For instance, the Pali *sutta* (aphorism) is equivalent to the Sanskrit *suva*. In this chapter Sanskrit will be used, as it is more familiar to Westerners, except in the section on Theravada, which uses Pali.

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Wheel of Being:
Middle Way
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The Buddha is traditionally thought to have given his first sermon, laying out the basic principles he had realized, in the Deer Park at Sarnath, to ascetics with whom he had previously engaged in severe austerities.

The newly awakened Buddha walked across northern India for forty-five years as a mendicant with an alms bowl, giving teachings and advice to people of all backgrounds and religions. Many young men decided to become monks (**bhikshus**; Pali: *bhikkhus*), emulating his life of poverty and spiritual dedication. Many others adopted his teachings but continued to live as householders.

The **Sangha**—the monastic order that developed from the Buddha's early disciples—accepted people from all castes and levels of society. The Buddha's stepmother Mahaprajapati, who had raised him after the death of his mother, and his wife, Yashodara, became **bhikshunis** (Pali: *bhikkhunis*), members of the order of nuns that the Buddha founded. After the death of his father King Shuddhodana, the Buddha's stepmother requested permission to enter the Sangha. When the Buddha hesitated to admit her, she and 500 women from the court shaved their heads, put on yellow robes, and walked a great distance to Vaishali where he was, and made the same request. At last he agreed, reportedly on the condition that Mahaprajapati observe eight special rules, a story that has been used to justify the subordination of nuns to monks, regardless of seniority. The Buddha's alleged reluctance to admit women to the Sangha is today a matter of much speculation. Some think that later monks may have added the rules or that the eight special rules were laid down with the monks' weaknesses in mind. Be this as it may, in the context of patriarchal Indian society, for women to leave their homes and become itinerant mendicants would probably have been perceived as socially disruptive, as well as difficult for women of the court. According to Hindu social codes, a woman could not lead the renunciate life and could achieve spiritual salvation only through personal devotion, especially devotion to her husband. By contrast, the Buddha asserted that women were as capable as men of achieving enlightenment.

Traditional accounts of the Buddha's death at the age of eighty are evidence of his selfless desire to spare humankind from suffering. His last meal, served by a blacksmith, inadvertently included some poisonous mushrooms or perhaps spoiled pork. Severely ill and recognizing his impending death, the Buddha pushed on to his next teaching stop at Kushinara. He sent word to the blacksmith not to feel remorse or blame himself, for his offering of food

accrued great merit. When the Buddha reached his destination he lay down on a stone couch. As his monks came to pay their last respects, he urged them to tend to their own spiritual development:

You must be your own lamps, be your own refuges. ... A monk becomes his own lamp and refuge by continually looking on his body, feelings, perceptions, moods, and ideas in such a manner that he conquers the cravings and depressions of ordinary men and is always strenuous, self-possessed, and collected in mind.²

He designated no successor and appointed no one to lead the order. But the Buddhist teachings and the monastic order survived and spread widely. His closest helper, Ananda, explained that before passing away the Buddha made it clear that his followers should take the Dharma and ethical discipline as their support. Followers should study the Dharma, put it into practice, and be able to defend it in the face of criticism.

Be the master of your own mind.

The Buddha³

The Buddha's final liberation into nirvana when he physically died is symbolized by this enormous Sri Lankan statue that depicts him serenely lying down with eyes closed to the world.

In his last discourse, the Buddha reportedly explained to his disciples:

The true Buddha is not a human body—it is Enlightenment. A human body must die, but the Wisdom of Enlightenment will exist forever in the truth of the Dharma, and in the practice of the Dharma.⁴



Nevertheless, after cremation of the Buddha's body, seven pieces of his bones and teeth were collected and greatly revered. It is said that these relics were given to messengers from seven clans who built dome-shaped reliquaries called stupas to commemorate the Buddha's passing, or final liberation (*parinirvana*). The Buddha's death is memorialized by images in which he is serenely lying on his side. These stupas and images became the focus of great devotion to the Buddha. Inscriptions dating back to the third century BCE or even earlier show that both monastics and laypeople made pilgrimages to these sacred sites. Standing before them, followers sense that the Buddha is present there.

The Dharma

Buddhism is often described as a nontheistic religion. There is no personal God who creates the world or to whom prayers can be directed. Buddhists who attended the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago found it necessary to explain to people of other religions that they do not worship the Buddha:

Shakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, was not God or a god. He was a human being who attained full Enlightenment through meditation and showed us the path of spiritual awakening and freedom. Therefore, Buddhism is not a religion of God. Buddhism is a religion of wisdom, enlightenment and compassion. Like the worshippers of God who believe that salvation is available to all through confession of sin and a life of prayer, we Buddhists believe that salvation and enlightenment are available to all through removal of defilements and delusion and a life of meditation. However, unlike those who believe in God who is separate from us, Buddhists believe that Buddha which means "one who is awake and enlightened" is inherent in us all as Buddha nature or Buddha mind.⁵

Unlike other Indian sages, the Buddha did not focus on descriptions of an unseen reality, the nature of the soul, life after death, or the origin of the universe. He said that curiosity about such matters was like a man who, having been wounded by a poisoned arrow, refused to get it pulled out until he was told the caste and origin of his assailant, his name, his height, the color of his skin, and all details about the bow and arrow. In the meantime, he died.

Being religious and following dhamma has nothing to do with the dogma that the world is eternal; and it has nothing to do with the other dogma that the world is not eternal. For whether the world is eternal or otherwise, birth, old age, death, sorrow, pain, misery, grief, and despair exist. I am concerned with the extinction of these.⁶

The Buddha spoke of his teachings as a raft to take us to the farther shore, rather than a description of the shore or something to be carried around once we get there. The farther shore is *nirvana* (Pali: *nibbana*) or liberation, the goal of spiritual effort; the planks of the raft are insights into the truths of existence and teachings about the path to liberation.

The Four Noble Truths

In his very first sermon at Sarnath, the Buddha set forth the Four Noble Truths, the foundation for all his later teachings:

- 1 Life inevitably involves suffering, dissatisfaction, and distress.
- 2 Suffering is caused by craving, rooted in ignorance.
- 3 Suffering will cease when craving ceases.
- 4 There is a way to realize this state: the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Buddha was neither pessimistic nor optimistic about our human condition, but realistic. Sri Lankan monk and scholar Walpola Rahula spoke of the Buddha as “the wise and scientific doctor for the ills of the world.” In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha diagnosed the human condition and proposed a cure, one step at a time. The Buddha’s First Noble Truth is the existence of *dukkha*: suffering and dissatisfaction. At some time or another, we all experience grief, unfulfilled desires, sickness, old age, physical pain, mental anguish, and eventually death. We may be happy for a while, but this happiness does not last. Even our personal identity is impermanent. What we regard as a “self” is an ever-changing bundle of fleeting feelings, sense impressions, ideas, and evanescent physical matter. One moment of identity leads to the next like one candle being lit from another, but no two moments are the same.

The Second Noble Truth is that the origin of *dukkha* is craving and clinging—to sensory pleasures, to fame and fortune, for things to stay as they are or for them to be different—and attachment to things and ideas. The Buddha taught that craving leads to suffering because of ignorance: We fail to understand the true, constantly changing nature of the things we crave. We grasp at things and hold onto life as we want it to be, rather than seeing things as they are, in a constant state of flux.



In Buddhism, unhappiness is understood as the inevitable companion of happiness. Sunshine gives way to rain, flowers wilt, friends die, and our bodies eventually age and decay. As the contemporary monk Ajahn Sumedho points out, “trying to arrange, control and manipulate conditions so as to always get what we want, always hear what we want to hear, always see what we want to see, so that we never have to experience unhappiness or despair, is a hopeless task.”⁸

To remedy this situation, the Buddha taught awareness of *dukkha*, *anitya* (Pali: *anicca*, impermanence), and *anatman* (Pali: *anatta*). According to this revolutionary and unique doctrine, there is no separate, permanent, or immortal self; instead, a human being is an impermanent composite of interdependent physical, emotional, and cognitive components. Insight into *anatman* is spiritually valuable because it reduces attachment to one’s mind, body, and selfish desires. Even suffering is useful, because it helps us to see things as they really are. When we realize that everything changes and passes away, moment by moment, we become aware that nothing in this world is permanent and independently existent. There are only momentary configurations within a continual process of change. As Venerable Ajahn Chah of Thailand explained to a dying woman:

Having been born we get old and sick and then we die, and that’s totally natural and normal. As soon as we’re born, we’re dead. It’s a little funny to see how at a death people are so grief-stricken and distracted, fearful and sad, and at a birth how happy and delighted. I think if you really want to cry, then it would be better to do so when someone’s born. Just think, “This is the way things are.” Right now nobody can help you; there is nothing that your family and your possessions can do for you. All that can help you now is the correct awareness.”

Once we have grasped these basic facts of life, we can be free in this life, and free from another rebirth. Ajahn Sumedho explains:

When you open the mind to the truth, then you realize there is nothing to fear. What arises passes away, what is born dies, and is not self—so that our sense of being caught in an identity with this human body fades out. We don't see ourselves as some isolated, alienated entity lost in a mysterious and frightening universe. We don't feel overwhelmed by it, trying to find a little piece of it that we can grasp and feel safe with, because we feel at peace with it. Then we have merged with the Truth.¹⁰

The Third Noble Truth is that *dukkha* will cease when craving and clinging cease. In this way, illusion ends, insight into the true nature of things dawns, and nirvana is achieved. One lives happily and fully in the present moment, free from self-centeredness and full of compassion. One can serve others purely, without thought of oneself. The Fourth Noble Truth is that craving and suffering can be extinguished by following the Noble Eightfold Path—a path of ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom.

To be free from clinging to thinking and feeling is nirvana—the highest, supreme happiness.

Maha Ghosananda¹¹

The Noble Eightfold Path to liberation

The Buddha set forth a systematic approach so that human beings could extricate themselves from suffering and achieve the final goal of liberation. The Noble Eightfold Path offers ways to purify the mind of afflictive emotions and avoid unwholesome actions. By following this path, we can live a happy life and also create the causes for a favorable rebirth. Ultimately, the path leads to freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth, and the peace of nirvana.

The first aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path is right understanding—comprehending reality correctly through deep realization of the Four Noble Truths. Initially, this means seeing through illusions, such as the idea that wealth and possessions can bring happiness. Gradually we learn to question old assumptions in the light of the Four Noble Truths. Everything we do and say is ultimately produced by the mind. The Buddha said that if our mind is defiled and uncontrolled, suffering will follow us just as a chariot follows a horse. If our mind is purified and well trained, then our actions will be wholesome and we will naturally experience happiness and well-being.

The second aspect is right thought or motivation. The Buddha's teachings help us to uncover any afflictive emotions that affect our thinking, such as selfish desires or a tendency to hide our imperfections. As we discover and purify mental defilements such as self-interest, our thinking becomes free from the limitations of self-centeredness—relaxed, clear, and open.

The third aspect is right speech. The Buddha taught his followers to relinquish the propensity to lie, gossip, speak harshly, or engage in divisive speech, and instead to use communication in the service of truth and harmony. He also advised us to speak to ourselves and others in a positive way: "May you be well and happy today."

The fourth aspect is right action, which begins with observing the five basic precepts for ethical conduct: to avoid destroying life, stealing, sexual

misconduct, lying, and intoxicants. Beyond these, all actions should be based on clear understanding. “Unwholesome deeds,” said the Buddha, are those “done from motives of partiality, enmity, stupidity, and fear.”¹²

The fifth is right livelihood—making sure that one’s way of making a living does not violate the five precepts. One should choose a profession or line of work that does not cause harm to others or disrupt social harmony.

Right effort, the sixth aspect, means striving continually to eliminate the impurities of the mind and diligently cultivating wholesome actions of body, speech, and mind. Joyful effort is the antidote to laziness.

The seventh aspect, right mindfulness, is a distinctive feature of the Buddhist path. The way to liberation requires discipline and the cultivation of awareness, moment to moment. The *Dhammapada* (Verses on the Path), an early compilation of the Buddha’s teachings, includes this pithy injunction:

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The Dhammapada
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*Check your mind.
Be on your guard.
Pull yourself out
as an elephant from mud.*¹³

The eighth aspect, right meditation, applies mental discipline to quiet the mind and develop single-pointed concentration. The Buddha explained that the mind is “subtle, invisible, treacherous.”¹⁴ Skillful means are therefore needed to understand and control its restless nature. When the mind is completely stilled, it becomes a quiet pool in which the true nature of things is clearly reflected. The various schools of Buddhism that developed over the centuries have taught different techniques of meditation, but this basic principle remains the same.

Try to be mindful, and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool, and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha.

*Ajahn Chah, meditation master, Wat Pa Pong, Thailand*¹⁵

The wheel of birth and death

Buddhist teachings about rebirth are significantly different from those of Hindu orthodoxy, for there is no eternal, independently existing soul to be reborn. In Buddhism, each phenomenon or event acts as a cause that sets another into motion. This sequence of spiritual cause and effect is called **karma** (Pali: *kamma*), the “action” of body, speech, and mind. The impressions of our virtuous and nonvirtuous actions shape our experience moment-by-moment. When we die, this process continues, passing on the flame to a new life in a realm of existence that reflects our past karma.

This wheel of birth and death operates primarily because of the three root afflictions: attachment, aversion, and delusion. The opposites of these afflictions—non-greed (such as generosity, renunciation for others’ sake), non-hate (such as friendliness, compassion, and patience), and non-delusion (such as mental clarity and insight)—act as causes to ultimately leave the circle of birth and death.

In Buddhist thought, not only do sentient beings take birth many times, but they also take on many different forms, creating an interconnected web of life. This has important implications for one's relationships with all life. One text explains:

In the long course of samsara [reincarnation], there is not one among living beings with form who has not been mother, father, brother, sister, son, or daughter, or some other relative. Being connected with the process of taking birth, one is kin to all wild and domestic animals, birds, and beings born from the womb.¹⁶

It is said that the Buddha remembered all his past lives and told stories about them to illustrate moral lessons. Hundreds of these stories have been collected as the Jataka Tales, or birth stories of the Buddha's past lives as



The Wheel of Life: in the center are animals representing the three root afflictions; attachment, aversion, and delusion. The next circle shows the fate of those with good karma (left) and bad karma (right). The third circle represents the six spheres of existence, from the gods to the infernal regions. The outer rim shows the chain of cause and effect. Grasping the wheel is a monster representing death, impermanence.

a bodhisattva (one dedicated to liberating others from suffering). The one recounted here, "The Great Ape Jataka Tale" (see Box), illustrates not only the Buddhist path as a way of personal development but also its importance in establishing moral guidelines for monastics, laity, and rulers alike.

In Buddhist cosmology, there are multiple possible states of existence, including hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, and gods. Whether interpreted as psychological metaphors or metaphysical realities, all these states of rebirth are imperfect and impermanent. Sentient beings take birth

TEACHING STORY

The Great Ape Jataka Tale

When Brahmadata was king of Benares, the Buddha took birth among the apes and became the powerful king of the 80,000 monkeys living near the Ganges. Overhanging the river there was a great mango tree, with huge and delicious fruits. When ripe, some fell on the ground and some fell into the river. Eating these mangoes with his monkeys, the Great Being foresaw that those that fell into the water would some day bring danger to the herd. He ordered that all the mangoes growing on branches over the river should be plucked when very small and discarded. However, one fruit was hidden by an ant's nest. When it was ripe, it fell into the nets which the king's fishermen had placed into the river. When they pulled out the ambrosial fruit, they took it to the king in Benares. When he tasted it, he developed a great craving for more and insisted on being taken to the tree from which it came.

A flotilla of boats brought the king to the great mango tree. Camping beneath it, he ate mangoes to his heart's delight. At midnight, the Great Being and his monkeys came and leapt from branch to branch above, eating the mangoes. The king woke up and saw them. He ordered his men to surround the tree and prepare to shoot arrows at the monkeys so that they could feast on mangoes and monkey flesh the following day.

Terrified, the monkeys appealed to the Great Being for help. He told them not to be afraid, for he would save their lives. So saying, he at once climbed to one of the branches over the river and then made a tremendous leap across the wide river to the opposite bank. There he cut a long bamboo shoot which he calculated would be long enough to reach across the river. Lashing it to a bush on the farther shore, he lashed the opposite end of the bamboo to his waist and then made a terrific leap back toward the mango tree where the monkeys were cowering

in fear for their lives. The shoot being slightly short, he grabbed an overhanging branch so that his own body's length filled the remaining distance. He signaled to the monkeys that they were to run across his body and then the bamboo shoot in order to escape to the other shore. Paying their obeisances to the Great Being and asking his forgiveness, the 80,000 monkeys ran across him to safety. In the process, one of the monkeys [later reborn as Devadatta, a cousin of the Buddha who repeatedly tried to undermine him] took the opportunity to leap from an upper branch onto the great ape's back, breaking his heart.

After all the monkeys had crossed to safety, the wounded Great Being was left alone, hanging from the tree. The king, who had watched the whole thing, was struck by the greatness of his self-sacrifice for the sake of his monkeys. At daybreak, he ordered his people to gently bring the great ape down from the tree, bathe him, rub his body with fine oil, dress him in yellow, and lay him to rest. Sitting beside the great ape, the king questioned him about his action. The Great Being explained to him that no worry or death could trouble him, and that he had acted for the welfare of all those whom he governed, as an example for the king to emulate. After thus advising the king, the Great Being died. King Brahmadata ordered funeral ceremonies due to a king for him, and then had a shrine built at the place of his cremation and had his skull inlaid with gold, which he then enshrined at Benares. According to the instructions of the Great Being, Brahmadata then became a very righteous ruler and a traveler to the Bright World.

When the Buddha told this Jataka Tale, he revealed that the human king was Ananda, and that the ape-king was himself.

again and again, caught up in this cycle of samsara, repeatedly experiencing birth, aging, suffering, and death as a result of their actions and mental defilements. Finally, by purifying their minds of greed, hatred, ignorance, and other delusions, they are able to achieve nirvana, or liberation from cyclic existence and suffering.

Nirvana

The Buddha said little about nirvana, the goal of Buddhist practice, but described it as a desirable state of mind. The only way to end the cycle of suffering is to end all craving and lead a life free of attachment that has no karmic consequences. One enters a state that the Buddha called “quietude of heart,”¹⁷ “a state beyond grasping, beyond aging and dying,”¹⁸ “the unborn, ... undying, ... unsorrowing, ... stainless, the uttermost security from bonds.”¹⁹ For the arhant (Pali: *arhat*, *arahat*), a worthy one, who has found nirvana in this life:


*No suffering for him
who is free from sorrow
free from the fetters of life
free in everything he does.
He has reached the end of his road. ...*

*Like a bird invisibly flying in the sky,
he lives without possessions,
knowledge his food, freedom his world,
while others wonder. ...*

*He has found freedom—
peaceful his thinking, peaceful his speech,
peaceful his deed, tranquil his mind.²⁰*

When an arhant dies, individuality disappears and the being enters the ultimate state of nirvana. The Buddha remained silent when he was asked what happens to an arhant after death. Why? At one point he picked up a handful of leaves from the forest floor and asked his disciples which were more numerous, the leaves in his hand or those in the forest. When they replied, “Very few in your hand, lord; many more in the grove,” he said:

Exactly. So you see, friends, the things that I know and have not revealed are more than the truths I know and have revealed. And why have I not revealed them? Because, friends, there is no profit in them; because they are not helpful to holiness; because they do not lead from disgust to cessation and peace, because they do not lead from knowledge to wisdom and nirvana.²¹

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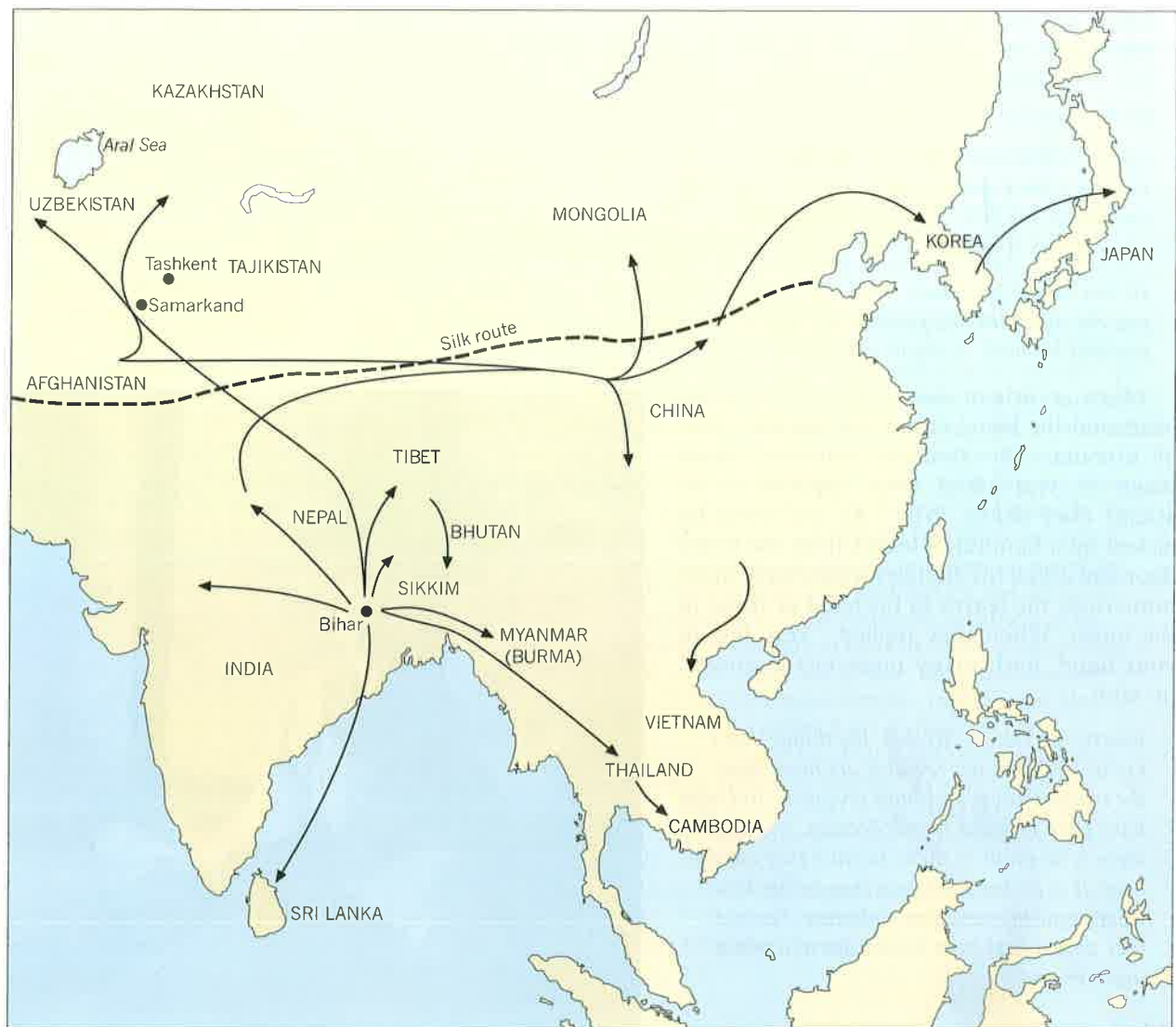
A Buddhist monk practices meditation to calm and purify his mind.



Branches of Buddhism

After the Buddha attracted a group of disciples, he began to send them out in all directions to help teach the Dharma. Two hundred years after the Buddha died, a powerful Indian king named Ashoka led a huge military campaign to extend his empire. After he saw the tremendous loss of life on both sides, he reportedly felt great remorse, became a practicing Buddhist, and began to espouse nonviolence. He had inscriptions written on rocks and pillars throughout his empire teaching the Dharma, with an emphasis on developing an attitude of social responsibility. Under King Ashoka's leadership, Buddhism was disseminated throughout the kingdom and outward to other countries, beginning its development as a global religion. After Ashoka's death, advanced study and dissemination of Buddhist philosophy and culture were highly developed in great Buddhist universities, such as Nalanda in northeastern India, which was founded in the second century CE. These were

Buddhism spread in all directions from India but had nearly disappeared in India itself by the 13th century CE.



huge complexes with libraries and lecture halls, and curricula that covered everything from linguistics to music, architecture, and science. Nevertheless, eventually brahmins reasserted their political influence and Buddhists were persecuted in some parts of India. By the time of the twelfth-century Muslim invasions of India, Buddhism was in decline and never became the dominant religion in the Buddha's homeland.

As the Buddha's teachings expanded and adapted to local cultures, various schools of interpretation developed. Of the earliest Buddhist schools, only the one today known as **Theravada** (Way of the Elders) survives. This school is prevalent in Southeast Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. The schools that developed somewhat later are collectively known as **Mahayana** (Great Vehicle). This school gradually became dominant in Nepal, Tibet, China, Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam, and Japan. Followers of all these traditions are in general agreement about the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the teachings about karma, samsara, and nirvana.

Theravada: the path of mindfulness

Theravadin Buddhists study the early scriptures in Pali, honor the life of renunciation, and follow mindfulness meditation teachings. These characteristics are more obvious among intellectuals and monastics; ordinary laypeople tend to be devotional in their practices.

The Pali Canon Buddhists who follow the Theravada tradition study a large collection of ancient scriptures preserved in the Pali language of ancient India. This ancient **canon**, or authoritative collection of writings, is called the **Pali Canon**. This collection is also referred to as the **Tipitaka** (Sanskrit: *Tripitaka*, "Three Baskets," because of the old practice of storing palm-leaf manuscripts in wicker baskets). The Three Baskets are three collections of sacred writings: rules of monastic discipline, Dharma teachings, and scholastic treatises. After the Buddha's death, leading members of the community of monks started compiling an authoritative canon of teachings and monastic discipline. According to Buddhist lore, this was done by a council of 500 elders who had studied directly with the Buddha. Venerable Ananda reportedly recited the Buddha's discourses from memory and another close disciple rehearsed the discipline of the monastic order. Then the elders agreed on a definitive body of the Buddha's teachings, which were recited orally until the first century BCE, when the *suttas* (Sanskrit: *sutras*) were written down. In addition to the Tipitaka, Theravadins accept certain noncanonical Pali works, such as later commentaries.

The Triple Gem Like Buddhists of all schools, those who follow the Theravada go for refuge in the **Triple Gem**: the Buddha (the Enlightened One), the Dharma (the teachings he gave), and the Sangha (community). To become a Buddhist, a person goes for refuge in these three jewels by reciting the Pali formula: "*Buddham saranam gacchami* [I go to the Buddha for refuge], *dhammam saranam gacchami* [I go to the Dharma for refuge], *sangham saranam gacchami* [I go to the Sangha for refuge]." One takes refuge in the Buddha not by praying to him for help, but by honoring him as a supreme teacher and inspiring model. In a sense, taking refuge in the Buddha is honoring the Buddha-wisdom within each of us.

Buddhist monks make daily rounds with their begging bowls seeking food from laypeople, who serve them with reverence as in this scene in Laos.



The Dharma is like a medicine that can cure our suffering, but it will not work unless we take it. In the Pali Canon, it is described as immediate, timeless, leading to calmness, and known only through direct experience and personal effort.

The Sangha is ultimately the community of realized beings; on the conventional level, the Sangha is the order of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis who have renounced worldly life in order to follow, preserve, and share the Dharma.

The Buddha established one of the world's first monastic orders, and the Sangha remains very strong in Theravada countries. There are presently about half a million Theravadin monks in Southeast Asia. To simplify their worldly lives and devote themselves to studying and teaching the Dharma, monks and nuns shave their heads, dress in simple robes, own only a few basic material items, eat no solid foods after noon, practice celibacy, and depend on the laity for their food, clothing, and medical supplies. Early every morning the monks set forth with an alms bowl, and laypeople regard it as a merit-making opportunity to offer food to them. The monks reciprocate by offering spiritual guidance, chanting blessings, and performing various social services, including offering advice and education.

Buddhist monasteries are at the center of village life, not isolated, as one might imagine. The monasteries are left open, and people come and go throughout the day. The monks hold a revered social position as models of self-control, kindness, and intelligence. In Thailand, it is common for young men to take temporary vows as monks—often for the duration of the rainy season when little farmwork can be done. They wear saffron robes, set forth with shaven heads and alms bowls, and receive religious instruction while practicing a life of simplicity.

In contrast to the monks, there has traditionally been little social support for Buddhist nuns in Southeast Asia. Provisions were made during the time of the Buddha for women monastics to live in their own monasteries, practicing the same lifestyle as monks, but the order of fully ordained nuns (bhikkhunis) disappeared completely in Theravadin countries about a thousand years ago. Many of the early Buddhist scriptures take an egalitarian position toward



Some 135 women from 23 countries received full ordination as Buddhist nuns at Bodhi Gaya in 1998, helping to revive orders of bhikkhunis.

women's capacity for wisdom and attainment of nirvana, but spiritual power has remained in the hands of monks and there has been little opportunity for nuns to take positions of teaching and leadership.

Over time, some of the monks and the texts they edited apparently became somewhat sexist. Because Buddhist monks are celibate, they are not allowed to come into direct contact with women, and many believe that women are hindrances to monks' spiritual development. Feminist scholars object to this interpretation. Thai Buddhist Venerable Dhammananda, for instance, asserts:

Newly ordained monks who have not had much experience with practice and are very weak in their mental resolve may be easily swayed by sensual impulses, of which women are the major attraction. Even if no women are present, some monks still create problems for themselves by images of women they have in their minds. Women are not responsible for the sexual behavior or imaginings of men; the monks themselves must cope with their own sensual desires. Enlightened ones are well-fortified against such mental states and are able to transcend gender differences. The Buddha himself found no need to avoid women, because women no longer appeared to him as sexual objects. He was well-balanced and in control of his mental processes.²²

There are now attempts to revive full ordination for nuns in Theravadin countries. A landmark event occurred in 1998, when 135 nuns from many countries received full ordination in Bodhi Gaya. According to the code of discipline, ordination of nuns is possible only if a quorum of both ordained monks and nuns is present. In China, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea orders of fully ordained nuns have continued, and therefore it was possible to assemble the requisite number of ten bhikkhus and ten bhikkhunis in Bodhi Gaya.

Meditation The Theravada tradition preserves a wide variety of meditation techniques for cultivating the mind, derived from the early Buddhist teachings. The two major branches of meditation practice are *samatha* (calm abiding) and *vipassana* (insight). The practice begins with increasing one's attentiveness to a specific object to focus the mind and achieve calm abiding.

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One then proceeds to the practice of vipassana to develop insight into *dukkha*, *anicca*, and *anatta*.

As taught by the famous Burmese meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982), vipassana practice begins by simply watching one's breath as it flows in and out, focusing attention on the rise and fall of the abdomen. To keep the mind concentrated on the present movement, rather than being distracted by uncontrolled, conditioned responses, one continually makes concise mental notes of what is happening: "rising" and "falling." Other vipassana masters suggest observing a point on the upper lip as the breath goes in and out of the nostrils, posting one's attention like a gatekeeper at that point. Despite the attempt to hold the restless mind to one point, inevitably other thoughts and feelings arise in the restless mind. As they arise, one simply notes these thoughts and feelings—"imagining," "wandering," "remembering"—and returns one's attention to the rising and falling of the breath. Bodily sensations are handled in the same way, noting "itching," "tight," "tired," and so on, as they arise, but maintaining an observer's attitude rather than letting one's mental equanimity be disturbed by reacting to the sensations. Periods of sitting meditation are alternated with periods of walking meditation, during which one notes the movements of the body in great detail: "lifting," "moving," and "placing." If ecstatic states or visions arise in the process of meditation, one simply notes them and lets them pass away without attachment. In the same way, emotions that arise are simply observed, accepted, and allowed to pass away, without evaluating them as "good" or "bad." As Buddhist teacher Joko Beck mentions, ordinarily it is very easy to get caught up and stuck in our emotions:

Everyone's fascinated by their emotions because we think that's who we are. We're afraid that if we let our attachment to them go, we'll be nobody. Which of course we are! When you wander into your ideas, your hopes, your dreams, turn back—not just once but ten thousand times if need be, a million times if need be.²³

The three characteristics of existence that the Buddha described—*dukkha* (suffering and dissatisfaction), *anicca* (impermanence), and *anatta* (no eternal self)—become apparent during the process of meditation. As one continues the practice, the mind becomes calm, clear, attentive, flexible, and free from the disturbances of likes and dislikes. The next step is to carry this same type of mindfulness over into every activity of everyday life.

Devotional practices In addition to the contemplative and philosophical traditions described above, many lay Buddhists and also many monastic practitioners of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia are likely to turn to the Buddha in devotion, taking refuge in his protective presence and power. Temples, halls, and roadside shrines have been built with images of the Buddha before which people bow, light candles, burn incense, offer flowers, press bits of gold leaf onto the images, and make aspirations and prayers. Some monastics and intellectuals—including Protestant Christians who became interested in Buddhist studies in the late nineteenth century—have labeled such practices antithetical to the spirit of Buddhism, which they understand as rationalistic, philosophical, nonritualistic, noniconic, and nontheistic. Despite the increasing commercialization of Buddhist imagery, some commentators are now trying to trace the history of image-oriented worship. Devotional practices are so widespread and so influential in popular

Buddhist practice that scholars have begun to examine them as perhaps being part of the mainstream of Buddhism after all.

A key text in this regard is the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, a Pali scripture that describes the Buddha's cremation and the dispersal of his relics. The text also deals with the issue of devotionism, recounting that, before his death, the Buddha recommended the commemoration of his relics alongside dedicated practice of the Dharma: "Whoever lays wreaths or puts sweet perfumes and colors ... with a devout heart, will reap benefit and happiness for a long time."²⁴ Simultaneously, the text advocates devotion to the Dharma as a way of respecting, revering, and paying homage to the Buddha. When lay Buddhists recite the refuge formula, taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, they may experience this refuge not merely as a philosophical idea, but as a way of connecting with the timeless presence of the Buddha.

In one popular ritual in northern Thailand, a network of threads attached to a large statue of the Buddha is used in special ceremonies to conduct his spiritual power to the Sangha, holy water, amulets, or new images to be consecrated. The 108 squares formed overhead by the strings are believed to form a magical cosmos whose sacred energy touches the earth through cords hanging downward. People may wrap these cords around their heads during the chanting of sutras by monks and thus receive spiritual blessings.

To consecrate new images of the Buddha, monks initially seal them by closing the eyes with beeswax and covering the heads with cloth. Throughout the night, they chant, meditate, and teach about the Buddha and the Dharma as a way to train their minds and also consecrate the images. In the process, the Sangha is also drawn into a strong sense of unity with the Buddha, the Dharma, and each other. At sunrise, the coverings are removed from the images, and they are offered milk and sweet rice; in a sense, they are now living presences.

Similarly, followers may consider the Buddha's power to be present in his relics—bits of hair, nails, teeth, bones, and ashes from his cremated body. Such relics or images of the Buddha may be placed in **stupas**, reliquary mounds reaching toward the sky—a practice perhaps derived from earlier indigenous



A relic purported to be a tooth of the Buddha is so revered that it is carried on an elephant palanquin in a huge yearly procession in Sri Lanka.



Stupas, such as these bell-shaped monuments in Borobudur, Java, may house relics or statues of the Buddha and are sacred places for pilgrimage.

The Buddha's long ears symbolize long life; elders are valued because of their experience and wisdom. The raised upper part of his head represents higher consciousness developed through years of meditation practice. The flame at the top signifies extinction of the flames of anger, hatred, and delusion.

spiritual traditions. For instance, a tiny bone chip believed to be a relic of the Buddha is enshrined at Doi Suthep Temple in Chiang Mai in Thailand. To share this sacred relic with the people, the ruler is said to have placed it on the back of a white elephant—a legendary symbol of the Buddha—in the belief that the elephant would choose the best place for the temple. The elephant climbed a nearby hill until it reached the auspicious spot and went down on its knees. Today, flocks of pilgrims climb the 290 steps to the temple and request blessings by acts such as pressing squares of gold leaf onto an image of the Buddha, lighting three sticks of incense to honor the Triple Gem, lighting candles, and offering flowers. So great are the powers associated with relics that huge processions carrying what is thought to be the Buddha's tooth relic have been used by the governments in Sri Lanka and Burma (Myanmar) to legitimize their claims to temporal power.

There is no evidence of worship of images of the Buddha during his lifetime. Early Buddhist art depicts only an empty seat under the bodhi tree where the Buddha attained enlightenment or symbols representing other events in his life: a lotus flower or elephant for his birth, a wheel or two deer kneeling before a throne for his first sermon. What was thought to be the Buddha's last footprint impressed into a stone was later worshiped by King Ashoka, and its replicas also became objects of worship. Images of the Buddha himself were not used until the first century BCE at the earliest, and were not standardized until about the fifth century CE.

Now cherished images of the Buddha proliferate in temples and roadside shrines. The shrines are almost identical to the indigenous spirit shrines, which are still quite common in Thailand, where Buddhism is frequently combined with indigenous spirituality and Brahmanism. These physical

images are a reminder of the Buddha's teachings and give a sense of his protective, guiding presence. In Southeast Asia, aspects of Theravada Buddhism are often adopted by shamans for greater efficacy in healing rituals. In Sri Lanka, the *yakeduras* invoke the power of the Buddha and the Dharma to ward off evil spirits and help cure spiritually afflicted people. In the cosmic hierarchy, the Buddha and the Dharma are considered powerful and therefore useful in subduing lesser forces. During healing rituals, patients listen to Buddhist stories to help free themselves from afflictions and obtain protection by the power of the mind. Even monks are regarded as magical protectors of sorts, and followers frequently request chanted blessings for protection.

As in all Buddhist cultures, Buddhist temples are important centers for community identity and integration. There the monks not only teach the Dharma, but also preside over agricultural festivals to improve the harvest, ceremonies to assist the dead to achieve a better rebirth, and ceremonies to invoke the blessings of the deities. All these events generate a festive atmosphere and communal joy. The monks and nuns help the people accumulate merit or spiritual benefits and share them with others. Ashin Nyana Dipa, a monk from Burma (Myanmar), explains the idea of transferring merit:

When we concentrate, our mind is purified. The purified mind can transmit, for it is stable. I can share if I have already done good deeds for the people, such as teaching them vipassana. It is like a wire: Without wire, electricity cannot pass. The wire is concentration; the electricity is loving-kindness. We have to use concentration and send benefits with loving-kindness. You have a bank account, so I put something into your bank account to fill it. Like a candle, one gives light to another. Then the light is more and more. My light will not be reduced; it will be more and more. You also get more; I also get more. Sometimes when I meditate, I see your face in my mind. When I see your face, I want to see your face happy, I don't want you to be in trouble. So I'm sending, sending my merits: "Let it be good."²⁵

Mahayana: the path of compassion and wisdom

Additional Buddhist practices and teachings began to appear in a wide range of scriptures from the early centuries CE. These further developments in thought and practice beyond the Pali scriptures gradually evolved into what is called Mahayana, the Great Vehicle. The Mahayana scriptures emphasize the practice of compassion and wisdom by both monastics and laypeople, toward the goal of liberating all sentient beings from suffering. The Mahayana traditions honor all the teachings set forth in the Pali Canon and, in addition, accept the extensive Mahayana literature originally found in Sanskrit and later translated into Chinese, Tibetan, and other languages. This literature praises the deeds and qualities of innumerable Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and inspires practitioners to develop the compassion and wisdom needed to become bodhisattvas and eventually Buddhas themselves.

The Mahayana scriptures emphasize the importance of religious experience. The Dharma is not embodied only in scriptures; for the Mahayanist it is



The golden feet of a 105-foot (32-meter) Buddha at Wat Indra Viharn, Bangkok.



Map showing the approximate distribution of forms of Buddhism in the world today.

the source of a transformative experience that awakens the quest for enlightenment as the greatest value in life and seeks to embody the Dharma in every aspect of life. Each school—and there are many branches within Mahayana—offers a special set of methods, or “skillful means,” for awakening. These methods are quite varied, in contrast to the uniformity of Theravada, but the Mahayana traditions also share many common characteristics.

Bodhisattvas An early Mahayana scripture, the *Lotus Sutra*, defended its seemingly innovative ideas by claiming that earlier teachings were skillful means for those with lower capacities. The idea is that the Buddha geared his teaching to his audience, and that his teachings were presented in different ways and at different levels of completeness in accordance with the readiness of his audience to understand them.

One of the most significant new interpretations introduced by the *Lotus Sutra* regards the Eternal Buddha. According to the *Lotus Sutra*:

Common people believe that Buddha was born a prince and learned the way to Enlightenment as a mendicant; actually, Buddha has always existed in the world which is without beginning or end.

As the Eternal Buddha, He has known all people and applied all methods of relief.

There is no falsity in the Eternal Dharma which Buddha taught, for He knows all things in the world as they are, and He teaches them to all people. ...

Buddha alone truly and fully knows the world as it is and He never says that it is true or false, or good or evil. He simply portrays the world as it is.

What Buddha does teach is this: "That all people should cultivate roots of virtue according to their natures, their deeds, and their beliefs."²⁶

The *Lotus Sutra* and other new Mahayana scriptures also taught that there was a higher goal than the arhant's achievement of liberation, namely, to aspire to become a bodhisattva (a being who is dedicated to liberating others from suffering) and work to achieve the perfect enlightenment of a Buddha. The *Lotus Sutra* says that all beings have the capacity for Buddhahood and are destined to attain it eventually. Both monastics and laity are urged to take the bodhisattva vow and work to become fully enlightened. Today Mahayana Buddhists in East Asia express this commitment in the Four Great Bodhisattva Vows compiled in China in the sixth century CE by Tiantai Zhiyi, founder of the Tiantai School:

*Beings are infinite in number, I vow to save them all;
The obstructive passions are endless in number, I vow to end them all;
The teachings for saving others are countless, I vow to learn them all;
Buddhahood is the supreme achievement, I vow to attain it.*

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, representing the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, says:

The motivation to achieve Buddhahood in order to save all sentient beings is really a marvelous determination. That person becomes very courageous, warm-hearted, and useful in society.²⁷

Soen Nakagawa-roshi, from the Japanese Zen tradition, says:

*You are not just here for yourself alone, but for the sake of all sentient beings.
Keep your mind pure and warm.²⁸*

The concept of the selfless bodhisattva is not just an ideal for earthly conduct; numerous bodhisattvas are believed to be present and available to hear the devotees' petitions. As emanations of wisdom and compassion, they are sources of inspiration and blessing on the path to Buddhahood. For karmic purification and removal of inner obstructions to enlightenment and bodhisattvahood, aspirants are taught to practice the Ten Perfections (*Paramitas*): generosity, morality, renunciation, transcendental wisdom, energy and diligent effort, patience and forbearance, truthfulness, determination, loving kindness, and serene equanimity.

The most popular bodhisattva in East Asia is Avalokiteshvara (known as Guanyin in China, Kannon in Japan), who symbolizes compassion and extends blessings to all. Although he is depicted as male in India, the *Lotus Sutra* says that this bodhisattva takes whatever form is needed to help others, and lists thirty-two examples. In East Asia, Avalokiteshvara is typically depicted as female, often as the bestower or protector of young children. In one hand, she holds a vase

Outside a temple in Kyoto, Japan, gravestones of children who have recently died are draped with pink cloths. The largest stone in the background represents Kannon bestowing blessings on them.





Guanyin, "hearer of cries," bodhisattva of mercy, depicted in a statue on a beach in Thailand.

with the nectar of compassion; in the other, she holds a willow branch symbolizing her healing powers. An image of the bodhisattva holding a baby has become especially popular in East Asia as a source of inspiration and blessing for women and children. She may also be depicted standing serenely atop a dragon in a turbulent ocean. The storm-tossed ocean and dragon are symbols of the upheavals of life and within our minds. Guanyin is therefore a model of the inner strength, equilibrium, and self-control with which these turbulences can be mastered.

The Three Bodies of Buddha The Theravada tradition emphasizes that the Buddha is an historical figure who taught the Dharma as a guide to liberation from suffering, then died like any other human being. By contrast, in the Mahayana tradition, the Buddha came to be regarded as the embodiment of enlightened awareness. Metaphysically, Buddha is said to be an immanent presence in the universe with three aspects, or "bodies." The first aspect is the formless enlightened wisdom of a Buddha; the second is the body of bliss of a Buddha, an aspect that communicates the Dharma to bodhisattvas; and the third is the emanation body, whereby a Buddha manifests in countless forms to help liberate suffering beings. It was in such an emanation body that the Buddha appeared for a time on the earth as the historical figure Shakyamuni Buddha.

In Mahayana, the Buddhas are seen to embody perfect purity, boundless compassion, omniscient wisdom, and many other enlightened qualities. Although some may interpret the Buddhas and bodhisattvas as metaphors for various aspects of enlightened awareness, others regard them as living presences that are able to impart blessings and guidance to those who call on them. Both Theravada and Mahayana are nontheistic, in that the existence or non-existence of gods is not a primary concern, yet ordinary people are inclined to seek help in times of need.

Mahayana scriptures portray Buddhas and bodhisattvas moving swiftly through intergalactic space and time, appearing in multiple forms at different world systems simultaneously. In the Tibetan tradition, for example, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama is regarded as a human emanation of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. Many Tibetan monks, nuns, and laypeople followed him into exile after the communist takeover of Tibet and have set up a community in the mountains of northern India, in Dharamsala, to be near him. Practitioners are not to be attached to these appearances, but receive teachings and draw great inspiration from them.

Emptiness As in Theravada, the Mahayana schools understand ultimate reality as the true nature of things. This "suchness" is not an absolute, but the absence of a permanent, independent reality. In accordance with the universal law of cause and effect, all conditioned phenomena arise and perish continuously, and therefore lack true existence. In the Udana scripture from the Pali Canon, the Buddha states, "O monks, there is an unborn, undying, unchanging, uncreated. If it were not so, there would be no point to life, or to training." But here the Buddha is referring to nirvana, a nonregressive state of liberation from mental afflictions, suffering, and rebirth, rather than to an eternal, independently existing reality.

Sunyata, meaning emptiness or voidness, is the most complex and profound of the Mahayana teachings. The concept of sunyata was elaborated by the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna around the second and third century CE on

the basis of the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures. According to Nagarjuna, compounded things have no independent existence and no eternal reality. All composite phenomena arise and pass away, dependent on causes and conditions. The world of phenomena is therefore empty of true or inherent existence. Insight into emptiness is similar to the insight into no-self that arises when we observe the arising and passing away of the elements of mind and body during vipassana meditation. Insight into emptiness also arises by understanding the dependent nature of thought constructs and freeing our minds from fixed concepts.

Everything being empty, there is nothing to cling to, so one who realizes emptiness is free to experience reality directly and to be compassionate without attachment. The concepts of selflessness and emptiness help practitioners understand things “as they are” and also help them overcome attachment to things, including attachment to concepts.

Some people may wonder: If everything is ultimately empty, what’s the point of action? The teaching on emptiness does not mean we do nothing, but that we are not attached to the results of our actions. Emptiness is always paired with compassion, skillful means, and the wish to benefit all living beings. Zen teacher Dainin Katagiri advised:


Broadly speaking, without desire, how can we survive in this world? Using our knowledge, we consider carefully what to do next. And then whatever we decide to do, let’s just do it, do our best to accomplish it from the beginning to the end. That’s all we have to do. Immediately, see the result and accept it. Just continue to sow good seeds from moment to moment.²⁹

The Perfection of Wisdom scriptures that celebrate the liberating experience of emptiness are foundational texts for most Mahayana schools. What is distinctive and startling about Mahayana is the application of the idea of emptiness to all things. Even the teachings of the Buddha and emptiness itself are empty of true existence. In the *Heart Sutra*, which is recited in all Mahayana schools, the core doctrines of traditional Buddhism are also deconstructed. Avalokiteshvara sees that the five aggregates of a person (form, feelings, perceptions, karmic formations, and consciousness) are empty of true existence, because they exist in relation to and dependent on other phenomena. With this realization, the bodhisattva becomes free of delusion. Next, birth and death, purity and defilement, increase and decrease are understood to be empty; the six sense objects, the six sense organs, and the six types of consciousness are empty; life and death are empty; the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path are empty. Even knowledge and attainment are proclaimed to be empty. With this “perfection of wisdom,” there are no obstacles and no fear. Having seen through the illusion of true existence of even the core Buddhist teachings, one attains nirvana. In the *Heart Sutra*, this realization culminates in the mantra: *Gate, Gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi, svaha!* (“Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond, awakened, so be it!”). As Professor David Chappell observed:

The systematic emptying of the central doctrines of the tradition is unparalleled in religious history. (Imagine a Christian saying that the Ten Commandments and Lord’s Prayer and Apostles’ Creed are empty!) And yet, insight into the impermanence of all things, and their connectedness, gives Mahayana a self-critical profundity and an inclusive acceptance of diversity, which provides balance in the midst of movement, and peace in the midst of compassion.³⁰




Many Buddhists anticipate the coming of Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, to re-establish the purity of the Dharma.

 **Read the Document**
The Heart Sutra
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Chan and Zen: the great way of enlightenment

Buddhism was transmitted from India to China beginning around the first century CE and thence to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, absorbing elements of Daoism along the way. Around the fifth century CE, according to tradition, a South Indian monk named Bodhidharma traveled to a monastery in northern China, where he reportedly spent nine years in silent meditation, "facing the wall." He became recognized as the first patriarch of the radical path that came to be called Chan Buddhism, from the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, meaning meditation. Although traditional accounts of Bodhidharma's life and contributions may not be completely factual, they illustrate the emphasis on meditation and direct insight that characterize Chan Buddhism, which became the most successful form of Buddhism in China. Bodhidharma's legendary practice became emblematic of a firm determination to reach enlightenment through sitting meditation. In lines attributed to Bodhidharma, Chan Buddhism is described as:

*Directly pointing to the human mind,
Achieving Buddhahood by seeing one's nature.³¹*

 **Read the Document**
Zen Mind,
Beginner's Mind
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The Chan school was transmitted to Japan, where it is known as Zen. Zen claims to preserve the essence of the Buddha's teachings through direct experience, triggered by mind-to-mind transmission of the Dharma. Instead of focusing on scriptures, Buddhas, and bodhisattvas, Zen emphasizes direct insight into the true nature of one's own mind, to reveal one's own Buddha nature. Direct insight results from *zazen* (sitting meditation). "To sit," said the Sixth Zen Patriarch, "means to obtain absolute freedom and not to allow any thought to be caused by external objects. To meditate means to realize the imperturbability of one's original nature."³²

A sixteenth-century Zen rock garden with raked gravel in the Daitoki-Ji temple complex in Kyoto. The garden is to be contemplated as a miniature and symbolic landscape of mountains, islands, land, and sea.



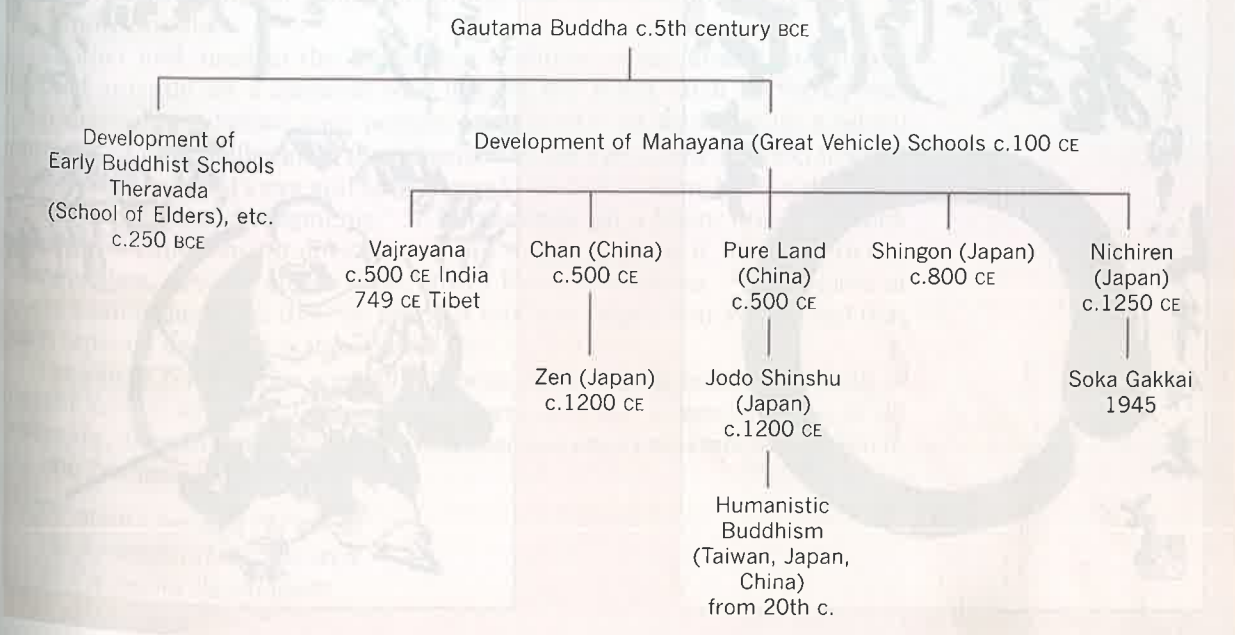
*The Great Way is not difficult
for those who have no preferences.
When love and hate are both absent
everything becomes clear and undisguised.
Make the smallest distinction, however,
and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart.*

Sengtsan²²

In Zen, instructions in the manner of sitting are quite rigorous to avoid distracting the mind: One must maintain an upright posture and not move during the meditation period. Skillful means are then applied to make the mind one-pointed and clear. The initial practice is simply to watch and count each inhalation and exhalation from one to ten, starting over from one if anything other than awareness of the breath enters the mind. Although this practice sounds simple, the mind is so restless that many people must work for months before finally getting to ten without having to start over. Getting to ten is not really the goal; the goal is the process itself, the process of recognizing what comes up in the mind and gently letting it go without attachment or preferences.

As one practices zazen, undisturbed by phenomena, one becomes inwardly calm and the natural mind is revealed in its original purity. This "original mind" is spacious and free, like an open sky. Thoughts and sensations may float through it like clouds, but they then disappear, leaving no trace. What remains is insight into "thusness," the true nature of things. In some Zen schools, this perception of thusness comes in a sudden burst of insight, or *kensho*.

Major Branches of Buddhism



RELIGION IN PRACTICE

Zen Oxherding Pictures

The ten Zen oxherding pictures metaphorically illustrate a series of stages along the spiritual path, with the meaning of each picture to be discovered through meditation. The practitioner is the herder (the worldly self, usually portrayed in male form) who is searching for the elusive ox (our true nature) in the wilderness. In the second picture, the herder notices the footprints of the ox. In the third, he catches sight of the ox. In the fourth, he struggles mightily to grasp the ox. In the fifth, he tames the ox with tether and whip, until "well tended and domesticated, the ox grows pure and gentle." In the sixth picture (illustrated upper right), the seeker has found and tamed the ox and leisurely returns home riding high upon it, playing tunes "full of profound meaning." In the seventh, he reaches home, but the ox disappears. In the eighth stage (below left), both ox and herder have disappeared—"Whip, tether, person, ox: all are empty! Blue sky all and all around." In the ninth picture, the herder is shown Returning to the Source: "Inside his hut, he does not see any object outside." In the tenth and final picture (below right), the now-enlightened herder returns to the marketplace with helping hands and a wide grin on his face.³⁴



Brush and ink drawings by Gyokusei Jikihara





The tea ceremony in Japan, a ritual way of inculcating direct awareness, simplicity, and self-restraint.

When the mind is calm, action becomes spontaneous and natural. Zen practitioners are taught to rest in the natural simplicity of their own **Buddha-nature**. It is said that two Zen monks, on gaining a glimpse of enlightenment, ran naked through the woods scribbling on rocks. On the other hand, the Zen tradition links spontaneity with intense, disciplined concentration. In the art of calligraphy, the perfectly spontaneous brushstroke is executed with the whole body in a single breath, yet this is the outcome of years of attentive practice. Being fully present in the moment—when pouring tea, being aware only of pouring tea—is simplicity itself. Whether painting, serving tea, sweeping, or simply breathing, the unconditioned “thusness” of life is fully revealed.

Another tool, used in the Rinzai Zen tradition, is the **koan**. Attention is focused ardently on a question that boggles the mind, such as “What was your original face before your parents were born?” As Roshi Philip Kapleau observes, “Koans deliberately throw sand into the eyes of the intellect to force us to open our Mind’s eye and see the world and everything in it undistorted by our concepts and judgments.” To concentrate on a koan, one must look closely and experience it directly, without thinking about it. The experience is immediate, beyond abstractions. Roshi Kapleau explains, “The import of every koan is the same: that the world is one interdependent Whole and that each separate one of us is that Whole.”³⁵

The aim of Zen practice is enlightenment, often experienced as the flash of insight known as *satori*. One directly experiences the interrelatedness of all existence, often in a sudden recognition that nothing is separate from oneself. As one Zen master put it:

*The moon’s the same old moon,
The flowers exactly as they were,
Yet I’ve become the thingness
Of all the things I see!*³⁶

All aspects of life become, at the same time, utterly precious and utterly empty, "nothing special." This paradox cannot be grasped intellectually; it can only be realized through direct intuitive awareness.

Pure Land: devotion to Amitabha Buddha

Zen is a practice of inner awareness with close attention given to every action and requires years of disciplined meditation. Other forms of Buddhist practice developed in India and East Asia that had greater appeal. One of the most popular Buddhist schools in East Asia is Pure Land Buddhism. At times of great social upheaval (for instance, when the government became corrupt and society was falling apart), it was widely thought that people had become so degenerate that it was nearly impossible for them to attain enlightenment through their own efforts.

Under the circumstances, many became devoted to **Amitabha Buddha**, the Buddha of Boundless Light. It was believed that **Amitabha** (**Amida** in Japanese) was previously a prince who vowed to attain enlightenment. After he did so, he used his pure virtue to manifest a Pure Land of Bliss for all those who called his name. In Japan, the original abstract Indian Buddhist concept of a Pure Land in the west to which devotees return after death became more concrete. The Japanese had an ancient tradition of worshiping mountains as destinations which the dead ascend and from which deities descend to earth. They began to depict Amida riding on billowing clouds over the mountains and welcoming his dying devotees.

A Japanese statue of Amida Buddha sitting among hanging ornaments symbolizing the spiritual bliss of the Pure Land.



Jodo Shinshu: the True Pure Land In the thirteenth century, the Japanese monk Shinran broke with monastic tradition by marrying. He emphasized the principle that salvation comes through repeating the name of Amida Buddha—the *nembutsu*, "*Namu-amida-butsu*"—with sincere trust and devotion, not by separating oneself from society. The Jodo Shinshu, or "True Pure Land," school developed by Shinran's followers became a major Buddhist movement throughout the world. Unlike other Buddhist sects in Japan, it did not mix its beliefs with those of Shinto, nor did its practitioners accept donations for prayers and blessings. It became the most popular form of Buddhism practiced in Japan. It is the most popular Buddhist school among Japanese immigrants and their descendants in North America, with well-established communities also in Europe, Australia, and Africa.

Nichiren: salvation through the *Lotus Sutra*

While some Buddhists in Japan despaired of achieving enlightenment through their own efforts and therefore relied on the grace of Amida Buddha, others stressed the importance of striving to enlighten not only ourselves but also society. One example was a thirteenth-century fisherman's son who named himself Nichiren. For Nichiren, the highest truths of Buddhism were embodied in the *Lotus Sutra's* compilation of parables, verses, and descriptions of innumerable beings who practiced the Buddha's teachings. Nichiren gave particular attention to two of these beings: the

An Interview with Naoyuki Ogi



Naoyuki Ogi is a young writer and translator now working in Tokyo at a society dedicated to propagating the teachings of Buddha. He is very kind and generous in devoting his time and energy to help others. He explains:

I'm in the fortieth generation of a Buddhist family. I was born in the temple family of Choshoji temple. All my ancestors were Buddhist priests. In ten years when I'm forty I will be the abbot of my temple. I want to have a good relationship with the members. I want to help them realize the good life and the truth in life, and I will try to ease their suffering. I want to make the temple the center of the community. That's my dream.

After the big economic crisis of a few years ago, many Japanese companies fell down. We have so much interconnection with American society. If the American economy becomes bad, the Japanese economy also becomes bad. We are interrelated. When Japan faced a financial crisis, everybody had to save their money. People couldn't go abroad. But then they realized: We don't need to go outside, because we have such a rich culture in our country. So they focused on their own culture. Now the situation has changed. Young people have discovered their own culture and its meaning, including its religion, so they visit lots of temples. People who are now in their sixties didn't care about religion much, because they associated it with the violence of religious cults like Aum Shinryko. But the younger generation don't know about that. It's just a story to them.

To me, Amida Buddha is the invisible supporting Power. My experience goes back to my childhood. I loved my grandmother. It's because of her that I encountered the teaching of Buddha. She passed away when I was only ten years old. I was so sad. A guy came to greet me. He said, "You know how to greet, how to speak, how to sit up straight, just like your grandmother." Then I realized how Buddha's teachings light our lives. Buddha's power, Buddha's light may be an invisible support in my life, in my kindness.

I don't ask Amida Buddha for anything for myself. I just give appreciation. I say, "I give thanks for the teaching of Buddha. I thank you for helping my life, supporting my life." That's the meaning of reciting the name of Amida Buddha which originally means immeasurable life and light.

I have a small Buddhist altar in my room. Every morning and every evening before going to bed, I

recite the name of Amida Buddha and express my appreciation by saying "Namu Amida Butsu" (I take refuge in Amida Buddha). In the morning I say, "Thank you very much for making me alive this morning," and then I try to live that day with gratitude as much as possible. And then before going to bed, I try to reflect on myself. Sometimes I'm so selfish, so I try to be selfless for the next day. Every Sunday I find a good Buddhist temple where my wife and I can do chanting. That's so beautiful. Sometimes we don't understand the meaning of the chanting, but the sound is really beautiful. After that, I'm sure our hearts are peaceful.

I can be called a Buddhist priest. When I was twenty years old, I went to Nishiyama Betsuin temple to get the qualification of Buddhist priest of Jodo Shinshu (Shin Buddhist) tradition. I shaved my hair and I got ordained. On special occasions—such as memorial services or funerals—I wear ceremonial robes for rituals, but usually I don't, because now I am working as a businessman.

Almost 100 families belong to my temple in my hometown. That means probably at least 300 people are supporting my temple, so I have to take care of them—by rituals, by counseling. For me they're not just members of the temple, they're more like family. That means I have 100 families, so I have to be concerned for each family equally. It's maybe going to be hard, but I have to do that. That's my dream.

Today people are very busy, but they need more time to reflect on themselves. They need more invisible body. Before the earthquake, people just depended on materialism. Material results were everything to them. After the earthquake, they came to depend more on the invisible body—on kindness, on spiritual stuff. I think they need time to reflect on themselves through spiritual practice. Also they need to cultivate their spiritual thoughts, their spiritual ideas, because that may be helpful for them when they face a lot of problems. They have to train their hearts.

Because of Buddha's teachings, my heart has changed a lot. I want to share this wonderful experience with everybody, so that other people might be able to experience what I received. What changed with Buddha's teaching is that now I'm not thinking about myself. I think more about others. I realized that everybody is interconnected. We are not alone. That's why I want to help open other people's blind eyes, so they may realize how wonderful a life we are living.¹⁷

Bodhisattva of Superb Action, who staunchly devotes himself to spreading the Perfect Truth, and the Bodhisattva Ever-Abused, who is persecuted because of his insistence, with unshaken conviction, that each person is potentially a Buddha. Nichiren himself was repeatedly abused by the authorities, but persisted in his efforts to reform Buddhism in Japan and spread what he considered its purified essence, the bodhisattva ideal, to the world. The phrase chanted by Nichiren and his followers, "*Namu myoho rengekyo*," pays homage to the *Lotus Sutra*. Today it is chanted by Nichiren monks, nuns, and laypeople for hours. The chant is thought to slowly reveal the profound meaning of the *Lotus Sutra* and to work inwardly, beyond thought.

In our time, some Nichiren followers undertake long peace walks. In one peace effort sponsored by Nipponzan Myohoji in 1995, people walked from Auschwitz in Poland to Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, making a plea for nonviolence and respect for all of life. They beat hand-drums while chanting "*Namu myoho rengekyo*," and bowed to the Buddha in each person they met, whether friendly or not, as a contribution to world peace. The founder of Nipponzan Myohoji, the Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii, strongly influenced Gandhi's doctrine of nonviolence. Before he passed away in 1985 at the age of 100, he explained:

We do not believe that people are good because we see that they are good, but by believing that people are good we eliminate our own fear and thus we can intimately associate with them. To believe in the compassionate power of the Supreme Being which we cannot see is a discipline in order to believe in the invisible good in others.³⁸

Civilization has nothing to do with having electric lights, airplanes, or manufacturing atomic bombs. It has nothing to do with killing human beings, destroying things or waging war. Civilization is to hold one another in mutual affection and respect.³⁹

The chanting of "*Namu myoho rengekyo*" has led to more than seventy Peace Pagodas being built in many countries, with donated materials and labor, by people of all faiths who pray for world peace and the elimination of all weapons.

Soka Gakkai International is another important offshoot of Nichiren's movement, which is based in Japan but has millions of members around the world. Its founders call for a peaceful world revolution through transformation of individual consciousness. They combine the central practice of chanting "*Nam myoho rengekyo*" with modern social activism in areas such as humanitarian relief, environmental awareness, human rights, literacy, and cultural and interfaith exchanges. Members are encouraged to develop their "unlimited potential" for hope, courage, and altruism.

Another new branch of Buddhism inspired by the *Lotus Sutra* is Rissho Kosei-kai, founded in Japan in the 1930s by Rev. Nikkyo Niwano and Myoko Naganuma. They sought to bring the message of the *Lotus Sutra* to the world in practical ways in order to encourage happiness and peace. Members chant the *Lotus Sutra* every day, skip a meal several times a month and donate the money for aid and peace projects, and meet twice a month in circles to discuss ways of applying the Buddha's teachings to specific problems in their own lives. Based on the *Lotus Sutra's* understanding of the Eternal Buddha as the "great life-force of the universe,"⁴⁰ Rissho Kosei-kai tries to cooperate with people and organizations of other religions. Its mission statement asserts:

Truth is universal and all religions are manifestations of it. All life springs from the same source, and thus all people are related and belong to one family. The Lotus Sutra declares that everyone is inherently imbued with the bodhisattva wish.⁴¹

The organization therefore is very active in international inter-religious activities.


The Bodhisattva loves all living beings as if each were his only child.

Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra 5

Vajrayana: the indestructible path

Of the many branches of Mahayana Buddhism, perhaps the most elaborate is Vajrayana. It developed in India, was transmitted to Tibet, and has also historically been practiced in Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Mongolia. Currently it is practiced throughout the Tibetan diaspora and increasingly in North America and Europe.

Prior to the introduction of Buddhism from India, the mountainous Tibetan region was home to a shamanic religion called Bön. In the seventh century CE a particularly powerful Tibetan king named Songtsan became interested in Buddhism and sent a group of students to India to study it. The journey from Tibet to India was extremely difficult and many of these emissaries died in the searing heat of the Indian plains. Only one member of a second group survived the arduous trip across the Himalayas, returning with many Sanskrit texts. After some of these works were translated into Tibetan, Songtsan declared Buddhism the national religion and encouraged Buddhist virtues in his subjects. Bön proponents are said to have sabotaged the new religion, until finally a tantric adept, Padmasambhava, was invited to Tibet in the eighth century CE. Eventually, it is said, Guru Padmasambhava subdued and converted the local Bön deities and, along with his consort Yeshe Tsogyal,

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Buddhism the Great
Wheel of Being:
Vajrayana
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Buddhist nuns from Tibet, where a distinctive version of Mahayana developed. Behind them, prayer flags flutter in the wind.



One of the most beloved of Tibetan Buddhist deities is Tara. She is savior and mother of the world; she protects us and helps us to achieve our spiritual longings. (Detail of Tibetan thangka, 18th/19th century, tempera on cotton.)

firmly established Buddhist teachings in Tibet. Although the Tibetans' understanding of Buddhism was no doubt influenced by earlier beliefs, and elements such as the use of prayer flags and an emphasis on practices for the dying may reflect Bön concerns, the Tibetans spent many centuries attempting to understand the Indian Buddhist teachings as purely as possible.

The Indian Buddhism that was transmitted to Tibet included elements of tantra—ancient esoteric teachings and practices that could have been in existence in India since before 2500 BCE. These ways emphasize visualization, ritual, mantras, mudras (hand positions during meditation), mandalas (sacred diagrams), and union of male and female energies for spiritual liberation, all under the strict guidance of a teacher. Lay Buddhists picked up these practices not only to invoke the aid of celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas but also to help in spiritual awakening and attainment of Buddhahood. Monastics rejected practices that were contrary to their precepts, but by the ninth century CE some of these—such as ritual intercourse—were accepted by some scholars at Buddhist universities in India, with the caveat that practices contrary to Buddhist precepts were to be done only in the imagination.

As Indian Buddhism was carried to Tibet, there was a period of decline in the tenth century CE, when some misinterpreted the tantric teachings. A teacher named Atisha was invited from the great center of Buddhist learning at Nalanda, India, to set things right. Under Atisha, Tibetan Buddhism became a complex path with three stages, said to have been prescribed by the Buddha. The first stage is quieting the mind and relinquishing attachments through meditation practice, as emphasized in the early Buddhist teachings. The second stage is intensive training in compassion and wisdom, as emphasized in the Mahayana teachings. The third stage is the advanced esoteric path called **Vajrayana** (the diamond vehicle) or **Tantrayana**, a rigorous, accelerated path to nurture enlightenment within a single lifetime.

Vajrayana aspirants are guided through a series of tantric practices by qualified teachers, or **lamas**. Some of these teachers are recognized as incarnate bodhisattvas and are carefully trained from a young age to help others advance toward enlightenment.

The masses have their heads on backwards. If you want to get things right, first look at how they think and behave, and consider going the opposite way.⁴²

Lama Drom Tonpa, eleventh century

Vajrayana initiates practice **deity yoga**: meditating on themselves in the form of a Buddha or bodhisattva in order to embody the enlightened qualities that the practitioner wishes to manifest. These radiant forms are themselves imagined and therefore lacking true existence, but meditating on them is considered a way to understand one's own true nature. Some of these meditational deities are shown in wrathful form, such as Mahakala, defender of the Dharma, while others, such as Tara, are shown in peaceful form.

The highest Vajrayana practices use the subtle vital energies of the body to transform the mind. A very subtle and profound state of consciousness is pro-

duced after lengthy practice; when the "gross mind" is neutralized, the "subtle mind" manifests powerfully as "the clear light of bliss." This innermost subtle mind of clear light is the true empty quality of one's own mind. Once it is realized, one is said to be capable of attaining Buddhahood in a single lifetime. The Seventh Dalai Lama of Tibet (1708–1757) gave this perspective:

Even the most seemingly evil person has the primordial clear light mind at the heart of his or her existence. Eventually the clouds of distortion and delusion will be cleared away as the being grows in wisdom, and the evil behavior that emanates from these negative mindsets will naturally evaporate. That being will realize the essential nature of his or her own mind, and achieve spiritual liberation and enlightenment.⁴³

The practices used to transform the mind are also believed to enable supernatural powers such as levitation, clairvoyance, meditating continuously without sleep, and warming the body from within while sitting naked in the snow. Milarepa, the famous Tibetan poet-saint, whose enlightenment was won through great austerities, once sang this song:

*Blissful within, I don't entertain
The notion "I'm suffering,"
When incessant rain is pouring outside.*

*Even on peaks of white snow mountains
Amidst swirling snow and sleet
Driven by new year's wintry winds
This cotton robe burns like fire.⁴⁴*

One of the highest practitioners of tantric Vajrayana was a woman, Yeshe Tsogyel, the consort of Padmasambhava, the powerful tantric adept who had helped bring Buddhism to Tibet. According to a semihistorical biography written by an eighteenth-century tantric monk, Yeshe Tsogyel was very beautiful but wanted only a life of spiritual seeking. Her father nonetheless sent her out



Tibetan Buddhists' full-length prostrations are so arduous that many have to strap on wooden pads and canvas shields to protect their bodies.

RELIGION IN PUBLIC LIFE

His Holiness the Dalai Lama



Surely one of the best-known and most loved spiritual leaders in the world, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama is a striking example of Buddhist peace and compassion. Wherever he goes, he greets everyone with evident delight.

Even when addressing an audience of thousands, he looks around the hall with a broad, childlike grin, which seems directed to each person individually. His example is all the more powerful because he is the leader in exile of Tibet, a small nation that experienced extreme oppression and suffering during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The simplicity of His Holiness's words and bearing belie his intellectual power. His Holiness was a peasant child just two years old in 1937 when he was located and carefully identified as the reincarnation of the thirteenth Dalai Lama. He was formally installed as the fourteenth Dalai Lama when he was only four and a half years old, thus becoming the spiritual and temporal ruler of Tibet. He was raised and rigorously educated in the Potala in Lhasa, capital of Tibet. One of the world's largest buildings, with over 1,000 rooms, the Potala contained large ceremonial halls, thirty-five chapels, meditation cells, government storehouses, national treasures, a complete record of Tibetan history and culture in 7,000 volumes, plus thousands of illuminated volumes of the Buddhist scriptures. The young Dalai Lama was educated according to the traditional Tibetan Buddhist system, which stressed an extensive and profound method for developing the mind to acquire many kinds of knowledge and also to practice advanced Buddhist meditation techniques.

Such a rigorous grounding in religious education and practice, maintains the Dalai Lama, brings steadiness of mind in the face of any misfortunes. He says:

Humanitarianism and true love for all beings can only stem from an awareness of the content of religion. By whatever name religion may be known, its understanding and practice are the essence of a peaceful mind and therefore of a peaceful world. If there is no peace in one's mind, there can be no peace in one's approach to others, and thus no peaceful relations between individuals or between nations.⁴⁵

The Dalai Lama's equanimity of mind was seriously challenged by the Chinese invasion and oppression of his small country. In 1959, when he escaped from Tibet to India in hopes of preventing bloodshed during a widespread popular revolt against the Chinese, Tibet was home to more than 6,000 monasteries. Only twelve of them were still intact by 1980. It is said that at least one million Tibetans died as a direct result of the Chinese occupation. Violence and suppression of the religion, culture, and people of Tibet continue today as millions of Chinese settlers fill the country.

In the face of the overwhelming military power of the Chinese, and armed with Buddhist precepts, the Dalai Lama has persistently tried to steer his people away from violent response to violence. Asserting that "Non-violence is the only way. ... It's a slower process sometimes, but a very effective one," he explains:

Practically speaking, through violence we may achieve something, but at the expense of someone else's welfare. That way, although we may solve one problem, we simultaneously seed a new problem. The best way to solve problems is through human understanding, mutual respect. On one side make some concessions; on the other side take serious consideration about the problem. There may not be complete satisfaction, but something happens. At least future danger is avoided. Non-violence is very safe.⁴⁶

While slowly, patiently trying to influence world opinion so that the voice of Tibet will not be extinguished by Chinese might, the Dalai Lama has established an entire government in exile in Dharamsala, India, in the Himalayas. There he and Tibetan refugees have built schools, orphanages, hospitals, craft cooperatives, farming communities, monasteries, libraries, and institutes for preserving traditional music, drama, dance, painting, and medicine. From this base, he has traveled tirelessly around the world in an effort to keep the voice of Tibet alive. Although he relinquished his role as political leader in 2011, he remains the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists and is recognized as one of the greatest moral leaders of our time. His quintessentially Buddhist message to people of all religions is that only through kindness and compassion toward each other and the cultivation of inner peace shall we survive as a species.

to be grabbed by rival suitors, from whom she escaped, but she was ultimately taken by the king. As the king's greatest desire was for spiritual liberation, he offered her to Padmasambhava in exchange for his precious spiritual guidance. The two, Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyel, were said to have practiced tantra together in a remote cave, developing their extraordinary spiritual powers in an "ecstatic dance of delight." Eventually Yeshe Tsogyel went alone to practice severe austerities on the edge of a glacier, where she faced the intense wind and cold without any clothing or food. When she returned to Padmasambhava after a year, he reportedly said:

*O yogini who has mastered the Tantra,
The human body is the basis of the accomplishment of wisdom
And the gross bodies of men and women are equally suited,
But if a woman has strong aspiration, she has higher potential.⁴⁷*

For centuries, Vajrayana was highly developed in Tibet, with an estimated 100,000 monks and nuns by the early twentieth century. However, communist Chinese overran Tibet between 1950 and 1959, destroying countless ancient monasteries and scriptures and killing an estimated one-sixth of the population over decades of occupation. The beloved Fourteenth Dalai Lama, spiritual and political leader of Tibet, escaped to India in 1959. The town of Dharamsala in the mountains of northern India where he established his headquarters has become a magnet for spiritual seekers. Despite persecution, religious practice and meaning still pervade every aspect of Tibetan life, from house-raising to fervent pilgrimages. Monks and laypeople alike meditate on *thangkas* and mandalas, visual aids to concentration and illumination, which portray Buddhas and bodhisattvas and representations of an ideal universe. A favorite practice is the chanting of mantras, especially "*Om mani padme hum*," the mantra of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. This mantra evokes an awareness of the sufferings of sentient beings in different states of existence and compassion for all living beings from within the heart of each of us. To help manifest this compassion, mantras are repeatedly recited, written thousands of times, spun in prayer wheels, and printed on prayer flags so that the blessings of the mantra extend in all directions as they blow in the wind. In addition to Tibet, Vajrayana is practiced throughout the Himalayan region and beyond: in Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Ladakh, Mongolia, and parts of Russia. Tibetan lamas in exile have also spread the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to Western countries, Southeast Asia, and Taiwan, where it has gained many adherents.

Festivals

Since Buddhism has evolved into different forms in different countries, most of its festivals are not uniformly celebrated. The most important Buddhist festival is *Vesak*, which according to Theravadins marks the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death, all of which were said to have miraculously occurred on the same day. For Mahayana Buddhists, *Vesak* marks the day of the Buddha's enlightenment. Vajrayana Buddhists celebrate four distinct days commemorating the Buddha's conception, birth, enlightenment, and death. According to the lunar calendar, the Buddha is said to have been born on the full moon of the month *Vaisakha*, the second month of the Indian calendar, which falls in April and May. In general, devout Buddhists gather at temples or monasteries before dawn to hear stories about the Buddha's life, to wash

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images of him, to make offerings of flowers, candles, and incense, and carefully to observe the Five Precepts, including refraining from any kind of killing. In several Buddhist-majority countries, slaughterhouses and liquor shops are closed for the holiday by government decree. In Sri Lanka, thousands of insects, birds, and animals are released as a symbolic act of liberation of all beings who are unwillingly imprisoned or tortured.

In Japan, Shakyamuni Buddha's birthday (*Hana Matsuri*) is celebrated in early April, coinciding with the blooming of cherry blossoms. The happy celebrations follow the traditional story in which birds sang, flowers bloomed, and there was a sweet rain from the heavens when he was born in the garden of Lumbini. The baby is said to have taken seven steps in each of the four directions, raised one hand to the sky and pointed downward with the other, and proclaimed his noble greatness and his mission of bringing peace to all suffering beings. In Buddhist temples, statues of a child in this pose are placed under flower-bedecked canopies representing the garden of Lumbini, and children pour sweet tea brewed from hydrangea flowers over the image of the little Buddha, symbolizing the sweet rain. There are also parades with images of the baby Buddha, a white elephant representing his mother's dream of an elephant just before he was born, and children wearing traditional Japanese clothes and carrying cherry blossoms.

On the full moon day of the third lunar month, *Magha* (approximately March), some Buddhists celebrate Magha Puja Day, also known as "Sangha Day." It commemorates a major event early in the Buddha's teachings in which, after giving the sermon to his first disciples at the Deer Park in Sarnath, he went to the capital city of Rajagaha and preached to the king and more than 1,000 citizens. His sermon was so convincing that most took refuge in the new teaching, and the king donated a beautiful bamboo grove for the Sangha's use.

With the monsoon comes the rainy-season retreat for monks and nuns, during a period when it is traditionally difficult to walk through the countryside.

Vesak, Buddha's birthday, being celebrated in Seoul, Korea, with a lantern festival.



In some countries young laymen may temporarily enter the Sangha and live as monks for a while to consecrate their passage into adulthood. What happens during the rainy-season retreat varies according to the teacher's instructions, but it is designed to turn one's mind away from worldly concerns and back to calm inner reflection. Vietnamese nun Cue Nguyen describes her rainy-season retreat pattern:

I spend most of my day writing in a diary, reflecting upon myself and the world. Only in calm water do things reflect faithfully. I observe nature, people, listen carefully to the crickets and the fallen leaves as if they are the most important things now.²⁸

After the rainy-season retreat, laypeople may ceremoniously offer new robes and other necessities to the monks and nuns, understanding that they are thereby earning spiritual merit.

Many other days are celebrated on local and national levels, such as the Festival of the Tooth in Sri Lanka honoring the Buddha's tooth relic, which is normally hidden within a series of caskets in a special temple but is on this day paraded through the streets on the back of a richly decorated elephant (see p. 155). In Thailand, there is a special Festival of Floating Bowls on the full moon night of the twelfth lunar month. Bowls made of leaves and flowers with candles and incense sticks are floated upon the water of rivers and canals, which are then full of water. As people let them go, they feel that their bad luck is floating away.

Buddhism in the West

Images of the Buddha are now enshrined around the world. The path to enlightenment that first gained currency in India has gradually spread to Western countries as well as throughout Asia. Wherever Asian Buddhists traveled, they carried Buddhism into their new surroundings. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Chinese workers migrated to California as the gold rush and railways opened up employment opportunities. In their new surroundings they built temples to Guanyin and Amitabha. In the late nineteenth century, Japanese workers migrated to Hawai'i as plantation workers and to California. Wherever they settled, they invited priests of various Buddhist schools from Japan. The largest school, Jodo Shinshu, gradually formed an organization called Buddhist Churches of America.

By the end of the century, Western Orientalists and occultists had developed considerable interest in Buddhism. The landmark 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago included a large delegation of Buddhist teachers from Japan, and some from China, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. One of the leading figures, Angarika Dharmapala from Sri Lanka, announced that just as King Ashoka had twenty-four centuries earlier spread Buddhism from India to teach Asia "the noblest lessons of tolerance and gentleness,"²⁹ the Buddhists had come bringing the same message to the West. Overflow crowds collected to hear their discourses.

During the twentieth century, North American and European countries became vibrant centers of Buddhism. Scholars today are studying Buddhist traditions at a variety of universities and many people are interested in learning Buddhist meditation practices. The exodus of Buddhists from Tibet since 1959, including many high lamas, has led to the establishment of Tibetan

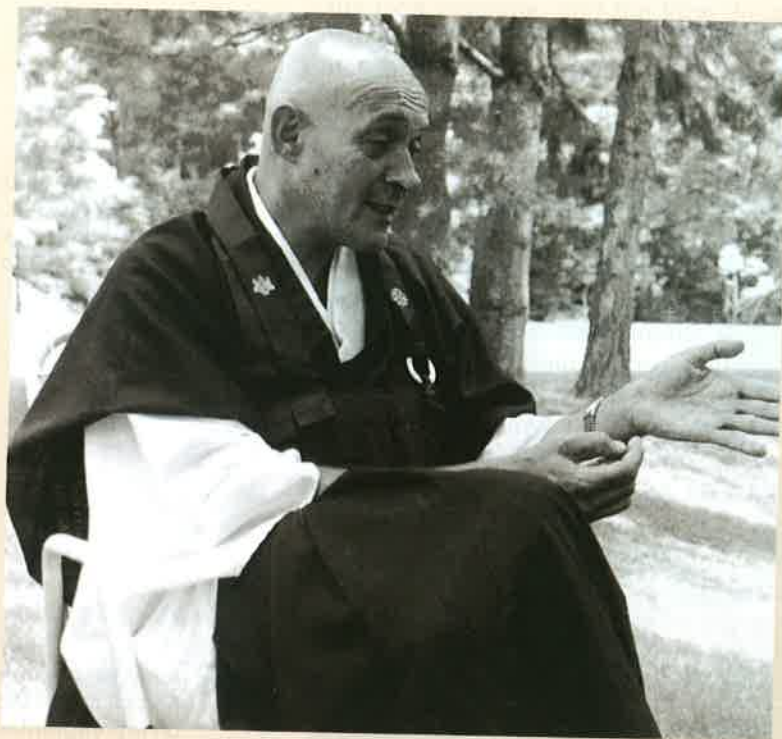
RELIGION IN PRACTICE

Life in a Western Zen Monastery

Side by side in still rows, with birdsong and sunlight streaming in through the tall windows, sit the monks and laypeople of Zen Mountain Monastery. For thirty-five-minute blocks, separated by periods of attentive walking, they support each other by practicing zazen together in silence. With this group structure, many find it easier to carry on the rigorous discipline of serious Zen training than they would by themselves.

This particular monastery, located in the Catskill Mountains near Mount Tremper, New York, reflects the changing face of religion in the United States. Over a hundred years ago the main building was handcrafted of stone as a Benedictine monastery; later it became a Lutheran summer camp. Now, back to back with Christ on the cross on the outside of the building is a statue of the Buddha on the altar inside the *zendo*. The monastery houses ordained monastics (including women) who have taken lifetime vows of service, novices and postulants in training (an

aspect adopted from Western monasticism), lay residents who stay for up to a year, and groups of people who come for special retreats and classes. These are primarily professionals and family people from the mainstream culture, rather than the hippies who embraced Buddhism in the 1960s and 1970s. They do not come for a comfortable vacation, for zazen is hard work and the teachers are dedicated to creating snags that help people discover the places where they are not free. They are expected to practice intensely and then leave, carrying what they have learned back into the world. As Geoffrey Shugen Arnold, Sensei, who received Dharma transmission in 1997, says, "If Zen doesn't work in the world, it's not working." In addition to long sessions of silent sitting and walking, Dharma talks by the resident Zen master, and private coaching by the monks, monastery residents participate in structured nontheistic liturgical services designed to foster attentiveness and appreciation. They chant



John Daido Looi Roshi (1931–2009), founder of Zen Mountain Monastery, an American ordained in both authentic Zen lineages.

in Japanese and English, with frequent bowing to each other, to their meditation cushions, and to the Buddha on the altar, in solidarity with all beings and gratitude for the teachings. The late abbot John Daido Looi, who was born a Catholic, noted that liturgy reflects the innards of a religion: "In Catholicism, cathedrals are awe inspiring, the chants expansive; in Zen the form is simple and the chanting is grounded, not otherworldly."

The rest of the day is devoted to taking care of the buildings and 200-acre nature sanctuary, mindfulness practice done in silence, body practice, Zen art practices, academic study, and work practice. Those with office jobs combine ancient and modern skills: They sit cross-legged on low cushions before their computers to prepare news, music, and interviews for their online radio station WZEN.org, and use calligraphic skills to hand-letter signs. Meals are simple and include coarse breads donated by a nearby whole-grain bakery. Every action—even

brushing one's teeth—is treated as practice, in the sense of bringing total attentiveness to the sacredness of even the most "mundane" activity, teaching that enlightenment takes place in one's everyday experience.

Following the lead of their former teacher Daido, who was at once highly disciplined in mind-to-mind Dharma transmission and down-to-earth, approachable, compassionate, and married, monastery residents are human, playful, and loving. The women "monks" shave their heads when they get ordained and keep their hair very short thereafter, but that is considered a freedom rather than self-sacrificing asceticism.

From training in flower arranging or Aikido to exploring the relevance of Buddhist principles in the workplace, Zen Mountain Monastery's programs are oriented toward one central goal: the personal experience of enlightenment and its application in the twenty-first-century world.



The stillness of the zendo at Zen Mountain Monastery.



Oriyoki, a ceremonial meal, at Zen Mountain Monastery.

Buddhist centers in many Western countries as well as in Southeast Asia and India, the Dalai Lama's home in exile, where over 100,000 Tibetan refugees now live. Several hundred thousand Westerners now have some spiritual involvement with Tibetan Buddhism.

Over 400 Zen meditation centers are also flourishing in North America alone, and there are many Zen monasteries that give training in zazen and offer a monastic lifestyle as a permanent or temporary alternative to the stress and confusion of modern life.

Intensive vipassana meditation retreats lasting up to three months are held in Theravadin centers such as the Insight Meditation Society in rural Barre, Massachusetts. Theravadin teachers from Southeast Asia and Europe make frequent visits to conduct retreats, and American teachers who have undertaken rigorous training in Southeast Asia under traditional meditation masters are also emerging as respected teachers. An American monk named Venerable Sumedho, who trained in traditional Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, has established monastic forest communities and meditation centers in England, Switzerland, Italy, and the United States. In contrast to the low profile of Buddhist women in Asia, many Buddhist centers in the West are led by women, who are explaining traditional Buddhist teachings to Westerners in fresh, contemporary ways. Some are exemplars of dedicated spiritual practice, such as Tenzin Palmo, a British woman who became a Tibetan Buddhist nun and lived alone for twelve years in a cave located 13,200 feet (4,000 meters) high in the Himalayas, undergoing tremendous austerities in the quest for enlightenment.

The Vietnamese monk Venerable Master Thich Nhat Hanh now lives in exile in southern France, conducting retreats for both women and men in a community called Plum Village. When he travels internationally, large audiences gather and derive inspiration from his teachings. He speaks simply, using familiar examples, and emphasizes bringing the awareness fostered by meditation into everyday life, rather than making spirituality a separate compartment of one's life. He says:

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Brother Thay: A Radio Pilgrimage with Thich Nhat Hahn
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Buddhism has spread around the world. Venerable Tenzin Palmo from England, who spent twelve years in a cave in the Himalayas, is standing sixth from the left with Buddhist nuns from Switzerland, India, Nepal, Mongolia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Australia, Vietnam, the Netherlands, and the United States during a gathering of Daughters of the Buddha in Mongolia.



*When we walk in the meditation hall, we make careful steps, very slowly. But when we go to the airport, we are quite another person. We walk very differently, less mindfully. How can we practice at the airport and in the market?*⁵⁰

Buddhism is often embraced by people in the West because they long for peace of mind in the midst of a chaotic materialistic life.

Many psychotherapists are studying Buddhism for its insights into the mind and human suffering. Richard Clarke, who is both a psychotherapist and a Zen teacher, founder of the Living Dharma Center in Massachusetts, feels that a discipline such as Zen should be part of the training of counselors and therapists:

*Emptiness is ... the source of infinite compassion in working with people: to really feel a person without any agenda, to be spacious to that person, to will that they be the way they are. When a person experiences that in someone's presence, then they can drop away those things that they've invented to present themselves with. Those faces, those armors, those forms of the self become unnecessary.*⁵¹


Are Westerners able to achieve enlightenment by taking Buddhist workshops here and there? Particularly in the case of Tibetan Buddhist practices, Westerners often want to be initiated into the most highly advanced teachings without taking time for years of patient practice and being inwardly transformed by the step-by-step foundational teachings. Can teachings developed within a specific cultural context be directly transplanted into the soil of an entirely different culture? Most Westerners who are adopting Buddhist practices are living in highly materialistic societies with different priorities and values, rather than in traditional Buddhist cultures or monastic settings. In their impatience to get results, many shop around from one teacher to the next and experiment with one practice after another, rather than persisting with one path over a long time. As Alan Wallace remarks:

In Tibetan society, fickleness is considered to be one of the worst of vices, while reliability, integrity, trustworthiness, and perseverance are held in high regard.

*So a few of the finest lamas are now refusing even to come to the West. Some are feeling—given the brevity and preciousness of human life—that devoting time to people with such fickleness and so little faith is time not very well spent.*⁵²

Another crucial issue is how to train teachers for the West. Two large Tibetan Buddhist organizations from the Gelukpa order have opened nearly 600 centers for study and meditation around the world but do not have enough fully trained lamas to staff all of them. Traditional training takes up to twenty-five years of rigorous study and debate of the finer points of Buddhist philosophy, logic, meditation, cosmology, psychology, and monastic life. Close guidance by an advanced teacher has traditionally been considered essential, but this is not possible for all Western aspirants, given the shortage of qualified teachers and the language problems entailed.

Given the differences in culture, background, and motivation, are Western students and their teachers in the process of creating new forms of Buddhism adapted to Western ways? How authentic are these new forms? Some observers feel that Western Buddhism, with its emphasis on inner practice rather than outer forms, is actually closer to what they construe as the core of early Buddhism than are later developments in the East. Contemporary Western Buddhists tend to be oriented to the goal of achieving enlightenment by their

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own efforts, which is reportedly what the Buddha prescribed for his followers, and are searching for ways to achieve that goal, though sometimes hoping to do so with minimum effort. Whether or not Western Buddhism conforms to early patterns, it seems to be evolving in new directions with some people in the West remaking Buddhism in their own image. For instance, the American Buddhist Stephen Batchelor argues in his book *Buddhism Without Beliefs* that the West needs a Buddhism stripped of belief in rebirth and karma. He emphasizes instead a secularized version, an “existential, therapeutic and liberating agnosticism.”⁵³

Another important difference between Western Buddhism and historical developments in Asia is the Western tendency to support equal participation of women, as renunciates, teachers, and lay practitioners. In recent years, Buddhists in Asia, confronted by modernization, consumerism, globalization, and new social attitudes, are taking directions similar to those of Western Buddhists.

Since 1987, Buddhist women from Asia and the West have joined hands and held international gatherings to enhance the role of women in Buddhism. Sakyadhita (Daughters of the Buddha), the International Association of Buddhist Women, is working to improve conditions for women’s Buddhist education, practice, ordination, and training as teachers of Buddhism. Sakyadhita’s conferences bring together women and men, lay and ordained, from different traditions to exchange ideas on meditation, peace-building, and women’s roles in contemporary Buddhist practice. The 2008 Sakyadhita conference in Mongolia highlighted Buddhist women’s achievements in recent years as well as persistent inequalities in education and ordination. The 2011 Sakyadhita conference in Bangkok paid tribute to eminent Buddhist women in the past and in contemporary society, with panels on issues such as leadership and lineage, stereotypes of women, global sustainability, and new directions for Buddhist social transformation. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, founder of Sakyadhita and also the Jamyang Foundation, which tries to increase educational opportunities for Buddhist nuns, says, “There are 300 million Buddhist women in the world. They have tremendous potential, goodwill, and energy to work for peace and the benefit of humanity.”⁵⁴

Socially engaged Buddhism



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An emerging focus in contemporary Buddhist practice is the relevance of Buddhism to social problems. Contrary to popular assumptions, the Buddha did not advise people to permanently leave society to seek their own enlightenment. Sri Lankan Buddhist monk Walpola Rahula (1907–1997) explained:

*It may perhaps be useful in some cases for a person to live in retirement for a time in order to improve his or her mind and character, as preliminary moral, spiritual, and intellectual training, to be strong enough to come out later and help others. But if someone lives an entire life in solitude, thinking only of their own happiness and salvation, without caring for their fellow beings, this surely is not in keeping with the Buddha’s teaching which is based on love, compassion, and service to others.*⁵⁵

Buddhism, like other world religions, has always been engaged with the wider society and political life. In Thailand, for instance, the king is the bearer of the Buddhist heritage, and thus has sacred legitimization. But Thailand also

has a tradition of socially conscious lay practice of Buddhism. The renowned Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993) was a great critic of capitalism, teaching that it increases egoism and selfishness, thus causing distress both to the individual and to society.

In Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh and other socially active Buddhists refused to take sides with the governments and military movements of either North Vietnam or South Vietnam during the Vietnam War, for they felt that both were oppressing the common people and also exploiting American soldiers. All were victims of an ideological conflict between communism and anti-communism. Buddhists worked hard to bring a negotiated end to the war, and helped the suffering people as best they could by evacuating villagers caught in the midst of battles, helping to rebuild damaged buildings, taking care of orphans, and providing medical care to people from all sides. They believed that all life is precious and interdependent—violence and suffering affect everyone. Thus they meditated to generate selfless compassion, according to the teachings of the Buddha, who said:

Hatred is never appeased by hatred. It is appeased by love. This is an eternal law. Just as a mother would protect her only child, even at the risk of her own life, even so let one cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings. Let one's thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world.⁵⁶

However, Buddhism's link with politics has not always been entirely altruistic. In Sri Lanka, a selective interpretation of Theravada Buddhist tradition was used to bolster nationalistic sentiments among the Sinhalese Buddhist majority against the Tamil (mostly Hindu and Muslim) minority in a conflict that had been going on for two thousand years. As in many contemporary fundamentalist movements elsewhere, a chauvinistic, rigid version of religious identity developed in response to rapid colonization, modernization, and Westernization. The reaffirmation of Buddhist identity became a tool of ethnic oppression of the minority, leading to a violent separatist movement among the Tamils and ultimately civil strife which disrupted life on the island from 1983 to 2009.

In general, however, the Buddha's emphasis on compassion has prevailed, and even when Buddhists have been social activists, they have tended to be guided by Buddhist principles of nonviolence, compassion, and social justice. In this posture, some contemporary Buddhists have tried to correct injustice, oppression, famine, cruelty to animals, nuclear testing, warfare, and environmental devastation. E. F. Schumacher preached what he called "Buddhist economics," to affirm human beings' willingness to live simply, generously, and humanely with each other. Ajahn Pongsak, a Thai Buddhist monk, was so troubled by the devastation of the northern Thai forests that he rallied 5,000 villagers to reforest an area by building a tree nursery, terracing the eroded hillsides, planting nearly 200,000 seedlings, laying irrigation pipes, and fencing the area to protect the new trees. He taught them the importance of a respectful relationship with the forest as their own home, their own parent. He says:

A mind that feels no gratitude to the forest is a coarse mind indeed—without this basic siladhamma [moral teaching], how can a mind attain enlightenment? ... The times are dark and siladhamma is asleep, so it is now the duty of monks to reawaken and bring back siladhamma. Only in this way can society be saved.⁵⁷

Maha Ghosananda courageously led peace marches through Khmer Rouge territory, and, as leader of the decimated population of Buddhist monks in post-communist Cambodia, helped to revive the religion and the country.



Cambodians are in the process of recovering from decades of a culture of terror in which the Khmer Rouge murdered over one million people. Buddhists have played major roles in peacemaking and rebuilding the country, promoting nonviolent responses to violence. The monks of Buddhism for Development, for instance, have gone to the villages and cities to carry out community development projects, emphasizing the Dharma of physical development, moral development, spiritual development, and intellectual development. The most instrumental figure has been Venerable Maha Ghosananda (1929–2007), whose entire family was killed during the Pol Pot regime. In addition to political initiatives, he led many peace marches of monks, nuns, and laypeople through areas infested with landmines, and counseled people facing issues such as domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, deforestation, and dire poverty. He urged:

*We must remove the landmines in our hearts which prevent us from making peace—greed, hatred and delusion. We can overcome greed with the weapon of generosity; we can overcome hatred with the weapon of loving kindness; we can overcome delusion with the weapon of wisdom. . . .*³⁸

*We must find the courage to leave our temples and enter the temples of human experience, temples that are filled with suffering. If we listen to the Buddha, Christ, or Gandhi, we can do nothing else. The refugee camps, the prisons, the ghettos and the battlefields will then become our temples.*³⁹

Another notable example of the use of Buddhist teachings as an antidote to violence is Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy

in Burma (Myanmar). Her father was assassinated in the attempt to bring democracy to the people, and she has been an outspoken advocate of democratic social change, repeatedly exposing herself to danger and ill health from continual house arrest or imprisonment. When she was freed from house arrest in 2011, she spoke of

the most dangerous kind of politics: the politics of dissent. You do not ask [NLD workers] if they have ever been to prison. You ask them how many times they have been to jail. Their weapons are their faith, their armour is their passion, our passion. What is the cause to which we are so passionately dedicated as to forego the comforts of a conventional existence? We are dedicated to the defence of the right of individuals to free and truthful life. [For a dissident] freedom from fear does not have to be complete. It only has to be sufficient to enable us to carry on; and to carry on in spite of fear requires tremendous courage.⁶⁰

Living by Buddhist principles to counteract fear and cope with government oppression, Aung San Suu Kyi observes:

It would be difficult to dispel ignorance unless there is freedom to pursue the truth unfettered by fear. With so close a relationship between fear and corruption it is little wonder that in any society where fear is rife corruption in all forms becomes deeply entrenched. The effort necessary to remain uncorrupted in an environment where fear is an integral part of everyday existence is not immediately apparent to those fortunate enough to live in states governed by the rule of law. Where there are no such laws, the burden of holding the principles of justice and common decency falls on the ordinary people.⁶¹

In Taiwan, Buddhist values mixed with Confucian civil ethics and Daoism have helped to support freedom and democracy. The Engaged Buddhist thrust is evident in Taiwan in several new Mahayana organizations that are attempting to create a Pure Land in this world, rather than waiting for the afterlife. Among these is Tzu Chi, founded by Venerable Cheng Yen in 1966 with donations from thirty housewives. A self-educated nun, Venerable Cheng Yen now heads an efficient bureaucracy with five million members in forty-five countries who are following and teaching the bodhisattva path by providing volunteer services such as disaster relief, medicine, education, environmental protection, and bone-marrow donor registry. As they work, they sing hymns about the joy of serving. They are taught to regard all of humanity as their own family, true to the bodhisattva vow.

Buddhism had largely declined in India but then returned during the twentieth century as a vehicle for overcoming caste distinctions which had made life so difficult for those considered "untouchables," now called Dalits. A Buddhist monk named Lokanatha, for example, wrote a pamphlet entitled "Buddhism Will Make You Free," and addressed it to the "Depressed Classes" of India. Among those who were influenced by this message was Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956). Born an untouchable Hindu, he was the chief architect of India's new democratic constitution, and built into it many provisions designed to end the oppression of the traditional Hindu caste system. In his personal search for a religion offering freedom and dignity to all human beings, he chose Buddhism. Dr. Ambedkar wrote that he was presented with a book on the Buddha when he was the first person from the lowest caste to graduate from high school:



Venerable Cheng Yen, a Buddhist nun from a poor area in Taiwan, established the Tzu Chi Foundation in 1966 to help the needy, with small donations from thirty housewives. Now it has five million members in forty-five countries.



A celebration around a statue of Dr. Ambedkar in honor of his birthday is mixed with political party banners. Dr. Ambedkar inspired many Dalits to convert to Buddhism in order to overcome the oppression caused by the traditional Hindu caste system.

That opened my eyes to Buddhism, and I have read voraciously on the topic ever since. Whatever I have achieved, I owe to the Buddha. I find thorough equality and superb humanism in Buddhism.⁶²

When Dr. Ambedkar publicly converted shortly before his death, he was the inspiration for almost half a million Dalits to do likewise. Despite this, he openly questioned and changed certain Buddhist teachings.

In "Ambedkarite Buddhism," the emphasis is on active social engagement, helping the people, rather than renunciation and meditation. Dr. Ambedkar prescribed twenty-two vows for his followers, including denouncing belief in Hindu deities and social inequality, and replacing these with affirmations such as "I shall believe in the equality of man," "I shall endeavor to follow the noble eight-fold path and practice compassion and loving-kindness in everyday life," and "I solemnly declare and affirm that I shall hereafter lead my life according to the principles and teachings of the Buddha and his Dhamma." Various Ambedkarite organizations are trying to propagate these vows on a large scale in India, particularly to help erase the traumas of casteism. This version of Buddhism based in social activism has been informally called "Navayana," (new vehicle), comprising a fourth branch of Buddhism.

Buddhism has also been adopted for political purposes in India. Politicians in some areas have tried to promote Dalit liberation through Buddhism and respect for Dr. Ambedkar, whose statue now appears in many towns. Since the Dalits comprise a large vote bank, it is uncertain whether the intention is sincerely to instill Buddhist ideals in them or rather to gain their votes. In the most populous state in India, Uttar Pradesh, the merger of Buddhist religion and politics is particularly controversial. The chief minister up to 2012, a Dalit politician named Mayawati, spent millions of rupees on public monuments honoring the Buddha, Dr. Ambedkar, and local politicians, including herself, affirming that these public works would engender public pride and economic development. Among her projects were the renovation of the ancient Buddhist pilgrimage sites—including Kapilvastu, Sarnath, and Kushinagar, the places of the Buddha's birth, first sermon, and death—and Gautam Buddha University, with its schools of humanities and social sciences, management, information technology, law and social justice, biotechnology, engineering and design, and Buddhist studies and civilization. While critics point to the persistence of poverty in Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati's supporters likened her building projects to those of the ancient King Ashoka, who coined the expression *dharma vijaya*, "the victory of righteousness."

In Sri Lanka, a movement uniting development and Buddhist ideals of compassion and selfless service has been active since the middle of the twentieth century, even in the midst of civil strife. This Sarvodaya Shramadana Sangamaya movement was founded by a devout Buddhist schoolteacher named Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne. He asserts that renunciation is not the best path for most people. Rather, they can best realize their spiritual potential in the midst of society, working for its betterment. He and the volunteers of the Sarvodaya movement have engaged people of all religions, in thousands of villages, in work camps where they come together to eliminate social decadence

and poverty by developing schools, nutrition programs, roads, and irrigation canals, and to learn to live by the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Dr. Ariyaratne encourages people to look at their own egotism, distrust, greed, and competitiveness and to recognize that these are the cause of their suffering and inability to work together for progress.

Summarizing the work of Engaged Buddhists, Thich Nhat Hanh said:

Once there is seeing, there must be acting. We must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then, with mindfulness, we will know what to do, and what not to do, to be of help.⁶³

Sulak Sivaraksa, founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, explains that socially engaged Buddhism does not mean promoting Buddhism per se:

The presence of Buddhism in society does not mean having a lot of schools, hospitals, cultural institutions, or political parties run by Buddhists. It means that the schools, hospitals, cultural institutions, and political parties are permeated with and administered with humanism, love, tolerance, and enlightenment, characteristics which Buddhism attributes to an opening up, development, and formation of human nature. This is the true spirit of nonviolence.⁶⁴

Even when one intends to be nonviolent in one's approach to life, difficult ethical questions may still arise. For example, contemporary scholars of Buddhist medical ethics are trying to determine how best to apply Buddhist principles to issues such as abortion, reproductive technologies, genetic engineering, organ transplants, suicide, coma patients, and euthanasia.

Buddhism is thus as relevant today, and its insights as necessary, as in the sixth century BCE, when the one who became Shakyamuni Buddha renounced a life of ease to save all sentient beings from suffering.

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Key terms

- anatman** (Pali: *anatta*) The principle that there is no eternal self.
- anitya** (Pali: *anicca*) Impermanence.
- arhant** (Pali: *arhat* or *arahat*) A "worthy one" who has followed the Buddha's path to liberation.
- bhikshu** (Pali: *bhikkhu*; feminine: *bhikshuni* or *bhikkuni*) A monk or nun who renounces worldliness for the sake of following the path of liberation and whose simple physical needs are met by lay supporters.
- bodhisattva** A person who is dedicated to liberating others from suffering.
- deity yoga** Vajrayana meditation on a deity in order to develop his or her qualities.
- Dharma** (Pali: *Dhamma*) The teachings and laws for conduct given by the Buddha.
- dukkha** Discomfort, suffering, frustration, disharmony.
- karma** (Pali: *kamma*) Actions; the law of cause and effect.
- kensho** A sudden experience of enlightened awareness.
- koan** A question used by Zen teachers to boggle the student's mind and thus liberate direct awareness.
- lama** A high Vajrayana teacher.
- Mahayana** The "Great Vehicle," the Buddhist school that stresses the altruistic wish to become perfectly awakened in order to free all living beings from suffering.