

Enlightenment, Nirvana, Rebirth— Eastern Religion and Thought

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Upon completing this chapter, students should be able to meet the following Learning Outcomes:

- 7.1 Articulate the main tenets of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.
- 7.2 Compare and contrast the various views of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.
- 7.3 Explain the connection between the Tao, Ying, and Yang.
- 7.4 Articulate how principles of Taoism serve as the foundation of the art of Feng Shui

Unlike the West, where most religious systems embrace the notion of monotheism, with one, all powerful deity in control of reality, the East is filled with a myriad of polytheistic deities systems. Many of these systems embrace similar concepts such as the belief that enlightenment is in our own hands, and that karma and that the place and the form we reincarnate into depend upon our action in this life. **Hinduism**, **Buddhism**, and **Taoism** all share notions of **karma**, **samsara** (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth), and **reincarnation**, and the purpose of our existence is to reach **enlightenment** (**Nirvana**).

Karma is sometimes known as the Law of Cause and Effect. Karma can also be described as the Law of Moral Causation. According to Eastern philosophy, all of our actions have consequences for us. If we perform bad actions, negative consequences

will eventually ensue for us. If we perform positive actions, positives consequences will eventually follow. Unlike the causality discussed in other chapters, the cause and the effect may not immediately appear. For example, when you lie or steal, you may not immediately be caught. In fact, karma we have generated in previous lives may now be bearing fruit.

Samsara is the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The notion goes hand in hand with reincarnation as it is believed by most Eastern systems that people live many lives in many lifetimes. Reincarnation is the belief that either our soul, consciousness, or some other aspect of our spiritual being is reborn into a physical body in another lifetime. In other words, the spiritual part of us, what some call a soul, and other call consciousness, transcends our physical body and will endure (and maybe have endured) through many lifetimes.

In the West, evidence of this is controversial, although there are various physiologist and scientists who have studied the “past life phenomena.” Dr. Brian Weiss in one such scientist, and he has detailed a number of these cases in various books, including *Many Lives, Many Masters* (1988). By using past life therapy, he has been able to cure a number of patients of psychological ailments. In fact, in many of his regression therapy sessions, patients would go into very precise detail about daily activities that happened hundreds or even thousands of years ago. As noted, although reincarnation is met with skepticism by many Westerners, it is taken as a certainty by most Eastern religions.

POWERFUL ANALYSIS

Do you think people who remember past lives provide evidence for reincarnation?

The notion of enlightenment is certainly one of the most varied of Eastern concepts. Generally, it is believed by the various systems (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism) that a soul (or some aspect of our consciousness) will reincarnate time and again until they reach a state of enlightenment. Enlightenment is a personal journey and cannot simply be granted by a Buddha or god, but rather by one's own study and spiritual practice. For the Buddhist, when one achieves such a state, you will no longer reincarnate and will, in a sense, become one with the universe. Some beings that reach enlightenment choose the option of becoming a Buddha and of returning to this realm to help other beings reach enlightenment as well. For a Taoist, you may leave the earthly realm and join the immortals in a Taoist heaven. The specifics of this idea of achieving enlightenment are as varied as the religions and sects of those religions that believe in the concept.

Hinduism

Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions. It predates written records and its actual origins are lost to the past. The term Hinduism refers to the collection of faiths that are believed to have originated in India, but other scholars believe that it

was brought to India thousands of years ago by nomadic peoples. It is a polytheistic system with various gods and goddesses as well as lesser deities. A complete list of the deities (in their various incarnations) is beyond the scope of this text, but some of the chief deities include Brahma, Shiva, Sakti, and Vishnu.

“On Earth whatever has been gained perishes. So dies, whatever is acquired for the next world by austerities, and so called good deeds. Those who leave here without knowing the Self, as consciousness, reality, love, will not find freedom in any world.”

—Book VIII, Part 1, verse 6 of *The Chandogya Upanishad*

Brahma is considered by many Hindus as the superior god and the creator of this reality. Together with Shiva and Vishnu, he forms a trinity of gods: Brahma is the creator, Shiva is the destroyer, and Vishnu is the preserver. Brahma's job was creation of the world and all creatures. His name should not be confused with **Brahman**, who is the supreme god force present within all things. Many Hindus believe that Shiva's powers of destruction and recreation are used to destroy the illusions and imperfections of this world, paving the way for beneficial change. According to the Hindu belief, this destruction is not arbitrary, but constructive.

Vishnu is a personal god and a protector of this realm. The Buddha was an incarnation of the god Vishnu according to some Hindu sects. Vishnu's purpose is to return to the earth in troubled times and restore the balance of good and evil. It is believed that he has been incarnated nine times (taking on various forms known as avatars). Some Hindus believe that he will be reincarnated one last time close to the end of this world.



POWERFUL IDEAS: NOTABLE AVATARS OF VISHNU

Vishnu has appeared in various incarnations nine times on this earth.

Rama was a greatest warrior. In this form, he kills the demon King Ravana, who abducted his wife Sita.

Krishna was a great thinker and is the hero of the *Mahabharata*, an epic poem. He also delivered his famous message known as the *Baghavat Gita*.

Buddha appeared in the fifth-century BCE and founded the teaching of Buddhism.

Kalki is expected to appear at the end of this present age of decline. He will be a person on earth appearing seated on a white horse.

Buddhism and The Buddha

A philosophical tradition, founded by Gautama Siddhartha Buddha in the fifth-century BCE, that took on various forms as a religion and spread throughout Asia. In a sense, it is related to Hinduism in the same way that Judaism is related to Christianity (in that the Buddhist teachings come out of earlier ideas found in Hinduism in the same way that Christian ideas come out of earlier teachings found in Judaism).

Although many ideas are similar, there are various differences, and Buddhism is a distinct philosophical-religious system. The primary difference is that Buddhist do not worship the large Parthenon of deities found in Hinduism. Some Buddhists make offerings to the various Buddhas, but do not necessarily worship the Buddhas as god. It is important to note that most schools of Buddhism recognize various Buddhas beyond the historical one. Some lived human lives as Gautama Siddhartha did, and other Buddhas exist in other realms and realities. The Tibetans, for example, recognize Padmasambhava, (also known as Guru Rinpoche), founder of Buddhism in Tibet as a Buddha.

Regardless of the school or precise practices, Buddhism attempts to help the individual conquer the suffering and mutability of human existence through the elimination of desire and ego and attainment of the state of nirvana. This is done by mitigating the past negative karma of past lives. There are various schools and sects of Buddhism. Some schools focus on prayer and ritual, and other schools focus on meditation or study.

POWERFUL ANALYSIS

Do you believe in karma? Why or why not?

The Buddha's Eightfold Noble Path and Four Noble Truths

Buddha's answer to the central problem of life is captured by what is known as the "Four Noble Truths." (1) *The Truth of Suffering*, there is suffering; (2) *The Truth of the Cause of Suffering*, suffering has specific and identifiable causes (ignorance, ego, attachment, and desire); (3) *The Truth of the Ending of Suffering*, suffering can be ended by letting go of the causes of suffering; and (4) *The Truth of the Path Leading to the Ending of Suffering*, the way to end suffering is through enlightened living, as expressed in the Eightfold Path.



POWERFUL IDEAS: THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

- 1) Right Understanding
To understand the Law of Cause and Effect and the Four Noble Truths.
- 2) Right Attitude
Let go of thoughts of greed and anger.
- 3) Right Speech
Avoid lying, gossip, and harsh speech.
- 4) Right Action
Not to destroy any life, not to steal or commit adultery.
- 5) Right Livelihood
Avoid occupations that bring harm to oneself and others.
- 6) Right Effort
Work hard to do one's best in the right direction.
- 7) Right Mindfulness
Always being aware and attentive.
- 8) Right Concentration
Make the mind steady and calm in order to realize the true nature of things.

Meditation and Practice

There is not a uniform system of practice and study. In fact, there is no uniform set of Buddhist writings. There are various mantras and sutras found throughout the Buddhist community. Mantras are mystical symbols or sounds that are written or chanted. Sutras are religious text. Some of these texts are attributed to the Buddha or a close disciple, but others are written by various other Buddhist masters since the time of the Buddha. Many practitioners of Buddhism and other Eastern religions will have a small altar or place to meditate at home. Offerings and prayers are often performed on a daily basis.



Photo courtesy of Matthew Schuh.

Powerful Thinkers: Jetsun Milarepa

Milarepa was originally a practitioner of black magic. He studied the dark practices, in an effort to avenge his suffering at the hands of his aunt and uncle, whom stole his property and inheritance and made him, his mother, and his sister work as slaves in their own home and lands. He sent a powerful storm to his village that killed many people and fled into exile. He eventually studied under the Tibetan Master *Marpa the Translator* and spent many years suffering at his master's hands (so that he could remove the negative karma he had generated by his previous actions). He achieved enlightenment in a single lifetime, by means of decades of solitary meditation and practice. He is honored by the title Jetsun which is a Tibetan title meaning "venerable" or "reverend".

Two books, *The Life of Milarepa* and *The 100,000 songs of Milarepa*, recount various aspects of his life and practice. He was also renowned for the practice of an ancient yoga known as Tummo, or inner fire. He is said to have been able to melt ice and snow and live in the mountains in just rags because of the heat he was able to generate with the yoga. Milarepa's advice to those seeking enlightenment was, "Life is short, and the time of death is uncertain; so apply yourself to meditation. Avoid doing evil, and acquire merit, to the best of your ability, even at the cost of life itself. In short, act so that you will have no cause to be ashamed of yourselves; and hold fast to this rule."

Lao Tzu, Founder of Taoism

Lao Tzu (ca. 570 BCE), the founder of Taoism, regarded that the Tao is ineffable and beyond our ability to alter or change. He emphasized the importance of effortless non-striving and living in accordance with the principles of the universe. These principles are found in the Tao, which is a single force that guides events in the universe. Lao Tzu believed that human life, like everything else in the universe, is constantly influenced by outside forces. He believed "simplicity" to be the key to truth and freedom. Lao Tzu encouraged his followers to observe and seek to understand the laws of nature, to develop intuition and build up personal power, and to use that power to lead life with love and without force.

The Tao, Ying, and Yang

All of us have seen the yin-yang symbol, but few of us realize its relationship to Taoism. The main idea is that the universe is run by a single principle, the Tao, or "Great Ultimate." The Tao itself can be divided into two opposite principles, or two principles that oppose one another in their actions, yin and yang. All the opposites one perceives in the universe can be reduced to one of the opposite forces. The yin and yang represent all the opposite principles one finds in the universe. Under yang are the principles of maleness, the sun, creation, heat, light, heaven, dominance, and so on, and under yin are the principles of femaleness, the moon, completion, cold, darkness, material forms, submission, and so on.

Each of these principles produce the other: Heaven creates the ideas of things under yang, the earth produces their material forms under yin, and vice versa; creation occurs under the principle of yang, the completion of the created thing occurs under yin, and vice versa, and so on.

The yin and yang accomplish changes in the universe through the five material agents, or *wu hsing*, which both produce one another and overcome one another. All change in the universe can be explained by the workings of yin and yang and the progress of the five material agents (wood, fire, metal, water, and earth) as they either produce one another or overcome one another. Yin-yang and the five agents explain all events within the universe.

Feng Shui

The principles of Taoism serve as the foundation of the art of **Feng Shui**. Feng Shui is an art of divination (or predicting the future) and a method of influencing our destiny, which is based on Taoist principles. For the most part, the knowledge of Feng Shui has been a closely guarded secret in the East and completely misunderstood in the West. There are various schools of Feng Shui and books that find their way to Western books stores are usually a jumbled mess. There is much more to the practice such as buying a bamboo plant and placing it in your living room.

For thousands of years, Feng Shui masters and their few handpicked "in house" students tightly guarded ancient classical Feng Shui concepts and formulas.

Its secrets poetically disguised in Chinese verses called the *Classics*. This secrecy made Feng Shui difficult to comprehend. Only masters with lifetimes of training and experience knew how to use these secrets to keep men in power, win battles, and amass wealth. Historically, only noble and high ranking people were allowed to engage in Feng Shui practices. In an effort to discover the secrets of Feng Shui's power, some sought to become scholars of the Classics. Others paid astronomical prices to obtain formulas hidden in various classical texts on the subject.

Powerful Thinkers: Angel de Para



Photo courtesy of Angel De Para, Earthluck International.

Master Angel de Para is a modern Feng Shui practitioner that lives in the United States. He has studied under many of the world's leading Feng Shui masters and routinely travels around the world to continue his studies and to provide Feng Shui readings. He has worked to gain deeper levels of understanding of the art and has studied many of the classical teachings and textbooks. With a background in aeronautic quality control, he has rigorously applied scientific methods and practice to demonstrate the veracity (or truth) of Feng Shui practices. He has worked to test the various theories and formulas by means of extensive, worldwide research, observation, application, and documentation.

Through his rigorous studies and private practice, he further discovered and continues to systematically prove a multitude of his own formulas and theories (based upon the classical teachings that go back thousands of years in the East). He has been trained in various schools, but his practice is most heavily based in a school of Feng

Shui known as Flying Stars. This school incorporates an element of time which changes with each lunar cycle. He is also working to advance Feng Shui practices with twenty-first century applications. His teachings clarify and transform the many misconceptions and ineffective formulas that are confusing and frustrating those who want to learn and practice authentic Feng Shui.

Through his extensive experience as a highly effective practitioner, he found the teachings of his masters to be strong; however, the methodology of applying Feng Shui needed to adapt to the many changes in our universe. Changes in our means of social interaction and communication, the way we conduct business, construct buildings, apply science, create economic strategies, and so on. Currently, Master de Para is the only Feng Shui master who has preserved the essence of the ancient art while scientifically developing it to synchronize with our modern world.

Confucius and the Confucian Tradition

Confucius (ca. 550 BCE) was the founder of one of the most dominant systems of thought in China. He wrote with an emphasis toward the perfectibility of people and their ability to affect things for the better. Confucius himself had a simple moral and political teaching: to love others, to live with honor, to act ethical not egotistically, and to practice "reciprocity," that is "don't do to others what you would not want yourself."

Confucius was very critical of the government. He believed that government and rulers should lead by example, not by force. He felt that a government based upon laws and punishments could keep people in line, but governments led by rulers that exemplified virtues and good manners would enable people to act socially and to control themselves. This was seldom the case during his lifetime and China was in a nearly perpetual state of civil war with various factions controlling the country. His critical views regarding the behavior of the government bureaucrats, and of the abuses of civil Chinese authority led to his teachings being banned at various times throughout Chinese history.

Conclusion

There are thousands of religions that exist in the world today. There are hundreds of variations of the four that have been mentioned in this chapter. No single chapter in an introductory textbook can do justice to the topics of Eastern religions. Thousand of books have been written on each of the four religions discussed and on the hundreds of other religions that were omitted. In closing, religion and practice are often integrated into everyday life and culture in the East, so that there is no separation at times between secular and religious life.