

An Insider's Perspective

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A Mahayana Perspective

Buddhism encompasses a wealth of forms and traditions. The last chapter explored the Theravada tradition, and many Westerners have some familiarity with Zen Buddhism, which is part of the Mahayana tradition. Less well known are Buddhist traditions that come by way of China. In fact, Japanese forms of the Zen tradition in many aspects directly copied their Chinese sources: their ritual style, their cultural and linguistic idioms such as parables and koans, their interpretations of the Buddha's teaching, and their formulation of dharma practices were essentially Chinese. Indeed, the Chinese tradition of the Mahayana, "the Northern tradition," includes a wealth of Chinese texts and practices that stretch back 2,000 years. The Chan tradition informed Buddhist East Asia, but few people in America know of it.

For nearly fifty years, from 1949 until the late 1990s, few people had access to the treasures of the Chinese Mahayana. Mao Tse-tung and his version of Marxism viewed religious practice as harmful to a communist utopia. The so-called bamboo curtain made study of the dharma impossible. Scholars could not come and go, and few Chinese monks emerged from China. Those who did faced language barriers that made communication difficult.

Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka and Thailand, on the other hand, faced no such obstacles to study, for it had arrived in the West in English translations done largely by scholars and missionaries. Learning about Chinese Buddhism, on the other hand, required mastering Chinese and traveling to Taiwan or Hong Kong or else working from secondary sources. For these reasons Westerners to this day have little knowledge of the flourishing of the Pure Land tradition or the rich resources of the Chinese Buddhist canon. When pioneer monks arrived in the West in 1962 and translated the texts and practices of the Buddha's dharma in China, people finally had access to the living Chan tradition of the Sixth Patriarch, the Pure Land school of Buddhist devotion, the lore of the bodhisattvas, including the inconceivable responses of Guan Shi Yin (the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion), and so many other treasures of the Mahayana. This chapter explores these treasures, examining Buddhist texts and practices from the Mahayana perspective.

What Makes Buddhism Attractive in the West?

The Nontheistic Nature of Buddhism

For individuals raised in Christian or Jewish traditions (or other theistic forms of belief), the

lack of a creator deity in Buddhism may require some mental adjustment. Is Buddhism simply "godless"? If so, what is the proper role for an aspiring devotee in a tradition without a creator? Newcomers to Buddhist practice report a variety of answers—from relief at the absence of a distant, all-powerful patriarchal authority figure to a certain uneasiness at the lack of a vigilant shepherd watching over his flock. In what ways is the Buddha godlike—and in what ways not godlike at all? When the Buddha in the Avatamsaka Sutra states that "everything is made from mind alone,"¹ is he talking about creation?

Some of the early English writings on Buddhism² claim that Buddhism is entirely atheistic, that it believes in no deity at all. This notion, however, needs clarification. The Mahayana sutras mention gods in three different levels of heavens, performing many functions, including on occasion speaking the dharma on behalf of the Buddha. Gods make offerings to buddhas and bodhisattvas, and they appear before practitioners to test their sincerity. They invite the Buddha into their celestial palaces and then serve as his audience for dharma teachings. They intervene in the affairs of humans and hold a space in the Brahma Heavens. An atheistic religion would hardly present gods so frequently or in such vivid detail.

From the Mahayana perspective, then, Buddhism is not atheistic; nor is it monotheistic like the Abrahamic faiths. Instead, Buddhism is nontheistic; the teachings of the dharma did not proceed from a creator deity, nor did they come from prophetic revelation, from truths handed down by a divine being to a prophet. Instead, they came by realization, from a human's transformation of his own consciousness through diligent spiritual cultivation.

1. Author's unpublished translation.

2. Among them, Walpole Rahula's perennial introduction to Theravada Buddhism: *What the Buddha Taught*, 2nd ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1974).

Orthopraxy, Not Orthodoxy

Another quality of Buddhism many find attractive is its emphasis on orthopraxy ("right practice") as opposed to orthodoxy ("right belief"). The Abrahamic traditions of the Bible also invite believers to experience the fruits of practice for themselves, but Buddhism makes this overt. What matters most for Buddhist disciples is not whether they say they believe in or accept a statement made by the Buddha. What matters most is how they practice according to the methods of the Buddha. Belief is important—indeed, the Pure Land devotional tradition has been called "the Buddhism of faith." The difference is this: somebody who works at holding precepts purely, entering profound samadhi (concentration) and activating their inherent wisdom will become a Buddha regardless of their never having said even once, "I believe in what the Buddha said." Professing faith is unimportant; cultivating the dharma correctly is essential.

Orthopraxy matters because the dharma is based on cause and effect. Merely professing belief will not help one move toward liberation. Orthodoxy proves useless if one fails to put that belief into practice. By cultivating the dharma as the Buddha taught it, one can wake up, or become enlightened, regardless of any profession of belief in the Buddha. This is true at all levels of the Buddhist community of believers. Advanced bodhisattvas have mastered pure conduct; they do not grow morally lax because of seniority.

In the Kalama Sutta, the Buddha tells a tribe of disbelievers, the Kalamas, how to deal with their doubts about teachers and their doctrines:

Kalamas: Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement

through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, "This contemplative is our teacher." When you know for yourselves that, "These qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to harm and to suffering"—then you should abandon them.³

The Buddha essentially deconstructs his own religious authority. He tells the Kalamas to challenge all truths and ideas by applying these criteria for belief. After giving the Kalama tribe ten sources of information open to analysis, the Buddha concludes with advice on how to discern and accept truth, free of doubts:

Kalamas, when you know for yourselves that these qualities are skillful, that these qualities are blameless and these qualities are praised by the wise, moreover these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to welfare and to happiness, you should undertake them.⁴

In Buddhist practice, teachings come directly from the Buddha's experience. In other words, the fundamentals of the dharma are embedded in the founding story of the Buddha's six years of practice in the forest before his enlightenment. He studied and mastered the various yogas taught by the gurus or adepts in his vicinity and then either discarded or adapted their methods to his own needs. After his meditation carried him to ultimate awakening, the prince (who was now the Buddha) transmitted his methods to anybody who cared to follow him. To this day, one who studies the dharma encounters the very practices the Buddha used along the Path.

One might consider the dharma-teachings as "public domain," that is to say, for the 2,550 years since the Buddha's time, his dharma-methods have always been offered to practitioners without requirement of membership or profession of faith. Catholics, Jews, scientists, atheists, and non-Buddhists of all descriptions are welcome to take up any practices they find suitable and appropriate. Committed believers of any tradition can delve deeply into meditation practice and gain the fruits of insight without compromising their cultural and religious identities. This situation also creates a rich environment for sharing practices among inter-faith communities.

Buddha's Life and Teaching

Prince Siddhartha lived a life of affluence. His future promised the power, authority, wealth, and hedonistic indulgence known only to royalty. Further, the prince had mastered every aspect of his training for the throne: charioteering, archery, wrestling, logic, debate, and statesmanship. No challenge defeated him. However, despite his father's attempts to keep him from asking questions that would lead him to realize the limitations to his freedom, the inevitable happened: Siddhartha woke up to the truth of impermanence. He saw the approach of old age, sickness, and death and realized that all the pleasures and glory of a king's life come to nothing in the end. Seeing the limits to his freedom, he asked himself, "Is this where life leads?" The prince challenged himself to overcome mortality and find freedom from samsara, the endless rounds of birth, death, and rebirth. Finding the Middle Way between extremes of asceticism and sense

3. Kalama Sutta: To the Kalamas (AN 3.65) 1994–2012, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, accessinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html.

4. Ibid.

pleasure, he succeeded in putting an end to thoughts of desire in his mind. Having identified the source of his afflictions, he became the Buddha, "the Awakened One."

He explained his methods for realizing bodhi, or awakening, for forty-nine years. In the Theravada tradition, these methods included the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path among others. In the Mahayana teachings, the Buddha emphasized the Six Paramitas (Perfections) and the Ten Thousand Practices.

A unique aspect of sharing his Path is that every individual who practices the Buddha's methods has the potential to become a buddha. Anyone who applies himself and replicates the Buddha's own process, as the Buddha exhorted his followers to do, does so fully expecting to replace the Buddha, so to speak, to become identical with the Buddha in wisdom and compassion. This is possible for several reasons: first, buddhas are perfected humans, not divine; and second, the Path is inward, not external. One achieves full awakening by transforming ignorance and afflictions in the mind to bodhi, or enlightened awareness.

The Canon

It is said the Buddha refused his disciples' requests to write down his teachings, insisting they remain accessible to all. Literacy in the agrarian culture of India was rare; only priests and royalty had the opportunity to learn to read and write. The dharma, however, was meant for use by people in need, so the Buddha gave the task of transmitting the teachings to his monastic *sangha* (community), which maintained the oral tradition. Once written down, scripture becomes the possession of a literate elite, that is, religious professionals who tend the libraries of texts and who are charged with protecting their sacred literature. The ordinary suffering sentient

being, for whom the dharma was spoken, would have to go through the priests to find the principles and learn their healing methods. By keeping the dharma oral and opening up membership in the sangha clergy to anybody, regardless of their caste background, the Buddha democratized access to the scriptures.

From this perspective, the oral tradition is indeed not an inferior medium for transmitting received knowledge. Along with the advantages mentioned above, chanting or singing sacred texts from memory has proven the most reliable vehicle for transmitting tradition through generations. For example, in traditional Hindu communities, the Sanskrit Vedas survive to this day in an oral tradition, carried by pandits, young Brahmins carefully trained for this sacred task. These young men have prodigious memories and astonishing recall of sacred texts and liturgies. In the Buddhist sangha, the fortnightly recitation of the monastic rule, the Pratimoksha (Pattimokha), is ideally done from memory.

The Buddha's sutras were delivered often as solutions to problems, rarely as sermons or philosophical treatises. They offered practical meditation instructions and solutions to disciples' daily concerns. The contents of the Buddhist Tripitaka, or "Three Baskets," are the Sutra (*pitaka*), which contain the Buddha's words; the Shastra (*pitaka*), commentaries appended over the centuries by the Buddha's learned disciples; and the Vinaya (*pitaka*), which contains the rules for regulating the monastic sangha.

The Three Baskets exist in both Pali and Sanskrit compilations. The Pali canon, studied by the Theravada tradition, calls the second basket the Abhidhamma (the highest dhamma), and it functions by and large as the repository for commentarial literature. In the Mahayana canon, the sutras, Shastra, and Vinaya texts came down not through the Pali language but through Sanskrit, which is also the language of the Vedas. Texts from all three baskets are in daily use and

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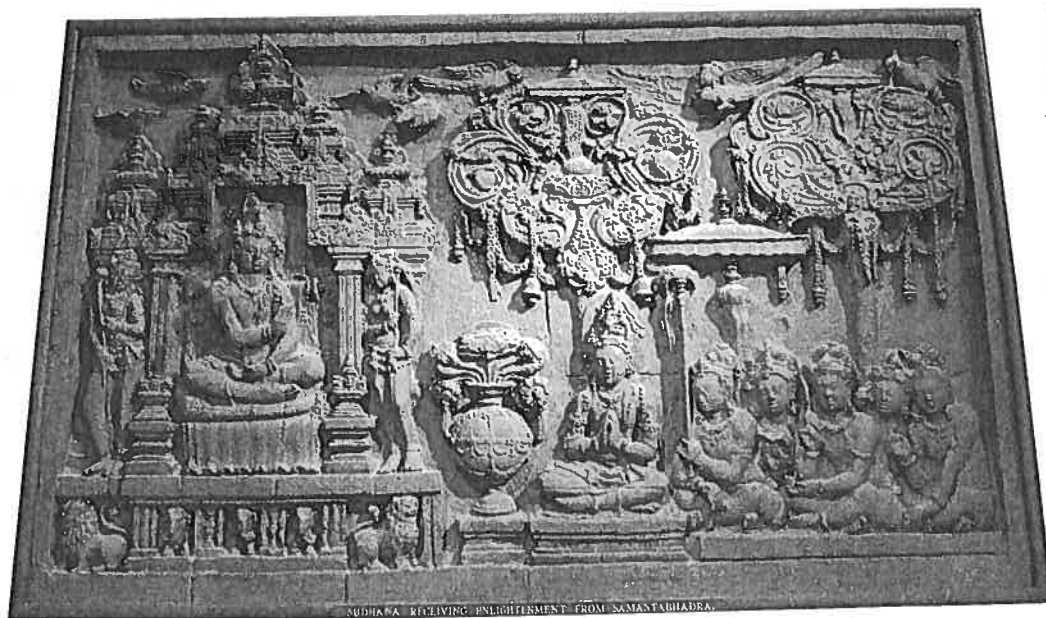
a portion has been translated out of Sanskrit and Pali into the world's languages.⁵

Unlike the Ten Commandments and biblical prophetic literature, sutras arise not through revelation but through realization. The source of the realized insights is the mind in *samadhi*, a meditative state of stillness, purity, and awareness. For this reason, the Three Baskets of the Tripitaka is not a closed canon. Potentially, any individual who cultivates the dharma and realizes buddhahood could produce a sutra identical in principle to the Buddha's. Texts have been added to the sutra basket through the Tang Dynasty, in tenth century China.

The sutras of the Mahayana comprise some of the most profound and sublime religious literature in human heritage. They include such

famous texts as the Lotus Sutra, the Diamond (Vajra Prajna Paramita) Sutra, the Shurangama Sutra, and the expansive Avatamsaka or Flower Garland Sutra. These texts are voluminous and diverse, containing descriptions of the Buddha's psychological transformation from consciousness to wisdom as well as explanations of the thinking and behavior of bodhisattvas (awakened beings), who live inspiring lives of service to others. The Lotus Sutra explains the path to buddhahood, while the Shurangama describes the methods of cultivating *samadhi*.

The Avatamsaka Sutra explains the many stages of the bodhisattva path and then follows the theory section with one of Buddhist literature's crowning achievements: an epic story of a young man's successful quest for bodhi



This plaster cast of the original relief from the eighth century depicts the aspirant Sudhana receiving enlightenment from the bodhisattva Samantabhadra.

5. Texts exist in English, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Silk Route scripts, such as Sogdian, Khotanese, and Uighur. Efforts are underway to bring the Tripitaka into English and other languages of the West. The work of the Buddhist Text Translation Society and Dharma Realm Buddhist University are online at drbu.org.

(awakening). In the "Gandhavyuha Chapter,"⁶ the Youth Sudhana sets out on a pilgrimage at the behest of the bodhisattva Manjushri and visits in succession fifty-three teachers, twenty-one of whom are women. Each teacher asks him if he has brought forth the resolve for bodhi (*bodhicitta*), the "thought for awakening." Sudhana tells each of these accomplished teachers (a list that includes bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, Maitreya, and Samantabhadra, a ship's captain, a prostitute, incense makers, kings, non-Buddhist Brahmins, children, and a host of female spirits who rule the night) that he has. Maitreya bodhisattva witnesses Sudhana's enlightenment and then sends him on to his final teachers, the bodhisattvas Manjushri and Samantabhadra. From Samantabhadra, Sudhana learns the essentials of practice and discovers that even after ultimate awakening, because of their altruistic vows, buddhas do not rest, but continue to teach sentient beings how to transform their afflictions and troubles into wisdom and compassion. The story of Sudhana on his successful quest for the Buddha's wisdom can be considered as one of the epic pilgrimages in world literature.

The Split in Buddhism: The "Multi-yana" Community

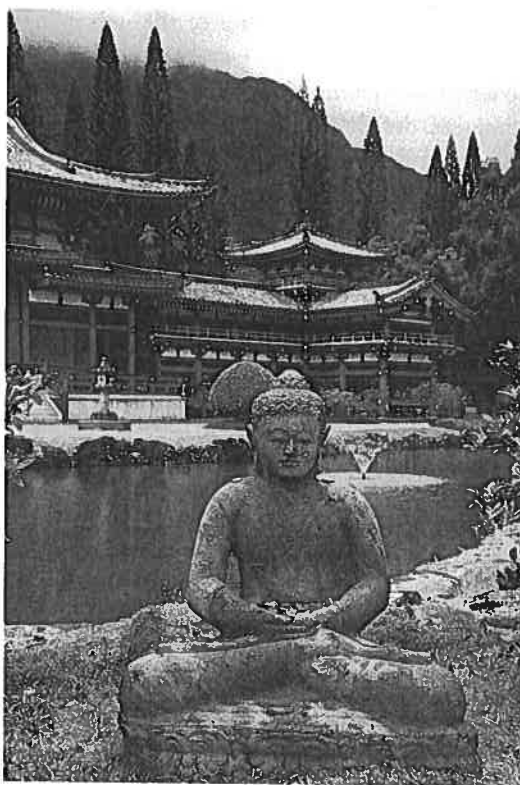
The religious world of India during the Buddha's lifetime was full of contending schools, with debate frequently used as a means of recruiting new students and becoming famous. The Buddha, however, did not contend. He taught through a dialectic process, like Socrates, asking questions of sincere students and leading them gradually to make their own conclusions. He never made philosophical statements for their own sake; nor did he make speculative

statements about the nature of the universe. In one discourse he likened metaphysical sophistry to a man who, having been shot by an arrow, first discusses the details of the arrow itself—what the wood is made of, what bird gave its feathers to the arrow, and so on—rather than pull out the shaft and seek medical attention. After making the analogy, the Buddha says that ending birth and death is the central issue; his disciples should give full attention to the methods that lead to liberation, not fruitlessly debate issues that do not lead to liberation.

Indeed, within the sangha order the Buddha always taught expediently, directing certain teachings to various individuals according to their capacity for understanding. In this way, dharma is like medicine and the wise teacher is like a healing physician, dispensing the right antidote to cure the illness of each different sentient being. Sometimes the purity of the arhat (an awakened sage) is the ideal role model for one to emulate; at another time the altruism of the bodhisattva is right. The Buddha teaches according to their potential for awakening. Dharma is shared equally by all Buddhist traditions.

Excavations of the early monasteries in India reveal that followers of Mahayana bodhisattvas and Theravada arhats meditated in the same monasteries. Current thinking on the historical origins of the sangha suggests that both Theravada and Mahayana monks coexisted in the same monasteries and that the Buddha's teaching was heard by different individuals, each according to their potential for understanding. However, for a variety of reasons, Buddhism over its 2,550-year history has experienced certain sectarian differences. The tradition broke into two main schools. The Theravada (Teaching of the Elders) school could be described as the "Southern tradition," with the Mahayana or "great vehicle" as the "Northern tradition."

6. Published in eight volumes by the Buddhist Text Translation Society as *Chapter 39: Entering the Dharma Realm*.



A statue of the Buddha serenely meditating in the full lotus position. One sees here that food alms have been placed in his hands as an expression of devotion.

What is different, then? The scriptural languages are different, as are the scriptures.⁷ Thus, interpretations of the buddhas and the sages who model success are different. Is there one Buddha or many buddhas? A Buddhist layman in Kuala Lumpur driving Venerable Master Hsuan Hua to the airport seized his chance with the senior monk to ask a question that had troubled him: "Here in Malaysia we have both Mahayana and Theravada practitioners, and they disagree. In the end is there just one Buddha or many

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buddhas, Shifu?" Master Hua replied, "To my mind there are no buddhas at all. There is only great wisdom." The driver was delighted with the answer.

Images from the Thai tradition depict the Buddha sitting with legs crossed in half-lotus posture, while Mahayana images always show the Buddha seated in full-lotus, with both legs crossed. Both images depict a meditator sitting quietly, with his body upright and his mind focused and serene. Contemporary Mahayana and Theravada meditators may use different methods, but all alike are disciples of the Buddha and all strive to walk the same Path the Buddha walked to its end.

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

One major difference between the traditions is that, unlike followers of the Theravada, Mahayana devotees worship multiple buddhas in their daily liturgies. Buddha(s) is written in the plural to indicate that the Mahayana tradition honors on a daily basis the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni (the former Prince Siddhartha Gautama); Amitabha, the Buddha of Limitless Light, who created the Western Pure Land of Utmost Happiness; and Baisajyaraja, the Healing Buddha, whose Buddha Realm is known as Lapis Lazuli Light in the East. One might add Maitreya, the Buddha to come, and Vairocana, the Teaching Buddha of the Avatamsaka Sutra. The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni (Siddhartha Gautama), later on in his teaching career introduced these other buddhas and their dharma-methods. The sutra collections in the Pali canon contain the teachings spoken during the years of peripatetic teaching. These particular buddha figures rarely appear in the Pali canon.

7. The text and commentary chapter that follows presents the Dhammapada, which belongs to the Pali canon, as well as a section from the Lotus Sutra, which introduces Guan Shi Yin Bodhisattva, lore held sacred by the Mahayana, but that would never appear in the Pali tradition.

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The figure of the bodhisattva, however, is so well developed in the Mahayana that to the average Chinese or Vietnamese devotee, attention to and worship of bodhisattva figures rivals worship of buddhas in importance. Avalokitesvara (the bodhisattva Guan Shi Yin, or Guan Yin) is the only figure in the Mahayana pantheon with three official celebration days in the calendar year. Guan Shi Yin is the Awakened Being of Great Compassion. In her female form she is without doubt the most popular figure for worship in East Asia. Other bodhisattva figures include Ksitigarbha (the Bodhisattva Earth Treasury), Manjushri (the Bodhisattva of Great Wisdom), and Samantabhadra (the Bodhisattva of Great Practices). These four, often referred to as "Celestial Bodhisattvas," function as paragons of altruistic service to all sentient creatures.

The Bodhisattva Vows

The two signature features of bodhisattvas are their practices and their vows. Each bodhisattva, indeed each buddha, has a distinctive set or number of vows. All Mahayana bodhisattvas adhere to what are known collectively as "The Four Great Bodhisattva Vows":

1. Sentient beings are beyond numbering; even so, I vow to save them all.
2. Afflictions are infinite; even so, I vow to transform them all.
3. Methods of practice are beyond measuring; even so, I vow to master them all.
4. The Buddha's Way is the highest Path; even so, I vow to realize it.

Inherent in each lies a contradiction, which the Awakened Being acknowledges: "This is an impossible task; even so, I set my heart on accomplishing the impossible." What moves the bodhisattva forward at all times is the bodhi resolve or *bodhicitta*, the "thought for enlightenment."

This is a heartfelt, two-part thought in the bodhisattva's deepest mind that says, "My highest aspiration is to realize my potential for ultimate wisdom and compassion, and I will realize that awakening by 'taking across' to awakening all sentient creatures."

Bodhisattva practices center around personal, societal, and universal vows. The Avatamsaka Sutra (Flower Garland Sutra), among the longest of all the Buddha's discourses, provides detailed explanations of the bodhisattva path from start to finish. The bodhisattva Samantabhadra, known as the "Bodhisattva of Great Practices," plays a major role in explaining a bodhisattva's practices and vows. Samantabhadra has a group of ten practices and vows associated with his name. In the sutra he teaches a bodhisattva pilgrim named Sudhana how to cultivate all ten vows to perfection. There are four personal vows (to bow in respect to every buddha, to praise the Tathagatas, to make extensive offerings, and to repent of karma offenses and reform), four social or relational vows (to offer joyful support for other's meritorious conduct, to request that the Buddha turn the wheel of dharma, to request that the buddhas stay in the world, and to always learn from the buddhas), and the universal vows (to ever accord with beings' abilities to respond, and to transfer merits everywhere to all beings). In chapter 39 of the Flower Garland Sutra, Sudhana masters these ten vows and realizes buddhahood.

84,000 Dharma-Doors (or the Myriad Practices)

Just as arhats, the role models of the Theravada school, observe the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, likewise in the Mahayana tradition bodhisattvas cultivate the Six Perfections and Myriad Practices. They are the hallmark quality of bodhisattvas. So many practices exist because sentient beings in all their diversity

require different methods to “cross over the ocean of troubles” from this shore of samsara to the other shore of Nirvana. Each method is geared for a specific being’s propensities, and the bodhisattva’s job is to employ skillful, expedient means to teach and inspire those beings to wake up and make the bodhi resolve for themselves.

Buddhist Holiness

The Four Noble Truths

The Buddha’s first teaching was the turning of the dharma-wheel of the Four Noble Truths. Each of these four profound insights can expand one’s awareness of the nature of the world and the proper role of humanity in the world.

Some consider Buddhism pessimistic, claiming that the first Noble Truth, the teaching on the unsatisfying nature of all compound things, is joyless and life-denying. In fact, pointing to the transient nature of phenomena provides a keen insight into the reality of all things that are made up of other things. In its essence, the First Noble Truth says that things that come together will later come apart; as much as we develop emotional attachments to transient, impermanent things is how much we will suffer when they come apart.

Even more startling than this profound insight is the Third Noble Truth, which reveals the result of the Buddha’s six years of ascetic discipline in the forest. Stating that suffering can end, it brings a message of hope, not defeat. Suffering can end, and the Eightfold Path is the road to suffering’s end. Moreover, this salvation from suffering does not come at the hands of an external agency, nor is it the exclusive reward of a chosen one. The path to suffering’s end is open to all. The human individual who claims that, by

using his method, anybody can transcend mortality and reach a state where all suffering ends offers a startlingly simple and direct promise. It is immanent and not transcendent. Diligent application of the dharma brought a result that took him beyond rebirth entirely, and he offers this method to all comers.

The Avatamsaka Sutra celebrates the Four Noble Truths, dedicating an entire chapter to their exposition. However, this Mahayana version of the Four Noble Truths also relates them to the bodhisattva’s Four Great Vows:

1. In accordance with the first truth of dissatisfaction/suffering, I vow to save all suffering living beings.
2. In accordance with the second truth of suffering’s accumulation, I vow to cut off all afflictions.
3. In accordance with the third truth of cessation, I vow to learn all the immeasurable methods of practice.
4. In accordance with the fourth truth of the Path, I vow to realize Buddhahood.

The Eightfold Path

The Mahayana, like the Theravada, teaches the Eightfold Path, but in the Mahayana tradition one would be more likely to hear about the Ten Wholesome and Unwholesome Deeds than the Eightfold Path. The Mahayana embraces that profound teaching, but integrates it into a different formulation.

In the Ten Grounds chapter of the Avatamsaka Sutra,⁸ the Second Ground explains the causes and effects of Ten Unwholesome Deeds. Avoiding these creates ten wholesome deeds. The ten consist of three unwholesome deeds

8. Tripitaka Master Hua, commentary, *Flower Adornment Sutra: The Ten Grounds*, ch. 26, pt. II, DRBU (Burlingame, CA: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 1981).

done with the body (killing, stealing, and adultery or promiscuity) as well as four unwholesome deeds done with the mouth (lying, gossip or schism-making, profanity, and frivolous prattle) and three done with the mind (greed, anger, and delusion). By avoiding those ten unskillful actions one purifies body, mouth, and mind and thereby creates wholesome karma.

The Mahayana tradition teaches that when one's ethical conduct accords with the Five Precepts (avoiding killing, lying, sexual misconduct, intoxicants, and stealing) and the Ten Wholesome Deeds, then the resulting blessings will lead one to rebirth in the heavens in a future life, as well as provide the foundation for deep samadhi and wisdom, should one choose not to aim for rebirth as a god. This formulation of dharma is the Mahayana equivalent of the Eightfold Path, in that it answers the question for practitioners, "How shall I live that is in accord with the dharma?" At the same time it depicts the realm of gods as a station of rebirth attainable by anybody through cultivation of an ethical lifestyle. Living wisely and harmlessly can take one to a divine state, although the Buddha warned against such a choice, for rebirth in the heavens remains subject to samsara, or birth and death. A much better goal would be Nirvana, transcending entirely the wheel of rebirth.

The Self and Emptiness

What Is the Self?

"Truth in the primary sense" is the Buddha's name for the teaching of "not-self." The understanding that all phenomena have no separate, distinct core of being, that all things are like onions, simply layers around an empty core, was the key insight that brought him to liberation.

Having seen this truth, the Buddha still had to verify it through meditation until his mind was pure and still. After awakening he explained how phenomena came about through a process of dependent coarising (*pratitya-samutpada*): that all things arise when conditions come together and vanish when conditions disperse. The term refers to the mutually interdependent links that bring phenomena into being in the mind and in the world. Here the Buddha "lifted the hood," so to speak, on the engine of the universe to reveal not only how phenomena arise from ignorance but also how they can be untied or unlinked and, when ignorance is illuminated through wisdom, how the chain of conditioned existence can be reversed and cast off.

In the Mahayana tradition, this fundamental insight was articulated in the Prajna Paramita texts for meditators whose skill had matured. The Vajra Prajna Paramita Sutra⁹ contains this famous quote: "All things arising from the coming together of conditions resemble dreams, illusions, dewdrops, shadows and flashes of lightning; we should contemplate in that way."

Dependent coarising further created the basis for the Buddha's disciples to assert the nonultimate status of the various gods of the Brahmanic pantheon and the other divinities prevalent in India. All things in the universe have no inherent nature, but instead come together and disperse based on temporary adhesion of conditions. If they arise through a process of dependent coarising and disappear the same way, then there is no basis for asserting the existence of a creator deity. Not surprisingly, this caused consternation among the various Hindu schools and sects in India. The Buddha neither debated nor asserted otherwise, he simply invited all seekers to meditate correctly and see for themselves the truth of his observation.

9. Tripitaka Master Hsuan Hua, *The Vajra Prajna Paramita Sutra: A General Explanation* (Burlingame, CA: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2003), 161.

Self and Nirvana

Nirvana is the ending of further becoming. If rebirth is likened to a flame leaping from one candle to the next, then Nirvana is the blowing out of the flame, with the smoke rising up, extinguished forever. In the Mahayana tradition buddhas do not explain Nirvana as an end; the word *extinction* does not accurately convey this vision of Nirvana. The Buddha's perspective extends beyond the world of duality. The sutras give the average reader, bound by discriminating consciousness, access to the Buddha's unitive consciousness, which sees beyond duality. Reading about the Buddha's insights into ultimate truth, however, does not bestow that truth on the reader or grant him or her license to speak with that religious authority until he or she actually does the work of purifying body, mouth, and mind, entering samadhi, and realizing wisdom.

Buddhist Practices

Buddhist Pure Land Devotion

Mahayana Buddhist literature incorporates the teachings on Pure Land Buddhism. Upon entering Buddhist monasteries from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, from Ho Chi Minh City to Taipei, one rarely finds meditation cushions or people meditating. Instead, one sees bowing benches set before tall images of Amitabha and lines of devotees circling the hall with recitation beads in their hands, chanting "Namo Amitofo," meaning "I return in refuge to the Buddha of Limitless Light."

The Pure Land form of devotion has been the dominant practice in East Asia for centuries—a reality that often surprises those who identify Buddhism with meditation. Seeing monks and laity alike praising Amitabha, reciting scriptures devoted to his Pure Land paradise, and chanting his name hundreds or thousands of times a day may seem "un-Buddhist" to those

whose knowledge of the dharma is limited to insight (*vipashyana*) meditation or studying Zen koans. East Asian Buddhists by and large prefer devotion to meditation because the full lotus posture, with both legs crossed over the thighs, requires flexibility and patience. A popular saying in Chinese Mahayana Buddhist circles says, "When one hundred practitioners do Chan (Zen) meditation, not even one can expect success; when one hundred devotees recite the Buddha's name, one hundred will be reborn in Amitabha's Pure Land."

The figure of Amitabha can seem like a Buddhist god, waiting for the faithful devotee to return to a home in the Western Land. For those familiar with the solitary Buddha of Theravada Buddhist culture, both the idea of faith and devotion to another numinous buddha can seem quite novel.

Source of the Pure Land Teaching

Pure Land devotional practice dates back to a fabled monk, Fazang' (*dharmakara* or "Treasury of Dharma"). While practicing throughout eons of lifetimes, Fazang dedicated all of his accumulated merit to the creation of a Pure Land, a paradise where no suffering was allowed. Animals, ghosts, and the hell realms would not exist. Monk Fazang made forty-eight vows, which stated in essence that whoever recited his name with sincerity, even ten times, could at the end of life leave the endless cycle of samsara and be reborn in a pure lotus flower in the Land of Utmost Happiness. There one would rest in the lotus until one's karma was purified and then emerge into an inspiring environment conducive to spiritual practice and free of any obstacles.

The Avatamsaka Sutra relates that new immigrants to the Pure Land learn all the means for teaching those beings still stuck in samsara. After being instructed in the skills of a bodhisattva, the newly trained buddhas-to-be return to



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Buddhist monks circling a statue of Amitabha Buddha, himself surrounded by Buddhas, at Fo Guang Shan Monastery in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. Amitabha ("boundless light") is the Buddha of the Western Paradise and the main focus of Pure Land Buddhism.

the worlds where their affinities lie, reach their final incarnation, become buddhas, and teach those beings who can hear their dharma. It is not surprising that such an extraordinary salvific tale sounded attractive to an Asian populace that was, for the most part, poor, uneducated, agrarian, and beset with cruel sufferings: harsh and catastrophic climate, incessant war or violent revolution, little difference between bandits and soldiers, exorbitant imperial taxes, forced labor, and disease. It is said that three types of individuals—those with dull wits, people with middling intelligence, and even skeptical intellectuals—need only recite the name of Amitabha to be reborn in the Pure Land, free of samsara's incessant rounds of incarnation. There they can cultivate bodhisattva practices undisturbed by the vicissitudes of the turbid world. The promise of

such unalloyed bliss awaiting those who believed in Amitabha's vows, wished to be reborn in his Pure Land, and who then recited his name with sincerity and vigor, makes a strong case for the rise of Amitabha's devotional practices as the most popular form of Buddhist practice for millions upon millions of East Asian Buddhists.

Dialogue and the Future

Buddhism and the West

Buddhism has successfully reinvented itself for 2,500 years, jumping cultures, languages, continents, and generations, as its principles and practices hybridize and renew in each new country. Wherever it goes, the Buddha's dharma not only influences the new culture but also is

transformed by each new religious environment. After Indian Buddhist pilgrims arrived in China, it took roughly 200 years for fully indigenous Chinese Buddhist forms and followers to evolve, following uniquely Chinese perspectives and practices of the dharma. If history repeats itself, then Buddhism in the West has another century before deeply rooted, distinctly Western practices of the dharma will emerge.¹⁰ In the meantime, contemporary Western Buddhists live on a bridge. They gain inspiration and knowledge of traditional dharma from Asia as interpreted by the few authentic dharma pioneers who introduced the living traditions to North America and to Europe, and then they integrate what they learn into Western cultural modes and into the English language.

The job for Western students of first generation Asian Buddhist pioneers consists of distinguishing the purely cultural elements of the practices they have absorbed from what is genuinely Buddhist, that is to say, taught by the sutras and by the various practices that have come down through the monastic tradition. Keeping alive Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Tibetan, or Vietnamese cultural norms is a priority for first-generation Buddhist immigrants from those cultures. But that generation's religious practices often matter little to their children and less to others outside their linguistic and cultural communities.

Bringing Buddhism into the twenty-first century is the challenge of those dedicated to absorbing the Buddha's teaching. Practitioners strive "to cultivate the dharma," that is, to apply the Middle Way to body, mouth, and mind and relearn many of the viewpoints and mind-sets regarding humanity and the world.

Four Aspects of Western Culture's Interaction with the Dharma

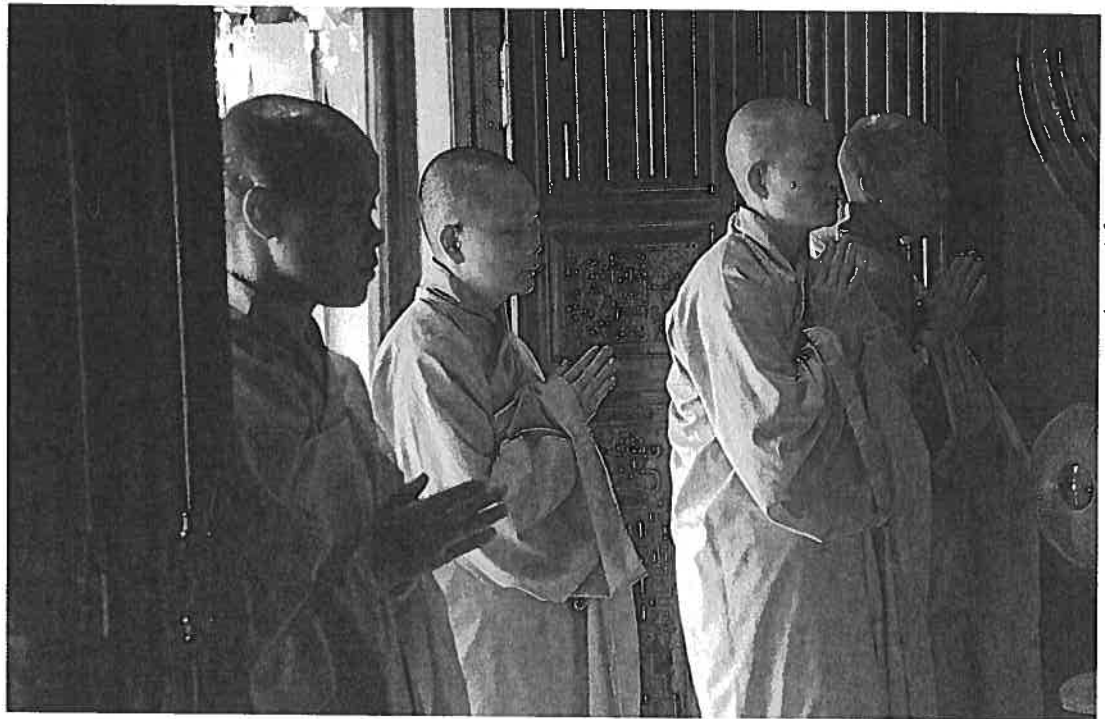
Buddhism has the potential to influence the culture of the West most markedly in the areas of psychology, science, egalitarian social structures, ethical environmental interdependence, and the reanimation of nature. The four aspects of the Buddha's teachings that could have the biggest impact are Buddhism's egalitarian nature, psychological orientation, science-friendly attitude, and contribution to discovering appropriate responses to technological advances.

Buddhism's Egalitarian Nature

The Buddha described all sentient beings in the Ten Dharma Realms as equally possessing the buddha nature; therefore, all beings share equal access to the fruits of cultivation. Goodness and virtue, along with vigor in cultivating the dharma, determines one's progress in the Buddha's Path, not birth or influence, gender, class, bank account, or age.

Buddhist practice appeals to the democratic nature of modern individuals, especially with regard to access to the teachings and the status of women in the Mahayana. This democratic aspect of the dharma has great significance. The Buddha welcomed all sincere practitioners, regardless of caste. He instructed that his teachings be kept in the vernacular, not in the language of priests or scribes, so that the purpose of the dharma—ending suffering—remained clear and available to all people, literate and illiterate alike. Likewise, he opened up the dharma for half the human population at a time and in a culture where women were little more than property; their primary value was their reproduction of

10. Organized Buddhism arrived in North America at the end of the nineteenth century with the establishment of the San Francisco Buddhist Church. In 1969, five American men and women from Gold Mountain Monastery became the first Americans to leave the home-life as fully ordained, celibate monastics.



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Buddhist nuns in prayer at Dong Thuyen pagoda, established in the eighteenth century in the village of Duong Xuan, Vietnam.

male children. The women's sangha was established in the Buddha's lifetime; his own foster mother became the first ordained nun, Mahaprajapati, and established the female (Bhikshuni) sangha. In the Mahayana tradition, women have been ordained and have taken vows for 2,500 years. The Buddha taught that liberation is possible not only for all humans, but for beings in all the realms of rebirth.

Buddhism's Psychological Orientation

Professor Huston Smith, celebrated educator and writer on religion, believed that one of the major avenues for Buddhist interest and acceptance in the West would be psychology and that the dialogue between psychology and

Buddha dharma would shape Western Buddhism in the twenty-first century. Buddhism's orientation toward psychology has already paved a broad highway of East-West exchange and mutual learning.

Since Freud, Jung, Adler, and the rise of secular humanism in Europe, individuals have largely defined themselves through the vocabulary and perspectives of psychology. Many lay Buddhist teachers and disciples in America were initially attracted to Buddhism by its attitude toward the mind. Students of psychology often report that advancing in the study of psychology required training in statistics, demographic studies, and experimentation with lab animals. When addressing human experience, training too often focused on pathology and chemical therapies. Buddhist meditation allowed them to

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experience the healthy human mind with a theoretical model—that is, the Buddha's description of the mind available both through Abhidharma texts and through the sutras' discourses on meditative states.

Two levels of inquiry are emerging now from the dialogue between psychology and Buddhism. The first consists of a meditative therapeutic model that uses the sutras' description of the mind as a methodology for self-understanding. The Buddha's sutras serve as blueprints of his awakened consciousness. He directed them to those whose meditations carry them through the same territory and along the same paths that the Buddha traversed to their end.¹¹ The second area investigates the interaction between Buddhist theories of mind and neuroscience.¹²

Buddhism's Science-Friendly Nature

The Buddha's methodical practice in the forest for six years fits the paradigm of proper scientific investigation. He worked from a theoretical hypothesis—that suffering can end—and employed a variety of methodologies in his research, discarding those that led to extremes. He left a paper trail in the sutras, and he bequeathed the fruits of his research for testing to anyone who might seek answers on their own. His model has been tested by subjects East and West for two and a half millennia.

Popular awareness of the conversation between Buddhism and post-Newtonian physics started with Fritjof Capra's book *The Tao of*

Physics and Gary Zukov's *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*. This conversation is now working back into the life sciences, with researchers in the fields of psychology, health, genetics, and biological engineering looking into Buddhist models of interdependence and conditioned arising.

Buddhism's Contribution to Discovering Appropriate Responses to Technological Advances

Buddhism offers a potential ethics-based solution to a current crisis created by advances in technology. It suggests that humans, as stewards for the planet, have a duty to think on behalf of not only all beings who share the natural environment but also unborn of generations to come. This emphasis on virtue and compassion, on giving and ethical integrity, can reshape our priorities as a society.

Contemporary Buddhists advocate the use of traditional ethics, or ancient wisdom tools, to review appropriate technology. This approach is not based on abstract predetermined laws or rights, but on cause and effect between you and yourself, you and society, and you and nature. In short, to discern the moral choices on an issue, one need not buy into the entire cosmology of the Buddhist faith to receive the benefits. Cause and effect operate independent of faith in a doctrinal creed.

Bill Joy, a former science officer at Sun Microsystems, has written extensively about humanity's lack of commonly agreed-upon standards to evaluate advances in technology. In a

11. The pilgrimage of Sudhana, the Buddhist pilgrim in the "Gandhavyuha Chapter" of the Avatamsaka Sutra, can be explained as the Buddha's description of meeting and integrating the archetypes of the anima and the shadow into a holistic conscious awareness. The Buddhist language for this process says that Sudhana, the pilgrim, experiences and cultivates to success his wisdom and great compassion through progressive encounters with fifty-three Good Spiritual Friends.

12. Formal studies are ongoing in University of Wisconsin at Madison, UCLA, and Stanford (B. Alan Wallace Contemplative Science), among other research institutions. There has been evolution, too, of the dimensions of humanistic psychology, and the theories of Fritz Perls, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rodgers, and others, vis-à-vis their contact with Buddhist practice and theory of mind.

talk at Stanford University he said, "I have a copy of the Bible and also His Holiness the Dalai Lama's *Ethics for a New Millennium* here in my briefcase, and frankly I don't find either one offering much in the way of concrete guidelines for addressing the dangerous situation humanity finds itself in today."¹³

The Buddhist awareness of interdependence and the value of basic human kindness

actually provide good starting points for a conversation dedicated to evolving those standards. Further, the Buddha's sutras, which can be understood as maps of the mind and blueprints for perfecting awareness, offer a means toward developing the sense of enlightened responsibility that Joy suggests is humanity's next step, a necessary step to survive the challenges of the twenty-first century.

13. Quotation from unpublished talk attended by the author in May 2000.