An Outsider's Perspective

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What Makes Buddhism So Interesting?

Westerners have been fascinated with Buddhism since classic Buddhist texts were first translated and disseminated by Western scholars well over a century ago. This interest has only increased over the past fifty years. What might be particularly surprising is that the reasons for such interest are utterly varied and even contradictory.

Some scholars, for example, have noticed Buddhist affinity with some expressions of Christian mysticism. Here both traditions emphasize a kind of self-emptiness as a prelude to either Nirvana or union with God. Both also understand that the problem of the human condition is being attached to things that ultimately do not satisfy, and thus clinging to the very things that keep us spiritually stuck. So, even while Buddhism seems so different, denying both soul and God, it may be fundamentally aligned with Christianity in crucial ways.

Others have become interested in Buddhism precisely because it offers an alternative to a Western or Christian perspective. For them, Buddhism offers ways to systematically develop and purify the mind with little to no appeal to supernatural forces or the need for divine grace. Rather, Buddhism directly and immediately demonstrates both the problem of human suffering and its remedy.

Some of the Western fascination with Buddhism can be attributed to claims that Zen Buddhism can be positively embraced by Christianity. Forty years ago, highly respected Jesuit missionaries recommended Zen insights and practices for Christians. Even more recently, respected Christians have received official designations as *Roshis* (Zen masters) and even claim that the traditions can unite. Such Christians argue that Zen is not about doctrine, but about directly seeing and participating in reality. As Zen's founder, Bodhidharma taught, "A special transmission outside the scriptures, not founded upon words or letters; by pointing directly to one's mind; it lets one see into one's own true nature, and thus attain Buddhahood."[1]

Another reason Buddhism interests many in the West is the enigmatic nature of Nirvana, the term that names Buddhism's objective. Is Nirvana, as the absolute transcendental reference in Buddhism, God? Is it the kingdom of God or heaven? The challenge to make sense of the nature of Nirvana attracts many Westerners.

1. Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History*, vol. 1, *India and China*, trans. James Heisig and Paul Knitter (New York: Macmillan, 1999), 85.

The Buddha's Life and Unique Teaching

According to Hinduism, one's karma, which is derived from the quality of one's moral and spiritual life, determines the quality of one's rebirth. A religiously devout and moral life generates good karmic energy leading to a better rebirth, such as a better human life, or even an existence in a godlike state, while a morally and religiously bankrupt life creates bad karmic energy leading to a painful rebirth. Even the most sublime existences are eventually subject to decay and are ultimately pointless. Finding a way to escape (moksha) the endless wandering (samsara) from one rebirth to another requires higher knowledge, extraordinary virtue, and intensive meditation. Such a vigorous life (or series of lives) enables one to stop identifying with one's body, emotions, or thoughts and discover that the core of one's existence (atman) identifies with ultimate reality (Brahman). When one realizes this identification, one becomes liberated. This is the goal of Hinduism.

The Buddha, who lived in the fifth century BCE, shared this broad Hindu understanding almost entirely. He too believed in karma and rebirth, and he advocated seeking an escape from samsara. But he thought many of his Hindu contemporaries were wrong in important ways, some of which would ensure that adherents would not achieve moksha. First, he (and some others) challenged the caste system and the dominance of Brahmanic rituals. In his view, the real Brahmin was anyone who was enlightened, and enlightenment had nothing to do with Brahmanic rituals or sacrifice. Second, he insisted there was no atman (self) and no Brahman (ultimate reality). Thus, he challenged the ultimate goal of Hinduism.

The Buddha, whose name was Siddhartha Gautama, was a prince of a small kingdom in northern India (today Nepal). According to legend, his father wanted him to grow accustomed to a kingly lifestyle and to avoid whatever might spark religious consciousness. His father tried to ensure he did not encounter unpleasant things, inside the palace or out. By the time Siddhartha reached his late twenties, however, he had experienced four realities. On separate occasions he saw an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a holy man. That is, he saw the reality of old age, sickness, and death, and then someone devoted to escaping these inevitable realities of life. Surely, it is not as though such possibilities had never occurred to him. Rather, Siddhartha *absorbed* these facts deeply into his consciousness. Ashvaghosha, his biographer, writes, "When he thus gained insight into the fact that the blemishes of disease, old age, and death vitiate the very core of this world, he lost at the same moment all self-intoxication."[2]

Siddhartha left the palace and found a great spiritual master who taught him *Samkhya*, an advanced form of Hindu psychology and metaphysics. After mastering all the subtleties of Samkhya, he learned from another master the most advanced meditation practices of the day, which again he quickly mastered. Finally, he devoted himself to severe asceticism, particularly fasting, as a method of detaching from all things and achieving moksha (escape). He found that none of these, least of all asceticism, gave him true freedom. Siddhartha realized that he had mastered the best philosophy, meditational practices, and ascetic practices of the day and had found them all wanting. After this realization, he accepted a pious woman's offering of boiled rice and milk and determined to sit under a papal tree, known henceforth as a *bodhi* (enlightenment) tree, and to remain there until he achieved moksha. It was here where he

2. Edward Conze, ed., *Buddhist Scriptures* (New York: Penguin, 1959), 43.

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Siddhartha Gautama attaining Nirvana under the Bodhi tree. This is the occasion when he became the Buddha, or "awakened one."

discovered the core truth about reality and the means to achieve moksha. These are the Four Noble Truths. From that point on, Siddhartha was the *Buddha*, which means "awakened one." The Buddha spent the rest of his life teaching others how to become awakened as well. He called this awakening Nirvana.

The Canon

The Buddha started a monastic order of men, and later women, who memorized his sermons. After his death, many prominent disciples gathered at the Council of Vesali and recited these sermons. They also discussed rules for monks. There was a great deal of disagreement about both, particularly regarding the material legislating monastic life. This led to a number of schools or subtraditions of Buddhism. The surviving school of this early period is now known as the Theravada tradition, or "way of the elders." It wasn't until the first century BCE that the Theravada tradition developed a canon of written texts. By then the "authentic" teachings of the Buddha were impossible to verify. The canon reflects thinking that developed over centuries, critically examining the nature of the person, psyche, and path. This massive canon has three sections: (1) *vinaya*, which are rules for monastic life; (2) *suttas*, which represent the Buddha's teachings; and (3) *abhidhamma*, which elaborate on and scrutinize those teachings.

The Theravada canon includes some 2,500 suttas (*sutras* in Sanskrit), some of them quite long. Because it is so unwieldy, the tradition focuses on some parts of the canon as most important. A small part of the canon consists of a collection of Buddha's sayings called the Dhammapada. This serves as a kind of canon within a canon and many monastics memorize it. Other important texts include the suttas on Turning the Wheel of Truth, Sublime States, Foundations of Mindfulness, Fire Sermon, and Buddha's Farewell Address.

Buddhist Holiness: Knowing the Truth and Living the Skillful Life

The Four Noble Truths

Virtually everything the Buddha taught was grounded in the Four Noble Truths that he learned the night he became awakened. Briefly, the Four Noble Truths are as follows: (1) life is suffering, (2) the cause of suffering is craving,

(3) suffering ends when craving ends, which is Nirvana, and (4) one achieves the end of suffering by following the Eightfold Path of Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

To many Western ears, framing the spiritual life in this way and suggesting that everything is suffering sounds negative and even absurd. The word translated here as suffering is *dukkha*, and the concept of dukkha is complex. Dukkha could be translated very differently, such as "dissatisfaction, unease, stress, pain," or even simply "not fully satisfying." There are also different kinds of dukkha. For example, dukkha-dukkha means something literally painful, say, dropping a hammer on your foot. *Viparinama-dukkha* refers to the dissatisfaction that arises when we experience change. Even if an experience is enjoyable, dissatisfaction can arise when the joy diminishes. Finally, there is *sankara-dukkha*, which refers to the fact that all states, except Nirvana, have the liability of lacking any kind of ultimacy. Because these states are not absolute, they cannot provide a place of refuge free of craving.

In Buddhist thought, this is how the craving mind works: We falsely think we have a self, that there is something personal, eternal, and essential about our existence. So we stay attached to our experience. (Conventionally, we can talk about ourselves, which proves useful as long as we realize that there is no *real* self underneath it all.) If an experience is satisfying, we feel attraction; if dissatisfying, we feel aversion. Unless we realize that the idea of an eternal self is a delusion, we are constantly jerked around by feelings of attraction and aversion. While sometimes quite subtle, these nonetheless dominate the mind.

Perhaps the Buddha's message could be considered as follows: We are imprisoned by a reactive mind. We can make the prison cell more comfortable with good karma, but until we address what imprisons us, we will find ourselves forever caught. The Eightfold Path provides the means to escape for good. It is the only way to freedom.

The Eightfold Path

The categories of the Eightfold Path discussed above fit into three subcategories: virtue, mental discipline, and wisdom. The cultivation of virtue for the Buddhist includes Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Right Speech is speech that must be useful, gentle, edifying, and truthful. In some circumstances, speech can and should be challenging, but even then it would be offered humbly and with the intention of pursuing a wholesome outcome. Right Action resembles speech but applies to activities. It refers to conduct that is peaceful and respectful of life. It would not be unusual for many Buddhists to refrain from killing even an insect that is biting them. Right Livelihood consists of a profession that does not lead to harming others or oneself. Buddhists strive for employment that brings wholesome goods and services to others.

The second subcategory in the Eightfold Path, mental discipline, involves Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Right Effort intends to cultivate wholesome states of mind that lead to a sound psyche as well as possibilities for deep meditation. Right Effort also involves developing a balanced mind, one both focused and open. The Buddha once compared the right mental energy to a stringed instrument. The string should be taut, not loose, but not so tight as to vibrate improperly or even break. Right Mindfulness involves diligent awareness of the dynamics of mind and body. It entails recognizing the qualities of one's experience and one's relationship to that experience. Am I inclining toward it, averting from it? Here one also watches the phenomena of mind and body arise and dissipate. This leads to the realization that there is nothing substantial in

any experience (or experiencing self) and thus nothing substantial to be controlled by (indeed, no substantive self to be controlled). Finally Right Concentration cultivates a strong, wholesome mind. One traditional commentator, Buddhaghosa, taught that there are forty meditation subjects. Some counteract negative mental states. So if one were vain about one's looks, a good meditation would consist of contemplating a corpse rotting. The objective of other meditations is the cultivation of positive mental states. A faithful, emotional psyche might do well meditating on the qualities of the Buddha, which would help one both revere the Buddha and appropriate those qualities for oneself. Finally, some meditational objects are meant to develop deep concentration.

The final subcategory, wisdom, includes Right Thought and Right Understanding. Right Thought consists of one's vision or perspective. It includes commitment to not being attached to or identified with our experience. At a basic level, Right Thought means accepting the Buddhist perspective on a notional level. As one gets deeper into the practice of Buddhism, one recognizes how attachments work on the mind and how suffering comes from them. Right Thought intimately aligns with Right Understanding, which is the discovery of the impermanence of all things and the absolute lack of selfhood in what makes up a human being.

The Self and Nirvana

What Is the Self?

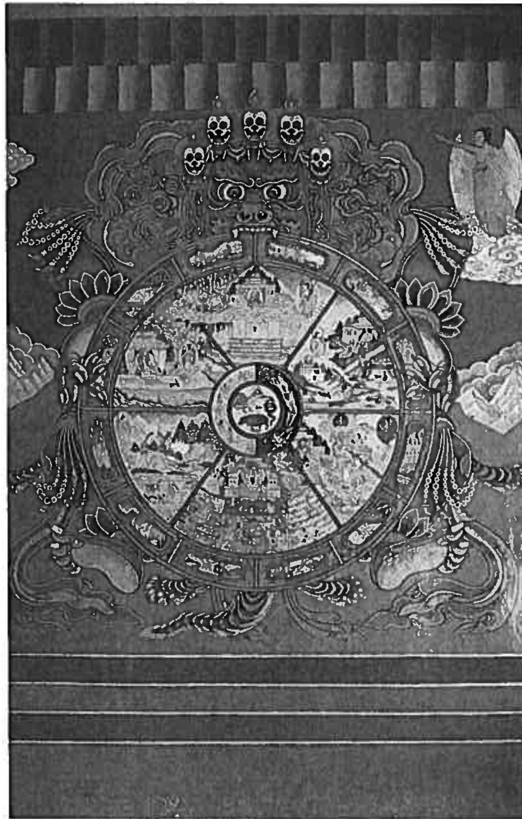
The Buddha taught that all reality has three characteristics: impermanence, no-self, and suffering (dukkha). His Hindu counterparts cautioned against identifying with or getting lost in a superficial sense of self (one's body and thoughts). But unlike his Hindu counterparts, who taught that there is a core, atman, underneath, he taught there is no atman at all. To believe an atman exists is part of the delusion one suffers from in this life.

The Buddha taught that the *conventional* self is made up of five impersonal aggregates (literally "bundles"): materiality, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. In a famous dialogue between the Buddhist monk Nagasena and King Melinda, Nagasena asks what a chariot is and the king tells him it is an arrangement of an axle, wheels, a carriage, and so on. Nagasena presses him to identify its essence, and the king replies that the chariot has no essence. This is the same as the self, Nagasena argues; the self has no essence but *self* is the conventional term used to describe the collection of the five aggregates.

One of the most important teachings of the Buddha regarding the self can be translated as "dependent coarising." This refers to all of these impersonal aggregates mutually conditioning each other. They all relate to and affect one another, and in a sense they collectively *cause* existence. Because of dependent coarising, we have a particularly difficult time seeing the impersonal aggregates for what they are. Many of the Buddha's meditations are designed to disentangle our mind so as to see how the aggregates work and that there is no self, and thus identifying with our experience is absurd.

Karma

Buddhist understanding of how the person is reborn and the quality of that rebirth has everything to do with karma. Karma both produces the condition that causes rebirth and sustains the human being. Ignorance causes karma and gives rise to craving and clinging. So karma is the energy for rebirth and aggregate formation, and it is perpetuated constantly throughout life by craving. All of this ties together in the mind.



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A *thangka* is a traditional painting on silk with embroidery, typically Tibetan. This *thangka* depicts the Wheel of Life, or realms of rebirth, with Yama, the god of death, presiding over judgment.

Ignorance of the three characteristics of all reality (impermanence, no-self, and suffering) conditions craving—it makes us want to identify with and cling to our experience. Ironically, the process of craving keeps the mind from seeing these central characteristics clearly.

Such ignorance causes and shapes a craving mind, and thus leads to even more volitions. By *volition* Buddhists mean an "intention involving craving." Someone who is enlightened surely intends things. But this intention is neither caused by nor cultivates an attachment or narcissistic clinging. In this sense, it is as though wisdom itself acts. There is no-self behind the action, and when one realizes this truth, karma ceases to be produced. Without karma there is no energy for rebirth, and attaining awakening, or Nirvana, is the way to stop karma production.

Self and Nirvana

This problem of the self raises a lot of questions. What is it that frees the self to see that there is no-self and so attain Nirvana, the ultimate refuge for the self? What happens to an enlightened person after death? Is there a super-secret self that can't be discussed or addressed? Would this survive for some existence after death (final-Nirvana)? Or is final-Nirvana simply extinction? The Buddhist would respond that its teachings only have an instrumental use: they are used only to lead to Nirvana. Additionally, Buddhists speak of two kinds of truth: conventional truth (*sammuti-sacca*) and ultimate truth (*paramattha-sacca*), Nirvana being ultimate. The Buddha was silent about Nirvana and what happens after death for those who have attained it. In one teaching, the Buddha used two similes regarding doctrine. The first involved holding a poisonous snake and the second holding on to a raft to get across the river. Taken together, they describe how a good Buddhist should deal with doctrine. Regarding the snake, you grasp it with great skill, firmly but not tightly. Regarding the raft, once you get to the other side (Nirvana), you let the raft go.

Nirvana references an ultimate truth and therefore cannot be conceptualized very well. It is known as *atakkavacara*, inaccessible to thought, and *avisayasmim*, beyond conceptual range. This holds true, even for the Buddha. That is, even the Buddha himself did not conceptually *understand* Nirvana.

In the end, Buddhists are somewhat dogmatic about what they believe in terms of conventional truth. They have confidence that the Eightfold Path leads to Nirvana. Speculating

beyond the teachings that lead to Nirvana distracts one from the path. Indeed, once Nirvana is attained such concerns seem silly.

Mahayana Shifts in Buddhism

Introducing the Great Vehicle

The Theravada school, which dominates in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, probably represents the tradition closest to early Buddhism. This school, however, was only one of perhaps eighteen during the time when the Pali canon was being devised by the Theravada tradition. Other schools of thought and practice represented a contrasting expression of Buddhism, which one can call collectively, Mahayana or "great vehicle." Mahayana texts claimed an ancient heritage as well and were put down in written form starting in the first century CE. While the Mahayana canon included many of the Theravadin teachings of the Buddha, it also incorporated additional famous teachings, such as the Perfect Wisdom, Diamond, Heart, Vimalakirti, and Lotus sutras. Mahayana also developed philosophical principles not found in Theravada. Arguably the most important of these is that everything is "empty" (*shunyata*) and everything has a characteristic of "suchness" or "thusness" (*tathata*); and these are related. To say that everything is empty—and this would include Nirvana—means that there is nothing separate and absolute. Rather, everything is intrinsically interconnected. This is also to say that everything carries profound truth and

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Theravada monks process during the Songkran (water) festival in Sukhothai, Thailand. Even here they carry their "begging bowl," as they depend on the generosity of the laity.

beauty, even Nirvana itself; this is what is meant by "suchness."

The Theravada school has a strong monastic tradition, which tends to emphasize individual liberation, or enlightenment. This can make Theravada Buddhism, especially its monastics, appear self-centered to outsiders. However, monks and lay people see themselves as mutually supportive: lay people give monks material support (*dana*) and monks offer lay people spiritual support (*dhamma dana*). Monks also note the Buddha's strong emphasis on monasticism, and that personal liberation has everything to do with living in the world free from greed and filled with compassion. For them, seeking enlightenment is exactly the opposite of being self-centered.

In contrast, the Mahayana tradition holds great confidence that the lay life can be extraordinarily profound and holy. According to Mahayana, buddha nature permeates the entire universe. One does not have to go off to a monastery to discover this. Rather, since it is right before us and indeed part of us, we can express the Buddha's teaching profoundly here and now. In fact, the lay life could even be better than monasticism.

Reconceptualizing Dependent Coarising

The differences between Theravada and Mahayana traditions are exemplified by how Mahayana changes the notion of dependent coarising. In the Theravada school this concept described how each person conditions his or her own rebirth. In the Mahayana tradition, the term rarely references this personal preoccupation at all. Rather, it almost always refers to the interconnectedness of everything in the universe. Mahayana believes that the universe is completely interpenetrating. While all Buddhists believe that there is no "I" or atman underneath the aggregates, Mahayana claims this primarily because there is no such thing as a discretely separate independent being.

Mahayana Buddhism believes that the universe is like an interpenetrating web of life. Everything is interconnected on some level. While this tradition recognizes that everyone has an individual center of consciousness, Mahayana thinkers caution that even one's own center is not isolated from the rest of reality. In Mahayana, compassion and wisdom involve moving beyond the notion of an isolated individual seeking Nirvana. By recognizing the delusion of a separate existence, one also sees that the suffering in the world is really one's own suffering and that the release from suffering in the world is necessary for one's own release. For example, one of the most inspiring practices in Tibetan practice is *tong-len*, a meditation that takes into one's own consciousness the energy of another's suffering in order to heal and purify it by one's own love and compassion. Paradoxically, this practice increases one's own happiness.

The Bodhisattva Vow

In the Theravada tradition a bodhisattva is a being on the cusp of enlightenment who temporarily renounces enlightenment and vows to train in the spiritual perfections (generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity) to the ultimate degree. This being waits to be reborn on earth for the time when, in becoming a buddha, he can lead the most people to enlightenment. This is extraordinary and only applies to those rare individuals throughout eternity who have or will become a buddha. In the Mahayana tradition, the idea of a bodhisattva (and bodhisattva vow) broadens and morphs, referring to anyone on the path who vows to forestall Nirvana until every being in the universe experiences Nirvana. A bodhisattva vow is the promise to take all of one's good

karma and apply that merit to the service of all beings and their enlightenment, and this virtually for eternity.

This stunning vow represents something beyond mere heroism. If one were to think about a Mahayana understanding of reality, one might ask: since everything is interrelated, could an individual even attain Nirvana alone? That is, in the absence of an absolute "I" completely distinguished from others, the "I" could not attain Nirvana until all do simultaneously. In one Mahayana text, the Buddha addresses this very point: "All these living creatures are my children to whom I will give equally the Great Vehicle, so that none will gain an individual Nirvana."[3] Mahayana Buddhists would say that the bodhisattva vow expresses proper intention for one's life: serving others by seeking to relieve their suffering and support their enlightenment.

Buddhist Practices

The Brahma Viharas

As mentioned above, meditation was central to the Buddha's teaching. Some particularly fruitful meditation strategies occupy a central place in Buddhist practice and spirituality. Among them are those called the Brahma Viharas (Divine Abidings), also known as the Four Sublime States or Unlimitables. These meditations are loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). Collectively, they represent an ideal way of relating to others, and one that reflects spiritual maturity. The Buddha promised that those who focus on these meditations will enjoy numerous benefits including a serene and happy life, a radiant face, and the protection of *devas* (godlike beings) and animals. In each of these four meditations, one takes on the particular quality—for example, loving-kindness—as a meditative subject and extends it progressively to all beings in the entire universe.

The four Brahma Viharas balance each other. Compassion balances sympathetic joy and keeps it from degenerating into sentimentality or fanciful optimism. Sympathetic joy keeps compassion from brooding over suffering. The boundless nature of loving-kindness extends conscious care to the whole universe. And equanimity provides balance for the above three. Without practicing equanimity, one can slip into some form of control or attachment around another. In terms of proper relationship with oneself and the world, probably nothing compares to the Brahma Viharas. When deeply ingrained in the psyche, they represent the Buddhist ethos perfectly.

Devotions and Holy Days

Because Buddhism is so diverse, Buddhist practices, rituals, and celebrations are likewise highly varied. In fact, the religious practices of many Buddhists in Southeast Asia might look rather confusing to Westerners. One could easily find a devout Buddhist in Sri Lanka offering devotion, or puja, to a Hindu god such as Shiva or Ganesh before heading to the local temple to light incense to a statue of the Buddha. Many Thai Buddhists have miniature temples on their roofs dedicated to guardian spirits, to whom they offer food and flowers daily. This may even be the case for Thai monks. They would not see themselves as blurring Buddhism with Hinduism or spirit religions. Rather, they take seriously the Hindu and Buddhist belief in a complex cosmology where spirits and gods are

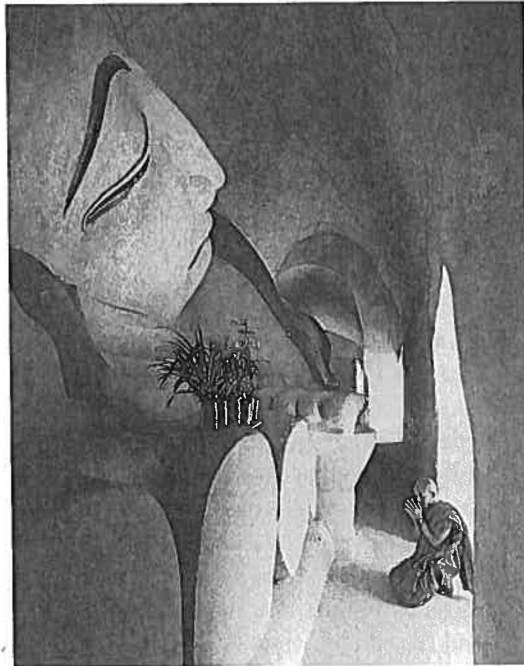
3. E.A. Burtt, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha: Early Discourses, the Dhammapada and Later Basic Writings* (New York: New American Library, 2000), 124.

active in the world, and where merit-making (good karma) is valuable, even if it will not directly lead one to Nirvana.

When Buddhists visit shrines, they are reminded of the qualities of the Buddha and venerate the Buddha as their guide and inspiration. They come with folded hands at the level of the chest, a symbol of reverence. Usually, they prostrate themselves before a statue or image of the Buddha. Venerators also light candles and offer incense, fruit, or flowers. All this, too, is merit-making, and deepens their devotion to the path.

Like most religions, Buddhism has a number of festival days. Buddhist New Year is an important holiday. In Theravadin countries it is celebrated for three days from the first full moon day in April. In Mahayana countries, such as China, Korea, and Vietnam, it is celebrated in late January or early February, according to the lunar calendar. Vesak or "Buddha Day" simultaneously celebrates his birth, enlightenment, and death. It is perhaps the holiest day for Buddhists. Asalha Puja Day marks Buddha's first teaching and is celebrated on the full moon day of the eighth lunar month. There are a number of similar commemorations broadly noted in the Buddhist calendar, as well as specific ones relevant to different countries or traditions, such as Kandy, Sri Lanka's Festival of the Tooth, where a relic of the Buddha's tooth, which is normally kept in a great temple, is paraded through the streets.

On festival days, lay people usually go to local monasteries or temples and offer food to the monks. The laity will renew their moral commitments and might even take on the stricter monastic moral code for the day. They will also distribute food to the poor, listen to dharma talks by monks, and walk around the temple or shrine three times to commemorate their three refuges: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (monastic community). Such a festival day typically concludes with chanting and meditation.



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A Burmese monk venerates the "reclining Buddha," an expression of the peace of enlightenment, at the Manuha pagoda in Pagan Myanmar.

Dialogue and the Future

In 1896, at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, Mahayana Buddhists introduced themselves to a large Western stage. This may have been the beginning of the modern Buddhist-Christian dialogue. While friendships were made and communication between participants continued throughout their lives, Buddhist-Christian dialogue lay fallow for decades. Then in the 1950s interest reemerged with monastics from both traditions writing and visiting each other, inspiring new possibilities for spiritual understanding. Along with this monastic experience, several books were published that highlighted

possible ways to appropriate the spirit of the other tradition, including D.T. Suzuki's *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* and Alan Watts's *The Way of Zen*. Some of Christianity's and Buddhism's most influential monastics have engaged in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, including Christians such as Thomas Merton, Wayne Teasdale, and David Steindl-Rast, and Buddhists such as the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Ajahn Buddhadasa.

In recent years institutional and structured forms of dialogue have taken place. Such examples include the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, which focuses on Buddhist-Christian engagement, the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, and the Journal of Buddhist-Christian Studies. Each helps Buddhists and Christians better understand both the religious other and their own tradition in light of the other's religious expression.

Some forms of Buddhist-Christian dialogue are less fruitful than others. The least helpful expression of dialogue between Christians and Buddhists focuses on differences and similarities in doctrine. How far can one go comparing and contrasting propositional claims, particularly when these traditions are so dissimilar, and their teachings are used in very different ways?

More fruitful discussions revolve around such questions as how does the belief in no-self *function* in the Buddhist religious tradition? That is, instead of focusing just on the teaching of the impermanent aggregates, how would looking at oneself in this manner allow for a kind of spiritual freedom unknown to the West? Could the Buddhist framing of religious practice associated with no-self provide insights for Christians in rethinking the nature of a soul or the nature of religious practice? Christians might also ask whether Mahayana dependent coarising can open up new ways of thinking about the mystical body of Christ or cosmic Christ. Some Buddhists have been surprised by how much Christians emphasize the passionate love of Jesus Christ and wonder if metta (loving-kindness) as traditionally framed is a bit too flat. They are discovering ways in which deeply passionate love can be spiritually profound, rather than problematic.

Even more fruitful dialogue has been influenced by interreligious practice, particularly Christians who have embraced Buddhist meditation practices. Because Buddhism has no deity, engaging many of its traditions is less compromising than, say, participating in Hindu rituals worshipping Krishna. In focusing on religious practices, one gets inside a religious sensibility in ways that mere conceptual dialogue alone cannot. Meditative practices that focus on Right Understanding, for example, helps one recognize that much of what one would identify as "I" or "mine" is really quite impersonal and impermanent after all.