Professor Malcolm David Eckel, Professor of Religion and Director of the Core Curriculum at Boston University, holds graduate degrees from Oxford and Harvard universities. An expert on Buddhism, comparative religion, and Asian faiths, Professor Eckel received the Metcalf Award for Teaching Excellence, the highest teaching award given at Boston University. His insightful books on Buddhist philosophy include *Buddhism: Origins, Beliefs, Practices, Holy Texts, Sacred Places*. 

**“Pure intellectual stimulation that can be popped into the [audio or video player] anytime.”**
—Harvard Magazine

**“Passionate, erudite, living legend lecturers. Academia’s best lecturers are being captured on tape.”**
—The Los Angeles Times

**“A serious force in American education.”**
—The Wall Street Journal
Malcolm David Eckel, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Religion
Boston University

Malcolm David Eckel received a B.A. in English from Harvard College in 1968. After a year at Episcopal Divinity in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he entered Oxford University to study Theology. He received his B.A. in Theology in 1971, with the M.A. to follow in 1975. While he was in Oxford studying the classical sources of the Christian tradition, Professor Eckel took a long journey through the major pilgrimage sites of Turkey and Iran. Out of this experience grew a fascination with the religious traditions of the Middle East and the rest of Asia.

After studying Sanskrit at Oxford, Professor Eckel returned to Harvard for a Ph.D. in Comparative Religion with special emphasis on the Buddhist traditions of India, Tibet, and Southeast Asia. As part of this program, he spent a year of research at the Institute for Advanced Study of Sanskrit in Poona, a traditional center of Sanskrit learning near Bombay. During this year, he also came to know the scholars in the Tibetan refugee community in India. He completed his Ph.D. in 1980 with a dissertation on the Madhyamaka School of Indian Buddhist philosophy.

After teaching at Ohio Wesleyan University and at Middlebury College in Vermont, Professor Eckel returned to Harvard as an assistant professor. At Harvard, he taught courses on Buddhism and Comparative Religion and was involved in the programs of Harvard Divinity School. He served as lecturer on several Harvard alumni tours of South and Southeast Asia and as Acting Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions.

Professor Eckel tells his colleagues and friends that in 1990, at the end of his years at Harvard, he walked down to the Charles River, raised his staff, watched the waters part, and walked dryshod across the river to Boston University. The details of this story are clearly apocryphal, but the story
expresses his satisfaction with the intellectual community he has found on the southern bank of the Charles River.

For the last decade at Boston University, Professor Eckel has taught courses on Buddhism, Comparative Religion, and the Religions of Asia. He has also participated in the university’s core curriculum program. In 1998, Professor Eckel received the Metcalf Award for Teaching Excellence, the university’s highest award for teaching. In 2002, he was appointed the National Endowment for the Humanities Distinguished Teaching Professor of the Humanities.

In addition to many articles, Professor Eckel has published two books on Buddhist philosophy, including To See the Buddha: A Philosopher’s Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness. He has traveled widely through the Buddhist countries of South, Southeast, and East Asia and is currently working on a book called Metaphors Buddhist Live By. This project explores the metaphorical connections between Buddhist thought and the practical demands of Buddhist life.
# Table of Contents

## INTRODUCTION

Professor Biography ........................................................................................................... i  
Course Scope .................................................................................................................... 1  

## LECTURE GUIDES

### LECTURE 1
Buddhism as a World Religion .......................................................................................... 4  

### LECTURE 2
The Life of the Buddha ...................................................................................................... 8  

### LECTURE 3
“All is Suffering” .............................................................................................................. 12  

### LECTURE 4
The Path to Nirvana .......................................................................................................... 16  

### LECTURE 5
The Buddhist Community ................................................................................................. 20  

### LECTURE 6
Mahayana Buddhism—the Bodhisattva Ideal ................................................................. 26  

### LECTURE 7
Celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas .............................................................................. 29  

### LECTURE 8
Emptiness ......................................................................................................................... 33  

### LECTURE 9
Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia ......................................................................... 37  

### LECTURE 10
Buddhism in Tibet ............................................................................................................ 43
Table of Contents

LECTURE 11
Buddhism in China ...........................................................................49

LECTURE 12
Buddhism in Japan ...........................................................................56

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL
Timeline ............................................................................................65
Glossary ...........................................................................................69
Biographical Notes ...........................................................................76
Bibliography ......................................................................................81
Great World Religions: Buddhism

Scope:

These 12 lectures survey the history of Buddhism—from its origin in India in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. to the present day. They are meant to introduce students to the astonishing vitality and adaptability of a tradition that has transformed the civilizations of India, Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan and has now become a lively component in the cultures of the West.

Born as Siddhartha Gautama in a princely family in northern India about 566 B.C.E., the man who is known as the “Buddha,” or the “Awakened One,” left his family’s palace and took up the life of an Indian ascetic. After years of difficult struggle, he sat down under a tree and “woke up” to the cause of suffering and to its final cessation. He then wandered the roads of India, preaching his Dharma, or “teaching”; gathering a group of disciples; and establishing a pattern of discipline that became the foundation of the Buddhist community, or Samgha. The Buddha helped his disciples analyze the causes of suffering and chart their own path to nirvana. Finally, after a long teaching career, he died and passed gently from the cycle of death and rebirth.

After the Buddha’s death, the community’s attention shifted from the Buddha himself to the teachings and moral principles embodied in his Dharma. Monks gathered to recite his teaching and produced a canon of Buddhist scripture, while disputes in the early community paved the way for the diversity and complexity of later Buddhist schools.

The Buddhist king Asoka, who reigned from about 268 to 239 B.C.E., sent the first Buddhist missionaries to Sri Lanka. From this missionary effort grew the Theravada (“tradition of the elders”) Buddhism that now dominates all the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia with the exception of Vietnam. Asoka also left behind the Buddhist concept of a “righteous king” who gives political expression to Buddhist values. This ideal has been embodied in recent times by King Mongkut in Thailand and Aung San Suu Kyi, who
won the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize for her nonviolent resistance to military repression in Burma.

The Indian tradition was radically transformed by two major new movements. The first was known as the Mahayana (“Great Vehicle”); the second, as Tantra or the Vajrayana (“Diamond Vehicle”). The Mahayana preached the ideal of the bodhisattva who postpones nirvana to help others escape the cycle of rebirth. Tantra developed a vivid and emotionally powerful method to achieve liberation in this life.

Buddhism entered Tibet in the seventh century and established itself as a powerful combination of Indian monasticism and Tantric practice. Tibetan Buddhism eventually developed four major schools, including the Geluk School of the Dalai Lama. Today, the fourteenth Dalai Lama carries Buddhist teaching around the world.

Born as Siddhartha Gautama in a princely family, the man known as the Buddha left his family’s palace and took up the life of an Indian ascetic.
Buddhism entered China in the second century of the common era, at a time when the Chinese people had become disillusioned with traditional Confucian values. To bridge the gap between the cultures of India and China, Buddhist translators borrowed Taoist vocabulary to express Buddhist ideas. Buddhism took on a distinctively Chinese character, becoming more respectful of duties to the family and the ancestors, more pragmatic and this-worldly, and more consistent with traditional Chinese respect for harmony with nature. During the T’ang Dynasty (618–907), Buddhism was expressed in a series of brilliant Chinese schools, including the Ch’an School of meditation that came to be known in Japan as Zen.

Buddhism entered Japan in the sixth century of the Common Era and soon became allied with the power of the Japanese state. Buddhist Tantra was given distinctive Japanese expression in the Shingon School, and the Tendai School brought the sophisticated study of Chinese Buddhism to the imperial court. During the Kamakura period (1192–1333), Japan suffered wide social and political unrest. Convinced that they were living in a “degenerate age,” the brilliant reformers Honen (1133–1212), Shinran (1173–1262), and Nichiren (1222–1282) brought a powerful new vision of Buddhism to the masses. The Kamakura period also saw a series of charismatic Zen masters who gave new life to the ancient tradition of Buddhist meditation.
During its 2,500-year history, from the time of the Buddha to the present day, Buddhism has grown from a tiny religious community in northern India into a movement that now spans the globe.

When you come to Buddhism after studying other major religious traditions, you have to be prepared for some surprises. Many aspects of Buddhism seem very familiar. For example, Buddhists tell a story about the founder of their tradition. His name was Siddhartha Gautama. He lived in northern India around 500 B.C.E. and was known to his followers as the Buddha, or the “Awakened One.” Like Jesus and Muhammad, he developed a distinctive response to the religious problems of his day, and he started a religious movement that now spans the globe, from India and Southeast Asia; to China, Tibet, Korea, and Japan; and in the last hundred years, to Europe, North America, and other parts of the world. During his life, the Buddha created an order of monks and nuns who passed on a tradition of Buddhist learning and practice, as Christian monks and nuns did in Europe during the Middle Ages and still do in many parts of the Christian world today. Buddhists have familiar patterns of ritual and worship. They go on pilgrimages to important shrines; they worship images and sites that are sacred to the Buddha; and they mark the stages of life with rites of passage, similar to the ritual of a bar mitzvah in Judaism or baptism in Christianity. Buddhists also teach people how to confront and deal with the deepest questions of human life: What will happen to me when I die? How can I live my life in a way that will be happy, peaceful, compassionate, and free from suffering?

But some aspects of Buddhism challenge our assumptions about religion. *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* defines religion as “the service and adoration of God or a god expressed in forms of worship.” If you mention the word “religion” to most people, the first idea that comes to mind is “God.” There are gods in Buddhism, and Buddhists sometimes attribute special powers to the Buddha, but the tradition begins simply with a human being—Siddhartha Gautama—who found a solution to the problem of human
suffering. Buddhists focus on his experience, and they deny the existence of a single, almighty God. The Buddhist tradition will challenge us to look in new ways at some basic religious questions: What is ultimate reality? How can I know it? And does it love me? Many religious traditions emphasize the importance of an immortal soul. This is not so in Buddhism. Buddhists say that a human personality is like a river or a raging fire: The personality is constantly changing, and the idea of an immortal soul is simply an illusion that human beings impose on a process of constant change. Buddhist ideas of the self challenge us to think in new ways about some old questions: Who am I? How can I develop my full potential as a human being? What is true for human beings is also true for Buddhism itself. Like everything else in the world, Buddhism is constantly changing. As we consider the astonishing variety of Buddhism that evolved in India and elsewhere in Asia, we will have to ask ourselves: What actually is Buddhism? Are there any values, practices, or religious commitments that remain constant through this extraordinary process of cultural change?

The most basic Buddhist expression of faith is called the “triple refuge”: “I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the Dharma [the Buddha’s teaching]; I take refuge in the Samgha [the community of the Buddha’s followers].” We will take our first step into the world of Buddhism by looking at each of these three refuges. We begin, of course, with the Buddha himself, the “Awakened One” who set the Buddhist tradition in motion. The Buddha often is depicted sitting in a serene pose, with feet crossed in front of him and hands folded in his lap—the very picture of calm and contemplation. This is the image that has drawn people to the Buddha for many centuries, and it is the one that conveys most explicitly the experience of his awakening. After his awakening, the Buddha got up from his seat and taught his experience to others on the roads of northern

Depicted here in the lotus position, the Buddha discovered enlightenment after the Second Awakening.
India. The major events of the Buddha’s life took place in the Madhyadesha, or the “Middle Region,” of the Ganges Basin in northern India. These sites are still the focus of Buddhist pilgrimage today. The Buddha’s Dharma, or “teaching,” is often expressed by Four Noble Truths: the truths of suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering (or nirvana), and the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering. These will be the subjects of our third and fourth lectures. The fifth lecture will take up some of the important institutional issues that confronted the Buddhist community after the death of the Buddha, including the origins of monasticism and the development of a canon of Buddhist scripture.

After laying the foundations for our study of Buddhism, we will trace the development of Buddhism through India, Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, and Japan. In India itself, two major reform movements appeared that changed the face of Buddhism. The first of these was called the Mahayana, or “Great Vehicle.” The second was called Tantra. The word Tantra is difficult to translate, but we might think of it, for the moment at least, as “power.” We will explore the Mahayana and Tantric traditions in separate lectures.

As Buddhism was transmitted to other countries in Asia, it developed in strikingly new ways. Buddhism was carried to Sri Lanka (the island that used to be called Ceylon) by Buddhist missionaries in the third century B.C.E. From Sri Lanka, it was carried to much of Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. Buddhism entered China in the second century C.E., carried north by monks and merchants over the mountains of Central Asia and across the Silk Road into the heartland of China. From China, Buddhism was eventually carried to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. In the eighth century, Buddhism was carried across the Himalayas from India to Tibet. Today, the Dalai Lama, the leader of the Tibetan Buddhist community, is one of the most visible and active Buddhist leaders in the world. In many ways, he is living symbol not just of Tibetan Buddhism, but of Buddhism itself. We will give separate attention to the major varieties of Buddhism in all these cultural areas in our final four lectures.
Today, Buddhism has spread through much of the rest of the world, including Europe, Australia, and the Americas. In some places, Buddhism is strongest in ethnic communities, such as the Sri Lankan Buddhist Samgha in Los Angeles or the Buddhist Churches of America, a Japanese-based community on the West Coast and in Hawaii. Buddhism also has had wide influence through several generations of Western converts.

These lectures have two goals: To give you a sophisticated appreciation of the varieties of Buddhism in the world, not just as historical movements but in the present day. To look at the world through Buddhist eyes and imagine what it might be like to be part of the unfolding historical drama we know by the name of “Buddhism.” In the process of achieving these two goals, we will find that Buddhism challenges the way we look at religion. It will challenge us to ask some familiar questions in a new way: What is sacred to us, what is our ultimate concern, and how are religious values reflected in our society? If we approach this tradition with an open mind and an open heart, the “otherness” of Buddhism will give us a new way of understanding ourselves.

**Essential Reading**


**Supplementary Reading**

Brown, *Man in the Universe*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. When you attempt to understand a new religious tradition, what is the most important thing to learn? Would you focus on its doctrines, the way it tells stories, its art, its rituals, or its institutions? Would you focus on something else?

2. If you were trying to explain your own religious tradition to someone who knew nothing about it, what would be the most important thing for that person to learn?
The Life of the Buddha
Lecture 2

Historically, we have just a couple of facts about the life of the Buddha. … This handful of historical facts is actually important to us. They tell us that the Buddha was not a figment of someone’s imagination. He was a real human being.

When a person encounters Buddhism for the first time, it is natural to ask two questions: Who was the Buddha? How did the story of the Buddha become woven into the lives of the people who call themselves Buddhists? This lecture will do two things: Tell the life story of the Buddha. Reflect about the way that story has been mirrored in the lives of Buddhist people throughout Asia and the rest of the world.

Historians are confident of a few key facts about the Buddha’s life: He was born into the family of King Shuddhodana and Queen Maya about the year 566 B.C.E. in a region of the Indian subcontinent that now lies in southern Nepal. (This date has been questioned recently by a group of historians who place his birth in the fifth century B.C.E.) He was a member of the Shakya tribe; his clan name was Gautama; and his given name was Siddhartha. It is common to refer to him as Siddhartha Gautama or, more commonly, as Shakyamuni, “The Sage of the Shakya Tribe.” These facts tell us that the Buddha was not a figment of someone’s imagination: He was a real human being. But they do not tell us much about what the Buddha did or about the impact he had on his followers. To learn about the Buddha this way, we must turn to the stories Buddhists tell about the Buddha.

Buddhists have a rich tradition of stories and legends about the Buddha. The stories begin with the Buddha’s previous lives. Buddhist tradition arose at a time when the doctrine of reincarnation was a basic assumption in Indian religious life. The doctrine of reincarnation or rebirth is known as samsara (literally, “wandering”). Samsara was not considered a pleasant prospect. For many people, it was not an opportunity as much as it was a burden, and they tried to find a way out.
Stories about the Buddha’s previous lives are told in texts known as *Jataka*, or “Birth Tales.” Most of these stories convey simple moral lessons, often in a form that is accessible to children. An example is the story of the monkey, the elephant, and the partridge. In a technical sense, these stories are not yet about the Buddha but about a “future Buddha,” known as a *bodhisattva*.

Stories about the Buddha’s life contain several key episodes. These episodes are widely represented in Buddhist art and have had an important influence on the way Buddhists imagine an ideal human life. The birth of the future Buddha was surrounded by miraculous signs indicating that he would become a *chakravartin*, or a “turner of the wheel.” A chakravartin becomes either a great king and turns the wheel of conquest or a religious teacher and turns the wheel of *Dharma*, or religious teaching. The wheel of the Dharma has become the international symbol of Buddhism. Siddhartha’s father tried to protect him from the suffering of the world in the hope that he would become a great king. He was raised as a prince, was married, and had a child. In his early thirties, he traveled outside the palace and saw four sights: a
sick person, an old person, a corpse, and an ascetic. These sights inspired him to renounce life in the palace and become an ascetic. His renunciation or (“going forth”) is reenacted in Buddhist communities today whenever a young person becomes a monk or nun.

He began the path of renunciation with severe fasting and self-discipline. Eventually, he found that this was unproductive, and he adopted a mode of discipline known as the Middle Path, avoiding the extremes of self-denial and self-indulgence. The theme of the Middle Path has affected not only Buddhist discipline but also the way Buddhists think about fundamental questions, such as the nature of the self. Following this mode of discipline, the future Buddha sat down under a tree and, with intense meditation, woke up to the truth. With this experience, he became a Buddha, someone who has “awakened” from the dream of ignorance and whose wisdom has “blossomed” like a flower. When Siddhartha became a Buddha, he also achieved the state or the goal that Buddhists call nirvana, which means “to extinguish” or “to blow out.” A Buddha is someone who has understood the causes of suffering and has “blown them out,” meaning that he no longer suffers from the ignorance and desire that feed the fire of death and rebirth.

Words have their place, but the Buddha’s teaching also can be conveyed through gestures, a smile, a tilt of the head, or perhaps best of all, through silence.

The Buddha got up from the tree of his awakening, walked to Sarnath, in the outskirts of Banaras, and turned the wheel of his Dharma by preaching about his realization to a small group of his former companions. Among the many stories about this phase of the Buddha’s life is a strange story about Angulimala (“Garland of Fingers”), a serial killer who collected his victims’ fingers. He met the Buddha, was stricken with remorse, and became a member of the Buddha’s monastic community.
These stories show something about the Buddha and something about the Buddhist tradition. Words have their place, but the Buddha’s teaching also can be conveyed through gestures, a smile, a tilt of the head, or perhaps best of all, through silence. Buddhism is a teaching about the way to live a serene and contemplative life. The Buddha taught this as much by his example as by his words.

At the age of about 80, after a long and productive teaching career, the Buddha lay down between two trees and passed gently from the realm of death and rebirth. This event is called his *parinirvana* or Complete Extinction. After the Buddha’s death, his body was cremated, and his relics were enshrined in reliquary mounds, or *stupas*. These stupas became the models for the practice of Buddhist worship.

Buddhists follow the example of the Buddha by walking, literally or metaphorically, in his footsteps, by attempting to wake up to the truth and extinguish the fires of desire and dissatisfaction.

---

### Essential Reading


### Supplementary Reading


### Questions to Consider

1. The story of the Buddha is so familiar that it is easy to take it for granted, but it represents a distinctive cultural image of an ideal human life. Are there any features of the story that seem surprising or problematic?

2. The concept of freedom is a central value in many cultures. Do you think that the story of the Buddha gives a convincing picture of freedom?
During his life, the Buddha had been a focus of veneration and a source of authority. When the Buddha not only died, but had left the realm of rebirth altogether, what was left to fill the void?

The death of the Buddha left his followers with a difficult problem. During his life, the Buddha had been a focus of veneration and a source of authority. When the Buddha both died and left the realm of rebirth altogether, what was left to fill the void? Buddhists have typically given two answers to this question. For those who want to worship the Buddha, the Buddha left behind a Form Body, initially comprised of the relics left behind by the Buddha’s cremation. Over time, any physical sign or representation of the Buddha came to play the same role, including objects the Buddha touched, places he visited, and images of the Buddha’s form. For those who want to follow the Buddha’s example, he left behind his Dharma, the teaching that expressed the content of his awakening and showed the way for others to achieve awakening for themselves.

Everything is suffering.
Everything is impermanent.
Nothing has any self, or “all is no self” (anatta).

Out of this distinction between the Buddha’s physical body and the body of his teaching came a theory of the two bodies of the Buddha. This theory is similar, in some respects, to the Christian speculation about the nature of Christ. Christian theologians distinguish between the two natures of Christ: Christ is said to be both fully human and fully divine. Buddhists say that the Buddha has two bodies: a physical or Form Body that arises and passes away like any other part of this changeable and transient world, and a Dharma Body that is eternal and does not change. It is misleading, however, to think that the Buddha is divine with respect to either of these two bodies.
In the “Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of Dharma” (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta), the traditional summary of the Buddha’s first sermon, the Buddha’s teaching is summarized in Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are: (1) the truth of suffering (dukkha), (2) the truth of the arising of suffering, (3) the truth of the cessation of suffering (also known as nirvana or nibbana), and (4) the truth of the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. The terms dukkha and nibbana are cited in Pali, the language of the earliest Buddhist scriptures. Pali is best understood as a vernacular form of Sanskrit, the classical language of India.

Some say that all of the Noble Truths are contained by implication in the seemingly simple claim that “all is suffering.” When people come to Buddhism for the first time, this statement often seems to be a barrier. It seems to mean that the Buddha (and, by implication, all Buddhists) was pessimistic. The first important intellectual challenge in the study of Buddhism is to understand how this simple statement about suffering leads not to pessimism but to a sense of liberation and peace. Traditional sources say that “all is suffering” in one of three ways. First, dukkha-dukkha, (suffering that is obviously suffering): Some things cause obvious physical or mental pain. Second, viparinama-dukkha (suffering due to change): Even the most pleasurable things cause suffering when they pass away. And third, samkhara-dukkha (suffering due to conditioned states): Pleasurable things can cause pain even in the midst of the pleasure, if the pleasure is based on an illusion about the nature of the object or about the nature of the self. To make these abstractions more concrete, we can use the example of an automobile. A car causes dukkha-dukkha if you drive it into the back of a bus. A car causes viparinama-dukkha if you drive it through a New England winter and watch it disintegrate in the snow and salt. A car causes samkhara-dukkha if you think there is something in your sense of self that will be enhanced by attachment to the car.

The significance of these three kinds of suffering can be explained further by relating them to the three “marks” of existence. Everything is suffering. Everything is impermanent. Nothing has any self, or “all is no self” (anatta).
What do Buddhists mean when they say that there is “no self”? In traditional Buddhism, “no self” means that there is no permanent identity to continue from one moment to the next. If there is no permanent identity, what makes up the human personality? The answer to this question is: five “aggregates,” from material form (rupa) to consciousness (vinnana). These five aggregates are only momentary, but they group together to give the illusion of permanence, like the flow of a river or the flame of a candle.

If there is no self, what is reborn? The “stream” or “flame” of consciousness (vi–ana). Because of the causal continuity between moments in the flame, it is possible to say that I am the “same” person from one moment to the next. But when we look closely at the flame, we realize that it changes at every moment, and the idea that one moment is the same as another is nothing but an illusion.

Is the doctrine of suffering pessimistic? The concept of no-self helps us understand why Buddhists do not consider the doctrine of suffering to be as negative as it seems. From a Buddhist point of view, it is simply realistic to accept that the human personality and all of reality are constantly changing. The cause of suffering is not the change itself, but the human desire to hold on to things and prevent them from changing.

When Buddhists look at the world through the lens of no-self, they do not approach it in a pessimistic way. They understand that if everything changes, it is possible for everything to become new. And if they accept the doctrine of suffering, it is possible to approach even the most difficult situations in life with a sense of lightness and freedom.

This doctrine also helps a person move forward on the path to nirvana. If a Buddhist realizes that there is no permanent self, there is no longer any reason to be attached to all the things that bring someone back in the cycle of death and rebirth. Just a hint of this realization is enough to start unraveling the chain of causes that bind people to samsara and get them moving toward nirvana.
Essential Reading


Robinson and Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion*, ch. 2.

Supplementary Reading


Questions to Consider

1. Why would it be attractive to think that there is no self?

2. Would this be a dangerous idea if it were understood in the wrong way?

3. How might Buddhists protect themselves against these dangers?
Like the concept of suffering, nirvana at first seems extremely pessimistic. In some respects, this is inescapable. Nirvana marks the definitive end of the cycle of rebirth.

The Second Noble Truth is the truth of the origin of suffering. The origin of suffering is explained by a causal sequence known as the twelve-fold chain of dependent arising (paticca-samuppada). The most important links in this chain show a process that leads from ignorance to birth. Ignorance leads to desire. Desire leads to birth. To understand what Buddhists have in mind when they make this series of connections, you might take a glossy advertisement and ask what kinds of illusions it fosters, what kinds of desires it is meant to arouse, and what comes into being as a result of those desires. Most of these illusions are quite benign, but they feed a process that, for Buddhists, leads to more death and rebirth. The most fundamental form of ignorance is that “I” constitutes a permanent ego that needs to be fed by new and desirable experiences or new and desirable objects.

The Third Noble Truth is the truth of cessation or nirvana. When someone begins to cultivate an awareness of no-self and strips away the desires that feed the fire of samsara, it is possible eventually for the fire of samsara to burn out. This is not easy, and it may take many lifetimes. But it is possible for anyone to achieve the same cessation of samsara that was experienced by the Buddha himself.

This cessation is known by the name nirvana (Pali nibbana). Nirvana means to “blow out,” as if one were extinguishing the flame of a candle. Nirvana can be understood as the “blowing out” of desire, the “blowing out” of ignorance, or the “blowing out” of life itself, if life is understood as the constant cycle of death and rebirth. Nirvana comes at two moments: at the moment of awakening, when the Buddha understood that he was no longer adding fuel to the fire of his personality, and at the moment of parinirvana, when the fire of his personality finally flickered out. These two moments are called “nirvana with residues” and “nirvana without residues.”
Like the concept of suffering, nirvana seems at first to be quite negative. Why do Buddhists find it so attractive? The concept of nirvana forces us to take seriously the negative Indian evaluation of samsara. If samsara really is something to be avoided, then the most positive thing to do about samsara is simply to negate it, to bring it to an end. Nirvana is this negation. This view of nirvana as cessation is quite different from a Jewish or Christian concept of the goal of life. According to Jewish and Christian tradition, God created the world out of nothing. You could say that God once faced “nothing” and made something come to be. The Buddha did the opposite. He faced a situation in which death and rebirth had been going on for time without beginning, and he found a way to bring his part of this cycle to an end.

Another way to explain the appeal of nirvana is to understand that the experience of nirvana is not limited to the moment of the Buddha’s death. The Buddha also experienced nirvana at the moment of his awakening, when he knew that he was no longer bound by the ignorance and desire that fuel samsara. When nirvana is understood in this way, it is not just the cessation of life. It is a quality of mind or a state of being that characterizes the Buddha’s life in the 40 years between his awakening and his parinirvana. During this time, the Buddha exemplified many characteristics that we would consider quite positive: He was peaceful, wise, unattached, and free. We could imagine that he also was able to act with a certain spontaneity and clarity of mind, perhaps even with a certain amount of compassion for the suffering of others.
The Fourth Noble Truth is the truth of the path. The path to nirvana is divided into eight categories: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The logic of the path is more clear, however, if we reduce these eight categories to three: *sila*, or moral conduct; *samadhi*, or mental concentration; and *pa–a*, or wisdom. These three categories give us a concise summary of basic Buddhist practice. Buddhist laypeople observe five moral precepts (*sila*): no killing, no stealing, no lying, no abuse of sex, and no drinking of intoxicants. Monks observe five more, including the restrictions that they cannot eat after noon, cannot sleep on soft beds, and cannot handle gold or silver. Buddhist practitioners engage in mental concentration (*samadhi*) to focus and clarify the mind. They also cultivate wisdom (*panna*), or the understanding of no-self. These three modes of discipline are meant to avoid the bad *karma* (or “action”) that leads to difficult and dangerous forms of rebirth. They also are meant to cultivate the qualities of wisdom and detachment that eventually led to the Buddha’s experience of awakening.

---

**Essential Reading**


**Supplementary Reading**

Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, chs. 3 ff.
Western religious traditions, such as Judaism and Christianity, emphasize the idea of God the creator. According to the story of creation, God once looked out on a formless void (or on nothing) and made something come into being. This has produced a preference for ideas of creativity and being and a suspicion of cessation and non-being. Is there a place in Western religions for an experience of “cessation?” Would it be better if there were?

The Buddhist path is meant to lead a person to nirvana and to stop the cycle of rebirth. How is the path structured to help Buddhists achieve this goal? How would the Buddhist path change a person’s life even if he or she did not have the goal of nirvana in mind?

Questions to Consider
The Buddhist Community
Lecture 5

During a long and productive teaching career, the Buddha attracted many disciples and laid the foundation for Buddhist monasticism, including orders of monks and nuns, as well as a sophisticated tradition of lay devotion and support.

In the last three lectures, we have talked about the Buddha and the Dharma. It is now time to consider the third of the three refuges, the Samgha, or the community of the Buddha’s disciples. As the Buddha wandered from town to town during his long teaching career, he gathered a large and diverse community of followers, including not just monks, such as Angulimala, but a community of nuns and lay supporters. The role of an ideal layperson is often represented by the figure of Anathapindika, the donor, or danapati, who purchased a pleasure grove for use by the Buddha and his community of monks. The word danapati means “lord of generosity.” To understand the religious orientation of a typical Buddhist layperson, it is a good idea to start with this ideal. Generosity is not included as one of the five moral precepts, but for laypeople, generosity is a fundamental virtue. Generosity makes it possible for monks and nuns to live the monastic life, and it gives laypeople an opportunity to live the ideal of renunciation in their own distinctive way.

As the monks go on their ritual morning begging round, the lay community provides them with food; this act of generosity ties laypeople into the act of “renunciation” that mirrors the more complete renunciation that will eventually lead to nirvana. Stupas (reliquary mounds) became the prototype of places of worship—temples. Buddhists often visit temples and make offerings at a shrine; they chant prayers and bow with their palms together. The objective of worship is not merely to gain merit, but to help orient the Buddhist on the path to nirvana.
The Buddha created an order of nuns when he agreed to ordain Mahaprajapati Gautami, his great aunt. The Buddha insisted that nuns should abide by several additional restrictions and occupy a rank inferior to that of the monks. It was possible, however, for nuns to achieve awakening and nirvana, just like the monks. The community of nuns thrived in the early history of Buddhism and was important in the tradition’s early expansion to other parts of Asia. Today, communities of nuns are found principally in China, Tibet, and Korea.

The monastic community began as a group of wanderers but soon evolved into a settled pattern of life, at least during a portion of the year. The rainy season, which arrives in northern India during the month of June or July, made the roads impassable and forced the monks to take refuge in residences, where they could be supported by a stable group of lay followers. At first, these were just temporary dwelling places, but they soon evolved into settled monasteries (vihara), where monks and nuns stayed not just for the rainy season, but for the entire year. This pattern of monasticism, with its circle of lay supporters, has become the basic structure of Buddhist society and the bearer of Buddhist values. The monasteries functioned as sophisticated centers of learning, as in Tibet.

But this form of social organization also made the Samgha vulnerable to persecution. After the Buddha’s death, the community confronted a significant problem of authority: To whom could the Buddha’s disciples turn when they needed to resolve disputes about doctrine or discipline?
While the Buddha was alive, he suggested that they base their decisions on his own teaching. This point was expressed in one of the Buddha’s most famous teachings: “What point is there, Vakkali, in seeing this vile body? Whoever sees the Dharma sees me. Whoever sees me sees the Dharma.” The Buddha’s stress on the teaching, rather than on his physical presence, was not problematic while he was still alive. If there were questions, people could always turn to the Buddha for help. But when the Buddha was no longer present, the community had to find a way to fix the content of the Buddha’s teaching so that it could function as a source of authority.

After the Buddha’s parinirvana, senior monks convened a council to recite the Buddha’s teaching and establish an authoritative body of doctrine and discipline. Ananda recited the Buddha’s doctrinal teachings. These became the Sutta-pitaka, or “basket of discourses.” Upali recited the Buddha’s rules and regulations. These became the Vinaya-pitaka, or “basket of discipline.” Eventually, these were supplemented by a third basket, the Abhidhamma, which contained systematic reflection on the Buddha’s teaching. Together, these constitute the “three baskets” (tripitaka). It is common to call these three baskets a canon of Buddhist “scripture,” although they were not written down for several centuries after the Buddha’s death.

The contents of the Buddhist scriptures often are quite simple and pragmatic. Discourses of the Buddha begin with a formula drawn from the oral tradition: “Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was dwelling at… and he said….!” These discourses are presented in a simple, down-to-earth style and offer a pragmatic approach to religious truth. “The Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma” is considered the Buddha’s first sermon, delivered after the Buddha had walked to Sarnath from the seat of his awakening and encountered a group of his old associates.
Thus have I heard. At one time the Lord was staying in the Deer Park at Isipatana near Banaras. There the Lord spoke to a group of five monks:

“O monks, someone who has gone forth into the monastic life should avoid two extremes. What are the two? One is devotion to passions and worldly pleasures. This is inferior, common, ordinary, unworthy, and unprofitable. The other is devotion to self-mortification. This is painful, unworthy, and unprofitable. By avoiding these two extremes, O monks, the Tathagata has realized the Middle Path. It gives vision, it gives knowledge, and it leads to calm, superior insight, awakening, and nirvana.

And what, O monks, is the Middle Path? It is the Noble Eightfold Path: right views, right thoughts, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. This, O monks, is the Middle Path realized by the Tathagata. It gives vision, it gives knowledge, and it leads to calm, superior insight, awakening, and nirvana.”


After this account of the Middle Path, the Buddha goes on to give a brief account of the Four Noble Truths.

One of the simplest of the early sermons (and, in my view, one of the most significant) is the Fire Sermon. The Buddha begins by saying: “Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what is the all that is burning? Bhikkhus, the eye is burning, visible forms are burning, visual consciousness is burning…. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion.” The Buddha talks in the same way about the other senses.
The story of Malunkyaputta and the arrow is often cited as an example of the Buddha’s concern for practical solutions to human problems rather than for fruitless doctrinal controversy. A man by the name of Malunkyaputta asked the Buddha to tell him whether the world was eternal, not eternal, finite, infinite; whether the soul was the same as the body; and whether the Buddha existed after death. The Buddha responded by comparing Malunkyaputta to a man who is shot by an arrow and will not let anyone remove it until he is told who shot it, what it was made of, and so on. The Buddha said that Malunkyaputta should be concerned with removing the arrow of suffering rather than with useless doctrinal speculations.

The Buddha’s teaching is sometimes expressed in short, easily memorized verses, as in the collection known as the Dhammapada, or “The Words of the Teaching.” These sayings are quite pithy and convey the simplicity of the Buddha’s teaching. For example:

Not to do any evil, to cultivate good, to purify one’s mind, this is the teaching of the Buddha.

You are your own protector. What other protector can there be? With yourself fully controlled, you obtain a protection that is hard to obtain.

There are a few people who cross to the other shore. The others merely run up and down the bank on this side.


The second Buddhist council and the beginnings of Buddhist sectarianism. As the community expanded across northern India and monks adapted the teaching to new geographical and cultural situations, it became more difficult to enforce uniformity in doctrine or discipline. About a hundred years after the death of the Buddha, a dispute in the Samgha provoked a second Buddhist council. Historical accounts of this council are contradictory, and it is difficult to be certain about the source of the controversy or about its outcome. One account says that the council was provoked by the scandalous
behavior of a monk named Mahadeva. Another says that it was provoked by disagreement over some of the prohibitions in traditional monastic discipline: one that prevented monks and nuns from using gold and silver and another that prevented them from carrying salt from one day to the next.

Out of this dispute came a split between two major parties. The party known as the *Sthaviravada*, or “Doctrine of the Elders,” was the predecessor of the *Theravada* tradition that now dominates the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia (with the exception of Vietnam). The party known as the *Mahasamghika*, or “Great Community,” was the predecessor of the *Mahayana* tradition that now dominates the Buddhist countries of North and East Asia.

Later disputes took place over doctrine. For example, a group of Buddhists challenged the traditional understanding of the no-self doctrine by postulating the existence of a *pudgala*, or “person,” that continued from one moment to the next. The pudgala was neither identical to the aggregates (which were momentary), nor was it different. Eventually, this doctrine was rejected by the majority of the community, but it remained influential in the Buddhist community for several centuries before it was finally refuted. Disputes in the Samgha eventually gave rise to 18 schools (*nikaya*), only one of which still survives in its traditional form: the *Theravada* (Pali for *Sthaviravada*) tradition of Southeast Asia.

---

**Essential Reading**

Robinson and Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion*, ch. 3.

**Supplementary Reading**

Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism*, ch. 3.

**Questions to Consider**

1. What are the distinctive features of Buddhist social organization?

2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this social system?
The Mahayana promotes the ideal of the bodhisattva, or "future Buddha," who does not attempt to achieve nirvana as an individual goal but vows to return again and again in the cycle of samsara to seek the welfare of other living beings.

The Mahayana, or “Great Vehicle,” emerged as a reform movement in the Indian Buddhist community around the beginning of the Common Era. Eventually, the Mahayana spread to China, Tibet, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. The name Mahayana comes from the literature of the movement itself. Mahayana texts refer to themselves as a “Great Vehicle,” in contrast to the Hinayana, or “Lesser Vehicle,” that preceded it. The Hinayana is associated with the teaching of the 18 nikayas. An important source of this contrast is “the parable of the burning house” in the Lotus Sutra, in which a father (who represents the Buddha) tries to lure his children out of a burning house by promising each of them a different cart (or “vehicle”). When the children escape the house, he offers them “one vehicle,” the Mahayana.

Indian legends trace the origin of the Mahayana to a “second turning of the wheel of Dharma” on the Vulture Peak in Rajagriha during the life of the Buddha. In other words, Mahayana texts claim to be the teaching of the Buddha himself, delivered to a special assembly of bodhisattvas from which other Buddhist practitioners (the Disciples and Solitary Buddhas) were excluded. Mahayana tradition goes on to say that the Mahayana was concealed for several centuries until the world was ready to receive it, then the sutras of the Mahayana were brought forth and promulgated across India. Scholars are uncertain about the actual origin of the Mahayana.

There are suggestions in later Mahayana tradition that practitioners fasted and meditated in order to receive visions and revelations from great Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Perhaps some of the early texts of the Mahayana also came about in this way, although this could not be true of the more elaborate literary sutras of the Mahayana. Some scholars have suggested that the
Mahayana arose in circles of laypeople who were worshippers of particular stupas. This view has now been discredited. It seems clear that the Mahayana had a strong monastic component from the very beginning.

One of the Mahayana tradition’s most important innovations is the “bodhisattva ideal.” A bodhisattva is a “Buddha-to-be” or “future Buddha” who does not attempt to go straight to nirvana but returns to this world to help others along the path. The bodhisattva ideal includes laymen and laywomen, as well as monks and nuns. A bodhisattva cultivates two important virtues: the wisdom (Sanskrit praj–a) that leads to nirvana and the compassion (karuna) that serves the interests of other sentient beings. The bodhisattva path can be represented as a two-way street or as a circle leading toward nirvana, then returning to the world of samsara.

Some people say that a bodhisattva renounces nirvana in order to lead all other beings to nirvana. This is not strictly accurate. A bodhisattva aspires to achieve Buddha-hood for the sake of all other beings. Eventually, even bodhisattvas become Buddhas, when their aspirations have reached fruition and their practice of the path is complete.

The bodhisattvas described in Mahayana literature are often human beings like ourselves, engaged fully in the world. Vimalakirti was a wise layperson who pretended that he was ill in order to teach a lesson to the Buddha’s monastic disciples. A queen named Shrimala taught an important lesson about the Buddha nature. The young student Sudhana visited 50 different teachers and finally found Samantabhadra, a bodhisattva who had a vision of the universe that was vastly more complex and complete than anything we find in the earlier literature of this tradition. Such worldly figures had a radical effect on the spread of Buddhism. The tradition was no longer seen as a philosophy based solely on a monastic ideal, but one that had direct appeal for laymen and laywomen.
In classical Mahayana literature, the most important conceptual expression of the bodhisattva path is the “mind of awakening,” or *bodhicitta*. The “mind of awakening” is a combination of wisdom and compassion. It is expressed in the form of an aspiration: “May I achieve Buddha-hood for the sake of all other beings!” It also can be viewed as the nature of one’s own mind.

Formal accounts of the bodhisattva path are divided into a series of stages. One account of the path divides it into six perfections (*paramita*): generosity, moral conduct, patience, courage, mental concentration, and wisdom. Another account divides the path into 10 stages (*bhumi*), incorporating and expanding the list of six perfections.

The easiest way to visualize the image of a bodhisattva may be simply through the tradition of Buddhist art. Unlike Buddhas, bodhisattvas wear the ornamentation of a layperson, and they often seem to be in motion, as if they were getting up from a moment of meditative concentration and reaching out to engage you in conversation.

### Essential Reading

Robinson and Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion*, ch. 4.

### Supplementary Reading

Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism*, ch. 4.

### Questions to Consider

1. Theravada Buddhists sometimes say that the Mahayana is a fabrication and not the teaching of the Buddha. Mahayana Buddhists say that it is the Buddha’s only true teaching. How different do you think the Mahayana is? Are there important continuities that tie the Mahayana together with earlier traditions?

2. Mahayana Buddhists sometimes say that important figures in other religious traditions are really bodhisattvas. Would it be helpful to think of Jesus or Krishna, for example, as great bodhisattvas?
Celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas
Lecture 7

The most well known celestial Buddha is Amitabha, the “Buddha of Infinite Light.” According to tradition, Amitabha resides in a celestial paradise known as the Pure Land and has vowed to save anyone who chants his name with faith.

Advanced practitioners of the bodhisattva path (in the ninth or tenth stages) achieve extraordinary, superhuman powers. These powers make it possible for them to reside in the heavens (hence the name “celestial”) and to function as the Buddhist equivalents of Hindu gods. Buddhists insist, however, that the great bodhisattvas have gone far beyond Hindu gods in their power and in their understanding of reality. Celestial bodhisattvas and Buddhas are the focus of devotion throughout the Mahayana world.

One of the most important celestial bodhisattvas in India and elsewhere in the Mahayana world is Avalokiteshvara, the “Lord Who Looks Down.” Avalokiteshvara is considered to be the great bodhisattva of compassion. In the Lotus Sutra, Avalokiteshvara is described as a protean deity who takes any form that is appropriate to save the person who calls his name. Devotees of Avalokiteshvara invoke his compassion by chanting the mantra *om manipadme hum.* This mantra is sometimes translated, “Ah, the jewel in the lotus,” in which *om* is the sacred syllable of the *Vedas* and *hum* is a sound that conveys power. As a mantra, however, the power of this phrase resides in the syllables themselves rather than in their meaning. In India and Tibet, Avalokiteshvara was associated with Tara (“the Protectress”), who is the female manifestation of his compassion.
In Tibet, under the name Chenrezig, Avalokiteshvara is considered the patron deity of the Tibetan nation, taking form as the monkey who was the progenitor of the Tibetan people. He is also manifested in the succession of Dalai Lamas.

In China, Avalokiteshvara is known as Kuan-yin (“one who hears sounds”). During the T’ang Dynasty (618–907), Kuan-yin came to be pictured as a white-robed female deity who was particularly associated with the power to grant children.

Maitreya is venerated widely throughout the Buddhist world (including Theravada countries) as the Buddha of the future. Maitreya is thought to reside in a Buddhist heaven known as Tushita (“Pleasurable”). Devotees of Maitreya not only invoke his aid, but—in some traditions—make a meditative ascent to Maitreya’s heaven to see him face-to-face. Hsuan-tsang, a well-known Chinese pilgrim who visited India in the seventh century, is said to have visualized Maitreya in heaven when he was captured and nearly sacrificed by pirates on a remote stretch of the Ganges River. A popular and well-known image of Maitreya is Hotei, the fat, laughing Buddha of Chinese tradition.

Ma–jushri (“charming splendor”) is the bodhisattva of wisdom and the patron deity of scholars. In his left hand, he carries a copy of the Mahayana sutra called the Perfection of Wisdom. Ma–jushri is the Buddhist counterpart of the popular Hindu goddess Sarasvati, whose festivals are celebrated by schoolchildren across India.

The Buddha Amitabha (“Infinite Light”) is a particularly influential example of a celestial Buddha. While still a bodhisattva, Amitabha vowed that when he became a Buddha, he would create a Pure Land known as Sukhavati (“Pleasurable”). Amitabha’s vow stipulated that anyone who recollected his name, especially at the moment of death, would be reborn in this land.

Celestial bodhisattvas and Buddhas are the focus of devotion throughout the Mahayana world.
A concise version of this story of salvation is found in a text known as the shorter Sukhavativyuha Sutra:

Then the Blessed One said to Shariputra: “In the west, Shariputra, many hundreds of thousands of Buddha-fields from here, there is a Buddha-field called the Land of Bliss. A perfectly awakened Buddha, by the name of Infinite Life [Amitayus], dwells in that land and preaches the Dharma. Why do you think it is called the Land of Bliss? In the Land of Bliss no living beings suffer any pain in body or mind, and they have immeasurable reasons for pleasure…

When any sons or daughters of good family hear the name of the Blessed Tathagata (Buddha) of Infinite Life and keep it in mind without distraction for one, two, three, four, five, six, or seven nights, then, at the moment of death, the Buddha of Infinite Life will stand before them, leading a group of bodhisattvas and surrounded by a crowd of disciples, and those sons or daughters of good family will die with minds secure. After their death, they will be born in the Land of Bliss, the Buddha-field of the Tathagata of Infinite Life.

This is what I have in mind, Shariputra, when I say that sons or daughters of good family should respectfully aspire for that Buddha-field.

—From the shorter Sukhavativyuha Sutra, translated by Malcolm David Eckel.

The “recollection” of Amitabha is often expressed in the words namo ‘mitabhaya buddhaya (“homage to Amitabha Buddha”).

Like the invocation of Avalokiteshvara’s name, this practice was a deliberate attempt to open the possibility of salvation to anyone who approached the deity with sincere faith.

Devotion to Amitabha Buddha (often known as Pure Land Buddhism) has been particularly influential in China and Japan. The Pure Land tradition
represents the largest Buddhist group in Japan today. It is represented in North America by the Buddhist Churches of America.

The practice of Pure Land Buddhism raises a significant question about “salvation by faith.” How can a tradition that placed so much emphasis on self-reliance be transformed into a tradition of reliance on a celestial or otherworldly savior? As surprising as it may seem, this tradition is a natural outgrowth of the Mahayana understanding of the bodhisattva’s compassion. In the Mahayana, it is important not only to act with compassion but also to receive the compassion of others. In the Mahayana, the passage to awakening has been stretched out over many lifetimes as a bodhisattva returns to this world again and again to help others. The length of the bodhisattva path puts more emphasis on the virtues that help a person get started on the way to awakening. It is less important to have perfect wisdom, which can come later, than to develop the faith that begins the path. It also is important to receive the compassion of others gratefully. These changes of emphasis make possible a radically new view of salvation.

Robinson and Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion*, ch. 5.

Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism*, ch. 5.

Questions to Consider

1. At the end of the last lecture, I asked a question about the continuity between the Mahayana and the Hinayana. That question becomes even more challenging when we consider Mahayana worship of celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas. With this new information, how different do you think the Mahayana is from all that came before?

2. Are there still important continuities that tie the Mahayana and Hinayana together?
At the heart of Mahayana tradition lies the paradoxical concept of Emptiness.

The Mahayana introduced many important changes in the Indian Buddhist tradition, but none was as profound or as far-reaching as the concept of Emptiness. Emptiness challenged and undermined many of the rigid categories of traditional Buddhism. But it also introduced a new spirit of affirmation and possibility. A balanced understanding of Emptiness has to account for both its positive and its negative dimensions.

Emptiness can be understood as an extension of the traditional Buddhist doctrine of no-self. In the Hindu tradition, particularly in the Upanishads, it was understood that each person has a permanent or eternal self (atman). The Theravada Buddhist tradition denies that there is any permanent self. According to the Theravada, the so-called “self” is made up of a series of momentary phenomena known as dhammas (Pali) or dharmas (Sanskrit). These momentary phenomena give the illusion of continuity, like the moments of flowing water that make up the current of a river or the flickers of burning gas that make up the flame of a candle.

The Mahayana takes the concept of no-self a step further: It denies the reality of a permanent self and the reality of the momentary phenomena that make up the flow of the personality. This Mahayana position is expressed by saying that everything is “empty” (shunya) of identity (svabhava or atman). The nature of all things is simply their “Emptiness” (shunyata). By rejecting the idea that the personality is made up of real moments, the Mahayana completely reorients the conceptual framework of Buddhism.
The concept of Emptiness has several important consequences, some of which are negative and some, extremely positive. If everything is empty of real identity, there can be no real difference between any two things. As a result, Mahayana texts often equate Emptiness with “non-duality.” If everything is empty, there can be no difference or “duality” between nirvana and samsara, and there can be no difference between ourselves and the Buddha. This means that nirvana is right here, at this moment, if we can only understand it. It also means that we are already Buddhas, if we understand that the nature of ourselves is no different from the Buddha.

According to the doctrine of Emptiness, the bodhisattva does not turn away from nirvana purely for altruistic reasons. In seeking nirvana, the bodhisattva finds that there is no nirvana apart from samsara. This means that nirvana can be attained only by returning to the context of samsara. A correct understanding of Emptiness requires a balance between two different perspectives or “truths.” Ultimately, all things are empty, and nothing is real. Conventionally, from the point of view of ordinary life, it is possible to take things seriously. The doctrine of Emptiness was given sophisticated philosophical expression in the Indian monastic tradition, and it still is the intellectual focus of Tibetan monastic education.

One of the most striking expressions of Emptiness appeared in the tradition known as Buddhist Tantra. Tantric Buddhism began to emerge in India during the sixth century of the Common Era. Tantra is known as the Vajrayana (“Diamond Vehicle”) and as the Mantrayana (“Vehicle of Powerful Words”). Tantric Buddhism shares many important concepts, symbols, and ritual practices with its Tantric counterparts in other Indian traditions.
How is the Tantric tradition related to earlier forms of Buddhism? Sometimes, the Tantric tradition is described as a separate “vehicle” alongside the Hinayana and the Mahayana. But it is more helpful and more accurate to consider Tantra an extension of the values of the Mahayana.

Buddhist Tantra was based on a radical extension of the concept of non-duality. The Buddha was pictured not just as a serene and peaceful figure but one that is full of passion and wrath. These images are known as “wrathful Buddhas.” Tantric texts say that poisonous emotions, such as passion and wrath, can be removed by cultivating and transmuting the emotions themselves.

Those who do not perceive the truth think in terms of samsara and nirvana, but those who perceive the truth think neither of samsara nor nirvana. Discriminating thought is then the great demon that produces the ocean of samsara. But being free of this discriminating thought, the great ones are freed from the bonds of existence….

Just as water that has entered the ear may be removed by water and just as a thorn may be removed by a thorn, so those who know remove passion by passion itself. Just as a washerman removes the grime from a garment by means of grime, so the wise man renders himself free of impurity by means of impurity itself.


In Tantric tradition, Buddhas can also be pictured as the union of male and female. These figures are known as yab-yum images, from a Tibetan word that means “male and female” or “father and mother.” People often ask whether yab-yum images were meant to suggest that sexual union functions literally as a form of Buddha-hood. This question is difficult to answer because the texts are not easy to interpret. There is no question, in some situations, that a ritual of sexual union played a role in Tantric meditation. But it is
more common for these images to function as symbolic representations of a mind that has transcended all dualities, including the distinction between the sexes.

Tantric ritual often arranges images of the Buddha in the form of a sacred circle, or *mandala*. A basic mandala contains the images of four Buddhas, located at each of the cardinal directions, with a fifth Buddha in the center to represent ultimate reality. In Tantric ritual, practitioners learn to unify their own personalities (as miniature mandalas) with the mandala of the five Buddhas and with the mandala of the universe as a whole. Tantric tradition has had enormous impact on the culture of Tibet and has played a significant role in the development of Buddhism in China and Japan.

### Essential Reading

Robinson and Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion*, ch. 4, section 2; ch. 6.

### Supplementary Reading

Eckel, *To See the Buddha*.

Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism*, ch. 4, sections 2–3; ch. 5, section 5.

White, *Tantra in Practice*, Introduction and chs. 1, 14, 30.

### Questions to Consider

1. The doctrine of Emptiness sharpens many of our earlier questions about the negative characteristics of Buddhist thought. How does the idea that everything is “empty of individual identity” make a person feel more wise or more free?

2. When Western scholars first encountered Tantric Buddhism, they thought that it was a corruption of the Buddha’s teaching, and they blamed it for the eventual destruction of Buddhism in India. Do you think Tantra distorts or corrupts the Buddha’s teaching? Or would you be more inclined to think of it as a rediscovery or intensification of the basic insight in the Buddha’s teaching?
Throughout the history of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, there has been a close relationship between the Buddhist Samgha and Buddhist political leaders.

In the last few lectures, we have seen that Buddhism in India changed substantially in the centuries that followed the Buddha’s death. This process of change continued until about the year 1200, when a series of Muslim invasions destroyed the major monasteries in North India and effectively brought the history of Indian Buddhism to an end. To continue the story of Buddhism, we now have to shift our attention to the history of Buddhist sectarianism outside India. After the death of the Buddha, disputes in the Samgha generated a series of sectarian movements known as nikayas. Most of these sects are now only historical artifacts, but one is still active: the Theravada (“Doctrine of the Elders”) tradition of Southeast Asia.

This lecture will explore the history of Theravada Buddhism. One way to study the Theravada tradition would be to focus on the history of Buddhist monasticism in Southeast Asia. This tradition is quite strong and sophisticated. Buddhaghosa, the great commentator on the Pali canon, systematized the doctrine of Therevada Buddhism. Forest monks keep alive the ascetical traditions of primitive Buddhism.

To study the tradition anthropologically, we could focus on the way Buddhist values have been interwoven with the popular cults of spirits and ghosts. There is such a deep connection between Buddhism and popular spirit cults in the Theravada world that it often is difficult to draw the line between Buddhism and popular religion. Some interpreters say that there is not even a line to draw. In our brief discussion of Therevada Buddhism, we will focus on the relationship between Buddhism and politics.

This story starts with King Asoka, who reigned from 269 to 238 B.C.E. and became the prototype of a Buddhist “righteous king” (dhamma-raja). Traditional chronicles report that his son was the first Buddhist missionary
to Sri Lanka. When King Asoka assumed the throne in 269 B.C.E. as emperor of the Maurya Dynasty, he waged a bloody campaign to conquer a small kingdom known as Kalinga. The brutality of this campaign provoked Asoka to convert to Buddhism. After his conversion, Asoka proclaimed himself a “righteous king” (dhamma-raja), or protector of the Dharma, and advocated a policy of conquest by Dharma (dhamma-vijaya) rather than by force of arms. Asoka’s position was recorded in a series of Rock Edicts placed at strategic spots around his empire.

Rock Edict XIII gives an account of his conversion:

Eight years after his coronation, King Devanampriya Priyadarshi [Asoka] conquered Kalinga. One hundred and fifty thousand persons were deported, one hundred thousand were killed, and many times that number perished. Now that the Kalingans have been taken, Devanampriya is zealous in his study of Dharma. Devanampriya feels sorrow at having conquered the Kalingans… Indeed, Devanampriya wishes all beings to be safe, restrained, and even-keeled in the face of violence. For Devanampriya considers the foremost form of conquest to be Dharma-conquest.


Other Rock Edicts describe Asoka’s policy of promoting the Dharma:

King Devanampriya Priyadarshi says: I have had banyan trees planted along the roads to provide shade for beasts and people, and I have had mango groves planted. And I have had wells dug and rest areas built every mile, and here and there I have had watering holes made for the enjoyment of beasts and humans…. Of course, previous kings as well have sought to please the people with such facilities, but I am doing this so that people may follow the path of Dharma.

Tradition tells us that Asoka sent out missionaries to spread the Buddha’s teaching. His actions have continued to serve as a model for “righteous kings” throughout the Buddhist world. A righteous king protects and promulgates the Dharma. In return, the king is recognized or “legitimated” by the religious authority of the monks. In some situations, the king disciplines and reforms the Samgha to make sure that it adheres to proper discipline and does not interfere in the affairs of the state. Asoka himself set an example for the control and discipline of the Samgha when he said: “Any monk or nun who causes a schism in the Samgha will have to wear the white robes of a layperson and will no longer be able to dwell in a monastic residence. This order should be made known to both the community of monks and the community of nuns… and a copy of this edict shall be given to the laity” (Strong, p. 85).

One of the most striking examples of a “righteous king” in modern Southeast Asia is King Rama IV or King Mongkut of Thailand. King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868) spent 25 years as a monk, then, as king, instituted a reform movement to modernize Thai monastic life. As king, Mongkut believed that Thai monastic life needed to be purged of “superstitious” practices and returned to the pristine model of the Pali canon. He gave institutional form to his ideas by creating the Thammayut movement. During the reign of his son, King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910), this reform movement was extended throughout the Thai Samgha and given the status of an official orthodoxy and a national religion. Thailand continues to be an example of the close alliance between king and Samgha. Important symbols of the connection between royal power and Buddhist practice in Bangkok include the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, where the central image functions not just as a focus of worship, but as a symbol of Thai national identity and the legitimacy of the royal family.
Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar (Burma), a democratic activist and Nobel laureate, gives another example of the intersection between religious and political values in Southeast Asia. Aung San Suu Kyi was born in 1945 as the daughter of Burma’s national hero General Aung San. Her father led the Burmese liberation movement during World War II. He was assassinated in 1947, just before Burma gained its independence. Aung San Suu Kyi was educated in Rangoon, Delhi, and Oxford and settled down to raise a family in Oxford, until she was called back to Burma by her mother’s illness in 1988.

In Burma, she became involved in a spontaneous revolt against 26 years of repressive military rule. She soon emerged as the movement’s leader. Even though she was placed under house arrest, her movement won a colossal electoral victory in May 1990. The military government annulled the results of the election and imprisoned its leaders. Aung San Suu Kyi has continued to speak out in support of the democratic movement. In 1991, she received the Nobel Peace Prize and was cited by the Nobel committee “for her unflagging efforts... for democracy, human rights, and ethnic conciliation by peaceful means.”

“Fearlessness may be a gift but perhaps more precious is the courage acquired through endeavor, courage that cultivates the habit of refusing to let fear dictate one’s actions.”

—Aung San Suu Kyi

Aung San Suu Kyi’s political philosophy seems, on the face of it, to be quite simple and straightforward. But her words carry force and eloquence that echo teachings of the Buddha. One of her most famous speeches is called simply “Freedom from Fear.” She begins the speech by saying: “It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it” (Aung San Suu Kyi, Freedom from Fear and Other Writings [London: Penguin, 1991]). Near the end of the speech, she refers to Mahatma Gandhi’s statement that the greatest gift for an individual or a nation is fearlessness, “not merely bodily courage, but absence of fear from the mind.” (This refers to a story about the Buddha’s gesture of fearlessness
when he was threatened by a raging elephant.) Aung San Suu Kyi adds her own Buddhist twist to Gandhi’s words by saying, “Fearlessness may be a gift but perhaps more precious is the courage acquired through endeavor, courage that cultivates the habit of refusing to let fear dictate one’s actions.”

Anyone who listens to these words can hear how Aung San Suu Kyi’s career brings together modern democratic values and the fundamental Buddhist values of courage, patience, tolerance, and nonviolence. It is a powerful mix for anyone who wonders whether Buddhist values belong only in the monastery. Here, they play a forceful and active role in political life.

Shifting from Myanmar to Sri Lanka, we find a political situation that is even more problematic. Sri Lanka has been torn apart for more than a decade by a bloody ethnic conflict between Tamil Hindus and Sri Lankan Buddhists. One of the most puzzling aspects of this conflict for those who think of Buddhism as a peaceful religion is the way Buddhist monks have sometimes used Buddhist tradition to fan the flames of conflict. Scholars who study this struggle trace its roots to the colonial period, when Buddhist leaders appealed to the island’s Buddhist identity as a way of mobilizing resistance to the British colonial administration. Buddhism came to be the defining characteristic of Sri Lanka as a nation. When the British left, Sri Lanka was given the opportunity to establish itself as a Buddhist community. The problem was that large portions of the country, especially in the north, were Hindu minority communities. The struggle for power between Buddhists and Hindus produced a bloody conflict that continues today. Sri Lanka is a case where the political impact of Buddhist values has not been entirely benign.

Essential Reading

Robinson and Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion*, ch. 7.

Supplementary Reading

Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear and Other Writings*.

Questions to Consider

1. Some historians have questioned whether Asoka’s dhamma really was Buddhism in any recognizable sense. What is “Buddhist” about his imperial ideology?

2. Why do you think Asoka found the Buddha’s teaching attractive as a political strategy?

3. Aung San Suu Kyi’s speeches are widely available on the Internet. (You can search for them under her name.) What is Buddhist about her political program?
Today, the Tibetan tradition is best known in the figure of the 14th Dalai Lama, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for his peaceful campaign of resistance to Chinese domination in Tibet.

In the latter half of the first millennium C.E. (from about 600 to 1200 C.E.), the teachings of the Mahayana and the ritual practices of Tantra were absorbed into the sophisticated intellectual life of the Indian Buddhist monasteries. These monasteries had large libraries, colorful rituals, and an elaborate monastic curriculum, ranging all the way from Buddhist philosophy and meditation to astronomy and medicine. Unfortunately, their cultural strength turned out to be their greatest weakness. When waves of Afghan raiders began to sweep across the Ganges Basin, the monasteries were tempting targets for plunder and destruction. By the year 1200, after two centuries of persecution, there was little left of Buddhist monastic culture but a handful of destitute, old monks. We now trace the Mahayana tradition beyond the Himalayas to Tibet, where Indian monastic culture has been preserved more faithfully and more richly than anywhere else in the Buddhist world.

The “First Diffusion” of the Dharma in Tibet began in the seventh century. During the seventh century, a line of kings in central Tibet united the Tibetan tribes and began to extend their military influence outside the Tibetan plateau. As they turned their attention beyond Tibet, they encountered the lively Buddhist cultures of India, Nepal, China, and Central Asia. According to Tibetan tradition, King Songtsen Gampo (c. 609–49) invited one of his two Buddhist wives to help him introduce the cult of the Buddha to Tibet. The initial attempts to build a
temple in the capital of Lhasa were unsuccessful. In a dream, the king was told that the land of Tibet lay on the body of a demoness who had to be subdued before the cult of the Buddha could be successfully established. He ordered a series of temples to be built around the country, pinning down her knees and elbows and her hips and shoulders. Finally, a temple was built in Lhasa to pin down her heart. This temple is the Jokhang, the most sacred temple in Tibet and the site of the Jobo Rinpoche, Songtsen Gampo’s first Buddha image. The actions of Songtsen Gampo not only subdued the demoness that was Tibet, but they marked Tibet with the form of a mandala.

During this early period in Tibetan Buddhist history, Tibetans fixed the spelling of their language. The difference between this ancient spelling and modern pronunciation produces many puzzling inconsistencies. In these outlines, I use a phonetic system to indicate roughly how Tibetan words are pronounced. Correct traditional spellings can be found in the glossary.
The next major series of events in Tibetan Buddhist history occurred in the eighth century, during the reign of King Thrisong Detsen. Thrisong Detsen sponsored the construction of a monastery at Samye, the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet. The construction of the monastery required the help of the Tantric saint Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche (“Precious Teacher”). With his magic power, Padmasambhava subdued the demons that opposed the monastery’s construction. King Thrisong Detsen also enlisted the help of the Indian scholar named Shantarakshita to establish the curriculum in his new monastery. Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita represent the two faces of Tibetan Buddhism: a reverence for the power of a Tantric practitioner and a reverence for the practice of Buddhist scholasticism.

Tibetan tradition also tells us that Thrisong Detsen sponsored a debate at Samye to determine the character of Tibetan Buddhism. Representing the Chinese side was a meditation master named Mahayana who advocated a practice of sudden awakening. Representing the Indian side was a disciple of Shantarakshita named Kamalashila who advocated a practice of gradual awakening. According to Tibetan tradition, the king decided in favor of the Indian party and permanently oriented Tibet toward India. The First Diffusion of Buddhism came to an end around the year 836, when a king named Langdarma attempted to suppress Buddhism. He was assassinated, and the line of Tibetan kings was broken.

The “Later Diffusion” of the Dharma in Tibet took place during the 11th century. Important teachers, such as Atisha (982–1054) and the Tantric saint Marpa (1012–96), reintroduced the tradition of monastic learning from eastern India. From these tentative beginnings, and others like them, grew most of the schools that have dominated Tibetan Buddhism to the present day. The Nyingma, or “Old,” School traces its origin back to the First Diffusion of the Dharma, in the eighth century C.E. The Kagyu, or “Teaching Lineage,” School traces its origin to the Lama (guru) Marpa, whose disciple Milarepa (1040–1123) became one of Tibet’s most beloved saints.
The story of Milarepa’s first meeting with Marpa gives a sense of the robust, down-to-earth quality of this tradition:

By the side of the road, a large, corpulent monk with sparkling eyes was plowing a field. As soon as I saw him, I felt inexpressible and inconceivable bliss. For a moment, his appearance stopped me in my tracks. Then I said: “Sir, I have been told that Marpa the translator, direct disciple of the glorious Naropa, lives in this place. Where is his house?”

For a long time he looked me up and down. Then he said: “Where are you from?”

I said: “I am a great sinner from upper Tsang. He is so famous that I have come to ask him for the true Dharma.”

He said: “I will introduce you to Marpa, but now plow this field.”

From the ground he pulled some beer that had been hidden under a hat, and he gave it to me. It was good beer, and it tasted great.

He said, “Plow hard,” and he went away.


The Sakya School emerged in the 11th century under the leadership of Drogmi (992–1074). Drogmi was the teacher of Kunchog Gyeltsen who, in 1073, founded the Sakya Monastery that gave the school its name. The Geluk, or “Virtuous Way,” School (also known as the “Yellow Hats”) emerged in the early 14th century under the leadership of the scholar Tsongkhapa. Tsongkhapa founded several major monasteries in central Tibet, including Ganden, his home monastery. These have been some of the most influential religious institutions in the history of Tibet.
Tibetan Buddhism is personified for many people today by the figure of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for his peaceful resistance to Chinese rule in Tibet. From exile in India, the Dalai Lama has traveled the world to champion the Tibetan cause and present Buddhist solutions to many of the problems that plague the modern world. The present Dalai Lama represents a line of incarnations that goes back to the 14th century. The title “Dalai Lama” was given to the third member of the lineage, Sonam Gyatso (1543–1589), by a Mongol leader named Altan Khan. The “Great Fifth” Dalai Lama (1617–1683) made the Dalai Lamas the spiritual, as well as the temporal or political, leaders of Tibet—bringing the ideal of the righteous king and the charismatic monk together in the same person. The first Dalai Lama to become enmeshed in international politics was the 13th (1876–1935). The weight of international responsibility has fallen most heavily, however, on Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama. The 14th Dalai Lama functions as a bridge between the ancient cultural traditions of Tibet and the complex challenges that face many modern Buddhists at the turn of the 21st century.

---

**Essential Reading**

Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile*.

Robinson and Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion*, ch. 11.

**Supplementary Reading**

Many of the Dalai Lama’s speeches are available on Web sites, such as www.dalailama.com.

Lhalungpa, *The Life of Milarepa*.

Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism*, ch. 7.
Questions to Consider

1. Tibet shows again how important royal patronage has been to the establishment of Buddhism in new regions. Does the Tibetan case tell us anything more about the Buddhist alliance between monks and kings?

2. If you have an opportunity to read the public pronouncements of the Dalai Lama on the Internet or elsewhere, how do you think he has adapted Buddhist teaching for a modern Western audience?
Buddhism in China
Lecture 11

By the time Buddhism entered Tibet, there had been Buddhists in China for more than 500 years.

In this lecture, we will consider the process of transformation that took place as the first few generations of Chinese Buddhists struggled to understand the significance of this foreign tradition and adapt it to the distinctive needs of Chinese culture and Chinese people. When the first Buddhist monks began to appear in the Chinese capital in the middle of the second century C.E., China was coming to the end of one of the most prosperous periods in its history.

During the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E–220 C.E.), China was culturally and politically stable. The prosperity of Han China was closely tied to an ideological synthesis known as Han Confucianism. Starting from the teaching of Confucius (c. 500 B.C.E.), scholars created a vision of heaven, earth, the family, and human society as a single, harmonious whole. The key values were harmony, respect for elders, and a sense that society was bound together by the proper performance of ritual.

In the middle of the second century, the Han synthesis began to fall apart. The emperor came under the influence of rival factions in the court and no longer had the power or the moral force to guarantee the legitimacy of the state. As factions struggled for power, the peasants were increasingly alienated and oppressed. Intellectuals looked for new ways to diagnose and respond to the moral malaise of the times. China was ripe for the introduction of new ideas, even ideas as foreign as the teaching of the Buddha.

During the T’ang Dynasty (618–907) ... Buddhism became the dominant religious tradition in China.
Buddhism had to go through a long process of adaptation before it could become a major part of Chinese civilization. As Buddhist monks made their way into China and tried to communicate Buddhist ideas in a Chinese way, they faced difficult barriers. Sanskrit and Chinese were radically different languages and expressed radically different systems of thought. One of the key differences had to do with the family. Chinese social values emphasized the family, while Buddhism stressed the rejection of the family as part of the path to awakening.

Buddhist monks adapted to these challenges in several ways. Sanskrit and Chinese terms were matched with one another so that key Buddhist ideas were matched with ideas already familiar to Chinese audiences. For example, the word dharma was matched with the Chinese word tao. Offensive concepts often were omitted, and aspects of the Indian tradition that were particularly congenial to Chinese tastes were emphasized, such as the image of the bodhisattva Vimalakirti, who maintained his loyalty to the family while pursuing the path of the Buddha.

One of the key components in the Chinese adaptation of Buddhism was a sense of kinship between Buddhism and the indigenous Chinese tradition of Taoism. Taoism was comparable in antiquity to the tradition of Confucius. In contrast to the active, public virtues of Confucianism, Taoism advocated a strategy of inactivity and contemplation. The Taoist “Way,” or Tao, was down to earth, natural, harmonious, and inexpressible in words. We can see the kinship between Taoism and Buddhism by looking at a few passages in the Tao-te Ching, one of the fundamental texts of the Taoist tradition:

\[
\text{The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao; } \\
\text{The name that can be named is not the eternal name. } \\
\text{The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth; } \\
\text{The Named is the mother of all things. } \\
\text{The Tao is empty like a bowl. } \\
\text{It may be used but its capacity is never exhausted.}
\]
It is bottomless, perhaps the ancestor of things.
It blunts its sharpness,
It unties tangles,
It softens its light.
It becomes one with the dusty world.
Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel,
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage depends.
Clay is molded to form a utensil,
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the utensil depends.
Doors and windows are cut out to make a room,
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the room depends.
Therefore turn being to advantage, and turn non-being into utility.

—From Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook of Chinese Philosophy*

We can imagine how Buddhists, with their reverence for simplicity, renunciation, and emptiness would have been delighted to hear these words. In the hard times that followed the fall of the Han Dynasty, Taoism offered an effective survival strategy for the beleaguered intelligentsia. It also offered a rich body of words and ideas to express Buddhism in a Chinese way. While Taoism had a philosophical side, it was not as elaborate as the Indian analysis of, for example, the self.

Although the connection with Taoism offered Buddhists an important cultural opportunity, it also changed Buddhist values in important ways. Buddhism became more pragmatic and down-to-earth. Nature became an important concept in Chinese Buddhism as it never had been in India. The Tao is associated with the movements of nature and was often found by withdrawing into a natural environment. Buddhism became much more amenable to the possibility of sudden enlightenment.
During the T’ang Dynasty (618–907), these influences became clear when Buddhism became the dominant religious tradition in China. The T’ang Dynasty saw the development of several important Buddhist schools, including the meditation school known in China as Ch’an and in Japan as Zen. The Ch’an School is traced to the legendary Indian saint Bodhidharma (fl. 460–534). According to tradition, Ch’an began to take on a Chinese character in the hands of Hung-jen (601–674) and, particularly, in the hands of his disciples Shen-hsiu (605?–706) and Hui-neng (638–713).

One version of the conflict between these two disciples is found in the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch. Hui-neng advocated a position of sudden awakening, while Shen-hsiu advocated gradual awakening. In response to a challenge from the master to write a short verse expressing his understanding of awakening, Shen-hsiu wrote:

The body is the tree of perfect wisdom  
The mind is the stand of a bright mirror.  
At all times diligently wipe it.  
Do not allow it to become dusty.

Hui-neng replied:

Fundamentally perfect wisdom has no tree.  
Nor has the bright mirror any stand.  
Buddha-nature is forever clear and pure.  
Where is there any dust?

—From Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook of Chinese Philosophy*  

The Ch’an tradition’s distrust of words, its love of paradox, and its emphasis on direct, person-to-person transmission of insight had much in common with Taoism.
Mahayana devotional traditions also had great influence during the T’ang Dynasty. For peasants and villagers, the promise of salvation in Amitabha’s land held out hope for a future life. For the elite, it offered a type of contemplation that was very different from the austere practice of Ch’an, as in the words of Tao-ch’o (d. 645):

Suppose a man in an empty and distant place encounters a bandit who, drawing his sword, comes forcefully and directly to kill him. This man runs straight on, looking ahead to cross a river….

So also is the practitioner. When he is contemplating Amita [Amitabha] Buddha, he is like the man contemplating the crossing. The thought is continuous, no others being mingled with it.


For many people, the cult of bodhisattvas, including Avalokiteshvara (Kuan-yin), promised not just rebirth in another world but direct assistance with the concerns of this life, such as the birth of a child or prosperity in the family.

Buddhist values had broad influence on Chinese literature and the arts. The poet who is known simply as Cold Mountain wrote some of the Buddhist tradition’s finest contemplative verses about nature. For example:

As for me, I delight in the everyday Way,
Among mist-wrapped vines and rocky caves.
Here in the wilderness I am completely free,
With my friends, the white clouds, idling forever.
There are roads, but they do not reach the world;
Since I am mindless, who can rouse my thoughts?
On a bed of stone I sit, alone in the night,
While the round moon climbs up Cold Mountain.

Wang Wei gave poetic expression to a distinctively Chinese three-stage view of Emptiness:

Empty hills, no one in sight,
only the sound of someone talking;
late sunlight enters the deep wood,
shining over the green moss again.


The Buddhism of Vietnam is largely derived from China. There is a lively tradition of Ch’an Buddhism in Vietnam (as in the work of the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh). Vietnamese Buddhists also share the Chinese reverence for powerful Buddhas and bodhisattvas, such as Amitabha and Avalokiteshvara.

### Essential Reading


### Supplementary Reading


Watson, *Cold Mountain*.
1. It is sometimes said that Buddhists do not seek converts for their tradition, yet Buddhism spread aggressively through the countries of Asia, even to countries as remote and as confident in their own cultures as China. Why did Buddhists feel such an impulse to spread their faith?

2. The relationship between Taoism and Buddhism in China raises major questions about cultural influence and religious change. Why were Buddhists and Taoists able to adopt each other’s ways of looking at the world so readily? What does this tell us about the character of both traditions?

Questions to Consider
Buddhism entered Japan as early as the year 535 from Korea, at a time when the Japanese were suffering from some of the same difficulties the Chinese had experienced a few centuries earlier, during the fall of the Han Dynasty. In their search for an effective model, the Japanese turned to China and found a combination of Confucian and Buddhist values. Although the Japanese borrowed Chinese traditions, they also had different orientations and different needs. Buddhist values had to be placed in some kind of relationship with the indigenous Japanese religious tradition that we know today as Shinto. Shinto is sometimes called the indigenous nature and spirit worship of Japan. The most important deity in Shinto tradition is the sun goddess Amaterasu. The rising sun is the symbol of Japan, and the power of the sun goddess is understood as being present in the lineage of the emperors. The presence of Shinto posed a distinctive challenge to Buddhism in Japan. Were the Shinto and Buddhist deities rivals, or were they manifestations of the same power? When Buddhism first entered Japan, some Japanese perceived Buddhism as a threat, but the two traditions eventually were perceived as complementary, and the kami and the Buddhas could be worshipped together.
Prince Shotoku (573–621) and the Seventeen-Article Constitution. One of the most important figures in the early history of Japanese Buddhism was Prince Shotoku. As the regent during the reign of his aunt, Shotoku led Japan through a process of political reorganization. As he changed the procedures of the court to conform to Chinese models, most of Shotoku’s reforms grew out of the Confucian values then popular in China. But Shotoku also was a convinced and devout Buddhist. He felt that Buddhism could also be used to unify the nation and promote the welfare of the Japanese people.

Prince Shotoku expressed his Confucian and Buddhist values in a manifesto called the Seventeen-Article Constitution. The first article shows the influence of the Confucian concept of a harmonious society:

Harmony is to be valued, and avoidance of wanton opposition is to be honored. All men are influenced by partisanship, and there are few who are intelligent. Hence there are some who disobey their lords and fathers, or who maintain feuds with the neighboring villages. But when those above are harmonious and those below are friendly, and there is concord in the discussion of business, right views of things spontaneously gain acceptance. Then what is there which cannot be accomplished?

The second article shows the influence of Buddhism:

Sincerely reverence the three treasures. The three treasures, viz. Buddha, the Law, and the Monastic orders, are the final refuge of the four generated beings, and are the supreme objects of faith in all countries. Few men are utterly bad. They may be taught to follow it. But if they do not betake to the three treasures, wherewithal shall their crookedness be made straight?

During the Nara period (710–784, named after the city that served as the imperial capital), less than a century after the death of Shotoku, Buddhism effectively became a state religion. Emperor Shomu (r. 724–49) sponsored a series of building projects that gave special prominence to Buddhism as an instrument of national policy. He constructed Todai-ji (the “Great Eastern Temple”) as a symbol of the relationship between Buddhism and the Japanese state. The temple is said to be the largest wooden building in the world. It houses a colossal bronze statue of the Buddha, known as Dainichi (“Great Illumination”). This is the Japanese version of Vairochana, the Buddha of the Sun. According to tradition, the emperor sent messengers to the shrine of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu in Ise to seek her permission to erect a statue of Vairochana. The message that came back suggested that the Sun Buddha and the Sun Goddess were identical. At the end of the Nara period, the capital was moved to Kyoto, and Japan entered the Heian period (794–1185), a time of peace, prosperity, and courtly sophistication.

The Heian period produced two important Buddhist schools. Kukai or Kobo Daishi (774–835) founded the Shingon (“True Word”) School. Kukai traveled to China to find an authentic form of Buddhist practice. In the Chinese capital, he encountered Chen-yen, a Chinese version of the Mantrayana, or “Vehicle of Powerful Words.” The word Shingon, which is the name of his school, is the Japanese form of the Chinese translation of Mantrayana. The elaborate, colorful rituals of Shingon had immense appeal in the Heian court.

Saicho or Dengyo Daishi (762–822) founded the Tendai School. Saicho stressed the importance of the Lotus Sutra and used the teaching of “one vehicle” as a unifying principle, with political, as well as religious, implications. The significance of this concept is evident in his “Vow of Uninterrupted Study of the Lotus Sutra”:

The Disciple of the Buddha and student of the One Vehicle this day respectfully affirms before the Three Treasures that the saintly Emperor, on behalf of Japan and as a manifestation of his unconditional compassion, established the Lotus Sect and had the Lotus Sutra, its commentary, and the essays on Concentration and Insight copied and bound—together with hundreds of other volumes—and installed them in seven great temples. Constantly did...
he promote the Single and Only Vehicle, and he united all the people so that they might ride together in the ox-cart of the Mahayana to the ultimate destination, enlightenment.


The Kamakura period (1192–1333) saw the foundation of three new schools that changed the face of Japanese Buddhism. The turbulence of the Kamakura period brought a feeling of pessimism to Buddhist life, but it also brought a new sense of opportunity. Buddhist thinkers returned to the ancient Buddhist idea of a degenerate age (*mappo*, the degenerate age of the Dharma), when it was no longer possible for people to hope for salvation in a traditional way. This sense of crisis gave a new urgency to their account of Buddhist practice.

Honen (1133–1212) and Shinran (1173–1262)—two Pure Land reformers—responded to this sense of crisis by preaching a radical reliance on the grace of Amitabha Buddha. Honen believed that it was no longer possible to rely on one’s own efforts to achieve salvation. The only way to be saved was simply to trust in the grace of Amida Buddha. Honen’s teaching is made clear in his “One-Page Testament,” delivered to his disciples two days before he died:

The method of final salvation that I have propounded is neither a sort of meditation, such as has been practiced by many scholars in China and 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 practical rules. If I, as an individual, had any doctrine more profound than this, I should miss the mercy of the two honorable ones, Amida and Shaka [the historical Buddha and Shakyamuni] and be left out of the vow of Amida Buddha. Those who believe this, though they clearly understand all the teachings Shaka taught throughout his whole life, should behave themselves like simple-
minded folk, who know not a single letter, or like ignorant monks or nuns whose faith is implicitly simple. Thus, without pedantic airs, they should fervently practice the repetition of the name of Amida, and that alone.


Shinran (1173–1262) adopted Honen’s teaching and pushed it to a radical extreme. He expressed his faith in Amida in the following way:

If even a good man can be reborn in the Pure Land, how much more so a wicked man!

People generally think, however, 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 reborn in the True Land of Recompense.


Another key Kamakura reformer was Nichiren (1222–1281), one of the few people who can appropriately be called a Buddhist “prophet.” Nichiren felt that the Lotus Sutra was the key to the Buddha’s teaching, and he preached that Japan could be saved only by reliance on the Lotus Sutra. This reliance was expressed by the phrase “Namu Myoho Renge Kyo” (“Homage to the Lotus Sutra”).
The force of Nichiren’s teaching is evident in his own words:

When they hear me say that the Lotus Sutra is the only source of salvation for the Japanese people, the people will say that it is a curse; yet those who propagate the Lotus of Truth are indeed the parents of all men living in Japan…. I, Nichiren, am the master and lord of the sovereign, as well as of the Buddhists of other schools. Notwithstanding this, the rulers and the people treat us maliciously. How should the sun and the moon bless them by giving light? Why should the earth not refuse to let them abide upon it? …Therefore, also, the Mongols are coming to chastise them. Even if all the soldiers from the five parts of India were called together, and the mountain of the Iron Wheel were fortified, how could they succeed in repelling the invasion? It is decreed that all the inhabitants of Japan shall suffer from the invaders. Whether this comes to pass or not will prove whether or not Nichiren is the propagator of the Lotus of Truth.


The last Kamakura movement to be mentioned is the Japanese version of Ch’an Buddhism in China, the movement that is known in Japan as Zen.

Zen took shape as a separate sect during the Kamakura period, under the influence of two forceful personalities: Eisai (1141–1215) and Dogen (1200–1253). Eisai developed the tradition known as Rinzai Zen, which uses the discipline of koan practice to achieve an experience of sudden awakening. A koan is a puzzle that is meant to stop the mind in its tracks, such as: “Does a dog have Buddha-nature?” or “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

Dogen thought that koan practice put too much stress on achieving awakening, as if it were different from ordinary experience. To correct this misunderstanding, he emphasized the practice of zazen, or “sitting meditation,” as an end in itself.
He also criticized the idea of a “degenerate age,” arguing that all moments are equally reflective of Emptiness. A classic expression of this doctrine is found in his statement on “Being-Time:"

Know that in this way there are myriads of forms and hundreds of grasses throughout the entire earth, and yet each grass and each form itself is the entire earth. The study of this is the beginning of practice.

When you are at this place, there is just one grass, there is just one form; there is understanding of form and there is no-understanding of form; there is understanding of grass and no-understanding of grass. Since there is nothing but just this moment, the being-time is all the time there is. Grass-being, form-being are both time.

Each moment is all being, is the entire world. Reflect now whether any being or any world is left out of the present moment.”


Like other Zen masters, Dogen concentrates on the experience of the moment. If reality exists anywhere, it is in the infinitesimal moment of the present. If someone wants to be awakened, he or she has to find that awakening in the present moment of experience.

One of Dogen’s most powerful statements about Zen is the Genjo Koan or “Actualizing the Fundamental Point:"

To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly....
Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide. The whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in dewdrops on the grass, or even in one drop of water.


As we look back over the development of Buddhism from its origin in India to the varieties of Buddhism we experience in East Asia, we can see that Buddhism has changed so much that it often is difficult to see what makes it “Buddhist.” Buddhist teaching has evolved from the simple formulas of the Four Noble Truths to include traditions of devotion to celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas that would have been quite foreign to the early tradition, to say nothing of the immense philosophical complexities of Emptiness. The Buddhist community has grown from a simple community of monks and nuns and laypeople to include complex social and political movements that draw Buddhism into the center of a struggle for political power and national identity.

Is there anything that has not changed? Perhaps it is simply the serene image of the Buddha himself, who remains an island of calm throughout the turbulent history of tradition that bears his name.

**Essential Reading**


Robinson and Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion*, ch. 10.
Supplementary Reading

Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*.

Questions to Consider

1. The introduction of Japanese Buddhism challenges us to think again about continuity and change. What new themes emerged in the formation of the Japanese tradition?

2. Honen, Shinran, and Nichiren were radical reformers. In what sense do you think they were still working out the original impulse that motivated the career of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha? Do you think any of them went too far in their reinterpretation of Buddhism?
Timeline

Before the Common Era (B.C.E)

1500–1000........................................ The earliest hymns of the Veda.

1000–500........................................ The classical Upanishads.

486................................................ Death of the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama.

c. 486................................................. First Buddhist Council.

c. 386?............................................. Second Buddhist Council.

269–238........................................ Reign of King Asoka in India; introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka (Ceylon).

206................................................ Beginning of the Han Dynasty in China.

Common Era (C.E.)

1st century..................................... Emergence of the Mahayana in India.

C. 100.............................................. Kushan Empire: Mathura and Gandhara styles of Buddhist art.

2nd century .................................... Introduction of Buddhism to China; Madhyamaka School developed by Nagarjuna in India.

220................................................ End of the Han Dynasty in China.

4th century.................................... Yogachara School developed by Asanga and Vasubandhu in India.
4th–6th centuries .................................. Gupta Dynasty in India.

460–534........................................... Bodhidharma, founder of the Ch’an School in China.

6th century...................................... Emergence of Tantra in India.

531–597........................................... Chih-i, founder of T’ien-t’ai School in China.

574–622........................................... Prince Shotoku establishes Buddhism in Japan.

601–674........................................... Hung-jen, the fifth patriarch of Ch’an Buddhism.

c. 609–649...................................... King Songtsen Gampo introduces Buddhism to Tibet.

618–907........................................... T’ang Dynasty in China.

638–713........................................... Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch of Ch’an Buddhism.

643–712........................................... Fa-tsang, founder of the Hua-yen School in China.

710–784.......................................... Nara period in Japan.

754............................................... Accession of King Thrisong Detsen in Tibet.

762–822.......................................... Saicho, founder of the Tendai School in Japan.

774–835.......................................... Kukai, founder of the Shingon School in Japan.
c. 779.................................................. Samye Monastery founded in Tibet; Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita active in Tibet.

794–1185........................................ Heian period in Japan.

c. 836............................................... Accession of King Langdarma in Tibet; end of the First Diffusion of the Dharma.

992–1074......................................... Life of Drogmi, founder of the Sakya School in Tibet.

1022–1096....................................... Life of Marpa, founder of the Kagyu School in Tibet.

1040–1123........................................ Life of Milarepa.

1042................................................. Indian scholar Atisha comes to Tibet; beginning of the Later Diffusion of the Dharma in Tibet.

1133–1212....................................... Honen, founder of a separate Pure Land School in Japan.

1141–1215....................................... Eisai, founder of the Rinzai School of Zen in Japan.

1173–1262....................................... Shinran, founder of the True Pure Land School in Japan.

1192–1333....................................... Kamakura period in Japan.

c. 1200............................................... Destruction of Buddhism in India.

1200–1253....................................... Dogen, founder of the Soto School of Japanese Zen.
1222–1281............................... Nichiren, founder of the Nichiren School in Japan.

1357............................... Birth of Tsongkhapa, founder of the Geluk School in Tibet.

1391............................... Birth of Gendun Drubpa, later recognized as the first Dalai Lama.

1617–1683............................... The “Great Fifth” Dalai Lama.


1851–1868............................... Reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV) in Thailand.

1880............................... Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott convert to Buddhism in Ceylon.

1893............................... World Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

1935............................... Birth of Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama.

1951............................... Chinese occupation of Tibet.

1989............................... Nobel Peace Prize presented to the Dalai Lama.

Glossary

Amida: the Japanese name for Amitabha Buddha.

Amitabha ("Infinite Light"): the Buddha who is the focus of devotion in Pure Land Buddhism.

Aniconic image: represents the Buddha by symbols, by places associated with his life, or by his absence.

Arhant ideal: the pursuit of nirvana for one’s own sake, in contrast to the bodhisattva ideal, in which the bodhisattva postpones nirvana to help others achieve the same goal.

Avalokiteshvara ("Lord Who Looks Down"): the celestial bodhisattva of compassion, known in China as Kuan-yin and in Tibet as Chenrezig.

Bodhicitta: the “mind of awakening,” cultivated by a bodhisattva through a combination of wisdom and compassion.

Bodhisattva: a future Buddha or “Buddha-to-be” who postpones nirvana in order to help others achieve nirvana.

Bon: the indigenous religious tradition in Tibet.

Buddhist Churches of America: the American branch of the Jodo Shinshu or True Pure Land sect of Japanese Buddhism.

Celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas: Buddhas or bodhisattvas who have achieved extraordinary powers. These powers make it possible for them to reside in the heavens (hence the name “celestial”) and to function as the Buddhist equivalents of Hindu gods.
**Chakravartin**: a “turner of the wheel” who becomes either a great king and turns the wheel of conquest or a religious teacher and turns the wheel of religious teaching.

**Ch’an**: the meditation school of Chinese Buddhism, precursor of Zen.

**Ching-t’u (“Pure Land”) School**: a school of Chinese Buddhism related to the Pure Land tradition in Japan.

**Confucianism**: a Chinese philosophical system that stresses values of political and social responsibility. It is traced to the philosopher Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.).

**Degenerate Age of the Dharma (mappo)**: the view that conditions in the world have declined to such an extent that traditional means of Buddhist perfection are impossible; a key idea in several schools of Japanese Buddhism during the Kamakura period.

**Dharma (Pali Dhamma)**: the Buddha’s teaching.

**Dharmaraja (Pali Dhammaraja)**: a “righteous king” who protects and promulgates the Dharma.

**Emptiness**: the absence of identity in things, a fundamental teaching of Mahayana Buddhism.

**Gandhara style**: a style of Buddhist art that shows the influence of Greek craftsmen in the Hellenistic kingdoms in Afghanistan (c. 100 C.E.).

**Geluk (dGe-lugs)**: one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the school of the Dalai Lamas.

**Gupta style**: a style of Indian art associated with the Gupta Dynasty in north India (fourth to sixth centuries).
Han Confucianism: the Confucianism that was practiced during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) in China.

Hinayana: “Lesser Vehicle,” a term used in Mahayana literature to describe the teaching that preceded the Mahayana.

Hsi-lai Temple: a major Chinese Buddhist temple in Los Angeles.


Jataka tales: stories about the previous lives of the Buddha.

Jodo Shinshu: the True Pure Land sect founded by Shinran (1173–1262) in Japan.

Kagyu (bKa’-rgyud): one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

Kami: an indigenous deity in Japan.

Karma: a Sanskrit word that means “action.” Good actions bring a good rebirth, and bad actions bring a bad rebirth.

Kuan-yin: the Chinese name of Avalokiteshvara, the celestial bodhisattva of compassion.

Lama (bla-ma): a teacher in the Tibetan tradition.

Lotus sutra: an Indian Mahayana sutra that played a major role in the development of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism.

Madhyamaka: the “Middle Way” School of Mahayana philosophy, developed in India in the second or third century C.E. by the philosopher Nagarjuna.

Mahasamghika: the “Great Community,” a sectarian movement that is thought to be the forerunner of the Mahayana.
**Mahayana**: the “Great Vehicle,” a reform movement that appeared in the Buddhist community in India around the beginning of the Common Era. Eventually, the Mahayana dominated the Buddhism of Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

**Maitreya**: a bodhisattva who is venerated throughout the Buddhist world as the Buddha of the future.

**Mandala**: a sacred circle used in Tantric Buddhist ritual.

**Mañjushri ("Charming Splendor")**: the celestial bodhisattva of wisdom and the patron deity of scholars in Mahayana Buddhism.

**Mantra**: a sacred phrase whose syllables are believed to have power in their own right.

**Mantrayana**: the “Mantra Vehicle,” a common term for Tantric Buddhism.

**Mathura style**: a style of Buddhist art associated with the region of Mathura in the Ganges Basin (c. 100 C.E.).

**Meditation (dhyani) Buddhas**: the five Buddhas who are associated with the five major points in a mandala.

**Mt. Hiei**: the home of the Tendai School in Japan.

**Nembutsu**: the phrase “Namu Amida Butsu” (“Homage to Amida Buddha”), used in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism to invoke the compassion of Amida (or Amitabha) Buddha.

**Nirvana**: cessation of suffering, the goal of Buddhist life.

**Non-duality**: a way of speaking about the doctrine of Emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism.

**Nyingma (rNying-ma)**: one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, founded by Padmasambhava.
*Om manipadme hum*: a mantra used to invoke the power of the celestial bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

**Pali**: a language that is derived from Sanskrit and used in the scriptures of the Theravâda tradition in Southeast Asia.

**Pali canon**: the collection of Buddhist scriptures used by the Theravâda tradition.

**Potala Palace**: the palace of the Dalai Lamas in Tibet.

**Prajna (Pali pañña)**: wisdom, a crucial component of the path that leads to nirvana.

**Pure Land**: a celestial paradise thought to be the home of Amitabha Buddha in the Mahayana tradition.

**Renunciant**: someone who has renounced the ordinary duties and responsibilities of Indian society to escape from the cycle of reincarnation.

**Rinzai School**: a school of Japanese Zen, founded by Eisai (1141–1215).

**Sakya (Sa-skya)**: one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

**Samadhi**: mental concentration.

**Samgha**: the Buddhist community.

**Samsara**: the cycle of reincarnation.

**Samye (bsam-yas)**: first Tibetan monastery and site of a famous debate that led to the acceptance of Indian Buddhism in Tibet.

**Sanskrit**: the language of ancient India.

**Shingon (“True Word”) School**: a school of Japanese Buddhism founded by Kukai or Kobo Daishi (774–835).
**Shinto**: “the Way of the Gods” as opposed to “the Way of the Buddha” in Japan.

**Sila**: moral precepts. Traditionally, laypeople observe five precepts: no killing, no stealing, no lying, no abuse of sex, and no drinking of intoxicants.

**Soto School**: a school of Japanese Zen founded by Dogen (1200–1253).

**Sthaviravada**: the “Doctrine of the Elders,” a sectarian movement that was the forerunner of Theravāda Buddhism.

**Stupa**: a reliquary mound originally used to contain the relics of the Buddha.

**Sutra**: a Buddhist scriptural text.

**Tantra**: the term originally means the warp in a piece of cloth, used to refer to a variety of Buddhism that appeared in India in the sixth century C.E.

**Taoism**: a Chinese religious and philosophical tradition that stresses the value of harmony with nature.

**Tendai School**: a school of Japanese Buddhism founded by Saicho or Dengyo Daishō (762–822).

**Theravāda**: the “Doctrine of the Elders,” the only surviving example of the 18 nikayas, or “schools,” of traditional Buddhism. The Theravāda is now the dominant form of Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

**Three Baskets (tripitaka)**: the three sections of the Buddhist scriptures.

**Three Jewels**: the Buddha, Dharma, and Samgha, also known as the three refuges.

**Tibetan Book of the Dead**: a manual for ritual and meditation to guide the consciousness of someone who has recently died through the afterlife.


*Tulku* (sprul-sku): the Tibetan word *tulku* was used traditionally to refer to the “manifestation” body of a Buddha. Here, it refers to a saint or other religious leader who is recognized as being reborn in a new form.

Upanishad: the portion of the Veda that contained the most extensive speculation about the nature of reality and the doctrine of reincarnation.

Vairocana (“Radiant”) Buddha: one of the key Buddhas in Tantric Buddhism; played a particularly important role in the adaptation of Buddhism to Japan.


Veda: the most ancient and authoritative scriptures of the Hindu tradition.

Vedanta: another name for the Upanishads, the “end of the Veda.”

World Parliament of Religions: a meeting held in Chicago in 1893 that introduced many important Asian religious leaders to the West.

Wrathful Buddha: an image of the Buddha in destructive form, common in Tantric ritual and art.

Yab-yum: an image of a Buddha as the union of male and female, common in Tantric ritual and art.

Yogachara: the “Yoga Practice” School of Mahayana philosophy, founded in the fourth century by Asanga, with help from his brother Vasubandhu.

Zen: the meditation school of Japanese Buddhism.
Asoka: an Indian king (reigned 269–238 B.C.E.) who converted to Buddhism and became the prototype of a “righteous king” (dhammaraja).

Atisha (982–1054): an Indian scholar who played an important role in the Later Diffusion of the Dharma in Tibet.


Blavatsky, Madame Helena Petrova: co-founder of the American Theosophical Society with Colonel Henry Steele Olcott in 1875, an early convert to Buddhism.

Bodhidharma (fl. 460–534): an Indian saint who is said to be the founder of the Ch’an School in China.

Chih-i (538–597): founder of the T’ien-t’ai School in China.

Cold Mountain: a Chinese Buddhist poet who was active during the T’ang Dynasty.

Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.): a Chinese philosopher who was the founder of the Confucian tradition.

Dalai Lama: the spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet, thought by Tibetans to be the manifestation of the bodhisattva Chenrezig or Avalokiteshvara. Tenzin Gyatso, the current Dalai Lama, is the 14th holder of this lineage.

Dharmapala, Anagarika (b. 1864): a Theravāda Buddhist from Ceylon who helped introduce Theravāda Buddhism to North America at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.
Dogen (1200–1253): founder of the Soto School of Zen.

Drogmi (992–1074): founder of the Sakya School in Tibet.

Eisai (1141–1215): founder of the Rinzai School of Zen.


Great Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1683): the Dalai Lama who solidified the political power of the Geluk School in Tibet, builder of the Potala Palace in Lhasa.

Guru Rinpoche: another name for Padmasambhava.

Honen (1133–1212): a Pure Land reformer during the Kamakura period in Japan.

Hsuan-tsang (596–664): a well-known Chinese pilgrim and philosopher who visited India in the early part of the seventh century and brought Yogachara philosophy back to China.

Hui-neng (638–713): a disciple of Hung-jen and sixth patriarch of a particular lineage of Ch’ an Buddhism in China.

Hung-jen (601–674): the fifth patriarch of the Ch’ an tradition in China.

Konchog Gyelpo (dKon-mchog rGyal-po): founded the Sakya Monastery in Tibet in 1073.

Kukai or Kobo Daishi (774–835): founder of the Shingon (“True Word”) School in Japan.

**Mahadeva**: a monk whose scandalous behavior is said to have provoked the Second Buddhist Council.

**Mahaprajapati**: the Buddha’s great aunt, ordained as the first Buddhist nun.

**Maitreya**: the Buddha to come after Shakyamuni.

**Manjushri**: the celestial bodhisattva of wisdom.

**Marpa** (1012–1096): founder of the Kagyu, or “Teaching Lineage,” School in Tibet.

**Milarepa** (1040–1123): one of Tibet’s most beloved saints.

**Mongkut, King of Thailand** (r. 1851–1868), also known as King Rama IV: served as a monk for more than 25 years before becoming king. As king, he instituted a major reform movement in the Thai Samgha.

**Nagarjuna** (second or third century C.E.): founder of the Madhyamaka School of Buddhist philosophy in India.

**Nichiren** (1222–1281): Buddhist reformer during the Kamakura period in Japan.

**Olcott, Colonel Henry Steele**: co-founder of the Theosophical Society with Madame Helena Petrova Blavatsky in 1875 and an early convert to Buddhism.

**Padmasambhava** (eighth century): a Tantric saint who played an important role in the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet during the First Diffusion of the Dharma; considered the founder of the Nyingma School in Tibet.

**Saicho or Dengyo Daishi** (762–822): founder of the Tendai School in Japan.

**Shakyamuni**: Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha of this historical era.
Shantarakshita (eighth century): an Indian scholar who participated in the founding of the first Tibetan monastery.

Shinran (1173–1262): a Pure Land reformer during the Kamakura period in Japan.

Emperor Shomu (r. 724–749): the emperor who built the Great Eastern Temple in Nara and promoted Buddhism as state policy during the Nara period (710–784).

Prince Shotoku (574–622): Japanese prince who was instrumental in the adoption of Buddhism as a form of national policy.

Shunryu Suzuki (1905?–1971): established the San Francisco Zen Center and trained a number of important disciples, including Richard Baker Roshi.

Siddhartha Gautama: the name of the historical Buddha.

Songtsen Gampo (Srong-brtsan-sgam-po): king of Tibet from 627 to 649, credited with the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet.


Thrisong Detsen (Khri-srong-lde-brtsan): king of Tibet from 754 to 797, founded the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery and presided over a debate that led to the acceptance of Indian Buddhism in Tibet.

Tsongkhapa (1357–1419): founder of the Geluk, or “Virtuous Way,” School (also known as the “Yellow Hats”) in Tibet.

Trungpa Rinpoche, Chogyam: a modern leader of Tibetan Buddhism, founder of the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado.
Wang Wei: a Chinese Buddhist poet who was active during the T’ang Dynasty.

Bibliography


Strong, John S. *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995. A rich and varied compendium of Buddhist sources, ranging all the way from classical India to contemporary America. Each selection is introduced by a brief commentary that situates the selection in the development of Buddhist history.


**Internet Resources**


www.mro.org—Zen Mountain Monastery.


www.tibetart.org—a useful site on Tibetan art.