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driven from inside by raging emotional forces or from outside by the unpredictable events of life. It may not necessarily imply the elimination of anger (stories tell of the Buddha's getting angry at disputes within the monastic community), but it does suggest a general inner quiet. Nirvana is also believed to end karma and rebirth after the present life. (More will be said about nirvana later in this chapter.) To reach nirvana, Buddhism recommends following the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to Inner Peace The eight “steps” of the path actually form a program that the Buddha taught will lead us toward liberation from the impermanence and suffering of reality. Together, they describe three main goals: to face life objectively, to live kindly, and to cultivate inner peace. Although they are often called “steps,” the eight recommendations are not to be practiced sequentially but rather all together. As it is usually translated, the Noble Eightfold Path sounds so old-fashioned that readers may not immediately perceive its practicality. However, keep in mind that the word *right* in the following list is a translation of a word that might better be translated as “correct” or “complete.”

1. *Right understanding* You recognize the impermanence of life, the mechanism of desire, and the cause of suffering.
2. *Right intention* Your thoughts and motives are pure, not tainted by your emotions and selfish desires.
3. *Right speech* You speak kindly and honestly, in positive ways, avoiding lies, exaggeration, harsh words.
4. *Right action* Your actions do not hurt any other being that can feel hurt, including animals; You avoid stealing and any sexual conduct that would bring hurt.
5. *Right work* Your job does no harm to yourself or others.
6. *Right effort* With moderation, you consistently strive to improve.
7. *Right meditation (right mindfulness)* You use the disciplines of meditation (**dhyana**) and focused awareness to contemplate the nature of reality more deeply.
8. *Right contemplation* You cultivate states of blissful inner peace (**samadhi**).

THE INFLUENCE OF INDIAN THOUGHT ON EARLY BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

It is uncertain whether the Buddha intended to begin an entirely new religion. Early Buddhist literature rejects certain elements of the common Vedic practice of the time, particularly its ritualism, its reliance on priests, its caste system, and its belief in any permanent spiritual reality.

Some non-Buddhists responded negatively when women and slaves were allowed to enter the Buddhist monastic order. Such evidence leads us to think that early Buddhists saw themselves as outside the mainstream priestly Vedic culture—a fact that may have assisted them in developing their own statements of belief and practice. Nevertheless, we do know that early Buddhist teachings accepted certain elements of Indian thought that contemporary Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism all share.

Ahimsa: “Do No Harm”

Foremost among the elements adopted from the Indian worldview of the Buddha's day was the ideal of *ahimsa* (“non-harm”; see Chapter 3). It is not clear how old this ideal is, and it has not always been followed. We do know that Vedic sacrifice at the time of the Buddha sometimes included animal sacrifice—and animal sacrifice in Hindu practice can still be found, particularly in Nepal and Bali. Yet we also know that the ideal of *ahimsa* was already prominent in India before the time of the Buddha and may have had ancient and pre-Vedic origins.

For Buddhism, *ahimsa* is fundamental. The ideal holds that to cause suffering to any being is cruel and unnecessary—life is already hard enough for each of us. *Ahimsa* discourages causing not only physical pain but also psychological hurt or the exploitation of another. Upon reaching a real understanding that every being that feels can suffer, you gain wider sympathy. It is then natural and satisfying for you to live with deliberate gentleness.

Ahimsa is a high ideal and not always easy to achieve. Furthermore, you must recognize that there will always be a gap between the ideal and actual practice in different Buddhist cultures and among individuals. Nevertheless, however murky the definition of the “best action” may be, the ideal is fairly clear. A compassionate person does everything possible to avoid causing suffering: “ashamed of roughness, and full of mercy, he dwells compassionate and kind to all creatures that have life.”⁹ This empathetic ideal has been interpreted as recommending, when possible, a vegetarian or semi-vegetarian diet, and it warns against involvement in any jobs or sports that would hurt others, such as being a butcher, hunter, fisherman, soldier, or weapon maker. The result is a way of life that is harmonious and free of remorse.

The Soul and Karma

The Buddha rejected the notion of a soul—an unchanging spiritual reality, but he accepted some notion of rebirth. How, you might then ask, can an individual be reborn if there is no soul? Buddhism holds that while there is no individual soul, the elements of personality that make up an individual can recombine and thus continue from one lifetime to another. Buddhism offers the examples of a flame passing from one candle to another or the pattern caused by a breeze that passes over many blades of grass. The candles are separate, but only one flame passes between each candle. The blades of grass are rooted to separate places, but the pattern of the breeze travels across them and “unites” them in movement.

Closely related to the notion of rebirth is *karma*. As discussed in Chapter 3, *karma* determines how you will be reborn. In Hinduism and Jainism, *karma* is like something that clings to the soul as it passes from life to life in reincarnation. It works automatically: good actions produce *karma* that brings good effects, such as intelligence, high birth, and wealth. Bad actions produce *karma* that brings the opposite, including rebirth into animal and insect life-forms. Because the Buddha rejected the existence of a soul, explaining how *karma* works is more difficult in Buddhism. *Karma* is thought to accompany and affect the elements of personality that reappear in later lifetimes. Regardless of their

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Both Hindu and Buddhist elements can be seen in the temples of Angkor in Cambodia.

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specific manner of functioning, karma and rebirth were already such powerful ideas in India of the Buddha's time that they continued in early Buddhism and from there have spread well beyond India. They remain highly influential concepts in Buddhist countries today.

Nirvana

In Buddhism, as in Hinduism, the everyday world of change is called **samsara**, a term that suggests decay and pain. Liberation from samsara, however, is attained in nirvana. The notion of samsara has many similarities with the Hindu goal of *moksha* ("liberation"; discussed in Chapter 3). Nirvana is thought of as existence beyond limitation. Many people in the West associate nirvana with a psychological state, because it is described as evoking joy and peace. Perhaps, though, it is better to see nirvana as being indescribable and beyond all psychological states.

Although reaching nirvana may occur rather rarely, it is theoretically possible to attain during one's lifetime. In fact, the Buddha is said to have "entered nirvana" at the time of his enlightenment. Once you have reached nirvana, rebirth is finished, and in a culture that believes that you have already been born many times before this current life, an end to rebirth can be a welcome thought.

THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism might have remained an entirely Indian religion, much as Jainism has, if it were not for an energetic king named Ashoka, who flourished about 250 BCE (see Timeline 4.1, p. 133). Ashoka's plan to expand his rule over a large part of India naturally entailed much fighting. After a particularly bloody battle in eastern India, as Ashoka was inspecting the battlefield, he saw the scene very differently

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TIMELINE 4.1		
	c. 450 BCE	● Life of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha
Life of Ashoka, Indian king ● who spread Buddhist values	c. 273–232 BCE	
	c. 50 CE	● Entry of Buddhism into China
Creation of the Lotus Sutra ●	c. 100 CE	
	c. 300 CE	● Beginning of the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia
Entry of Buddhism into Korea ●	c. 400 CE	
	c. 520 CE	● Introduction of Bodhidharma's Meditation school of Buddhism to China
Introduction of Buddhism ● into Japan	c. 552 CE	
	c. 630 CE	● Entry of Buddhism into Tibetan plateau
Founding of Tendai and ● Shingon Buddhism in Japan	c. 820 CE	
	c. 845 CE	● Major persecution of Buddhists in China
Revival of Theravada ● Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia	c. 1000 CE	
	c. 1100–1500	● Decline of Buddhism in India
Life of Honen, founder of the ● Pure Land sect in Japan	1133–1212	
	1158–1210	● Life of Chinul, founder of the Korean Chogye order
Beginning of the growth ● of Zen in Japan	c. 1200	
	1222–1282	● Life of Nichiren, founder of Nichiren Buddhism in Japan
Life of Tsong Kha-pa, ● Tibetan Buddhist reformer	1357–1419	
	1644–1694	● Life of poet Matsuo Basho
Beginning of the ● World Fellowship of Buddhists	c. 1952	
	1991	Emergence of Soka Gakkai as ● an independent lay organization

Timeline of significant events in Buddhism.

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FIGURE 4.1

The birthplace and traditional home of Buddhism: India, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

than he had before. The whole experience was so horrifying to him that he converted to the ideal of nonviolence. Although it is uncertain whether Ashoka became a Buddhist, he did make political use of Buddhist moral values. A cynic might note that forbidding violence is a practical move for any ruler who wishes to remain on the throne. In any case, the principle of nonviolence is most effective when it is embraced widely. Otherwise, the few people who are nonviolent will be preyed upon by the violent.

To bring a large number of the population around to his new nonviolent way of thinking and acting, Ashoka decided to spread the principles of nonviolence throughout India and possibly even beyond. To do this, he erected many stone columns inscribed with his principles, placing some at sites important in the Buddha's life. A number of these columns still exist today.

In the first centuries after the Buddha's death, in response to widespread and long-standing disagreements over the Buddha's teachings, many Buddhist schools and splinter groups arose. Most of these ultimately died out and are only names to us today. A few survived and crystallized into the great branches of Buddhism that we now recognize: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.

It was once assumed that the three branches of Buddhism emerged in sequence, like three waves of thought that came from India in succeeding centuries. Scholars

now recognize, though, that essential elements of all three branches frequently existed side by side—possibly even in the earliest days of Buddhism. Often, too, the boundaries between the branches have been blurred or have even been nonexistent. The branches are more like families that have many shared elements.

In addition, people who follow a specific Buddhist path are often not aware of other branches. The same is not true of some other religions, in which practitioners are quite aware of the division to which they belong. (For example, Muslims define themselves as Sunni or Shiite, and Christians as Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox.) But Buddhist believers of one branch, even if they know of other forms, generally do not define themselves in contrast to those other branches. Instead, they define themselves more according to Buddhist “lineages,” tracing their beliefs and practices back to the great teachers of the past who, in a long chain of masters and disciples, handed on the traditions that they themselves follow.

Thus, before we divide Buddhism into these so-called branches, we must realize that to talk of three “branches” is to greatly oversimplify the complex reality of Buddhism. This approach is only meant to enhance the understanding of the richness of Buddhist history, belief, and practice.

THERAVADA BUDDHISM: THE WAY OF THE ELDERS

In the early centuries of Buddhism, several schools claimed to adhere to the original, unchanged teachings of the Buddha. All of them shared the Buddha's opposition to Vedic ritual and to the brahmin priesthood, and they embraced his appreciation for simplicity, meditation, and detachment. They took a conservative approach, hoping to protect the Buddha's rather stark teachings and simple practice from being altered. Of all the conservative schools, one has survived to the present day: Theravada. Its name is often used today to refer to the entire conservative movement.

The Theravada school takes its name from its goal of passing on the Buddha's teachings unchanged. It means “the way (*vada*) of the elders (*thera*).” Theravada monks originally passed on the teachings in oral form, but they eventually wrote them down. Although the school's claim to have kept its teachings relatively unchanged over time is doubtful, it is true that Theravada has a deliberately conservative orientation. Since the nineteenth century, the name *Theravada* has been commonly used to refer to the forms of Buddhism that are found mostly in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

The heart of Theravada Buddhism is its community of monks. As a school, it has always stressed the ideal of reaching nirvana through detachment and desirelessness, achieved by way of meditation. (This, of course, is an ideal that some would point out has been contradicted when the Sangha has courted wealth and temporal power.) Although Theravada does accept that laypeople can attain nirvana,

At a local festival Theravada monks playfully are doused with water by nearby inhabitants.

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