# 8 Buddhist Traditions

*Roy C. Amore*



## Traditions at a Glance

### Numbers

Most estimates range between 200 and 300 million.

### Distribution

South, Southeast, and East Asia, plus minorities on all continents.

### Founder

Shakyamuni Buddha, who taught in northern India 2,500 years ago and is believed to be the most recent in a long line of major buddhas.

### Principal Historical Periods

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|---|---|
| 5th to 1st century BCE | Early Indian Buddhism; the roots of the Theravada tradition, which eventually spread to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia |
| 1st century CE | Mahayana emerges and later spreads to Southeast, Central, and East Asia |
| 5th century CE | Vajrayana emerges and begins spreading to the Himalayan region |

### Deities

The Buddha is not worshipped as a god: he is venerated as a fully enlightened human being. Regional variants of Buddhism have often incorporated local gods and spirits. Mahayana developed a theory of three bodies of the Buddha, linking the historic buddhas to a cosmic force.

### Authoritative Texts

Theravada has the *Tripitaka* ("Three Baskets"): *Vinaya* (monastic rules), *Sutras* (discourses), and *Abhidharma* (systematic treatises). Mahayana has many texts in various languages, including Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan. Vajrayana has the *Kanjur* (tantric texts) and *Tanjur* (commentaries).

### Noteworthy Teachings

The Three Characteristics of Existence are suffering, impermanence, and no-self. The Four Noble Truths are suffering, origin of suffering, cessation of suffering, and the Eightfold Path. Other notable teachings include karma, rebirth, and nirvana. In addition, the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools stress the emptiness (non-absoluteness) of all things. All schools emphasize non-violence and compassion for all living beings.

At the heart of Buddhism are the "Three Gems": the Buddha, the Dharma (teachings), and the Sangha (congregation). Buddhists express their faith in these elements by saying they "take refuge" in them. Many Buddhist ceremonies include a recitation of the "Three Refuges"-mantra.

## Overview

With his last words to his disciples—"Everything that arises also passes away, so strive for what has not arisen"—the Buddha passed into nirvana some 2,500 years ago. After experiencing enlightenment at the age of 35, he had spent the rest of his life teaching that all worldly phenomena are transient, caught up in a cycle of arising and passing away. He set the wheel of dharma (teaching) in motion, established a community (sangha) of disciples, and charged his followers to carry the dharma to all regions of the world. Today there are Buddhists in nearly every country, and Buddhism is the dominant religion in many parts of East, South, and Southeast Asia.

← Novice monks at Bagan, Myanmar (Burma) (Martin Puddy / Getty Images).

Buddhism has three main traditions or "vehicles," all of which originated in India. The earliest is Theravada (also known as Hinayana), which spread to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia; the second is Mahayana, which became the principal school in East Asia; and the third is Vajrayana, which developed out of Mahayana and became closely associated with the Himalayan region. All three traditions also have followers in most parts of the world.

# The First Gem: The Buddha

## Religious Life in Ancient India

By 500 BCE, a tradition that might be called "Ganges Spirituality" was flourishing in northern India. Located halfway between the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, the region had easy access to a trading route that stretched across the subcontinent. Trade enriched the merchant (vaishya) class and gave rise to a new money-based economy, while agriculture flourished on large estates owned by the two highest classes (brahmins and kshatriyas) and worked by commoners and low castes.

Beneath the prosperity, however, were both social and ideological tensions. The new money economy had created a large merchant class that had financial power but neither the land nor the social status of the traditional landowning classes, who looked down on the new urban rich. At the same time there was tension between the religion of the brahmins and the other religious traditions of the region. While the brahmins considered animal sacrifice essential, the ascetics—among them the Jaina master Mahavira—denounced it.

Another major difference between the brahmin and ascetic traditions had to do with the role of deities. The deities of the Brahmins would respond to devotees' requests for assistance in exchange for regular praise and ritual offerings. Some of the major deities were recognized by the ascetic traditions as well—especially the creator god Brahma and the storm god Indra. But they played quite a small role in the non-brahminic traditions. Minor gods might provide practical help from time to time, but the liberation that the ascetics sought could be achieved only through their own efforts. It was in this environment that Buddhism originated. Some Buddhist concepts were major innovations: the impermanence of the human self or soul, for instance, and social egalitarianism. But others—including the notions of karma and successive reincarnations, the ideal of ascetic withdrawal from the world, and the belief that numerous gods, demons, and spirits play active roles in human life—were common to all the Ganges traditions.

## The Bodhisattva Vow and Previous Lives

Buddhism, like Hinduism and Jainism, understands the cosmos in terms of an endless succession of universes arising and passing away. Our current universe was already in the declining phase of its life cycle when the Buddha of the present age, Siddhartha Gautama—better known as Shakyamuni, the "sage of the Shakya clan"—was born. In every era, when dharma (morality and truth) has declined, a highly developed being is born to become the buddha for that era. (In the same way, Hindu tradition maintains that the lord Krishna comes to save the Earth when dharma has declined.)

No almighty god is needed to send a new buddha: such a highly developed being knows when the time has come. Buddhists tell the story of Shakyamuni with the understanding that there were



# Timeline

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|---|---|
| c. 531 (or 589 or 413) BCE | Shakyamuni's enlightenment |
| c. 496 (or 544 or 368) | Shakyamuni's *parinirvana* or passing |
| c. 395 | First Buddhist council |
| c. 273 | Accession of King Ashoka |
| c. 225 | Mahendra takes Theravada Buddhism to Sri Lanka |
| c. 67 CE | Buddhism takes root in China |
| c. 100 | Emergence of Indian Mahayana |
| c. 200 | Nagarjuna, Madhyamika philosopher |
| c. 350 | Asanga and Vasubandhu, Yogacara philosophers |
| 372 | Buddhism introduced to Korea from China |
| c. 500 | Emergence of tantra in India |
| 604 | "Prince" Shotoku, Japanese regent and patron of Buddhism, issues Seventeen-Article Constitution |
| c. 750 | Padmasambhava takes Vajrayana Buddhism to Tibet |
| 806 | Shingon (tantric) Buddhism introduced to Japan |
| 845 | Persecution of Buddhism in China |
| 1173 | Birth of Shinran, Japanese Pure Land thinker (d. 1262) |
| 1222 | Birth of Nichiren, founder of the Japanese sect devoted to the *Lotus Sutra* (d. 1282) |
| 1603 | Tokugawa regime takes power in Japan; Buddhism is put under strict state control |
| c. 1617 | Dalai Lamas become rulers of Tibet |
| c. 1900 | Beginnings of Buddhist missionary activity in the West |
| 1956 | B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) converts to Buddhism, leading to the conversion of 380,000 other Dalits and re-establishing Buddhism in India |
| 1959 | China takes over Tibet; the Dalai Lama and many other Tibetans flee to India |
| 1963 | Thich Quang Duc immolates himself in protest against the persecution of Buddhists in South Vietnam |
| 2001 | Taliban forces destroy colossal Buddhist statues along ancient trade route in Afghanistan |
| 2008 | Tibetan protests against Han Chinese domination erupt into violence in the lead-up to the Beijing Summer Olympics. The Dalai Lama denounces the violence while sympathizing with the Tibetans' concerns. |
| 2011 | The Dalai Lama renounces his role as the temporal ruler of Tibet |

buddhas in previous eras and will be buddhas in subsequent ones. In addition, in every age there are numerous other beings who have achieved some degree of enlightenment. Among them are Arhats ("worthy ones" or "saints") and bodhisattvas (those who have dedicated themselves to achieving buddhahood).

All Buddhist traditions agree that Shakyamuni lived to the age of 80, but no one is certain when he lived. Some believe he was born in 566 BCE; others argue for 563. In Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, the standard birth date is 624 BCE, while Japanese scholars, relying on Chinese and Tibetan texts, have adopted a later date of 448 BCE.

Although Shakyamuni achieves enlightenment through his own efforts, he has nearly perfected his "mind of enlightenment" through hundreds of previous lives. Unlike the Hindu *avatara* or the Christian god incarnate, the Buddha is simply a human being who has fulfilled the spiritual potential of all living creatures. What is special about him is the power of his insight to free people from entrapment in suffering. This is what Buddhists have in mind when they say that they "take refuge" in the Buddha.

The story of the Buddha, as Buddhists tell it, begins in an earlier age. During the lifetime of one previous buddha, a young man comes on a crowd of people filling holes in the road in anticipation of that buddha's arrival. But the buddha comes before one hole is filled, and so the young man offers himself as a stepping-stone. Instead of stepping on him, the buddha announces that the young man will become a buddha himself in the distant future.

The young man takes the prophecy to heart and vows to work towards full enlightenment. To solemnly promise to work towards buddhahood is to take a "bodhisattva" vow. *Bodhi* means "enlightenment" and *sattva* means "being," as in "human being." After the young man in our story dies, his karma complex—the matrix of all his past actions—gives rise to a new being. In short, he is reborn, as are all living beings, and over many lives he gradually purifies his inner nature. Stories of more than 500 of those lives are preserved in a collection called *Jataka* ("birth stories").

The best known of the *Jataka* tales is the final one, which tells the story of the bodhisattva's last incarnation before he becomes the Buddha. Here he is reborn as a prince named Vessantara, who as a young boy vows to perfect the virtue of generosity: whenever he is asked for something, he will give it. The consequences of this promise are not serious as long as he is a child, but eventually his father retires and passes the throne to him.

No one complains when Vessantara gives food and clothing from the public treasury to the poor, for his generosity brings rains and prosperity to the kingdom. But when he gives the kingdom's lucky white elephant to citizens of a rival kingdom, the people demand that his father resume the throne. Vessantara is banished. Yet even in exile he continues to give away everything he is asked for, including his wife and children. Finally his father intervenes, Vessantara is reunited with his family, and we learn that the gods have been guiding events to test his resolve. Vessantara's strict adherence to his vow serves as a model for Buddhist self-discipline.

## Siddhartha's Birth and Childhood

After Vessantara dies, he is not reborn immediately. Rather, the new being generated by his karma complex waits until a new "wheel turner" is needed to set the wheel of dharma (the *dharmachakra*) in motion once again. Finally, when the world needs him, he chooses to be born into the ruling family of a small kingdom in what is now southern Nepal.

The story of the Buddha's birth and childhood varies somewhat among the Buddhist traditions. What follows is a very brief version, based on the early Pali-language account preserved in the



Theravada tradition. According to this account, the queen of the Shakya people, Mahamaya, is keeping a vow of sexual abstinence in observance of a festival. One afternoon she takes a nap and dreams that the four "world protectors" (minor gods) carry her to a pleasant grove of trees.

There a spiritual being in the form of a sacred white elephant (associated with good fortune) miraculously enters her body and becomes the embryo of the Buddha-to-be. After a pregnancy marked by supernatural signs, Mahamaya sets out for her home city, intending to give birth there. But along the way she stops to rest at a roadside park known as Lumbini, and the baby is born through her side as she holds on to a tree branch for support. In the Theravada tradition, the birth takes place on the full-moon day of the month called Vaishakha ("rains"), which usually falls in April or May of the Western calendar (East Asian Buddhists follow a different tradition). That night a bright light illuminates the world to mark the holy event.

The infant bodhisattva is named Siddhartha, "he who achieves success." But Buddhists rarely use that name, preferring titles related to his spiritual role, such as Shakyamuni or (Lord) Buddha.

During the naming ceremony, brahmin sages offer predictions based on his physical features. Later Buddhist texts report that they find 32 major bodily signs and more than 80 minor ones. His unusually long ear lobes are a sign of great spiritual wisdom; his golden complexion shows his inner tranquillity, and the wheel patterns on the soles of his feet point to his role as "wheel-turner." On the basis of these signs, the brahmins predict an extraordinary destiny: the young prince will become either a great emperor or a fully enlightened buddha.

His father orders that no evidence of life's inevitable suffering be allowed near the boy, lest it lead him to renounce the world and become a monk. Evidently the early Buddhists who told this story shared the view of those modern scholars who suggest that, in the absence of adversity, humans would have little reason to pursue the spiritual path.

There are only a few stories of the bodhisattva's childhood. In one of them his first teacher is amazed to find that he already knows the various alphabets. In another he wins a martial arts

# Focus

### Shakyamuni and Jesus of Nazareth: Life-Story Parallels

Although Shakyamuni and Jesus lived in very different times and places, there are several parallels in their life stories. Whether coincidental, the reflection of common narrative themes, or the result of historical influence, the parallels include the following:

- both infants are conceived without normal intercourse (Mahamaya is a married woman under a temporary vow of celibacy; Mary is a virgin)
- both infants are born in an unusual setting (Shakyamuni in a park, Jesus in a stable)
- the birth is announced by angels (to a meditating sage in the case of Shakyamuni, to shepherds in the case of Jesus)
- birth under a special star or constellation
- adoration by sages or wise men, who foresee spiritual greatness
- departure from home
- temptation by the Lord of Death (Mara, Satan)
- disciples who are sent out as missionaries
- miracle-working

tournament even though he has shown little interest in war. In the most significant story, he is sitting in the shade of a rose-apple tree watching his father perform a spring ground-breaking ritual when he enters a meditational trance, during which the shadow of the tree miraculously stands still even though the sun moves. The memory of this wakeful meditation state will play a role in his achievement of enlightenment.

## The Four Sights and the Great Departure

Despite all the king's precautions, Siddhartha learns the bitter truth about life around the time of his thirtieth birthday. By then he is happily married (the earliest sources do not refer to his wife by name, but later texts call her Yashodhara) and the father of a son. During a chariot ride through the royal park, the prince happens to see four sights that will alter the course of his life. The first three—a sick man, a suffering old man, and a dead man—awaken him to life's sorrows. When he asks what is wrong with these men, his chariot driver answers honestly, revealing to him for the first time the harsh realities of life.

The fourth and final sight is an ascetic whose aura of tranquil detachment from the world suggests that there is a way to overcome the suffering of life after all. To this day, Buddhist monks often say that what first attracted them to join the sangha was seeing, as children, the serenity of the older monks and nuns as they passed through the streets on their daily alms-seeking rounds.

On returning home, the bodhisattva ponders the four sights, and that night, with the help of the world protectors, he flees the palace.

He exchanges his princely clothes for those of a poor hunter, obtains an alms bowl, and begins a new life as one of the wandering students seeking spiritual truth along the banks of the Ganges. Determined to learn all eight levels of classical yoga, he soon masters the six levels known to his first guru. He then finds another guru who teaches him the seventh level, but even the deep tranquillity he experiences there is not enough to satisfy him.

Therefore, with five other students, he embarks on an independent program of rigorous ascetic discipline. After six years he is subsisting on nothing more than one palmful of water and one of food per day. He becomes so emaciated that he loses consciousness, but the world protectors preserve him.

## Enlightenment

Now convinced that even the most extreme asceticism cannot produce the enlightenment he seeks, the bodhisattva leaves the cave where he has been living and goes to a pleasant town now called Bodh Gaya. There he resumes eating and drinking, but he still needs a method. Then he remembers the wakeful meditational trance he experienced spontaneously as a child:

> I thought of a time when my Sakyan father was working and I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree: quite secluded from sensual desires, secluded from unprofitable things I had entered upon and abided in the first meditation, which is accompanied by thinking and exploring with happiness and pleasure born of seclusion. I thought: Might that be the way to enlightenment? Then, following up that memory there came the recognition that this was the way to enlightenment (*Majjhima Nikaya*; Nanamoli 1972: 21).



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## From the *Dhammapada*

*Many sutras include one or more verses that sum up the teaching. These "memory verses" were eventually collected as a separate work called the* Dhammapada, *"fundamentals of Dharma." The verses from Chapter One concern the pure mind.*

1. The mind is the source of all mental actions [dharmas],
   mind is the chief of the mental actions, and they are made by the mind.
   If, by an impure mind, one speaks or acts, then suffering follows the mind as a cartwheel follows the footprint of the ox.
2. The mind is the source of all mental states, mind is their leader, and they are made by the mind.
   If, by a pure mind, one speaks or acts, then happiness follows the mind like a shadow.
3. "I was abused." "I was beaten." "I was hurt." "I was robbed."
   Those who dwell excessively on such thoughts never get out of their hating state of mind.
4. "I was abused." "I was beaten." "I was hurt." "I was robbed."
   Those who leave such thoughts behind get out of their hating state of mind.
5. In this world hatreds are never ended by more hating.
   Hatreds are only ended by loving kindness.
   This is an eternal truth [dharma].
6. Some people do not know that we must restrain ourselves.
   But others know this and settle their quarrels.
7. One who dwells on personal gratifications, overindulges the senses, overeats, is indolent and lazy, that person is overthrown by Mara [Death] like an old, weak tree in a windstorm.
8. One who dwells in meditation on the bodily impurities, keeps the senses under control, eats moderately, has faith and disciplined energy, that person stands against Mara like a rocky mountain.
9. Whoever puts on the ochre robe but lacks purity, self-control, and truthfulness,
   that person is not worthy of the robe.
10. Whoever puts on the ochre robe and is pure, self-controlled, and truthful,
    that person is truly worthy of the robe.
11. Mistaking the unessential for the important, and mistaking the essential for the unimportant,
    some persons, dwelling in wrong-mindedness, never realize that which is really essential.
12. Knowing the essential to be important, and knowing the unessential to be unimportant,
    other persons, dwelling in right-mindedness, reach that which is really essential.

Choosing a pleasant spot beside a cool river, under a *pipal* tree (a large fig tree considered sacred in India at least as far back as the Harappa civilization, known thereafter to Buddhists as the Bodhi tree), he sits to meditate and vows that he will not get up until he has achieved nirvana.

In some versions of the story, it is at this point, just before dusk on the full-moon day in the month of Vaishakha, that Mara, the lord of death, arrives. Mara's main function is to come for people at death and oversee their rebirth in an appropriate place. But he wants to exercise power over events in this world as well. Determined to thwart the bodhisattva's attempt to achieve enlightenment, Mara summons his daughters—whose names suggest greed, boredom, and desire—to tempt him. When that fails, Mara offers him any worldly wish, if only he will return home and live a life of good karma (merit) as a householder. The bodhisattva refuses.

Now Mara becomes violent. He sends in his sons—whose names suggest fear and anger—to assault the bodhisattva. But the bodhisattva's spiritual power surrounds and protects him like a force field.

Having failed in his efforts to tempt and threaten the bodhisattva, Mara challenges him to a debate. Mara himself claims to be the one worthy to sit on the Bodhi Seat—the place of enlightenment—on this auspicious night, and he accuses the bodhisattva of being unworthy. But the bodhisattva has the merit of the generosity, courage, and wisdom he has perfected through countless previous lives, and he calls on the Earth herself to stand witness on his behalf. The resulting earthquake drives Mara away. Buddhists today may understand this story as symbolizing the surfacing of the last remnants of the mind's deep impurities, which the bodhisattva must overcome before he can attain liberation.

Now the bodhisattva begins to meditate in his own way—the reverse of the way taught by the yoga masters. A yogi seeks to move ever deeper into unconsciousness, drawing in the conscious mind as a turtle draws in its head and limbs, shutting out the world. The bodhisattva, by contrast, meditates to become more conscious, more aware, more mindful.

First he remembers his own past lives; the ability to do this is one of the psychic powers that come with spiritual advancement, but it should not be a goal in itself. Then he acquires deeper insight into the working of karma, understanding how the past lives of various people have been reflected in later incarnations. Finally he contemplates how to put an end to suffering, and arrives at what will come to be known as the Four Noble Truths.

Just before dawn, the bodhisattva enters the state of total insight into the nature of reality. After hundreds of lives, he has fulfilled his bodhisattva vow. He is no longer a being striving for

Young Tibetan monks pay their respects to the Buddha by circumambulating the Bodh Gaya Bodhi tree (© Gianni Muratore / Alamy).



enlightenment; now he is a buddha, a "fully enlightened one": "I had direct knowledge. Birth is exhausted, the Holy Life has been lived out, what was to be done is done, there is no more of this to come" (*Majjhima Nikaya*; Nanamoli 1972: 25).

Having completed his journey to enlightenment, he has earned the title Tathagata ("thus-gone one"), and it is by this title that he will most often refer to himself. Another term for the state he has reached is "nirvana" ("*nibbana*" in Pali). This state has two aspects, negative and positive. In its negative aspect nirvana has the sense of "putting out the fires" of greed, hatred, and delusion. In its positive aspect nirvana is the experience of transcendent happiness. A poem by Patacara—one of the first ordained Buddhist women—expresses the way the two meanings come together in the perfect happiness that arrives when evil desires have been extinguished. In the first verse she expresses her longing for nirvana and her frustration at not attaining it; in the second she recalls how the breakthrough finally came as she was turning down the wick on her oil lamp:

> With ploughshares ploughing up the fields, with seed
> Sown in the breast of earth, men win their crops,
> Enjoy their gains and nourish wife and child.
> Why cannot I, whose life is pure, who seek
> To do the Master's will, no sluggard am,
> Nor puffed up, win Nibbana's bliss?
>
> One day, bathing my feet, I sit and watch
> The water as it trickles down the slope.
> Thereby I set my heart in steadfastness,
> As one doth train a horse of noble breed.
> Then going to my cell, I take my lamp,
> And seated on my couch I watch the flame.
> Grasping the pin, I pull the wick right down
> Into the oil . . .
> Lo! the Nibbana of the little lamp!
> Emancipation dawns! My heart is free!
> (*Songs of Sisters*, Rhys Davids 1964: 73)

Reflecting on his experience, the new Buddha believes that the way to enlightenment can be taught, and so begins a teaching career motivated by compassion for all living beings.

## Setting the Wheel in Motion

Shakyamuni's first impulse is to seek out and teach his two former yoga teachers, but his heightened psychic powers tell him that both have died. Thus he decides to begin with his five former companions. Perceiving that they can be found at a deer park called Sarnath near Varanasi, he sets out and on the way encounters two merchants who show their respect by offering him food.

In a sense, this act marks the beginning of institutional Buddhism, which depends on the material support (food, medicine, robes, financial donations) given by laypeople in return for the spiritual gifts offered by ordained Buddhists (dharma teaching, chanting, guidance). This pattern

of reciprocal giving remains central to all forms of Buddhism. On arriving at the deer park, the Buddha is at first shunned by his friends because he has abandoned their rigorous discipline, but when they see his aura they recognize that he has attained nirvana and ask to know how he did it. He responds with his first *sutra*, often referred to as the "Wheel Turning" discourse because it marks the moment when the wheel of true dharma is once again set in motion.

Another name for it is the "Instruction on the Middle Path." As long as he lived the life of a pampered prince, he did not advance spiritually. Yet the years of ascetic discipline left him too weak to make any real progress. Only after he began to eat, drink, and sleep in moderation was he able to reach enlightenment. In time, this principle of moderation would be developed into a general ethic of the Middle Way. Now the Buddha begins to explain the insight into suffering that he has gained. After a few days of instruction in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path for overcoming suffering, the Buddha ordains the five as his first disciples and sends them out to teach the dharma to others.

Shakyamuni and his five fellow ascetics in the deer park at Sarnath, the site of his first sermon; from a series of illustrations of the life of Buddha on a temple wall (Roy C. Amore).



## Entering Parinirvana

For the next 45 years the Buddha travels, ordaining disciples and teaching thousands of lay followers, including various local kings. He also ordains several members of his own family.

His body is weakening as he nears 80, but he continues to travel until one day, as he and his disciples are dining with the leader of a local tribal group, an odd-smelling dish is brought to the table. He asks his host to serve it only to him, not to his disciples, and on eating it he falls ill. The Compassionate One tells his disciples not to blame the host, who meant well. They ask whom they should follow if he dies, and he tells them to follow the dharma; thus in Buddhism no individual has absolute authority. Finally, in a grove of trees at Kushinagar, at the moment of death, the Buddha experiences *parinirvana*: the final end of the cycle of rebirth, the total cessation of suffering, the perfection of happiness.

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## A Woman's Compassionate Wisdom

*Compassion is a major value in Buddhism. In this story, a woman's compassion for her sick husband not only comforts him but brings him back to health.*

Once, while the Lord [Buddha] was staying among the Bhaggis on the Crocodile Hill . . . , the good man Nakulapita lay sick, ailing and grievously ill. And his wife Nakulamata said to him: "I beg you, good man, do not die worried, for the Lord has said that the fate of the worried is not good. Maybe you think: 'Alas, when I am gone, my wife will be unable to support the children or keep the household together.' But do not think like that, for I am skilled in spinning cotton and carding wool, and I will manage to support the children and keep the household together after you are gone.

"Or maybe you think: 'My wife will take another husband after I am gone.' But do not think that, for you and I know that for sixteen years we have lived as householders in the holy life [that is, as celibates, practising strict sexual abstinence].

"Or maybe you think: 'My wife, after I am gone, will have no desire to see the Lord or to see the monks.' But do not think like that, for my desire to see them shall be even greater.

"Or maybe you think: 'After I am gone, my wife will not have a calm mind.' But do not think like that, for as long as the Lord has female disciples dressed in white, living at home, who gain that state, I shall be one. And if any doubt it, let them ask the Lord.

"Or maybe you think: 'My wife will not win a firm foundation, a firm foot-hold in this Dhamma and discipline. She will not win comfort, dissolve doubt, be free from uncertainty, become confident, self-reliant, and live by the Teacher's words.' But do not think like that, either. For as long as the Lord has female disciples dressed in white . . . I shall be one."

Now, while Nakulapita was being counselled thus by his wife, even as he lay there his sickness subsided and he recovered. And not long after, he got up, and leaning on a stick, Nakulapita went to visit the Lord and told him what had happened. And the Lord said: "It has been a gain; you have greatly gained from having Nakulamata as your counsellor and teacher, full of compassion for you, and desiring your welfare" (adapted from Dhammika 1989: 111–13).

# The Second Gem: The Dharma

Avoid doing all evil deeds,
cultivate doing good deeds,
and purify the mind—
this is the teaching of all buddhas.

(*Dhammapada* 183)

The crystallization of the Buddhist tradition began with the transformation of the Buddha's discourses into a set of doctrinal teachings—the dharma—and the movement towards an institutionalized monastic system. "Dharma" (*dhamma* in Pali) is a central concept in Buddhist thought, and the range of its meanings extends well beyond the meaning of "dharma" in the Hindu context.

In classical Indian culture generally, "dharma" carries the sense of social and moral obligation, but Buddhist usage reflects its root meaning: "that which holds." Thus in English we could understand "dharma" to mean eternal truth, which for Buddhists includes the laws of nature, the reality of spiritual forces such as karma, and the rules of moral duty. Believing the Buddha's understanding of those realities to be definitive, generations of thinkers studied and systematized his insights, creating a program of instruction that anyone seeking enlightenment could follow.

## The Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path

At the core of the Buddha's first sermon in the deer park were the Four Noble Truths about suffering and the Eightfold Path to overcoming it. The Truths are:

1. The Noble Truth of Suffering: No living being can escape suffering (*dukkha*). Birth, sickness, senility, and death are all occasions of suffering, whether physical or psychological.
2. The Noble Truth of Origin: Suffering arises from excessive desire.
3. The Noble Truth of Cessation: Suffering will cease when desire ceases.
4. The Noble Truth of the Eightfold Path: It is possible to put an end to desire, and hence to suffering, by following eight principles of self-improvement.

The eight principles that make up the Eightfold Path are not sequential, like the steps on a ladder. All are equally important, and each depends on all the rest. Thus none of them can be properly observed in isolation. They must work in concord, like the petals of a flower unfolding together. They are:

1. right understanding (specifically of the Four Noble Truths),
2. right thought (free of sensuous desire, ill-will, and cruelty),
3. right speech,
4. right conduct,
5. right livelihood,
6. right effort,
7. right mindfulness, and
8. right meditation.



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## From the *Itivuttaka*

*The* Itivuttaka *("So I heard") is a collection of the Buddha's teachings said to have been made by Khujjuttara, a woman of the servant class who was held up by the Buddha himself as an exemplary lay disciple. She used the teachings she had heard to teach other women; hence the phrase "So I heard" ("Itivuttaka"), which begins each section of the collection and became its title.*

Even if one should seize the hem of my robe and walk step by step behind me, if he is covetous in his desires, fierce in his longings, malevolent of heart, with corrupt mind, careless and unrestrained, noisy and distracted and with sense uncontrolled, he is far from me. And why? He does not see the Dhamma, and not seeing the Dhamma, he does not see me. Even if one lives a hundred miles away, if he is not covetous in his desires, not fierce in his longings, with a kind heart and pure mind, mindful, composed, calmed, one-pointed and with senses restrained, then indeed, he is near to me and I am near to him. And why? He sees the Dhamma, and seeing the Dhamma, sees me (Dhammika 1989: 49–50).

## The Three Characteristics of Existence

Existence has three characteristics, according to the Buddhist dharma: suffering, impermanence, and no-self. "Suffering" refers to all the varieties of pain and deprivation, physical and psychological, that humans are subject to; and "impermanence" is the passing nature of all things; and "no-self" (*anatman* in Sanskrit) refers to the psychological implications of that existential impermanence. *Anatman* means "without Atman": but what is Atman? The Hindu understanding is reflected in the *Upanishads*, where Atman represents the eternal self or soul and is related to Brahman, the underlying energy of the universe. For many Hindus, the innermost self is the most stable and abidingly real feature of the individual, because it participates in the reality of the universe.

The Buddha proposed that no such eternal, unchanging self exists. And in denying the existence of a self, he made the concept of ownership radically unsustainable for his followers: if there is no "I," there can be no "mine." The *anatman* concept does not mean that there is "no person" or "no personality" in the ordinary English sense of those terms. In fact, Buddhist teachings address the components of personality, the *skandhas*, in some detail, suggesting that personality is the product of shifting, arbitrary circumstance. In that respect, Buddhist notions of personality have more in common with modern psychological theory than they do with the religious notion of an eternal soul. Buddhist personality theory implies that wise people, recognizing the impermanence of all things—including themselves—will not become emotionally attached to fixed images of themselves.

## Dependent Origination

The principle of causality is a thread that runs throughout the Buddha's dharma. To appreciate its function, think of a pool table where the balls are colliding with one another and the cushions, repeatedly causing one another to change directions: each time you blink, you see a new configuration caused by the previous configuration.

The standard term for this understanding of causality—in which everything that arises does so in response to other factors, and will in turn cause changes in other things—is "dependent origination" or "conditioned coproduction." Buddhist dharma uses the image of a 12-spoked "wheel of becoming" (not to be confused with the eight-spoked Dharma Chakra, the wheel that symbolizes the Eightfold Path) to express the view of life as a cycle of interdependent stages or dimensions.

The 12 links of the chain may be further divided into three stages, reflecting the movement from a past life through the present one and on to the future:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Past | 1. | Ignorance, leading to |
| | 2. | karma formations, leading to |
| Present | 3. | a new individual "consciousness," leading to |
| | 4. | a new body-mind complex, leading to |
| | 5. | the bases of sensing, leading to |
| | 6. | sense impressions, leading to |
| | 7. | conscious feelings, leading to |
| | 8. | craving, leading to |
| | 9. | clinging to (grasping for) things, leading to |
| | 10. | "becoming" (the drive to be reborn), leading to |
| Future | 11. | rebirth, leading to |
| | 12. | old age and death |

The process does not stop with the twelfth link, of course, since old age and death lead to rebirth, and so the wheel of life turns on and on. Buddhists have analyzed this wheel from many viewpoints and with many similes, but the message is always the same: all living beings are in process and will be reborn over and over again until they realize nirvana.

## The *Tripitaka*: Three Baskets of Sacred Texts

Shakyamuni did not write down his teachings, nor did anyone record them. This was in keeping with the Hindu tradition that associated writing with commerce. The sacred teachings of the Hindus were the preserve of the priests, who committed them to memory and transmitted them by sound alone. In fact, the Hindu ritual formulas were understood to have an acoustic effectiveness that would be lost if they were not spoken and heard. Thus for the first four centuries or so, the Buddha's teachings were recited from memory. Different *bhikshus* (monks) memorized different portions, and at the early conferences of sangha members, one of the most important tasks was to recite the teachings in their entirety.

At the first council, held long after Shakyamuni's death, *Bhikshu* Ananda is said to have recited the discourses (*sutras*) on dharma ascribed to Shakyamuni. *Bhikshu* Upali is credited with reciting the section on monastic rules (*vinaya*). The systematic treatises (*abhidharma*) composed after Shakyamuni's *parinirvana* were recited at a later meeting. The oral teachings were finally put into writing by the Theravada monks of Sri Lanka in the first century CE, after a famine had so reduced the monks' numbers as to threaten the survival of the oral tradition. The fact that Theravada Buddhists refer to their scriptures as the *Tripitaka* ("three baskets") suggests that the manuscripts of the three types of texts—written on palm leaves strung together and bundled like Venetian blinds—may have been stored in three baskets. The collection survives in the Pali language and is therefore referred to as the Pali canon.

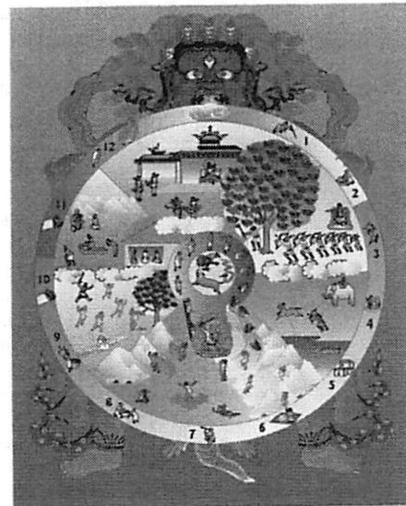


The *Sutra Pitaka*, or "discourse basket," contains the talks on dharma attributed to Shakyamuni or his early disciples. Many *sutras* are presented as responses to questions from disciples. The opening of the "Discourse on the Lesser Analysis of Deeds" is typical:

> Thus have I heard: At one time . . . the brahmin youth Subha, Todeyya's son, spoke thus to the Lord: "Now, good Gotama, what is the cause, what the reason that lowness and excellence are to be seen among human beings while they are in human form?" (Horner 1967, 3: 248–9)

Subha has asked the timeless question of why bad things happen to apparently good people. Shakyamuni then explains to Subha how the karma accumulated through actions in past lives causes some people to suffer short, unhappy lives and others to enjoy long, blessed lives.

There are five sections (*nikayas*) of the *Sutra Pitaka*, the first "basket." In the ancient world, texts were usually organized not chronologically or alphabetically but by length, from longest to shortest. (The same principle was followed by the early Muslims in organizing the sequence of the *surahs* that make up the Qur'an.) The second basket, the *Vinaya* ("discipline") *Pitaka*, contains both the rules of monastic discipline and stories about how Shakyamuni came to institute each rule. Finally, the *Abhidharma* ("further discourses") *Pitaka* contains seven books by unnamed early Buddhists who systematically analyzed every conceivable aspect of reality in the light of Buddhist principles. For example, the first book of *abhidharma* classifies all mental phenomena according to their karmic consequences, good, bad, or neutral. Other books deal with the various physical elements of nature.



The Wheel of Becoming (Bhava-Chakra) represents the 12 stages of dependent origination. At the centre are three animals representing the three evil root tendencies of human consciousness: greed represented by a rooster with endless desire for more hens; hate represented by a snake spitting venom; and delusion represented by a boar (perhaps because boars were thought to have poor eyesight or bad judgment). The surrounding 12 pictures illustrate the spokes of the wheel of becoming (see list). The wheel is held in the teeth of the demon of death, whose head, hands, and feet are visible behind the wheel.

# The Third Gem: The Sangha

The third part of the Triple Gem has two components: the monastic community of ordained men (*bhikshus*) and women (*bhikshunis*), and the broader community, the universal sangha of all those who follow the Buddha's path.

## Bhikshus and Bhikshunis

Shakyamuni began accepting disciples in the deer park at Varanasi. Soon an ordination ritual took shape in which the new disciples recited the Triple Refuge, took vows of chastity, poverty, and

obedience, and put on the distinctive robes of a monk. In early Indian Buddhism, monks' robes were usually dyed with saffron, which produces a bright orange-yellow. Most Theravada monks still wear saffron robes, but in East Asia other colours were eventually adopted, such as red and brown. There is no special meaning to the colour, although all members of a particular branch of Buddhism wear the same one.

## Ordained and Lay Women

Unlike many other religious traditions, Buddhism never defined women as the "property" of men. Nevertheless, the early texts indicate a profound ambiguity about the status of women in Buddhism, and Shakyamuni is said to have resisted the formation of an order for women on the grounds that it would be detrimental to the survival of his teachings. On the other hand, he did permit it, and he encouraged close relatives to join it, maintaining that women were no less capable than men of becoming Arhats (saints), and that the way to nirvana was the same regardless of gender:

> And be it woman, be it man for whom
> Such chariot doth wait, by that same car
> Into Nirvana's presence shall they come (Horner 1930: 104).

Other early Buddhist texts are similarly ambiguous about women. On the positive side, they describe approvingly the support provided to the early sangha by some wealthy women, and one book of the Pali canon, the Therigatha, contains poems by early *bhikshunis*. On the negative side, there was a distinct difference in status between *bhikshus* and *bhikshunis*, who were not allowed to teach their male counterparts.

## Ordination

Eventually a preliminary level of ordination was introduced during which novices were required to master the basics of dharma. Each novice was assigned both a rigorous, demanding teacher and a supportive spiritual guide.

The full ordination ritual takes several hours. Friends and relatives pay their respects to the new sangha members, who give presents to their teachers and counsellors in gratitude for their assistance. Because seniority plays a large role in monastic life, careful attention is paid to the exact time and date of every ordination.

## The Lay Sangha

Lay Buddhists are considered members of the sangha in its wider sense. The sangha of all disciples includes eight categories of "noble persons," according to the progress they have made towards nirvana. There are four levels: "those who have entered the stream (to nirvana)," those who have advanced enough to return (be reborn) just once more, those who are so advanced that they will never return, and those who have advanced to the state of realizing the Arhat (worthy) path. At each level, those who have just reached the new level are distinguished from those who have matured at that level, making a total of eight classifications.



## Controversies, Councils, and Sects

A Theravada *bhikshu* with a palm-leaf umbrella (Roy C. Amore).

Because there was no central authority, the monks had to settle disputes collectively on the basis of their interpretations of the Buddha's discourses—a challenging task in the era before the scriptures were written down. In the fourth century BCE, for instance, a *bhikshu* visiting the city of Vaishali found that his colleagues there were accepting donations of gold and silver. He criticized them publicly, and they demanded that he apologize in front of their lay supporters. As a consequence, a meeting of all the *bhikshus* in the area had to be convened.

The meeting, called the Vaishali Council, decided that monastic discipline did indeed forbid the acceptance of gold and silver. Most of the Vaishali *bhikshus* agreed to abide by the ruling, but a schism developed when one dissident monk raised five points of controversy concerning the status of Arhats. Was an Arhat subject to the same limitations as an ordinary *bhikshu*? Was an Arhat susceptible to sexual misconduct? Was it possible for an Arhat to have doubts about doctrine? Could one become an Arhat merely by instruction, without spiritual practice?

Behind those questions lay an issue that was to fuel serious divisions later on: the level of spiritual attainment possible for Buddhists in this life. Most of the monks held out the prospect of enlightenment for ordinary people, but some of the *sthavira* ("elders") argued that the Arhat level was beyond the reach of all but a few. In this way a division arose between the majority group, who formed the Mahasanghika or "Great Sangha" sect, and the Sthavira group, who formed the Sthaviravada or Theravada sect. This debate foreshadowed the split that would lead to the development of the Mahayana and Theravada schools as distinctly different "vehicles." By the third century BCE there were 18 sects, each with its own oral version of the teachings, although all shared a similar ordination tradition and all followed more or less the same *vinaya* rules. Monks of different sects sometimes lived together in one monastery, especially at the major training centres, and the same was true of the *bhikshunis*, who always lived in their own monasteries, separate from the men.

## King Ashoka's Conversion

The spread of Buddhism within India was remarkable. Unlike many reformers, Shakyamuni gained converts across the social spectrum, from the lowest labourers to powerful kings. Among the latter was Ashoka (r. c. 273–232 BCE), who had waged a series of wars to expand his territory and eventually ruled an empire that included most of modern India. Buddhist accounts claim that it was the horrible carnage of his bloody war with the kingdom of Kalinga on the eastern coast that led Ashoka to convert to Buddhism and begin promoting the ethic of non-violence.

Under Ashoka's patronage Buddhism enjoyed its golden age in India. To spread the dharma of non-violence, he ordered that large stones or pillars be erected at the main crossroads throughout his empire, with messages carved on them for the moral instruction of his subjects. Some of these messages are still readable.

A message in the Kalinga region expresses Ashoka's remorse for the death and suffering he caused to its people:

> When the king, Beloved of the Gods and of Gracious Mien, had been consecrated eight years Kalinga was conquered, 150,000 people were deported, 100,000 were killed, and many times that number died. But after the conquest of Kalinga, the Beloved of the Gods began to follow Righteousness (dharma), to love Righteousness, and to give instruction in Righteousness. Now the Beloved of the Gods regrets the conquest of Kalinga, for when an independent country is conquered people are killed, they die, or are deported, and that the Beloved of the Gods finds painful and grievous. . . . (*Thirteenth Rock Edict*; de Bary 1958: 146).

Ashoka then lays out his ideals for governance, saying that he desires security, self-control, impartiality, and cheerfulness for all living creatures in his empire. He spells out his "conquest by dharma" and claims that it is spreading not only within the Indian continent but to the west, to lands whose kings he names.

Although he reminds his subjects that he will not hesitate to deal firmly with rebels and criminals, he promises that his punishments will be just and moderate. Ashoka's promotion of dharma became a model for later Buddhist rulers, who were willing to sentence criminals (and rebels) to punishment or even death, but remained committed to non-violence in other matters.

## Buddhism and the State

### *The King as Wheel-Turner*

Indian tradition had long used the term *chakravartin* or "wheel-turner" to refer to kings as world rulers. On one level, the image suggests a ruler whose chariot wheels encounter no opposition. On another, it evokes the wisdom of the ruler who has both the spiritual wisdom to perceive the cosmic order and the political power to impose a similar order in the world.

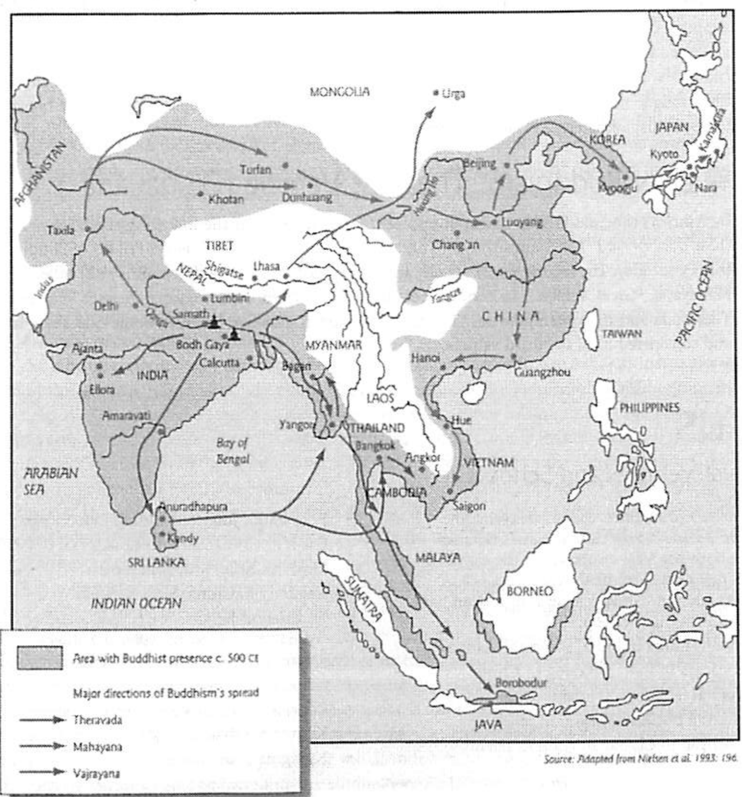
When the early Buddhists began to refer to Shakyamuni as a *chakravartin*, they were at once according him the honour due to one of his princely birth and redefining the concept of political power, shifting the emphasis away from unchallenged military strength and towards wisdom in the guidance of society.

From the time of Shakyamuni, Buddhism expected rulers not only to provide for the physical welfare of their subjects (for example, by distributing food in times of need) but to promote dharma by setting a good example and sponsoring lectures, translations, and the distribution of literature. The king who promoted dharma would be a true successor to the Buddha, the definitive wheel-turner.

As Buddhism spread throughout Asia, so did its social and moral ideals regarding kingship. A Zen Buddhist story tells of a Chinese king named Wu who has dedicated himself to doing all the good works expected of a Buddhist king, probably with the goal of winning a long and pleasant rebirth in heaven. When Wu learns that a monk named Bodhidharma has arrived from India, he summons the monk to court and proudly shows him the rice kitchens he has established for feeding the poor, the new wing of the palace filled with scribes who are busy translating and copying the sacred texts, and the altar he has set up for daily worship.

After the tour, the emperor asks Bodhidharma how much merit he has made. "None whatsoever!" is the famous response. Bodhidharma explains that true merit comes only from activities that increase one's wisdom and purify one's mind. It seems that the emperor has been doing all the right things for the wrong reason. What this story tells us is that although the rulers were encouraged to support the sangha and promote dharma in their realms, the ultimate goal was the ruler's own spiritual advancement. This helps to explain why Buddhist kings sometimes abdicated to take ordination as *bhikshus*.

## **Map 8.1** The Spread of Buddhism




Source: Adapted from Nielsen et al. 1993: 196.

### *Non-violence as a Public Ethic*

One characteristic of Buddhist political rule, at least ideally, was promotion of non-violence. Unnecessarily harsh punishment was forbidden, and kings were expected to release prisoners during Buddhist festivals. (Even today, some Buddhist festivals include the release of caged birds or other animals into the wild.) Justice was to be administered fairly, regardless of the social status of the accused, and quickly. One king of ancient Sri Lanka is remembered for having a rope attached to a bell installed outside the palace walls so that anyone seeking justice could pull it to summon the king, even in the middle of the night.

At the same time, the Buddhist king was expected to maintain an army and a police force, to defend the people. There is no such thing in Buddhist scripture as a "just war" of aggression, but many Buddhists have believed that a defensive war is not against dharma, and that the state may use force to maintain law and order.

With very few exceptions, Buddhism spread by missionary conversion rather than by force. The adoption of Buddhism in new regions was helped by the dedicated, spiritual lifestyle of the monks and nuns and the fact that Buddhist missionaries allowed new converts to continue venerating their traditional deities as well as the spirits of their ancestors. There were territorial wars between Buddhist kingdoms in Southeast Asia, however, and Sri Lanka has a long history of conflict between the Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils.

## Early Buddhism: The First Vehicle ("Hinayana")

By Ashoka's time, Buddhism had split into 18 distinct sects. Over the following centuries most of these disappeared. The main survivor, Theravada, is one of the three major divisions of Buddhism that exist today. The second major school, which emerged around the first century CE, called itself Mahayana, "Great Vehicle," in contrast to what it considered the Hinayana, "Lesser Vehicle," of Theravada and its contemporaries. The third division, Vajrayana, emerged some 500 years later and considered itself the third vehicle.

## Focus

### Buddhist Vehicles and Schools

1. Theravada (sometimes called Hinayana, the "Little Vehicle"), now dominant in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia; a survivor of the eighteen sects that existed in the third century BCE
2. Mahayana (the "Great Vehicle"), now dominant in East Asia and Vietnam:
   - Madhyamika in India, Sanlun in China
   - Yogacara in India, Faxiang in China
   - Tiantai in China, Tendai in Japan
   - Huayan in China, Kegon in Japan
   - Zhenyan in China, Shingon in Japan
   - Pure Land, Jingtu in China, Jodo in Japan
   - Chan in China, Seon in Korea, Zen in Japan
   - Linji in China, Rinzai in Japan
   - Caodong in China, Soto in Japan
   - Nichiren in Japan
3. Vajrayana (the "Diamond Vehicle"), now dominant in Tibet and the Himalayas:
   - Gelugpa ("Yellow Hats")
   - Kargyu ("Red Hats")
   - Karma-pa ("Black Hats")
   - Nyingma ("Ancient" school)



## Theravada Buddhism

We know very little about the early history of the "Way of the Elders" (Sthaviravada in Sanskrit and Theravada in Pali), although it appears to have been widespread in India by the time of Ashoka. We do know that the Theravada tradition was conservative, as its name suggests. Rejecting all scriptures composed after the formation of the *Tripitaka*, it considers itself the preserver of Buddhism in its original form.

### Theravada in Sri Lanka

A monk named Mahinda (Mahendra in Sanskrit), who was Ashoka's son, is said to have taken Theravada Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE. The story is told in the island's *Great Chronicle* (*Mahavamsa*). Mahinda and his assistant monks use psychic powers to travel through the air, and arrive on a large hill near the island's capital, Anuradhapura. There the king of Sri Lanka and his hunting party discover the monks and are soon converted to the Buddha's dharma. (Mahinda's Hill, Mihintale, remains an active centre for monks and lay pilgrims in Sri Lanka today.) The next day, Mahinda enters the capital and teaches dharma to the members of the king's court, who are converted. On the following day the largest space available—the royal elephant stable—is put into service as a hall of dharma instruction, whereupon everyone is converted.

These legends are presumably based on historical events, since one of Ashoka's inscriptions claims that he sent missionaries in groups of five to seek converts far and wide, even in the Hellenistic kingdoms to the west. The king of Sri Lanka could well have been receptive to the idea of an alliance with the great emperor on the mainland, in which case adopting the empire's religion and court rituals would have been an excellent way of signalling willingness to comply with the greater power. The king ordered the building of a proper temple, dharma hall, and stupa, and the temple grounds were made complete with the arrival of a Bodhi tree sapling brought from India by Mahinda's sister, herself a *bhikshuni*.

The king underwent a new enthronement ritual, carried out according to Ashoka's instructions, and in this way the island became a cultural extension of Ashoka's empire while maintaining its sovereignty. This uniting of Buddhist leadership and Indian forms of kingship set the pattern for subsequent Buddhist rulers across mainland Southeast Asia. Theravada Buddhism is still the main religion of Sri Lanka, even though the sangha fell on such hard times in the eleventh century that there were not enough monks to continue. Since five senior *bhikshus* are required to officiate at an ordination, *bhikshus* had to be imported from Burma. A similar appeal to Siam in the eighteenth century led to the establishment of a new ordination lineage. The majority of Sri Lankan monks today belong to the Siyam Nikaya ("lineage").

Sri Lanka was populated by various peoples from India, and many aspects of the island's culture reveal close ties to the predominantly Hindu mainland. Among the Hindu transplants to Sri Lanka is a version of the Indian caste system. Shakyamuni taught that people should be judged by their character rather than the hereditary occupational or clan group they were born into. In keeping with this principle, his sangha was open to all social groups. In Sri Lanka, however, the Siyam Nikaya today accepts only members from the Goyigama caste, the equivalent of India's vaishyas.

There are other *nikayas* in Sri Lanka that accept members regardless of caste. The most important of these is the Ramanna Nikaya, which was founded in the nineteenth century as a lineage dedicated to various reforms, including the elimination of caste restrictions.

## Theravada in Southeast Asia

The spread of Buddhism into Southeast Asia took place over many centuries. Today Buddhist culture remains dominant in much of the mainland, including Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar. It was also influential (as was Hinduism) in the Indonesian islands and the Malay peninsula, although Islamic religion and culture eventually became dominant there.

An account written by a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim in the seventh century suggests that several of the early Buddhist sects were established in Southeast Asia by that time. This diversity follows the pattern in India, where various schools of Buddhism coexisted for centuries before Theravada eventually prevailed. Some early accounts from Southeast Asia emphasize the working of miracles, a feature of Buddhist missionary efforts found later in Tibet and elsewhere. Chanting to invoke blessings and protective powers was also a feature of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, partly because some of the missionaries there came from the Vajrayana school (p. 417).

Until about 1000, various early Buddhist sects as well as Mahayana and Vajrayana schools competed for support, but by the fifteenth century all the region's major rulers had embraced Theravada, perhaps because, in adopting it, they could bring their kingdoms into political alignment with other powerful kingdoms in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia. Other forms of Buddhism gradually died out, and Theravada training centres and temples of national importance flourished under royal patronage. Today Theravada remains the majority religion of the Thai, Khmer (Cambodian), Burmese, and Lao (Laotian) peoples.

Island Southeast Asia, by contrast, is now predominantly Muslim, but both Buddhist monuments and Buddhist minorities survive. In Indonesia, for example, tourists still flock to the ruins of the majestic temple of Borobudur, which covers a hilltop with a geometrical arrangement of stupas representing the mountains that, according to traditional Buddhist cosmology, anchor the world. Malaysia also has a sizable Buddhist minority, mainly among the Chinese population.

## Theravada Practice: Rituals and Mindfulness

The most common Theravada ritual is the Buddha-puja, in which Buddhists chant praise to the Buddha and promise to observe the Five Precepts, vowing to refrain from

- taking life
- taking that which is not given
- sensual misconduct (sexual immorality)
- wrong speech (lying, slander, and the like) and
- intoxicants leading to the loss of mindfulness.

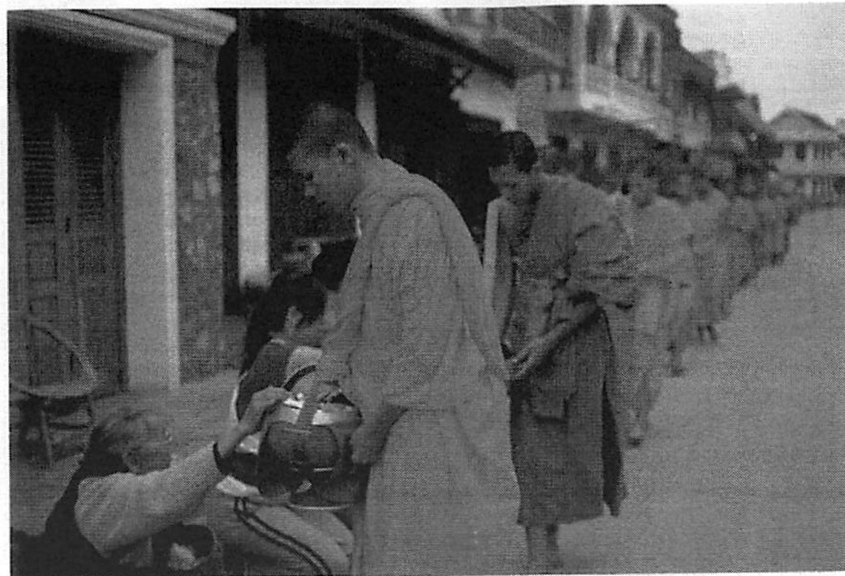
Unlike the "commandments" of the Judeo-Christian tradition, these precepts are moral rules that Buddhists voluntarily undertake to follow.

### *Merit-Making Rituals*

Theravadins also perform a number of more elaborate "merit-making" rituals specifically designed to produce good karma. Of these, two of the most important are almsgiving and the *dana* ritual.

Traditionally, members of the sangha would leave the monastery early each morning carrying bowls to collect their daily food. As they moved silently through the streets, their eyes downcast





Lay Buddhists in Laos lower themselves in respect as they offer food to monks, who silently make their alms rounds early in the morning (© Robert Harding Picture Library Ltd / Alamy).

to maintain a tranquil, composed state of mind, laypeople would come out of their houses, put cooked food into the alms bowls, and then bow low or prostrate themselves as a sign of respect. The practice of going for alms is rare today, but it is still common in Thailand, and efforts have been made to revive it in Sri Lanka.

In time, the practice of giving alms to monks and nuns developed into a ritual called *dana*, from the Sanskrit word for "giving." A *dana* might be held at a temple or a pilgrimage site, but is often held by a family in their home to celebrate some important occasion. The following description of a *dana* ceremony in a Sri Lankan home offers a glimpse of several other Buddhist rituals as well.

As the monks arrive at the door, their feet are washed by the men of the family. (If the guests are *bikshunis*, this hospitality ritual is performed by the women.) On entering, the *bhikshus* first bow before the Buddha altar. A string is run from the Buddha image on the altar to a pot of water, then to the monks, and finally to the laypeople, so that all are holding the string in their right hands. The monks lead a Buddha-puja, then chant from a collection of scriptures called *paritta*, followed by a dharma talk. The water and the string become sacred through the power of the chanting. Then a merit-transfer ritual is performed, in which the merit made by those present through their participation is transferred "to all living beings": "May the merit made by me now or at some other time be shared among all beings here infinite, immeasurable; those dear to me and virtuous as mothers or as fathers are, . . . to others neutral, hostile too. . . ."

In some respects merit transfer resembles the old Roman Catholic traditions of performing penance or purchasing "indulgences" for the benefit of deceased relatives: it is intended to help one's ancestors, and others, in the afterlife. Although the practice might seem to violate the early Buddhist principle that all of us must make our own karma, the scriptures say that Shakyamuni himself advocated it.

### *Life-Cycle and Death Rituals*

Early Indian Buddhists continued to follow the life-cycle rituals of what we now call Hinduism, and as Buddhism spread, converts in other regions also retained their own traditions. Thus there are no specifically Buddhist wedding or childhood rituals. It is in part for this reason that Buddhism has been able exist alongside different traditional belief systems: Sri Lankan Buddhists continue to observe Indian rituals, Thai Buddhists still worship their traditional spirits, and Japanese Buddhists still visit Shinto shrines.

There is a Theravada funeral ritual, however, based on the ancient Indian cremation ceremony. Although the pattern varies from country to country (and where the cost of wood is prohibitive, cremation is replaced by burial), the principal features of the ceremony are similar. The corpse is taken in a procession to the cemetery along a route prepared in advance by filling in potholes, cutting the grass and weeds beside the road, and placing flowers along the way. This tradition has parallels in many parts of the ancient world (similar preparations were made for Jesus' procession into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday).

At the cemetery the body is placed in a wooden structure above a funeral pyre. A brief service is then held that includes chants, prayers, and a ritual in which family members and friends take turns pouring holy water from one container into another while a long prayer is chanted. Then the pyre is lit, ideally by the eldest son of the deceased. In the event that a crematorium is used instead of a funeral pyre, one or more *bhikshus* will still come to recite prayers over the body.

The loss of a loved one is always painful, but Buddhists prepare for it through years of meditation on the inevitability of death. One of Buddhism's strengths is its emphasis on the transience of life, which helps its followers develop a realistic view of the end.

On the sixth night after the death, a dharma-preaching service is held at the home, followed by a *dana* on the morning of the seventh day. Other memorial *dana* rituals are held at the home of the deceased after three months and one year. Family members and friends who were unable to attend the funeral may participate in these memorials. After time has lessened the pain of the loss, the memorial services provide occasions to remember the deceased and enjoy a family reunion.

### Vipassana: *Mindfulness Meditation*

Theravada Buddhists practise a simple form of meditation called *vipassana* ("insight" or "mindfulness"). Practitioners concentrate on their breathing, focusing either on the sensation of air passing through the nostrils or on the rising and falling of the abdomen. Although the breaths are usually counted, the point is not to keep count but to focus the mind. Practitioners may also cultivate mindfulness of other parts of the body, personal emotions, or relationships with others. The goal is to live in a totally mindful way.

### *The Buddha Day Festival*

Many Buddhist festivals developed out of earlier seasonal festivals, and there are regional variations. However, Buddhists in most places celebrate the day on which three major events in the life of Shakyamuni are said to have occurred: his birth, his enlightenment, and his *parinirvana*. Known in Theravada countries as Vesak or Wesak (Sanskrit Vaishakha), it is called "Buddha Day" in English.



## Mahayana, The Second Vehicle

The Mahayana ("Greater Vehicle") movement appears to have emerged around the first century CE. We know that its members were dismissing older forms of Buddhism as Hinayana ("Lesser Vehicle") by the third or fourth century, and that around the same time it was becoming the dominant form of Buddhism across the region traversed by the Silk Road, from Central Asia to northern China. It remains the main form of Buddhism in China, Korea, and Japan.

Mahayana differed from Theravada in everything from the doctrines and scriptures it emphasized to its rituals and meditation practices. Whereas Theravada saw the discipline of the *bhikshu* as a precondition for enlightenment and liberation, Mahayana offered laypeople the opportunity to strive for those goals as well. Whereas Theravada focused on the historical Shakyamuni, in Mahayana he represented only one manifestation of buddhahood. Furthermore, whereas Theravada insisted that there was no supernatural force on which human beings could call for assistance, Mahayana populated the heavens with bodhisattvas dedicated to helping all those who prayed to them.

How did these differences arise? A possible explanation is that Mahayana Buddhism developed from one or more of the 18 early Indian sects. There is some evidence for a close connection between early Mahayana and two or three of those sects, but it seems more likely that Mahayana emerged in southern India as part of a movement towards more liberal interpretation that spread across several of them.

Despite their differences, Mahayana and the earlier sects share a common core of values and moral teachings, practices (such as meditation, chanting, scripture study, and veneration of relics), and forms of monastic life. In short, Theravada and Mahayana are different vehicles (*yanas*) for travelling the same path to enlightenment.

### Mahayana Doctrine

Mahayana Buddhism begins with the same basic teachings as Theravada, but gives more emphasis to some doctrines, such as Emptiness; interprets others, such as the role of the lay sangha and the doctrine of the Buddha Body, in new ways; and includes additional elements, such as the bodhisattva vow.

#### *The Lay Sangha*

The practice of venerating Shakyamuni at the stupas enshrining his relics began soon after his death. In time, many laypeople began making pilgrimages to places with major relics, and new stupas were built in all Mahayana countries. (The veneration of sacred relics was an important part of several religions in this period, including Hinduism and Christianity.) Lay Buddhists came to believe that they could earn valuable karmic merit by making a pilgrimage.

This development marked a major shift away from early Buddhism, in which the religious role of laypeople had been restricted to providing material support for the sangha, and the prospects for lay progress along the spiritual path were limited. Anyone who wished to seek enlightenment more

seriously was expected to "depart the world" for the monastic life. Mahayana, by contrast, offered laypeople the possibility of attaining enlightenment even while living in the world.

## *Doctrine of the Three Bodies* (Trikaya)

To account for the various ways in which Buddha could be experienced, Mahayana developed a doctrine of "three bodies" (*trikaya*). The earthly manifestation of a buddha is called the Appearance or Transformation Body (*nirmanakaya*). The heavenly body that presides over a buddha-realm and is an object of devotion for Mahayana Buddhists is called the Body of Bliss (*sambhogakaya*). These are supported by the buddha as the absolute essence of the universe, called the Dharma Body (*dharmakaya*).

The Three Bodies doctrine calls attention not only to the oneness of all the buddhas that have appeared on Earth, but also to the unity of the buddha-nature or potential in all its forms. That is, the *trikaya* doctrine envisions one cosmic reality (Dharma Body) that manifests itself in the form both of heavenly beings (Body of Bliss) and of humans such as Shakyamuni (Appearance Body). By connecting the earthly Buddha to the Dharma Body or Absolute, the doctrine of the three bodies also moved Mahayana Buddhism in the direction of theistic religion—in sharp contrast to the Theravada school, which continued to revere the Buddha not as a deity but as an exceptional human being.

## *Teaching by Expedient Means*

The Sanskrit word *upaya* forms part of an expression frequently translated as "skill in means" or "skilful means." The word was used occasionally in Theravada texts with a more general sense, but the roots of the more technical sense were already present. Shakyamuni's teachings were pragmatic, and he tailored his presentation of them to suit each audience's capacity. He urged his followers to use skill in guiding people to spiritual attainment, like the boatman who ferries people to the other side of the river. The analogy implies that once one has reached the other side, there is no further need of the boat for the onward journey.

### *The* Lotus Sutra *and the Parable of the Burning House*

A Mahayana text that emphasizes *upaya* is the *Lotus Sutra*. It treats many Buddhist teachings as steps towards a more complete understanding. As an illustration of this perspective, it tells of a father whose children are inside a burning house. He persuades them to come out by promising them chariots that he does not actually have; this false promise may be a lie, but it serves an important purpose. Similarly, those just starting on the path are taught not the ultimate truth, but temporary formulations that will allow them to advance to a point where they will be able to see the purpose of the earlier stages. From this perspective, even Shakyamuni's teaching is provisional: simply an expedient means of persuading human beings to start along the path. By treating earlier teachings as expedient means, Mahayana thinkers were able to shift the emphasis from Shakyamuni to celestial buddha figures and a notion of cosmic wisdom.

## *Bodhisattvas and Merit Transfer*

Early Buddhism taught that every individual makes his or her own karma, and that there is no supernatural source of grace. By contrast, the Mahayana school proposed that grace is available in the form of merit transferred to humans from bodhisattvas. Mahayana cosmology envisions a multitude of spiritually advanced beings, all of them prepared to share their great merit with anyone who prays for help.

Even though Shakyamuni himself had remained a bodhisattva until the night of his enlightenment, for most Theravadins the highest goal was to reach the status of an Arhat. The Mahayana school criticized this goal as self-centred because it was focused on personal liberation. Thus all Mahayana Buddhists are encouraged to take the bodhisattva vow, pledging not only to attain buddhahood themselves but also to work towards the liberation of all beings.

The corollary of this innovation in Buddhist thought was the Mahayana idea that humans could appeal to merit-filled beings in the heavens for assistance. Early Indian Buddhism had considered Shakyamuni, after his *parinirvana*, to be beyond the realm of direct involvement with human lives, and therefore it had no tradition of appealing to him for assistance. In some Mahayana schools, by contrast, worshippers not only venerate the bodhisattvas but petition them for blessings, much as Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians ask the saints for help.

Another important characteristic of Mahayana Buddhism is its extension of the concept of merit transfer. As we have seen, early Buddhism taught that merit—that is, karma—is made solely by the individual. The only exception involves the merit transfer ritual. In Mahayana, by contrast, the buddhas and the bodhisattvas are believed to be capable of transferring merit from themselves to human beings.

Some important bodhisattvas have special functions. For example, Bodhisattva Manjusri is the guardian of Buddhist wisdom, and novices entering Buddhist training often call on him to guide and inspire them. The bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara ("the Lord who looks down"), is popular in all Mahayana countries. Originally Avalokiteshvara was masculine, but in China he came to be venerated in female form under the name Guanyin. This change of gender is an example of the bodhisattva's power to take any shape necessary to benefit believers. The most venerated of all bodhisattvas, Guanyin has been called the "Virgin Mary of East Asia" by Westerners. Many Mahayana women feel especially close to her because she is believed to bring children to those who lack them and to care for infants who die, as well as aborted fetuses.

Bodhisattva Maitreya (the "Friendly One") is expected to be the next buddha, the one who will turn the dharma wheel once again after the wheel set in motion by Shakyamuni has stopped turning. Some Mahayana Buddhists pray to Maitreya as the "future buddha," requesting that they be reborn when he comes because it will be easier to achieve enlightenment when there is a living buddha to follow.

The heavens in which the buddhas and bodhisattvas reside are known as "fields" or "realms." Those who venerate a certain buddha may be reborn into his heaven. As we shall see, this is a central belief of the Pure Land movement, which venerates a celestial buddha of "infinite life" and "infinite light" known in Sanskrit as Amitayus or Amitabha, in Chinese as Amituofo, and in Japanese as Amida (the Japanese spelling is the one most commonly used in English).

The bodhisattvas have had enormous appeal as saviour figures, and in their compassionate self-sacrifice, they have been compared to the Christian Jesus.

## *Bodhisattva Vows*

The practice of taking bodhisattva vows reflects the Mahayana emphasis on giving of oneself to help others. As we have seen, early Indian Buddhists rarely aspired to become buddhas themselves: they were content to hope that in some future life they could achieve the status of Arhat. It was

the self-centred nature of this focus on personal liberation that Mahayana philosophers criticized. All Mahayana Buddhists—male or female, lay or monastic—were encouraged to declare their intention to become buddhas someday, but also to remain active in helping to liberate all beings.

In practical terms, taking the bodhisattva vow meant vowing to be reborn in a heaven from which one can transfer merit to others. Although the possibility of helping others by accepting rebirth as a human was not ruled out, the advanced bodhisattvas were thought to live in their own heavenly realms.

## Mahayana Schools

The above overview of Mahayana doctrine suggests some substantial differences from Theravada Buddhism. But there are also pronounced differences between the various Mahayana ordination lineages or "schools" that developed first in India and eventually across East Asia. For example, the Chan (Zen in Japan) school downplays Buddha veneration and has much in common with Theravada, whereas the Pure Land school stresses the necessity of Amida Buddha's help. We will briefly discuss some of the more important schools of Mahayana thought, focusing on their beginnings (usually in India) and noting the names they assumed as they spread across East Asia.

### *Madhyamaka*

Early Buddhism taught that there were six perfections, the last and most important of which was the perfection of a kind of wisdom known as *prajna*. This wisdom—not to be confused with worldly wisdom or scientific knowledge—is accessible only to those with a highly developed consciousness.

Mahayana thinkers wrote a number of texts on *prajna*, beginning as early as the first century BCE with the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses*. The two that were to become the most important were the *Heart* and *Diamond Cutter Sutras*. In all these texts, the key to the highest spiritual wisdom is awareness of the emptiness or nothingness (*shunyata*) of all things.

Sometime in the second century, a brahmin from southern India converted to Buddhism and took the ordination name Nagarjuna. He wrote Buddhist devotional hymns and ethical guides, but his fame is based on philosophical works such as the *Mulamadhyamaka-karika* ("Fundamentals of the Middle Way").

Nagarjuna's philosophical position is called the "Middle Way" (Madhyamaka) because it refuses either to affirm or to deny any statement about reality on the ground that all such statements necessarily fall short of ultimate truth. All realities (dharmas) are equally "empty" of absolute truth or "self-essence." According to Nagarjuna's doctrine of Emptiness, everything in the phenomenal world is ultimately unreal. By a process of paradoxical logic he claims that Emptiness as ultimate reality is itself unreal, although it may be experienced directly in meditation. Nagarjuna summed up this paradox in a famous eightfold negation:

> Nothing comes into being,
> Nor does anything disappear.
> Nothing is eternal,
> Nor has anything an end.
> Nothing is identical,
> Or differentiated,
> Nothing moves hither,
> Nor moves anything thither.
> (Chen 1964: 84)



For Madhyamaka and the later Mahayana schools that developed under its influence, including Zen, enlightenment demands recognition of the *shunyata* of all dharmas.

Of course Nagarjuna recognized that his own thinking was no less empty than any other. Thus he made it his philosophical "position" to refrain from taking any dogmatic position. According to his paradoxical logic, *nirvana* is dialectically identical to *samsara*, or the phenomenal world: each is present in the other.

#### *Sanlun: Chinese Madhyamaka*

The Sanlun ("Three Treatises") school is the Chinese extension of Nagarjuna's Madhyamika. The monk Kumarajiva (334–414) introduced this teaching into China with his translation of two treatises by Nagarjuna and a third by Nagarjuna's disciple Aryadeva (or Deva, c. 300). These three works became the foundations of the Sanlun school.

The chief Sanlun teaching is essentially a restatement of Nagarjuna's idea that everything is empty (*shunya*), because nothing has any independent reality. An entity can be identified only through its relation to something else. In this unreal phenomenal world we make distinctions between subject and object, *samsara* and *nirvana*, but with the higher wisdom comes understanding of *shunyata* (emptiness).

### *Yogacara or "Consciousness Only"*

In the late fourth century, three Indian *bhikshus* named Maitreyanatha, Asanga, and Vasubandhu founded a new Mahayana school. Though usually called Yogacara ("Practice of Yoga") because it stresses meditation and uses a text by that name, it is also known as "Consciousness Only" (Vijnanavada), because it argues that what most people assume to be realities are merely images taken from a "storehouse consciousness" (*alaya-vijnana*) shaped by past karmic actions and attachments. As a consequence, we can never know if external objects exist.

For Yogacara, both the universe and the perceiver exist only in the process of perceiving. Even our "selves" and our karma are merely reifications of momentary awareness. Sensory impressions are "seeds" that lead to acts or thoughts:

> A seed produces a manifestation,
> A manifestation perfumes a seed.
> The three elements (seed, manifestation, and
> perfume) turn on and on,
> The cause and effect occur at the same time.
> (Chen 1964: 323)

According to this theory, the only way to avoid false substantialization is to so exhaust the consciousness, through yoga and spiritual cultivation, that it becomes identical to the ultimate reality called "thusness" (*tathata*), which corresponds to the "emptiness" of Madhyamaka. Critics from

rival schools argued that the storehouse consciousness concept seemed to come close to affirming the Hindu notion of the Atman (eternal soul) that the Buddha had rejected. But the Yogacara writers argued that the storehouse consciousness has no eternal, unchanging substance. Buddhist ideas of the link between one birth and the next as a "karma complex" or "migrating consciousness" were developed by Yogacara into the notion of a storehouse consciousness.

#### *Faxiang: Chinese Yogacara*

The Chinese version of Yogacara or "Consciousness Only" also has two names, Weishi ("Consciousness Only") and Faxiang ("Dharma Character"). First introduced into China in the sixth century, the school grew up around a text by Asanga entitled *Compendium of Mahayana*. Perplexity over the meaning of this work spurred a monk named Xuanzang to go to India in search of more scriptures; on his return, the Big Wild Goose Pagoda was built in Xi'an (the Chinese terminus of the silk route) to house the manuscripts he brought back. Although Faxiang did not survive as a vital sect, it had some influence on the development of other schools of thought, including neo-Confucianism.

### *Pure Land Buddhism*

The school dedicated to Amitabha (Amida) most likely began to take shape around the first century. According to an account in the *Larger Sutra on the Pure Land*, attributed to Shakyamuni himself, Amitabha was a buddha of a previous age who in an earlier life, as a young prince named Dharmakara, took 48 bodhisattva vows detailing his intention to strive for enlightenment and help others in specific ways. In the eighteenth vow, Amitabha promised to establish a heavenly region—the "Pure Land" or "Western Paradise"—into which all beings who so desired could be reborn. No extraordinary effort would be required to earn rebirth in that land: admission would be free to all who had faith in Amitabha's compassionate power and made their desire for rebirth in his heaven known by thinking of him.

Suffering, old age, and death will be unknown in the Pure Land—the *sukhavati*, as opposed to the *duhkha-vati*, the land of suffering, that is the world. There will be food, drink, and music for all, and the buddha's followers will be so uplifted by his merit that their progress towards nirvana will be easy. This notion of the "Pure Land" marked a transformation in the Buddhist idea of heaven. In early Buddhism, meritorious individuals could hope to be reborn in a paradise, but they would be unable to "make" new merit or develop their higher wisdom while there. In other words, there was no path leading from heaven to nirvana: once the inhabitants' store of merit was exhausted, they would have to be reborn in human form to make more. But for those in the Pure Land, rebirth on Earth will no longer be necessary.

The *Smaller Sutra on the Pure Land* spells out what is required to benefit from Amitabha's store of merit. Those who have remembered and repeated his name before death will be reborn in his Pure Land. This rebirth cannot be earned by any meritorious works: it is a gift made available through the infinite merits of Amitabha. Theologically, the Christian concept of salvation through faith in divine grace is a parallel.

A third early Pure Land text, the *Meditation on Amitayus Sutra*, offers detailed instruction in vision meditation. But for those unable to undertake the rigorous training required to achieve a vision, it also offers an easier path. Even the meritless or wicked could gain rebirth in the Pure Land through sincere repetition of the sacred formula "Homage to Amitabha Buddha."



The Pure Land school introduced a path to salvation based solely on faith. There is no equivalent in the Theravada tradition. The *Smaller Sutra on the Pure Land* teaches that the only condition for rebirth in the Pure Land is faith in Amitabha's infinite compassion, shown through prayerful repetition of his name. This reliance on an external or "other" power stands in sharp contrast to the self-reliance emphasized in early Buddhism. Over the centuries that followed, Pure Land spread from India to China, Korea, and Japan, becoming the most popular of all Buddhist schools in East Asia.

#### *Jingtu: Chinese Pure Land*

In China, Pure Land is known as Jingtu and Amitabha as Amituofo. He is assisted by two bodhisattvas (*pusa*), one of whom is Guanyin, the bodhisattva of compassion.

The recitation of praise to Amituofo is called *nianfo* in Chinese. During the recitation the devotee usually fingers a string of beads. Thus Pure Land Buddhism parallels some forms of Christianity in several ways, with a God-figure (Amida), a mediator (Guanyin), a doctrine of faith and grace, and a devotional practice not unlike the recitation of the rosary. (Some think that the practice of using beads to keep count while reciting a sequence of prayers originated in India.)

In China, Pure Land Buddhism has had a special appeal for the masses of people who seek not only ultimate salvation but also assistance in everyday life. Guanyin is particularly important in this respect, especially for women. She soon came to symbolize the "giver of children"—an adaptation that underlines the more worldly focus of Chinese Buddhism, compared with its Indian counterpart.

#### *Jodo: Japanese Pure Land*

In Japan, Pure Land Buddhism is called Jodo, its Buddha is called Amida, and the female bodhisattva is called Kannon. Most Buddhists in Japan today belong to the Jodo school.

Pure Land Buddhism was introduced to Japan by a monk named Honen (1133–1212) who wanted to provide a simpler way to salvation for those unable to undertake the demanding program prescribed in the *Meditation on Amitayus Sutra*. The devotional practice he taught relies entirely on faith in Amida's power of salvation, and consists in chanting the "Homage to Amida Buddha" mantra. Repetition of this phrase, called the *nembutsu* in Japanese, leads to a heightened

## Document

### Pure Land Buddhism: Honen's Testament

The method of final salvation that I have propounded is neither a sort of meditation, such as has been practised by many scholars in China or Japan, nor is it a repetition of the Buddha's name by those who have studied and understood the deep meaning of it. It is nothing but the mere repetition of the "Namu Amida Butsu," without a doubt of his mercy, whereby one may be born into the Land of Perfect Bliss. The mere repetition with firm faith includes all the practical details, such as the three-fold preparation of mind and the four primordial truths. If I as an individual had any doctrine more profound than this, I should . . . be left out of the Vow of the Amida Buddha (Tsunoda 1958: 208).

state of consciousness, especially during services as the chanting quickens, building to a feverish pace. (For a detailed discussion of Pure Land in Japan, see Chapter 7.)

Honen's disciple Shinran (1173–1262) underlined the need for the "other-power" of Amida's grace in a "degenerate" age when Buddhist dharma was thought to be in decline. Condemning the magical and syncretic tendencies that he saw in other schools, Shinran taught the *nembutsu* as an act of faith and thanksgiving. In a moving passage about the salvation of the wicked, Shinran says:

> People generally think . . . that if even a wicked man can be reborn in the Pure Land, how much more so a good man! This latter view may at first sight seem reasonable, but it is not in accord with the purpose of the Original Vow, with faith in the Power of Another. The reason for this is that he who, relying on his own power, undertakes to perform meritorious deeds, has no intention of relying on the Power of Another and is not the object of the Original Vow of Amida. Should he, however, abandon his reliance on his own power and put his trust in the Power of Another, he can be born in the True Land of Recompense. . . . Amida made his Vow with the intention of bringing wicked men to Buddhahood. Therefore the wicked man who depends on the Power of Another is the prime object of salvation (Tannisho; Tsunoda 1958: 217).

Both Honen and Shinran faced opposition from rival schools and were exiled by the authorities, but they found wide support among the people. Shinran founded a new sect called "True Pure Land" (Jodo Shinsu) or Shin Buddhism. He also did something revolutionary: like Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century German priest who launched the Protestant Reformation in Europe, he chose to marry, maintaining that husband and wife are to each other as the bodhisattva Kannon is to the believer. In so doing he laicized Buddhism. Although this break with the tradition of monastic celibacy was widely opposed, today most Buddhist priests in Japan are married, and temples are usually passed down through their families; the oldest son is typically expected to train for the priesthood so that he can continue the family tradition.

## *Chan–Zen Buddhism*

The founder of Chan Buddhism (better known in the West by its Japanese name, Zen) was Bodhidharma—the same sixth-century Indian monk who told King Wu that all his good works had earned him no merit at all. In sharp contrast to the Pure Land sect's emphasis on "other power," Chan emphasized "self-power" and the attainment of personal enlightenment through rigorous practice of meditation. Although there is no surviving evidence that a similar school existed in India, Chan tradition traces Bodhidharma's lineage to the Buddha's disciple Kashyapa, whose intuitive insight is celebrated in the story of the "flower sermon" (see Focus box).

The Chinese pronunciation of the word *dhyana* (*jhana* in Pali) was "*chan*": hence the name of the school that Bodhidharma founded in China, centred what he called a "mind to mind, direct transmission" of enlightenment, with "no dependence on words." Just as the Buddha relied on a single enigmatic gesture to deliver his "flower sermon," so Bodhidharma and later Chan masters used surprising, shocking, paradoxical, or even violent actions to bring about the state of mind best known in the West by the Japanese term *satori*. One master twisted a disciple's nose so hard that the pain and indignity led to a breakthrough. Another shoved his disciple into a thorn bush, with the same result. Another would simply hold up a finger. Many made impossible demands on their students, including the master who held up one hand and demanded to be told what sound it made: this was the origin of the familiar Zen koan "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" One master would instruct his disciples to imagine hanging by their teeth from a branch suspended over some danger, then being asked a question that demands a response—for example, "Do all persons have Buddha-nature?" If the disciple correctly answers "Yes," he will fall and die. But if he refuses to answer, he will seem to communicate an untruth. The master demands to know: "What would you do?" Since there is no logical way out of this dilemma, the correct answer must be found in some place other than the rational mind.

In the early sixth century, Bodhidharma took this school of thought to China and settled into a cave in the mountains above the village of Shaolin. He was known especially for meditating while facing the wall of his cave. One legend has it that after nine years of "wall-gazing meditation," his legs atrophied. Another says that he began teaching his students self-defence as an antidote to their long hours of sitting meditation. His teaching is summed up in these four lines attributed to him:

> A special transmission outside of doctrines. Not setting up the written word as an authority. Pointing directly at the human heart. Seeing one's nature and becoming a buddha (Robinson 1959: 332).

These lines put into words Kashyapa's "flower sermon" experience of the transmission of enlightened consciousness by direct contact between master and disciple, without textual or doctrinal study.

Because of its distaste for book learning, Chan became known for its transmission of enlightenment "outside the scriptures," independent of "words or letters." The special Chan state of consciousness is transmitted only "from mind to mind"—from master to disciple—without the intervention of rational argumentation. It advocates the "absence of thoughts" to free the mind from external influences.

### *The Lineage of Chan Patriarchs*

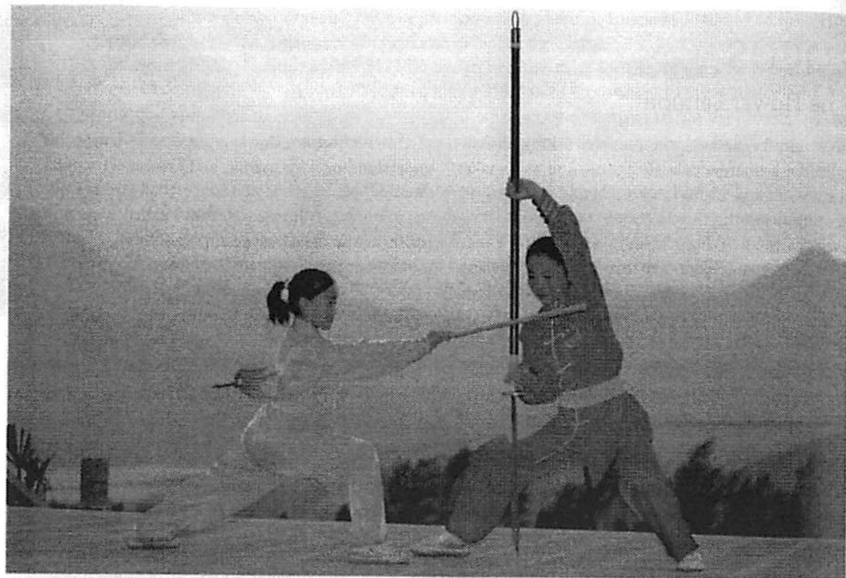
One winter day a Chinese man is said to have arrived at Bodhidharma's cave, hoping to study under the master. But he was not invited in. Hours passed and darkness fell but the man waited throughout the night, shivering in the ever deepening snow. In the morning Bodhidharma finally asked him what he wanted. He explained that he wanted a teacher who would open his mind to

## Focus

### The Flower Sermon

This story begins with the disciples asking Shakyamuni for a dharma talk. He agrees, and as he takes his seat on the teaching throne, all grow silent, eagerly waiting to hear his words. Instead of speaking, however, Shakyamuni simply holds up a white lotus flower.

All are dumbfounded except for Kashyapa, who in that moment experiences an intuitive flash of enlightenment. The Buddha acknowledges his understanding with a smile, and Kashyapa becomes the first patriarch in a lineage that stresses the achievement of the state of mind called *dhyana* in Sanskrit: the state reached by the young Shakyamuni while meditating under the rose-apple tree.



Dozens of elementary and high schools in the town of Shaolin combine academic studies in the mornings with martial arts training in the afternoons. Although most of the schools are Buddhist in orientation, two are Muslim; there are also some schools for girls, although the majority are male-only. The best students from each age group perform hourly for tourists, as in this photo (© VISUM Foto GmbH / Alamy).

enlightenment. Bodhidharma refused, telling him it was hopeless for someone like him, with little wisdom and only feeble resolve, to expect any serious breakthrough. After several more hours, the man cut off his left arm and presented it to Bodhidharma as proof of his resolve. Bodhidharma accepted him as a disciple.

The story continues with the new disciple, now named Huike, asking Bodhidharma for help in pacifying his anxious mind. The master replied, "Bring me your mind so that I can pacify it." Huike explained that he had long sought his mind, but he could not find it. "So there," says Bodhidharma, "I have pacified your mind!" The one-armed Huike went on to become the first Han Chinese patriarch. Most Chan monasteries in China, Korea, and Japan are located part-way up a mountain, where the cool, dry atmosphere optimizes the chances of a spiritual breakthrough. For this reason Chan has been called the "mountain school."

#### *Huineng and the Poetry Contest*

During the era of the fifth Chan patriarch, in the late seventh century, a young boy from southern China named Huineng arrived at the Shaolin monastery seeking admission as a novice. He was not accepted, perhaps because he spoke a different dialect, but he stayed to work in the kitchen.



Huineng had made the journey because he had learned that the monastery taught a radical new form of Buddhism that offered the possibility of a direct breakthrough to a higher level of consciousness, without undue dependence on knowledge of scriptures or the performance of rituals. He understood the essence of Buddhism to involve an intuitive, mystical experience, the "direct pointing of the mind" that Bodhidharma had taught.

When it came time for the aging fifth patriarch to choose his successor, candidates were asked to compose a poem expressing their state of enlightenment. The most senior disciple produced this verse:

> This body is the Bodhi-tree;
> The soul is like the mirror bright;
> Take heed to keep it always clean,
> And let no dust collect upon it.
> (Suzuki 1991)

This poem nicely captures the Chan point of view. Instead of practising ritual veneration of the Buddha who was enlightened under a Bodhi tree long ago in a distant land, one is to think of one's own body, here and now, as the Bodhi tree, the place of enlightenment. A bright, shiny mirror perfectly reflects reality, and a pure mind should do the same. Thus the senior disciple's poem encourages regular meditation to keep the mind clear and pure. That night, however, Huineng produced a counter-poem:

> The Bodhi (True Wisdom) is not like the tree;
> The mirror bright is nowhere shining:
> As there is nothing from the first,
> Where does the dust itself collect?
> (Suzuki 1991)

This poem deepens the understanding of Chan enlightenment. It goes beyond merely bringing the enlightenment experience, symbolized by the Bodhi tree, to the "here and now." In denying the imagery of the Bodhi tree and the mirror, it implies that the pure mind corresponds to the state of emptiness central to the Mahayana tradition.

The fifth patriarch acknowledged Huineng's deep understanding and awarded him the robe and staff of the patriarch—but with the advice that he should go back to the South. This he did, and even though he was still a layman, he began teaching the deep state of intuitive wisdom that became known in the West as *satori*. Eventually he was ordained and recognized as the true sixth patriarch. It was Huineng who spread Chan into southern China, from which it was eventually taken to Korea, where it is known as Seon, and Japan, where it is called Zen.

#### *Zen Sects: Linji (Rinzai) and Caodong (Soto)*

There are two main Zen sects, Linji (Rinzai in Japan) and Caodong (Soto in Japan). The first is named after Linji, a ninth-century Chan monk who is said to have entered training as a shy young boy. After training diligently for more than a year, he was permitted to meet with the master, Huangbo. When the master asked why he had come, Linji humbly requested instruction in enlightenment, whereupon the master hit him hard with his stick.

# Document

## Chan Buddhism

*The* Platform Sutra *is attributed to Huineng and was compiled by one of his disciples in the early 700s.*

**Meditation and Wisdom**

Good friends, how then are meditation and wisdom alike? They are like the lamp and the light it gives forth. If there is a lamp there is light; if there is no lamp there is no light. The lamp is the substance of light; the light is the function of the lamp. Thus, although they have two names, in substance they are not two. Meditation and wisdom are like this (*The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, sec. 15; Yampolsky 1976: 137).

**On Saving Oneself**

Good friends, when I say "I vow to save all sentient beings everywhere," it is not that I will save you, but that sentient beings, each with their own natures, must save themselves. What is meant by "saving yourselves with your own natures"? Despite heterodox views, passions, ignorance, and delusions, in your own physical bodies you have in yourselves the attributes of inherent enlightenment, so that with correct views you can be saved (*The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, sec. 21; Yampolsky 1976: 143).

When Linji told his teacher what had happened, he was advised to try again, which led to a second beating. After three such beatings Linji concluded that he was not worthy. The master granted his request to leave, but asked that he first visit an old hermit monk who lived farther up the mountain. After hearing Linji describe what had happened, the hermit exclaimed, "Poor old Huangbo, he must have nearly exhausted himself hitting you!" This lack of sympathy so shocked and angered Linji that he experienced a breakthrough and burst out laughing. "Why the sudden change?" demanded the hermit. "There's not so much to old Huangbo's Zen after all" was the reply. On returning to Huangbo, Linji threatened to hit the master with his own stick. "Just get back to your training," said the master.

When Huangbo died, Linji succeeded him as master and gave his name to a new ordination lineage that emphasizes exactly the kind of "sudden enlightenment," or *satori*, that he experienced in response to Huangbo's apparently irrational behaviour. Later Linji/Rinzai masters continued to find that they could stimulate a breakthrough to Chan (Zen) consciousness by delivering unexpected blows and shouts, or otherwise confounding their pupils.

At the centre of this approach is the koan (from Chinese *gongan*): a paradoxical anecdote that is specifically designed to defy rational understanding and force the student out of the reason- or word-centred state of mind into a more intuitive, body-centred mode. The typical koan retells an incident in which, by doing something unexpected, a master sparked an enlightenment experience in his student. The point of the retelling is to evoke the same experience in successive generations of disciples. We will return to koan training in the Practice section below.

The second Zen sect, Caodong/Soto, seeks "gradual enlightenment" through long hours of *zazen* (sitting meditation). Both sects use koans and *zazen*, so the differences lie mainly in emphasis, Linji/Rinzai relying more on koans and Caodong/Soto on *zazen*.



## Mahayana Practice

### *Meditation*

Meditation is central to all forms of Buddhism. The goals include quieting the mind and heightening mental alertness, with the ultimate goal of breaking through into a state of pure mind known as the buddha-mind or emptiness (*shunyata*). In some Mahayana schools, terms such as "buddha-nature" and "buddha-mind" became virtual synonyms for "enlightenment."

The practice of meditation is particularly intense in the Soto Zen school. Typically, after half an hour of seated meditation (*zazen*), during which attention is focused on breathing, a bell is rung to signal that it is time to rise and practise walking meditation—focused on the slow lifting of the feet high off the ground—for a similar length of time. Then another bell signals a return to *zazen*.

In the Pure Land tradition, as we have seen, rebirth is granted through the grace of Amida (Amitabha). The *Meditation on Amitayus Sutra* promises that whoever achieves a vision of Amida will be reborn in his Pure Land, and explains 16 forms of "vision meditation" designed to help the devotee achieve that goal and develop a special rapport with him. Such visualization would eventually become a central element in Vajrayana Buddhism.

#### *Koan Training*

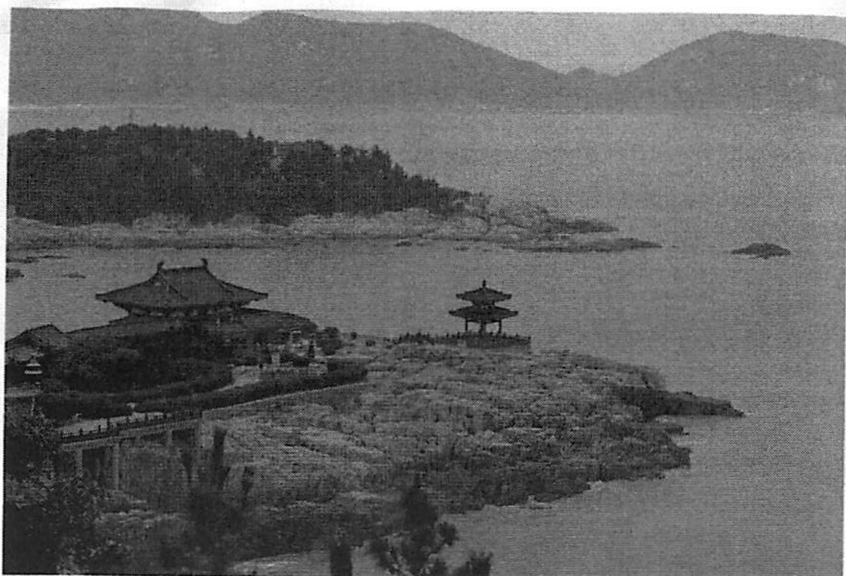
The first koan presented to Zen disciples is known as "Joshu's *Mu*." It tells of a time when the ancient master Joshu and a disciple were walking through the monastery grounds and saw one of the stray dogs that lived there. The disciple asks Joshu, "Does a dog have buddha-nature?" Joshu replies "*mu*" ("no"; *wu* in the Chinese original). There are many layers to this reply. We might think that the standard Buddhist answer to this question would be "yes," since all living beings have buddha-nature. Yet Joshu answers with a word that seems to deny that fundamental doctrine. The key to this paradox lies in the fact that *mu*, "no," is the very word used in Buddhism to express emptiness, the "nothingness" state of mind that characterizes the buddha mind. Thus Joshu's negation is in reality an affirmation.

The correct response to the koan lies not in a rational answer to the master's question but in the experience of breaking through the confines of the rational mind to a new level of consciousness. It is the master's task to reject all false responses to the koan until the breakthrough is achieved.

# Focus

## Roshi Robert Aitkin

Roshi Robert Aitkin of the Zen Center in Hawaii tells a story from his time as one of a group of students who were assigned "Joshu's *Mu*" in Japan. One of the other students, frustrated at working on the koan in silence, began to shout: "mu! muU! muUU! muuuuuuuUUU!." Day after day he continued to shout, and finally the master acknowledged his breakthrough, demonstrating that there is no single correct approach. Whatever the route taken, once a student has broken through to the first level of spiritual enlightenment, a second koan is assigned.



Mount Putuo, off the southern coast of China, is one of the four mountains that Chinese Buddhists hold most sacred, each of which is associated with a particular bodhisattva. Putuo is dedicated to Guanyin, and it includes a temple and a huge Guanyin statue (Sanguis1973 / Dreamstime.com / GetStock).

Disciples must report to the master regularly to respond to the assigned koan, and may be hit or shouted at if their "answers" are inadequate. Mastering one's first koan can take years.

### *Mahayana Holidays*

In Mahayana countries, the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and *parinirvana* are remembered on separate days, determined by the lunar calendar. Festivals honouring other buddhas and bodhisattvas are also observed, especially Guanyin's birthday. Different sects also celebrate the anniversaries of their patriarchs (for example, Nichiren in Japan).

Under the influence of the ancestor cults of China and Japan, the dead are honoured by an "all souls' day." In China this day is celebrated by burning paper boats to free the *preta* ("hungry ghosts") who have perished in violence. At the Japanese feast called Obon, two altars are built, one for offerings to the dead ancestors and the other for the "ghosts." Traditionally, Chinese Buddhists avoided non-essential outside activity during the "ghosts" month, to lessen the risk of a ghostly encounter. Buddhism has also adopted local customs surrounding occasions such as the beginning of the new year. In China pilgrimages are made to four sacred mountains, each dedicated to a different bodhisattva. In Japan the temple gong is struck 108 times on New Year's Eve, symbolizing forgiveness of the 108 kinds of bad deeds.



# ⊕ Vajrayana, The Third Vehicle

"Vajrayana"—from *vajra*, meaning both "diamond" and "thunderbolt"—is just one of several names for the third vehicle of Buddhism. The diamond image suggests something so hard that it cannot be broken or split, while the thunderbolt suggests a very particular kind of power. Long before the emergence of Buddhism, the thunderbolt was the sceptre of the Hindu storm god Indra, and it came to be represented by a wand, used regularly in Vajrayana rituals, that is shaped somewhat like an hourglass, or a three-dimensional version of the familiar infinity symbol. Despite the thunderbolt connection, the symbolism is not physical or astronomical: rather, the curved prongs represent various buddhas, and the power that the wand symbolizes is the power of the enlightened awareness. It remains a central symbol in the principal Vajrayana school today, Tibetan Buddhism.

Followers of Vajrayana refer to it as the "third turning of the wheel of dharma," the culmination of the two earlier vehicles, Theravada and Mahayana. This is exemplified in a system of Vajrayana training that takes place in three stages named after the three vehicles. In the "Hinayana" phase (corresponding to Theravada), beginners concentrate on basic moral discipline. In the "Mahayana" stage, they receive instruction in basic Mahayana doctrines. And in the third and highest stage, the Vajrayana, they learn the doctrines and practices that Vajrayana itself considers the most advanced.

The view of Vajrayana as the third turning of the wheel also makes sense in historical terms, for it is the most recent vehicle. Emerging in India during or after the third century, it spread to virtually all parts of the Buddhist world, although it disappeared from Southeast Asia centuries ago, and in East Asia had to settle for a minor role in relation to the more popular Mahayana schools. Where Vajrayana became the majority religion was in the region of Nepal and Bhutan, and across the Himalayas in Tibet and Mongolia. Hence some refer to Vajrayana as "northern" Buddhism—northern from the point of view of the Ganges region where Buddhism first developed (from that perspective, Theravada is "southern" and Mahayana "eastern").

## Vajrayana Practice

### *Mantras*

Vajrayana incorporates numerous elements that originated in India, in both Hindu and Buddhist practice, but in many cases gives them its own emphasis. An example is its use of mantras: sacred syllables or phrases thought to evoke great spiritual blessings when properly spoken or chanted. Although mantras are also central to the Pure Land ("Homage to Amida Buddha") and Nichiren ("Homage to the Lotus Sutra") schools, the Vajrayana (also known as Mantrayana) tradition puts an emphasis on sound that recalls the ancient brahminic idea that the priests' chanting of the ritual formulas in itself had a particular acoustic efficacy.

The best-known Vajrayana mantra is the Sanskrit phrase *Om mani padme hum*. *Mani* means "jewel" and *padme* "lotus," while *om* and *hum* are not words but sacred syllables. In English we might say "O the jewel in the lotus," or simply "Om jewel lotus hum." But the phrase can be interpreted in several ways. Some Vajrayana practitioners see the jewel and lotus as symbolic of the male and female principles, and understand their union to represent the harmony of the cosmic forces. Others believe that the phrase refers to the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara in feminine form as the "jewelled-lotus lady." Some think that its six syllables refer to six realms of rebirth, or six spiritual perfections. Whatever the interpretation, the mantra evokes a cosmic harmony.

The eyes of the Swayambhunath Buddha survey the Kathmandu Valley in all four directions. The Nepali script for the number one, symbolizing unity, forms the "nose" (© Tuul / Hemis / Corbis).

Mantras need not be spoken to be effective: they can also be written on banners or slips of paper and hung on trees or lines, or rotated in cylindrical containers called prayer wheels. The repetition achieved through rotation is thought to provide additional benefit.

### *Tantras*

Another Indian tradition that Vajrayana incorporated is tantrism. "Tantric" Buddhism, like Hindu tantrism, envisions cosmic reality as the interplay of male and female forces and teaches a set of practical techniques for tapping into the spiritual energy produced by that interplay. The image of a male figure in sexual embrace with his female consort is common in Vajrayana art. Known in Tibetan as the *yab–yum* (father–mother), this union of male and female symbolizes the coming together of the complementary elements essential to enlightenment, such as compassion and wisdom.

Thus a central component of tantric Buddhism is the concept of sexual union. Some tantric texts suggest that since the world is bound by lust, it must be released by lust as well. While the "right-hand" school understood this principle symbolically, the "left-hand" school interpreted it more literally, practising ritual unions in which the man and woman visualized themselves as divine beings. Such practices, properly undertaken, would defeat lust and transcend it. The texts that lay out such techniques are called tantras. The Tibetan canon includes a vast library of tantras under the heading *Kanjur* and various commentaries under the heading *Tanjur*.



The Vajrayana tantras classify the many buddhas and bodhisattvas in various families, which are often depicted in a sacred geometric design called a **mandala**. The "head" of the family occupies the centre of the design, surrounded by the other members, each of whom occupies a specific position.

Practitioners meditate on their chosen buddhas or bodhisattvas in order to achieve visions that will help them along the path to enlightenment. The Vajrayana guru initiates the disciple into the symbolic meanings of the various members of the family and their relationships, as well as the rituals required to develop inner wisdom.

Having built up a visualization, practitioners begin to identify with their chosen figures and tap into their energies. Visualizing themselves as identical with them, practitioners become aware of the centres of power ("chakras") in their own bodies and may perceive themselves to be at the centre of a sacred space defined by a mandala. At the culmination of this process of gradual enlightenment, initiates aspire to dissolve slowly into emptiness (*shunyata*), liberated from ego attachment.

A classic mandala pattern reflects tantric Buddhism's emphasis on the *Mahavairocana* ("Great Sun") *Sutra*. For example, a mandala might centre on Mahavairocana, surrounded by the buddhas of the four directions: Aksobhya in the east, Amida in the west, Amoghasiddhi in the north, and Ratnasambhava in the south, all of whom together represent the various emanations of buddhahood itself. It is also characteristic of tantric Buddhism to give female counterparts not only to the buddhas but to the bodhisattvas who accompany them; thus mandalas often include numerous figures.

These deities have dual aspects, pacific and angry, depending on their functions (e.g., to assist in beneficial activities or to repel evil forces). The union of wisdom and compassion, considered the key to enlightenment, is represented by the father–mother image evoked by the embrace of deities and their consorts.

## Vajrayana in East Asia

Introduced to China in the eighth century under the name Zhenyan ("true word" or "mantra"), tantric Buddhism enjoyed only a brief period of popularity there, but in 806, a Japanese monk who had been studying in China introduced it to his homeland, where it flourished under the name Shingon. Shingon Buddhists practise a "right-handed" tantrism and believe that enlightenment comes with the realization that one's own Buddha-nature is identical with the Great Sun Buddha, Mahavairocana, and can be achieved in this life.

Zhenyan was transmitted to Korea in the same period. Known there as Milgyo, it maintained a distinctive identity until the fourteenth century, when it was amalgamated with Mahayana schools.

## Vajrayana in Tibet

Shakyamuni was born in the foothills of the Himalayas and converted his home region (now part of Nepal) a few years after his enlightenment. But the high Himalayan plateau was so difficult to reach that Buddhism made little headway there for the first 1,200 years of its history. It was not until the late eighth century that a few Buddhist missionaries found their way there at the invitation of Tibetan kings.

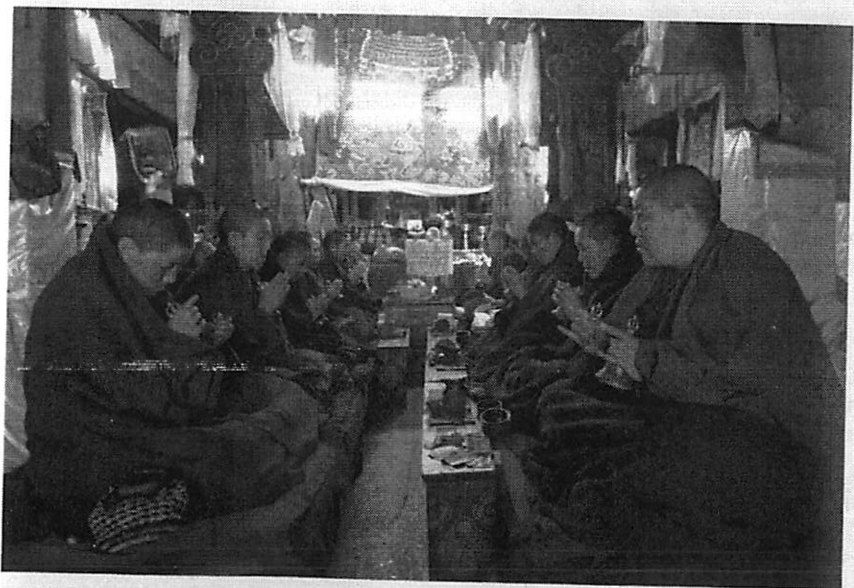
Vajrayana is said to have been established in Tibet by a *bhikshu* named Padmasambhava, who combined instruction in dharma with magic involving the world of the spirits. Revered as Guru Rinpoche ("precious teacher"), Padmasambhava is particularly identified with a school of Tibetan Buddhism known as the Nyingma ("ancient"), which traces its origins to his time.

Tibetan Buddhism is divided among three main ordination lineages or orders. The best-known, the Gelugpa, was founded by the reformer Tsongkhapa (1357–1419). On ceremonial occasions, members of this order wear large yellow hats, whereas the Kargyu and Karma-pa orders wear red and black hats, respectively.

### *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

A unique feature of Tibetan Buddhism is the text called the Bardo Thodol ("Liberation by Hearing on the After-Death Plane"), better known as The Tibetan Book of the Dead. A set of written instructions concerning the afterlife, the Bardo Thodol was to be read aloud to the dying, to help them achieve liberation during the three stages of the *bardo* state between death and rebirth.

During the first stage the dying person loses consciousness, experiences a transitional time of darkness, and then emerges into a world filled with objects unknown on the earthly plane. A brilliant light then appears. If the person recognizes the light as the Dharma Body of Buddha, he or she will



Buddhist nuns during morning chanting service in Lhasa, Tibet (© Tom Salyer / Alamy).



attain liberation and experience nirvana rather than rebirth. More often, however, bad karma prevents people from recognizing the true nature of the light, and instead they turn away in fear. Thus most people then pass on to a second *bardo* stage, in which some consciousness is regained. One may be aware of one's own funeral, for example. Peaceful deities appear for seven days, then wrathful deities appear for seven more days. These are all the Buddha in the Body of Bliss form, and those who meditate on them as such will experience liberation. Those who do not recognize them will gradually assume a new bodily form within a few weeks of death. Liberation is possible right up to the moment of rebirth, but karma keeps most people in the grip of *samsara*, the wheel of death and rebirth. In the third stage the individual's karma is judged and the appropriate rebirth is determined.

### *The Office of the Dalai Lama*

To understand the office of Dalai Lama and the controversial Chinese claim that Tibet is a part of China, we need to understand the historic relationship between Tibet and the Mongols. As the rulers of China from 1222 to 1368, the Mongols did not invade Tibet, but they appointed the head of

## Focus

### The Fourteenth Dalai Lama

Born: 6 July 1935, in a peasant farming village northeast of Lhasa. His name was Lhamo Thondup.

Signs: After the death of the thirteenth Dalai Lama, in 1933, the head of his corpse turned to the northeast, and a senior monk had a vision that included a monastery and a house with a distinctive guttering. When the search party found the house, in 1938, the three-year-old boy who lived there called one member of the party by name, and picked out the toys and other objects loved by the thirteenth Dalai Lama. He was then taken from his family to the monastery to begin training.

Instruction: After 18 months the boy was reunited with his family, who moved with him to Lhasa. In 1940 he was ordained as a novice and installed as the spiritual leader of Tibet. A long course of Buddhist studies followed.

High Office: An earthquake and threats of invasion from China prompted his installation as the political leader of Tibet in 1950, at age 15.

Exile: By 1959 the Chinese had taken over Tibet. To avoid arrest or worse, the Dalai Lama crossed the Himalayas to Dharamsala in northern India. From there he led the Tibetan government in exile until 2011, when he officially turned over the leadership to Lobsang Sangay, a Harvard-trained legal scholar. This brought to an end the tradition of joint religious and political leadership that began in the seventeenth century.

Writings: The Dalai Lama has written numerous books on Tibetan Buddhism, meditation, and philosophy, as well as an autobiography, *Freedom in Exile*.

Politics: The Dalai Lama continues to use non-violent means to advocate for the well-being of the Tibetan people. Negotiations with the Chinese government have so far not been fruitful. It remains to be seen whether his formal renunciation of political power will ease the tensions with China.

the Shakya monastery to serve as their viceroy for the region. Some two centuries later, a Gelugpa missionary named Sonam Gyatso (1543–88) went to Mongolia and converted its ruler, Altan Khan, who created the title Dalai Lama ("Ocean of Wisdom") and bestowed it posthumously on Gyatso's two predecessors, designating Gyatso the third in the succession. With the sponsorship of the Mongol princes, the Gelugpas soon became the dominant sect in both Mongolia and Tibet.

The first Dalai Lama to become the temporal as well as the spiritual leader of Tibet was the fifth, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617–82). With Mongol aid he subdued the challenge of the rival Karma-pa lineage and constructed the famous Potala palace in Lhasa. He recognized his teacher, Lobsang Chogye Gyaltsen (1569–1662), as an incarnation of Amida Buddha and gave him the title Panchen Lama. The position still exists, but has become controversial because the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government disagree on the identity of the legitimate Panchen Lama.

The fifth Dalai Lama also established diplomatic relations with the Manchu (Qing) dynasty, which came to power in China in 1644. As a result, Tibet became embroiled in the eighteenth-century rivalry between the Manchus in Beijing and the Oirots of Mongolia, and became a Manchu protectorate. Those old Tibetan ties with Mongolia and China are the basis of modern China's claim to Tibet. The former Tibet is now divided into three Chinese provinces known collectively as the Tibetan Autonomous Region, or TAR.

***Choosing a New Dalai Lama***

Considered to be a manifestation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, each Dalai Lama is said to be the reincarnation of the previous one. When a Dalai Lama dies, a search is undertaken to find a boy who shows intellectual qualities and personality characteristics similar to those of the deceased; then various objects are presented to him to see if he chooses those that were the Lama's favourites. Finally, the State Oracle enters a trance state to contact the spirits who must confirm the selection. The fourteenth and current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, was chosen in this way from a family of Tibetan descent living in China. A senior monk's vision played a key role in locating the boy.

# Interaction and Adaptation in East Asia

## China

Chinese converts interpreted a number of Buddhist ideas in ways that served to harmonize them with Indigenous traditions; (see Chapter 6). The Buddhist concept of rebirth on a higher or lower level of life was combined with the Chinese concepts of retribution for good and evil and a home with the ancestors to produce a system of many-layered heavens and hells, with a variety of saviour figures, including Guanyin and the bodhisattva Dizang ("earth-store"; Jizo in Japanese), to relieve the suffering of those reborn in hell. The scripture *Yulanpenjing* tells of a monk named Mulian, who after his enlightenment sought to rescue his mother from hell. This Buddhist expression of filial piety was the basis for the "all souls' day" celebrated on the fifteenth day of the seventh month in China, Korea, and Japan, where it is known as Obon.

Nevertheless, Buddhist monasticism was deeply alien to a social system based on kinship and veneration of ancestors. The practice of celibacy put the family lineage in jeopardy, and Chinese society looked down on those who did not work to support themselves. Thus Chinese monks eventually started to grow their own food. As a Chinese Zen master proclaimed, "A day without work is a day without eating."



At the same time, imperial officials saw Buddhism as a direct threat to the state's authority, as this seventh—century memorial to the first Tang emperor shows:

> Thus people were made disloyal and unfilial, . . . discarding their sovereign and parents, becoming men without occupation and without means of subsistence, by which means they avoided the payment of rents and taxes. . . . I maintain that poverty and wealth, high station and low, are the products of a man's own efforts, but these ignorant Buddhist monks deceive people, saying with one voice that these things come from the Buddha. Thus they defraud the sovereign of his authority and usurp his power of reforming the people (Hughes and Hughes 1950: 77).

Two centuries later, in 845, the Chinese state launched a campaign of persecution against Buddhism that, according to a report prepared for the emperor, led to the destruction of more than 40,000 temples and the laicization of 260,500 monks and nuns.

### *Folk Buddhism and the Milo Cult*

The image of the "friendly" bodhisattva Maitreya underwent a transformation in China not unlike that of the Indian Avalokiteshvara into the Chinese Guanyin. Before the seventh century, Maitreya was a heroic figure, and he has more than once been the focus of political rebellions in China, including the one that led to the founding of the Ming dynasty (1368). In the fifteenth century, however, he began to appear as Milo, a laughing monk with a pot-belly who would travel from village to village, putting interesting objects into his hemp bag and then giving them out to children, like Santa Claus. With his happy-go-lucky nature (*maitri* means "friendly" in Sanskrit), his large belly, and his affinity for children, the "Happy Buddha" reflects the importance that Chinese culture attached both to children and to worldly prosperity.

## *Korea*

Physical proximity created close links between China and Korea. The Han dynasty conquered the northern part of the peninsula in the late second century BCE and Buddhism was introduced roughly two centuries later, spreading from the northern kingdom of Goguryeo first to Baekche in the southwest and then to Silla in the southeast. It became most influential after Silla conquered the two other kingdoms and united the country (668–935).

The new religion expanded on an unprecedented scale during the Silla period. Among the major schools of Buddhism introduced from China were the Theravada tradition of the *vinaya* (monastic discipline) and the Faxiang (Yogacara) school, which eventually developed into a syncretic tradition. The most influential school, however, was Chan ("Seon" in Korea), introduced in the early seventh century. Nine Seon monasteries, known as the Nine Mountains, were eventually established.

In a commentary on the *Flower Garland Sutra*, the monk Wonhyo (617–86) argued that the different teachings complement one another, and together make up one whole truth:

> The world itself is, essentially speaking, in everlasting Enlightenment. In other words, the essential base upon which the whole complex of relationships among the different living beings is standing, is the ultimate eternal reality which is . . . the source of life and light, . . . which make it possible for our life . . . to be truly human, to be enlightened (Rhi 1977: 202).

In the late twelfth century, a charismatic monk named Chinul united the various schools to create the Jogye sect, which became the orthodox form of Buddhism in Korea. Nevertheless, Buddhist influence withered for several centuries after Confucianism was adopted as Korea's state ideology in the 1400s. Confucian scholars petitioned the court to restrict the number of Buddhist temples, supervise the selection of monks, and reorganize the ecclesiastical system while reducing the number of sects to facilitate state control. Temple properties were confiscated, the serfs attached to monasteries were drafted into the army, and Buddhist monks were banned from Seoul, the capital.

### *Japan*

Buddhism reached Japan from Korea in the sixth century—almost 900 years after Shakyamuni's time—and it had been transformed along the way. A turning-point was the warm reception it received from the regent, "Prince" Shotoku, who welcomed it (and Confucianism) for its civilizing effects and in 604 issued the "Seventeen-Article Constitution," a set of moral guidelines for the ruling class that urged reverence for the Three Gems. How Buddhism developed in Japan will be explored in detail in Chapter 11.

# Cultural Expressions

## Stupas and Pagodas

After the Buddha's *parinirvana*, several kings requested the honour of enshrining his cremated remains in their kingdoms. Accordingly, the remains were divided into seven portions. The urn that had held them and the cloth that had covered it were also given the status of primary relics, and so nine memorials were built. Then, as Buddhism spread additional memorials were built over other sacred objects, including the remains of major disciples and portions of scriptures.

When asked before his death how he ought to be buried, the Buddha had said that a Tathagata's remains should be enshrined in a memorial stupa like that of a great ruler. Thus each portion of his remains was placed in a small casket, richly decorated with jewels, and interred in an above-ground crypt, which was covered with earth to form a large mound and then bricks, which were plastered and whitewashed. Finally, a pole was erected over the mound to represent Mount Meru, a cosmic mountain that in Indian mythology reaches from earth towards the pole star, and around whose axis the world is thought to turn. There are several terms for these memorial mounds. The Sanskrit *stupa* and its Pali equivalent, *thupa*, are cognate with the English word "tomb." The term used throughout East Asia is "pagoda," which derives from the Sanskrit *dagoba* and connotes "womb" in the sense that burial is the forerunner of a rebirth. Whatever the local term, there are stupas on the grounds of nearly every Buddhist temple in the world, and it is the custom for devotees to circumambulate them (always in a clockwise direction, with the right side of the body facing the holy structure).

In addition to the main stupa, a temple complex may have smaller ones built as memorial crypts for important local Buddhists. Lay Buddhists sometimes strew flower petals at these stupas and vow that they too will overcome death and achieve nirvana someday.

Building small stupas has been a popular merit-making ritual. In Myanmar, thousands of small devotional stupas have been built through the centuries, often of sand at the shore. Since the merit comes from the builder's devotional state of mind, there is no need for the structure itself to endure.



The shape of the stupa or pagoda underwent changes through the centuries. In East Asia, the pagoda developed into elegant stone or wooden towers with either five or seven storeys representing the levels of the heavens symbolized by the wooden disks of the original Indian stupas; thus pagoda architecture made the "heavenly section" of the original stupa the dominant part of the structure.

## Temples

Buddhist monasteries grew out of the simple refuges—usually a collection of thatched huts—in which early monks lived during the rainy season, when they settled down for a period of intense study and meditation. Wealthy devotees would earn merit by paying for the construction of permanent buildings, and over time a temple complex would take shape consisting of living quarters, a small shrine, and a meeting hall. Eventually, to accommodate lay worshippers, the shrine developed into a large temple housing images of the Buddha. Today, besides the stupa and temple, the grounds usually contain a Bodhi tree, dharma hall, monastery, library, and refectory.

Early cave temples carved in stone were clearly modelled after the simple huts of the early sangha. By the Gupta period (c. 320–540), Buddhist temples had taken on the rectangular shape and other architectural features of Hindu temples at the time. In some regions cliff-side cave complexes were developed that included all the essentials of a temple complex, including separate caves for shrines, living areas, and even large dharma halls. In China, the rectangular wooden buddha hall reflected the influence of the tile-roofed imperial hall of state, with the buddha statue enshrined in the posture of an emperor. This style was the one that made its way to Japan, where the best-known example, the Todaiji temple in Nara, houses a bronze image of the cosmic buddha Vairocana more than 16 metres (52 feet) high.

## Images of the Buddha

The first images of the Buddha date from the first century CE, a time when the devotional aspects of Mahayana Buddhism were becoming increasingly popular. Until then, it was apparently assumed that no physical form could or should depict him. Instead, the Buddha and his teaching were symbolized by the stupa and symbols such as his footprint, the Wheel of the Law, the Bodhi tree, or an empty seat. Early statues and reliefs show the Buddha standing, seated either with dangling legs or in the lotus position of yogic meditation, or reclining at the moment of the *parinirvana*.

Hand gestures or *mudras*, similar to those found in Hindu portrayals of deities, became an important feature of Buddhist art. In one, the Buddha touches the earth with the fingers of his right hand, "calling the earth to witness" as he did in his encounter with Mara on the eve of his enlightenment. "Teaching the Dharma" is symbolized by a pose in which both hands are held over the chest, with the tips of the left thumb and forefinger touching to form a wheel. Another *mudra* shows the Buddha with his right hand raised, palm outward, indicating the "Granting of Protection." This is usually combined with the "Fulfilling a Wish" *mudra*, in which the left hand is extended down with the palm outward and fingers pointed down. Disciples are typically shown with their two palms together in the gesture called "Paying Respect," Namaste.

Buddhist iconography also includes the 32 major signs of Shakyamuni's status, the most obvious of which are the *usnisa* (the protuberance on the top of his head that was supposed to be the locus of his supernatural wisdom) and elongated ear lobes. Some art historians think that these

features were associated with royalty (elaborate hair styles, earlobes stretched by heavy earrings), but Buddhists see them as signs of Shakyamuni's supernatural nature. Other signs include wheel images on the soles of his feet, and fingers that are all the same length.

In China the Buddha is often depicted like an emperor surrounded by his court, seated in a serene posture and flanked by his disciples Kashyapa and Ananda. Nearby stand the bodhisattvas and stern-looking Arhats (*lohans* in Chinese), while the four World Protectors stand guard.

### Story Illustrations

Buddhist paintings and relief carvings often illustrate scenes from the life of the Buddha or the *Jataka* collections recounting Shakyamuni's previous lives. The walls of temples are often lined with such images, so that circumambulating visitors can see the story of the Buddha's life unfold.

As Buddhism spread, other cultures developed their own distinctive iconography. In China, images of Shakyamuni gradually took on a more Chinese appearance, and the figure of Guanyin developed into the graceful, standing feminine form now found throughout East Asia. There is a distinctive Korean representation of Maitreya as a pensive prince with one leg crossed over the other knee. This pose spread to Japan and can be seen in the famous wooden statue of Maitreya in Kyoto's Koryuji temple, which was founded in 622 for the repose of "Prince" Shotoku.

### Zen Art and the Tea Ceremony

The highly ritualized tea ceremony was introduced by Zen monks and spread from monasteries to become one of the most familiar symbols of Japanese culture. The Zen influence is also reflected in the minimalism of Japanese painting, in which empty space plays a central role, and the raked-sand gardens (the space accented only by the occasional boulder) typically found in the courtyards of Zen temples. Another cultural expression of Zen values is the Japanese art of flower arranging, which originated in the practice of creating floral offerings for altars and special ceremonies.

# Buddhism in the Modern World

## India

Buddhism's intellectual and institutional influence within India lasted until the seventh century, but its royal support disappeared as Buddhist kings were replaced by Muslim rulers. A related factor may have been the loss of lay support as Hinduism absorbed a number of elements from Buddhism, including its ascetic dimension. Hindus understood the Buddha as an *avatara* of Vishnu: while some saw him in a positive light as a champion of non-violence, others thought it was his role to attract insufficiently committed Hindus away from the "true" religion. Monasteries throughout India were abandoned or repurposed by other traditions, and some of the most famous Buddhist scholar-monks left for Tibet beginning in the eleventh century. As a result of this migration and the loss of lay adherents, Buddhism largely disappeared from India until the mid-twentieth century, although it did survive in a few eastern regions, as well as Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Assam.

***B.R. Ambedkar and the Mass Conversion of Dalits***

One catalyst for the revival of Buddhism in India was Dr Bhimrao R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), the lead author of the Indian constitution. Although he was born into the "untouchable" Dalit class,

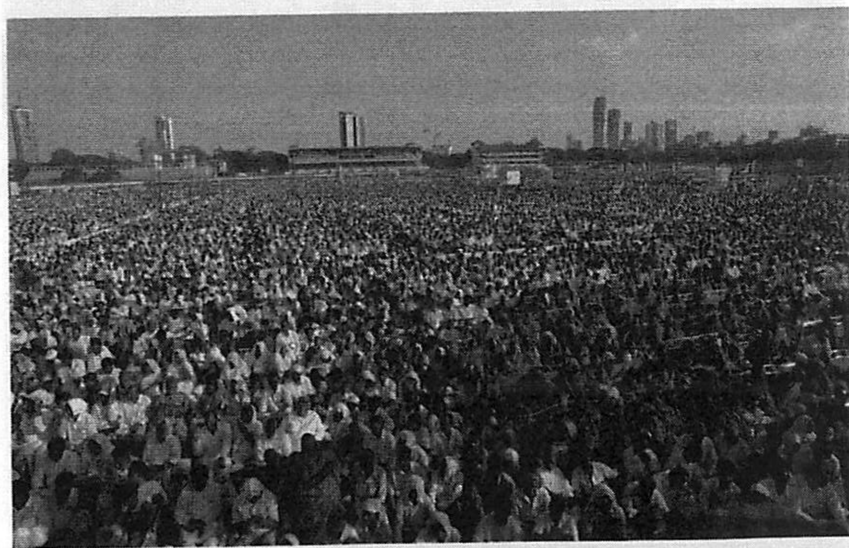


his intelligence led a brahmin teacher named Ambedkar to formally adopt him. With the help of that teacher and the local Muslim ruler, the young Ambedkar earned an undergraduate degree in India and eventually a doctorate from the London School of Economics. On his return to India he became an advocate for Dalit rights at a time when his older contemporary M.K. Gandhi was pursuing the same goal. The two disagreed, however, on the best way to that goal.

Ambedkar blamed Hinduism for the discrimination that Dalits faced. Hindu leaders such as Gandhi hoped that Hinduism could be reformed to eliminate, or at least greatly reduce, that discrimination, but Ambedkar foresaw that entrenched social and economic interests would make substantial reform impossible. Setting out to find a religion that would not discriminate against his people, he recognized in Buddhism a form of spirituality that was compatible with Indian cultural values, but that from its origins had taught the equality of all humans, regardless of birth status.

The history of Buddhism supports Ambedkar's view. The Buddha accepted followers without any regard for their caste. Seniority in the sangha was based solely on date of ordination, and the names of early Buddhist leaders suggest that they came from all social classes.

In 1956, at a large rally in city of Nagpur, in the heart of Hindu India, Ambedkar and his wife took the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from a Buddhist monk, and thousands of Dalits followed their example. Since then, many more Dalits have converted to Buddhism.



A mass conversion ceremony held in Mumbai in 2007 recalled the original mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism under Ambedkar's leadership in 1956. The people in red robes are Tibetan monks and nuns, many of whom now reside in India (© AP Photo / Rajesh Nirgude, File).

# Document

## Ambedkar on Religion and Democracy

*Here Dr Ambedkar argues the necessity of fraternity for democracy.*

What sustains equality and liberty is fellow-feeling. What the French Revolutionists called fraternity . . . [and] the Buddha called, Maitree [friendship or love]. Without Fraternity Liberty would destroy equality and equality would destroy liberty. If in Democracy liberty does not destroy equality and equality does not destroy liberty, it is because at the basis of both there is fraternity. . . .

In examining the possibilities of [democracy's] functioning successfully one must go to the Religion of the people and ask—does it teach fraternity or does it not? . . . If it does not, the chances are poor. . . . Why did Democracy not grow in India? . . . The answer is quite simple. The Hindu Religion does not teach fraternity. Instead it teaches division of society into classes or varnas and the maintenance of separate class consciousness. In such a system where is the room for democracy? (Ambedkar 2008: 270).

Shakyamuni's critique of social inequity has also contributed to a growing appreciation of his place in Indian history. As we noted above, there was a time during the period of Buddhist–Hindu competition when Hindus thought of the Buddha as an *avatara* of Vishnu. That some modern Hindu scholars recognize the Buddha as an important and admirable figure in his own right marks a significant change.

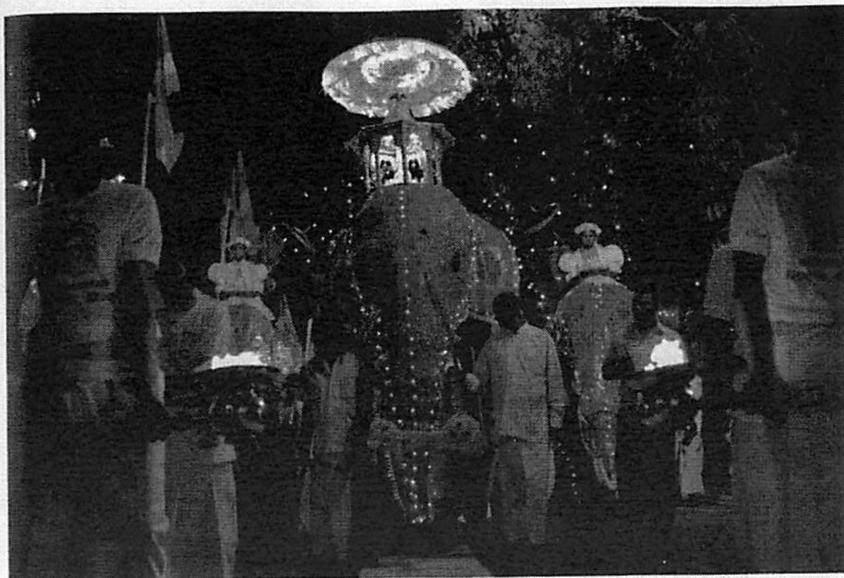
## Theravada in Modern Sri Lanka

After the fifteenth century, Sri Lanka was colonized by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British in turn, all of whom promoted some form of Christianity. Buddhism declined in prestige but hung on, and in the late 1800s it received an important boost from the founders of the Theosophical Society, Helena P. Blavatsky and Henry S. Olcott. Sinhalese Buddhists have been active ever since in publishing English-language materials on Buddhism, and they remain loyal to the Theravada tradition despite the presence of largely Hindu India to the north and 500 years of Christian missionary efforts under colonial rulers.

Since independence in 1948, Buddhism has had considerable influence on the policies of Sri Lanka's ruling parties, which draw support from the Sinhalese majority. This has led to feelings of oppression in the Hindu minority, most of whom are descendants of South Indian Tamils who migrated to the island over the past two millennia. (The Sinhalese are thought to have come from North India.) Conflict between the government and Tamil separatists led to more than two decades of bloodshed, even though both Hinduism and Buddhism teach non-violence. Although the civil war finally came to an end in 2009, relations between the two religious communities remain severely strained.

Nevertheless, Sri Lankan Buddhism continues its rich intellectual and ritual life. The symbolic centre of that life is the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, where an eye tooth said to be a relic of





The Kandy Perahera features torchlit processions in which more than 100 elaborately costumed elephants are paraded through the streets. Musicians and dancers come from surrounding villages, each with its own distinctive attire and dance style. (© M.A. PUSHPA KUMARA / epa / Corbis).

Shakyamuni himself is enshrined. At the time of the Perahera festival, one of the miniature gold stupas that house the tooth is placed in a howdah on the back of an elephant and paraded through the streets of Kandy for several nights.

## Theravada in Modern Southeast Asia

Theravada remains the most important vehicle across most of mainland Southeast Asia, though East Asian Mahayana traditions are dominant in Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore.

The end of Burmese kingship in the late nineteenth century, the years of British colonialism, and long periods of military rule since independence have severely weakened the Burmese sangha's traditional political influence. Its members have been cut off from significant contact with other Buddhist countries, and its temples have fallen into disrepair. Yet the *bhikshus* are still important in the traditional village-centred society, and the recent easing of military control offers some hope for renewal of Buddhist values.

Similarly in modern Cambodia, the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk (r. 1941–55) meant the end of the Buddhist kingship ideal of a government that provides for the basic human needs of all citizens. Since then, the political influence of the Cambodian sangha has been limited. Under the communist regime of Pol Pot (r. 1975–9) and the Khmer Rouge, many *bhikshus* were among the innocents slaughtered in the "killing fields." Yet by the late 1980s Khmer Rouge soldiers and *bhikshus* were working together on village projects. Today Buddhism continues to play its traditional role at the village level, most laypeople of all political stripes remain Buddhists, and all political factions appeal to Buddhist values to legitimate their claims to power.

In Thailand the tradition of monastic training for the king continues, and members of the royal family take part in rituals that symbolize the close ties between Buddhism and the monarchy. At the beginning of each season, the king changes the clothing on the Buddha image in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha and gives the image a ceremonial bath.

In Laos—under communist rule since the 1960s—Buddhism has lost the governmental support that it traditionally enjoyed. The traditional relationship of *bhikshus* and laity continues in the villages, however.

Finally, although Theravada has never gained a foothold in Vietnam, Theravada missionaries have recently had some success in Singapore and Malaysia, especially among English-speaking Chinese. Apparently some Mahayana Buddhists in Singapore have been attracted to Theravada as a purer form of the tradition than the Chinese schools that incorporated elements of Chinese folk religion. The Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia has been very active in encouraging dharma study.

Several reform movements are having an impact on Theravada Buddhism today. Retreat centres have been established in Thailand in an effort to reintroduce the lay practice of meditation among laypeople, and the Thai intellectual Sulak Sivaraksa (b. 1932) has argued for a Buddhist vision of society in which the means of development are harnessed for the good of everyone rather than the profit of a few capitalists. He has founded several organizations dedicated to that goal, including the Asian Cultural Forum on Development and the International Network of Engaged Buddhists.

## Mahayana in Vietnam

Theravada images and monastery foundations dating from before the ninth century have been found in Vietnam, but Chinese Mahayana traditions—notably Thien (from Chan) and Tinh-do (from Chinese Jingtu, "Pure Land")—have been dominant ever since then. Although Thien is largely a monastic tradition and Tinh-do mainly a lay movement, the two have influenced each other, and all Thien monasteries also teach Pure Land practices.

Twentieth-century efforts to reform Vietnamese Buddhism were interrupted by the Second World War. Then in 1954 the country was divided into a communist North and an anti-communist South, where the Roman Catholic president Ngo Dinh Diem (r. 1954–63) imposed restrictions on Buddhists. It was in protest against these restrictions that, in May 1963, an elderly monk named Thich Quang Duc assumed the lotus position on a busy street in Saigon, had gasoline poured over him, then calmly struck a match and became a human torch. A number of monks and nuns followed his example, attracting worldwide attention and contributing to the fall of the Diem government.



Self-sacrifice is an important theme in the thought of Thich Nhat Hanh (b. 1926), a Vietnamese monk who became not only a Thien (Chan–Zen) master but a poet and peace activist. In response to the atrocities of the Vietnam war, he developed what he called an "engaged Buddhism" to bring the resources of Buddhist wisdom to bear on contemporary conflicts. For him, the self-immolations of 1963 must be understood in the context of the Buddhist belief in the continuity of life beyond one human life span. He believes that changing the world requires that we first change our awareness, especially through meditation and the "art of mindful living." Commenting on the *Heart Sutra*, he says:

> If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. If we look even more deeply, we can see the sunshine, the logger who cut the tree, the wheat that became his bread, and the logger's father and mother. Without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist. . . . Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. So we can say that the cloud and the paper "inter-are." We cannot just be by ourselves alone; we have to inter-be with every other thing (Nhat Hanh 1988: 3).

## Buddhism in Modern China, Korea, and Japan

In the 1920s, while Chinese intellectuals were advocating greater openness to Western ideas, a Chan monk named Taixu ("Great Emptiness") called for both political and monastic reform, as well as a restatement of dharma in such a way as to speak to modern Chinese society. Like other Buddhist modernists, he believed that Buddhism should aspire to establish the heavenly Pure Land on Earth.

Government policy regarding Buddhist communities varies with their ethnicity. Temples of the majority Han Chinese population are mostly self-governing, but minority Buddhist communities, especially Tibetans, are strictly regulated because they are perceived to constitute a potentially threatening separatist movement. For that reason, any display of support for the Dalai Lama is prohibited. Even so, many Tibetan Buddhists took part in anti-government protests during the run-up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and in recent years dozens (most of them monks and nuns) have sacrificed themselves in what may be the ultimate form of non-violent protest: self-immolation.

In Korea, the overthrow of the pro-Confucian Joseon dynasty by Japan in 1910 freed Buddhism from the restrictions that had been imposed on it for centuries. Throughout the occupation (1910–45), however, religion was controlled and manipulated by the Japanese, and the influence of Japanese Buddhism led some Korean monks to abandon their vows of celibacy. The renewal of Korean Buddhism had to await the country's liberation from Japan, and the process was further delayed by the devastating civil war of 1950–3. The more conservative Jogye struggled to restore the traditions of Korean Buddhism, and in 1954 regained control of virtually all the major Korean monasteries.

Today in Japan Buddhism is often described as the religion of the dead, whereas Shinto is called the religion of the living because of its association with the joys of life. So closely is Buddhism

associated with the memorialization of the dead that the family shrine dedicated to the ancestors is called the *butsudan*—literally, the Buddhist altar. (For more on the complex interactions of Buddhism and other Japanese traditions, see Chapter 11.)

An interesting development in modern Japan is the Kyoto school of Buddhist philosophy. Its founder was Nishida Kitaro (1875–1945), who came of age in the period when Japan was looking to the West for ideas to help it modernize and sought to fuse Japanese Zen ideas with continental European philosophy. In keeping with Zen's emphasis on direct experience, he wrote of what he called "pure experience"—"experience just as it is without the addition of the slightest thought or reflection." For example:

> the moment of seeing a colour or hearing a sound that takes place . . . before one has added the judgment that this seeing or hearing is related to something external. . . . When one has experienced one's conscious state directly, there is not as yet any subject or object; knowing and its object are completely at one. This is the purest form of experience (Nishida, *Zen no kenkyu*; Takeuchi 1987: 456).

This approach is consistent with Zen founder Bodhidharma's call for a "direct pointing of the mind." Among Nishida's successors was Nishitani Keiji (1900–90), played a role in the emergence of an international Buddhist–Christian dialogue movement in the 1970s.

## Buddhism in the West

Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), the Anglo-American philosopher, once said that Christianity was "a religion seeking a metaphysic," whereas Buddhism was "a metaphysic generating a religion." For a long time, Western scholars were not certain whether Buddhism fitted their definition of "religion" at all, since—despite its rituals, scriptures, and monastic traditions—it did not centre on a personal deity.

Knowledge of Buddhism in the West was almost non-existent before the mid-nineteenth century, but in 1879 a book entitled *The Light of Asia*—a moving poetic account of the Buddha's life by Edwin Arnold—attracted wide public attention. Even so, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that a few Western seekers began to publish first-hand accounts of Buddhist meditational practice. By the 1930s, Buddhist societies had been established in Great Britain, France, and Germany.

Buddhist influences in North America have tended to come more from the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions than the Theravada. This has been the case ever since the World's Parliament of Religions conference in Chicago in 1893. Among the delegates was a Zen monk named Shaku Soyen (1856–1919), who later returned to America to spread Buddhism. His young translator, Daisetsu T. Suzuki (1870–1966), became the most influential Buddhist writer in North America. Suzuki made two extended visits to the United States, and wrote many popular books sprinkled with stories of Zen masters and koans. Popularized by Alan Watts, these writings caught the attention of Westerners looking for alternatives to Christianity.

Some Westerners have considered Zen a form of mysticism. Though others have argued that there is no experience of union with a personal god in Zen, if "mysticism" is understood in the broader sense of spiritual experience as a transformation of human consciousness, then Zen practitioners may well share something in common with Christian mystics. Catholic missionaries and theologians, coming from a long contemplative tradition, have sought to learn from Zen insights and techniques. Zen meditation has also attracted the attention of experts in depth psychology.

Zen was the first form of Buddhism to make significant inroads in North America, but it was not the only one. Immigrants from Japan also brought with them Nichiren Shoshu and various Pure Land sects. In addition, two lineages of Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism have gained converts in North America since the 1960s. The Kargyu lineage is represented both by the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, and by a community of Tibetans and converts based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, while the Dalai Lama's Gelugpa lineage has centres in New York and elsewhere.

### *Ethnic Congregations*

Existing alongside the Western converts are Chinese and Japanese Buddhists who, beginning in the late 1880s, settled along the west coast of North America, especially in California and British Columbia, and gradually found the financial resources to build their own temples. These ethnic congregations represented many branches of Buddhism, although the popularity of Pure Land in East Asia is reflected among ethnic Buddhists in North America.

There are also organizations such as the Buddhist Association of America and the Buddhist Association of Canada, which serve mainly immigrants of Chinese origin, and the Buddhist Churches of America (and of Canada), which serve True Pure Land followers, who are mainly ethnic Japanese. Similar, if smaller, groups with roots in Vietnam and Laos also have their own networks. Over time, some congregations have adopted Christian styles of worship, with pews, hymnals, and group leaders who take on all the responsibilities of North American clergy. There are now Buddhist Sunday schools, cemeteries, and wedding rituals conducted by *bhikshus* who are referred to as "priests."

In North America, ethnic Buddhist temples serve as community centres. Visitors are welcome, but the emphasis on community affairs tends to limit congregation membership to people from the same ethnic community. Buddhist meditation centres, on the other hand, have attracted many Western converts. Umbrella organizations such as the Buddhist Council of Canada are helping to bring Western "meditation Buddhists" into closer contact with ethnic congregations.

The influence of Buddhist thought in the West has been greater than the relatively small number of Western Buddhists might suggest. Without necessarily becoming Buddhists, many people in the West use modified versions of Buddhist meditational practices to calm their minds or improve their concentration before athletic or artistic performances. At the same time, Buddhist (and Hindu and Jaina) values such as non-violence and concepts such as rebirth and karma have spread well beyond the traditional religious context.

## Recent Developments

Buddhism continues to spread far beyond the land of its origin, but it has also faced setbacks in recent decades. In Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia it was weakened and challenged by the Christian missions and Western values introduced during the colonial era. And the loss of kingship in most of the Buddhist countries of southern Asia has undermined the political support system that existed for many centuries. Like other religions, Buddhism has also been challenged by modern,

secular ways of life. Buddhists generally do not see the scientific worldview as a serious challenge, since the Buddha himself emphasized rational thought. Still, the concepts of karma and rebirth do not fit comfortably into the standard scientific worldview.

It is also true that *bhikshus* are no longer the main educators, social workers, dispute settlers, and advisers in Buddhist countries, especially in the major cities; their roles are mainly limited to those of ritual leaders and directors of religious education. Yet Buddhists are not converting in any significant numbers to other religions, and most do make some effort to live according to Buddhist values.

### The Female Sangha

Over time the *bhikshuni* sangha died out in many Buddhist countries. The specific reasons may have varied, but in general the female order was vulnerable simply because it was smaller and less well connected to political power than the male order. In Sri Lanka, for instance, when both sanghas were devastated by famine, the king imported monks from Siam to revive the male order, but there is no evidence of similar action on behalf of the female sangha.

Recently, though, some effort has been made to revive the practice of *bhikshuni* ordination in Theravada countries. Some Theravada women take the same ten precept vows as male novices, consisting of the five precepts that lay persons take, plus five more. In Sri Lanka a female order observing ten precepts was started 1905 with the help of women from Burma, and in 1996 a new order of *bhikshunis*, adhering to all 235 precepts (the 227 that monks take plus 8 specific to women) was established in 1996 with the help of *bhikshus* from Sri Lanka and Korea.

Even without ordination, many Theravada women pursue a very active religious life both at home and in the temples. In Thailand laywomen can take vows of poverty and service similar to those taken by Roman Catholic nuns. Some of these women say they would not seek ordination if it were available, because they would have less freedom to serve others if they were bound by the *vinaya* rules. In modern times, Theravada has also moved towards greater acceptance of

## Document

### Jewel Brocade

*In* The Sutra of Sagara, the Naga King, *which was translated into Chinese in the third century, a princess named Jewel Brocade cleverly uses the Mahayana doctrine of the emptiness of all things to refute a male disciple who represents the stereotypical patriarchal position. No distinction between male and female spiritual abilities is valid, she argues, because all distinctions are ultimately invalid.*

You have said: "One cannot attain Buddhahood within a woman's body." Then, one cannot attain it within a man's body either. What is the reason? Because only the virtuous have eyes of Emptiness. The one who perceives through Emptiness is neither male nor female. The ears, nose, mouth, body, and mind are also Empty (Paul 1979: 236).



women's capacity for high religious achievement. A Thai laywoman named Upasika Kee Nanayon (1901–79), for instance, was revered by Buddhists of both sexes for her mastery of meditation and her instructional talks.

The status of women in the Mahayana tradition tended to be higher from the beginning. Certainly Mahayana took a more sympathetic view of laypeople in general than earlier forms of Buddhism did. The fact that Mahayana encouraged women as well as men to take the bodhisattva vow indicates that it considered women capable of enlightenment in a way that Theravada did not.

An order of Mahayana nuns following a *vinaya* of the Dharmagupta sect has continued as an unbroken lineage in China and Taiwan, and some of their *bhikshunis* may now be found in many countries. The founder of the Soto Zen school, Dogen, taught females as well as males, and although the Soto convents died out, the Rinzai school today has both nuns and female masters, and outside Japan, Zen masters give equal status to practitioners of both sexes.

Tibetan Buddhism has a long tradition of ordained women, several of whom have been in the forefront of Tibet's struggle against Chinese domination. Ani Pachen ("Great Courage") was known as Tibet's Joan of Arc after she led her clan in rebellion against the Chinese takeover in 1949. She was imprisoned and tortured, but refused to renounce Buddhism or her loyalty to the Dalai Lama. On her release from prison in 1981, she again played a leading role in Tibetan demonstrations against Hanification before escaping to join the exile community in Dharamsala, India.

## A Renewed Sense of Mission

According to the Buddhist understanding of long-term historical cycles, the dharma will continue to decline until the next buddha restarts the wheel. This somewhat pessimistic view of the future stands in sharp contrast to the views of many other religions, including Christianity. Yet it does not in any way diminish Buddhists' zeal or sense of mission.

In a sense, the many volunteer associations promoting Buddhist solutions to modern problems are performing the same functions as the Buddhist kings of the past who provided leadership in education, economic development, and social values. Meditation centres offer help with modern problems such as stress and overdependence on material possessions, and most of them emphasize the importance of breaking through the normal bonds of ego, self-centredness, and the assumption of permanence. *Bhikshu* Buddhadasa (1906–93), a Thai reformer, identified the fundamental problem as the attitude of "me and mine." This attitude may be part of the human condition, but Buddhists believe it is made worse by the materialistic and individualistic emphasis of contemporary values.

### Buddhist Economics

Another problem that Buddhists are addressing is the need for alternatives to modern patterns of economic development. The term "Buddhist economics" was first used by the economist E.F. Schumacher, who had exposure both to Gandhi's advocacy of small-scale, people-oriented development and to the efforts of U Nu to implement "Buddhist Socialism" in Burma as a middle path between communism and capitalism. (U Nu was a devout Buddhist who in 1947 became the country's first prime minister.) Not surprisingly, Buddhist economics proposes a middle

path between the environmental and social disasters of over- and underdevelopment. It advocates local-level, low-tech, people-oriented projects that will help everyone, and criticizes all projects that serve to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. Other advocates of Buddhist economics include the Thai monks Ven. Prayudh Payutto, who sees the Middle Path as the best way to sustainable development, and Ven. Prabhavanaviriyakhun, whose book *Buddhist*

## Sites

### Lumbini Park, Nepal

The site of the Buddha's birth, with the pond where Mahamaya is said to have bathed, a Bodhi tree, and a park surrounded by monasteries for visiting monks.

### Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India

The site of the Buddha's enlightenment. In addition to a huge Bodhi tree (said to be descended from the one under which he sat) there is a temple, and the park is surrounded by temples and monasteries representing different schools of Buddhism.

### Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, India

The deer park near Varanasi where the newly enlightened Buddha preached his first sermon and ordained his former companions.

### Bangkok, Thailand

On the grounds of the Grand Palace in Bangkok is the temple housing a jade sculpture known as the Emerald Buddha. The nearby Wat Pho temple complex is filled with interesting temples, and across the river is the picturesque Wat Arun, "Temple of the Dawn," where a tall pagoda sparkles at dawn and sunset.

### Angkor, Cambodia

Angkor (from a Sanskrit word meaning "city") was the heart of the Khmer Empire. Of the hundreds of religious temples and shrines it is home to, the most famous is the (originally Hindu) Angkor Wat.

### Shaolin, China

The Shaolin monastery is the home of Chan (Zen) Buddhism as well as many East Asian martial arts traditions. A two-hour hike up a mountain path leads to Bodhidharma's cave.

### Kathmandu, Nepal

There are two great Buddhist temples in Kathmandu. Swayambhunath sits high on a hill, its Nepali-style "eyes" overlooking the countryside. The other, Bodhanath, is a Tibetan-style stupa surrounded by shops and cafés.

### Lhasa, Tibet

The home of the Potala Palace (the home of the Dalai Lamas before the Chinese occupation) and the Jokhang temple.

### Ajanta Caves, Maharashtra, India

A complex of stone temples carved into a cliffside, filled with Buddhist sculptures and paintings.

### Kandy, Sri Lanka

The Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, northeast of Colombo, is the most important Buddhist site in Sri Lanka. The Perahera festival is a spectacular 10-day event in which some Hindus also participate.



*Economics* argues that achieving sustainable development will require (as he puts it in the title of another book) "reforming human nature." This theme is also central to the social critic Sivaraksa, who laments the spread of consumer greed throughout the world. In a variation on Descartes's "I think, therefore I am," Sivaraksa says that the slogan of consumerism is "I shop therefore I am."

### *Cooperation among Buddhists*

Buddhists in various countries are now forming networks across national borders; one example is the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, based in Bangkok. Many Buddhists now identify themselves first as Buddhists and only secondarily as Zen or Theravada Buddhists. This trend is strengthened by the growing tendency of Buddhist periodicals and Internet sites to feature articles by writers from a variety of traditions.

The sense of common purpose has been strengthened by the international exposure of the Dalai Lama, who has travelled to most Buddhist countries and in every case has been very well received. Strictly speaking, he is the spiritual head of just one Tibetan order, but Buddhists everywhere recognize Tenzin Gyatso as their spokesperson in some sense. His forced exile is seen as a loss for Tibet, but in the long run it may provide the impetus that Buddhism needs to regain its traditional role as one of the world's most vigorous and successful religions.

## Summary

Buddhists understand Shakyamuni, the Sage of the Shakya clan, to be the latest in a long line of spiritual masters who have become fully enlightened, teaching Buddhas. In the 2,500 years since his birth, his followers have preserved the teachings of the Buddha and others as sacred texts, selections from which are chanted to bring understanding and blessing to all. Buddhist thought makes no sharp distinction between animals and humans, and holds that all living beings are reborn according to their karma and progress along the path to enlightenment. Buddhism is organized by ordination lineages as subdivisions among three Vehicles: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. No one individual holds authority over all Buddhists, but the current Dalai Lama is world-renowned as the face of Buddhism today. Although Buddhism is a missionary religion, its approach today is generally low-key, centred on activities such as meditation training and informal "dharma talks."

What gives Buddhism its energy? What makes it work for so many people in so many different times and cultures? The answer may lie in the continuing power of the Triple Gem to shape people's spiritual lives. Buddhists feel confident "taking refuge" in the Buddha not as a god but as a great human being; in the Dharma as a set of living teachings that go to the heart of reality; and in the Sangha as a community of people committed to following the Buddha's path as closely as possible. They also feel confident that, in the distant future, when the wheel of dharma set in motion by Shakyamuni ceases to turn, the future buddha Maitreya will appear on Earth and turn the wheel yet again for the benefit of all beings.