



Buddhist temple, Ayutthaya, Thailand. The temple is a place where persons may show devotion to the three refuges: the Buddha, Dharma (teachings of the Buddha), and Sangha (the Buddhist Order). © Val Brinkerhoff.

CHAPTER 4

BUDDHISM

*As one Zen master put it, “To come to Self-realization you must directly experience yourself and the universe as one.”
Reality is not captured by thoughts. In enlightenment,
a person experiences reality as it is.*

Buddhism is a non-Vedic tradition like Jainism. Both religions moved beyond dependence on Brahmin priests, their sacrificial rituals, and the authority of the Veda. Like Jainism, Buddhism denies the relevance of caste. The story of the Buddha will sound much like the story of Mahavira, but unlike Jainism, Buddhism has spread across the world and is 376 million strong.¹ Many Americans are adopting various forms of Buddhism as their own faith, perhaps in part because there is a strong sense of compassion that runs through Buddhism, making it attractive in a world of violence and exploitation. There are three major schools of Buddhism. The first and oldest is Theravada Buddhism, or the “Tradition of the Elders.” It is found in south Asia in Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, and Thailand. The second tradition is Mahayana Buddhism, or the “Great Vehicle,” which is found in east Asia in Vietnam, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and China. The third school is Vajrayana, or the “Vehicle of the Thunderbolt,” found in Tibet and Mongolia. As we progress through this chapter,

we will look at each of these forms. Each believes that its traditions were taught by the Buddha.

— ORIGINS —

FOUNDER

The founder of Buddhism was a noble by the name of Siddhartha Gautama. He was born in 563 BCE in present-day Nepal and died in 483 BCE. Siddhartha was raised in luxurious surroundings. According to legend, at his birth, a wise man appeared and told Siddhartha's father that if Siddhartha never saw four sights, he would be a great ruler of India, but if he saw them, he would be a great ascetic. The four sights were old age, illness, death, and an ascetic. Needless to say, Siddhartha's father wanted him to be a great ruler of India, so he surrounded his son with young people and prevented him from seeing the harder side of life.

Eventually, Siddhartha married and had a son. Having fulfilled his obligations as a householder, he was free to follow his inclinations according to the four stages of Hindu life, but at this point, the Legend of the Four Sights returns to the story. After having his son, Siddhartha wanted to see what was outside the palace walls. He had been out before, since the family had three palaces (a summer palace, a winter palace, and a rainy season palace). As royalty, it was possible to travel between these in isolation from the countryside, so Siddhartha had never experienced anything other than court life. Since Siddhartha was almost thirty, it was hard for his father to deny his desire to go beyond the palace, so Siddhartha was permitted to venture out. Before he left the palace, however, his father sent servants to see that all old, ill, and dying persons were removed from the way along which Siddhartha would travel and that they were replaced by attractive young people. Thus, Siddhartha started off.

As his chariot moved along, suddenly an old man appeared beside the road. This was probably a god in the guise of old age, since the gods had the same problem that all other living beings had (i.e., they were trapped on the rounds of rebirth). They had been waiting for Siddhartha to come, gain enlightenment, and then teach the way so they could gain release. It would appear from the story that they wished to speed up the process. At any rate, Siddhartha brought the chariot to a halt and asked

what he was seeing, saying that it looked like a man but was all shriveled and shrunken. In response, he learned the mystery of old age.

A bit further along (or on subsequent trips), he encountered a man writhing in pain on the ground, and he learned the mystery of illness. As they continued, he encountered a funeral cortege and learned the mystery of death. Shaken by the pain and suffering which he had witnessed, he encountered a holy man who seemed to have found internal peace in the face of all the pain Siddhartha had seen. Siddhartha wanted to be like him. Thus, he returned to the palace, and in the middle of the night, without saying good-bye to his wife or son, he left the palace. He avoided saying good-bye because he knew that were he to do so, he could not leave them. Thus, we are given a little insight into the emotions of Siddhartha and the difficulty of his decision, which we do not get in the story of Mahavira.

Upon leaving the palace, Siddhartha turned sequentially to two Brahmin priests for instruction. Neither, however, helped him overcome desire, and so he left the Brahmin way and embarked on a five-year period of extreme asceticism much the same as did Mahavira.

Siddhartha's ascetic practices were so severe—eating a grain of rice a day, for example—that five other ascetics began to follow him as the ultimate ascetic model. After five years of these extremities, Siddhartha was on the verge of death, and the statues and paintings of him at this time portray him as nothing but skin and bones. He realized, however, that were he to die, he would not achieve release from the rounds of rebirth in his current condition, so when a young girl offered him a bowl of rice, he accepted it. Seeing this, the five ascetics left him. After all, a bowl of rice in five years clearly made Siddhartha a glutton and a fallen prophet. However, having renewed his strength, Siddhartha sat down under a tree and that night came to enlightenment, but not without opposition. Mara, the demonic figure of Buddhism, tried to thwart Siddhartha by sending his daughters to seduce him, and when that did not work, he sent an army from hell, whose arrows and spears turned into flowers as they were launched at Siddhartha. Upon attaining enlightenment, Siddhartha became the *Buddha* (i.e., one who is fully awake).

Following his enlightenment, the Buddha stayed at Bodh Gaya, in the area of the tree, wrapped in the incredible enlightenment

experience, but he also had a decision to make. In Hindu tradition, once a person gains enlightenment, or has one's calling and election made sure, so to speak, it would be perfectly appropriate to wander into the forest and let the flame go out—in other words, to die. However, out of compassion for the rest of suffering humanity, the Buddha decided to teach others what he had discovered, and therein lies the profound compassion of Buddhism.

Having made this decision, the Buddha left Bodh Gaya and walked to the deer park at Sarnath, near current-day Varanasi, and found the five ascetics who had left him. They saw him coming and debated among themselves whether they should let him sit down. They decided that they would, and when the Buddha sat down and began to teach them, the five realized that he had come to enlightenment. Thus they became the first five members of the Buddhist Order.

As with Mahavira, the Buddha's enlightenment destroyed the Brahmin argument that only Brahmin males were sufficiently advanced spiritually to gain enlightenment. Once again, a noble had reached this state, and as with Jainism, this opened possibilities for persons regardless of sex and caste. However, the way was not as difficult as that of Jainism, for the Buddha had realized that extremes of any kind did not necessarily lead to enlightenment. He had to step back from extreme asceticism before enlightenment came. Thus, Buddhism became known as the "middle way," the way between extreme luxury and extreme asceticism, both of which the Buddha had experienced. Consequently, Buddhism became very attractive in India and challenged the supremacy of Hinduism. The Brahmin response to the challenge was to validate the third way, the way of devotion, which also cut across caste and sex lines but which still encouraged the worship of familiar gods through the Vedic rituals that depended on the Brahmins and their knowledge. Hence, because of this Brahmin response, Buddhism gradually left India to cover the rest of Asia, and to this day it has very little presence in the land of its birth.

The Buddha taught for forty-five years after his enlightenment, which occurred around age thirty-five. Thus, he lived until he was eighty, when he died from eating spoiled pork. According to Buddhist tradition, he knew the food would kill him, but out of respect for the



Buddha at Bodh Gaya. It was here that Siddhartha Gautama reached enlightenment.

person who offered the food in good faith, the Buddha ate it. His last words to his disciples as he was dying were “Behold now, brothers, I exhort you, saying, ‘Decay is inherent in all component things! Work out your salvation with diligence!’”² We will examine the first part of this statement later, but the last part makes it clear that the Buddha’s Buddhism was a do-it-yourself religion in which no gods were available to give assistance.

THE BUDDHIST ORDER

As noted above, the Buddhist Order encompasses monks, nuns, and laypersons. For the ascetics in southern Buddhism or the Theravada form, there are four marks of the Order: the yellow or saffron robe, the receiving or begging bowl, the shaved head, and meditation. They all reflect humility and withdrawal from the world.

All Buddhists take five basic vows, four of which will sound very much like the vows of the Jain monks and nuns.³

1. *I take upon myself the discipline of abstaining from harming sentient beings.* A sentient being is one that possesses sense perception, meaning all moving life. Buddhists do not practice nonviolence to the degree that Jains do, but those trying to live a fully Buddhist life will be vegetarian. Buddhists farm, and in Mahayana Buddhism, monasteries may have gardens in which monks and nuns work as part of

their day and discipline. There is great variety in how Buddhists carry out this vow. Those living near the sea may fish and eat fish as part of their diet. Thus, there is some latitude for the practitioner.

2. *I take upon myself the discipline of abstaining from taking that which is not offered.* This vow is quite straightforward. For the layperson, it means paying for what one receives, but for the monks or nuns, it means that their livelihood is dependent upon the laypeople. For the southern Buddhist monk, it means daily begging rounds to collect his food for the day.

3. *I take upon myself the discipline of abstaining from sexual misconduct.* For laypersons, this means that sexual relations are to be had within the context of marriage. For the monks and nuns, the rule of celibacy is in force. If they break this vow, they will be ejected from the Order for life.

4. *I take upon myself the discipline of abstaining from false speech.* We have looked at this vow in Jainism and have seen that lying violates either the ascetic principles or that of nonviolence.

5. *I take upon myself the discipline of abstaining from stupefying drink.* This fifth vow is different from Jainism, where the last vow is one of nonattachment, but if we look at the vow in the light of the goal of Buddhism, it makes great sense. The goal is to become a Buddha, one who is fully awake, and persons who use alcohol or drugs blur the mind rather than making it awake and clear.

All the above vows are taken by all active members of the Order—monks, nuns, and laypersons. All of these vows can be carried out without entering the withdrawn life, although for the monks and nuns, there is clearly an augmentation to the basic vow. In addition to these vows, there are five more which summarize the additional weight assumed by monks and nuns. However, as we have seen, Buddhism is viewed as the middle way. This is a good test of that precept, so readers may want to ask themselves whether these additional vows define a less rigid asceticism than that which we have seen in Jainism, for example. These five are the Discipline in its simplest form,⁴ which is designed to give guidance and rules for monks and nuns.

1. *Not to eat after midday.* In southern Buddhism, monks go out on early-morning begging rounds. They go to homes where they know householders will give them food, or they just stop at homes



A monk and novices with shaved heads.

and wait a few moments. If no one brings out food, they move on. After collecting their food, they return to the monastery, eat about half of what they collected, and then go about their morning chores or study. Shortly before noon, they eat the remainder of the food and then fast until the next morning. Liquids may be taken, but not food. This vow underlines the spiritual dimension of Buddhism—from noon until the next morning, monks fast with the intent of elevating the spiritual over the physical.

2. *Not to watch secular entertainments.* This vow removes monks and nuns from any kind of secular entertainment such as dance, songs, plays, movies, and so on. The point is that monks and nuns are living a withdrawn life, although they are not totally isolated from the population. They should not involve themselves in things that would draw them back to worldly attachments.

3. *Not to use perfumes or ornaments.* This is very similar to the previous and following vows. Do not use the things of the world: in this case, jewelry, perfumes, and aftershaves.

4. *Not to use high couches or beds.* Once again, these would be signs of worldly indulgence. These are what the wealthy use, and monks and nuns are not to indulge themselves in this manner.

5. *Not to handle gold or silver.* This is a ban against involvement in business. The laypeople provide everything the monks or nuns need.

Sometimes the monks will go out with a young boy who will buy a few necessities for the monks, but the monks do not involve themselves in the commercial transaction. Again, it is a recognition that the ascetic has stepped back from the world.

As we look at these additional vows, one may ask whether they reflect a middle path or an extreme asceticism. As we can see, while there is definitely a withdrawal from the world, it is not severe. Monks and nuns eat adequately and regularly. Some live in community. They spend part of their time in work and study and part of their time in spiritual disciplines. They interact with people daily, even conducting schools. Their lifestyles, however, generate humility and internal peace.

The Buddhist community had early decisions to make. The laity provided what the ascetics needed, including groves, parks, and monasteries. They also provided some very rich bolts of cloth, and one of the Buddha's closest disciples came to him to ask what they should do with them. After all, they were ascetics, and up to this time the monks had been sewing together rags for their robes! The Buddha responded that they should cut up the cloth and then sew it back together. It thus lost its commercial value and therefore could be used. Even today, the orange robes of southern Buddhist monks are sewn together rather than being of one piece.

Another issue was the role of women. As a man of his day, the Buddha looked upon women as temptations to ascetics. Their normal role was that of wife and mother, and only the White Clad Jains seem to have allowed women into an ascetic role. Ultimately the Buddha permitted this too, although senior nuns must still bow to the lowliest monks. The lineage of ordination for women in southern Buddhism has been lost, so there are no formally ordained nuns among the Theravada, although there are women who live the ascetic life, as do nuns in the other two Buddhist traditions.

THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism spread rather slowly. At first, the Buddha and his disciples wandered, teaching what the Buddha had discovered in his enlightenment. After the Buddha's death, this practice continued until the reign of King Asoka (ca. 272–231 BCE). Asoka was the first

ruler to conquer virtually all of India, but he did it through fifteen years of very bloody warfare. At the end of this period, he discovered Buddhism and became a lay practitioner. His commitment was such that he set up stone pillars around India with inscriptions encouraging people to live the Buddhist principles of compassion and kindness to one another as well as to other forms of life. Asoka sent missionaries as far west as Greece and Egypt, but Buddhism did not take root in that environment. The missionaries who went to the south and east, however, found fertile ground. Theravada Buddhism took root in Sri Lanka as well as in the south Asian countries of Burma, Cambodia, and Thailand.

Around the time of Christ, Theravada missionaries went north through the Himalayas and followed the Silk Route to China. The Chinese enjoyed life and families, and so the Theravada form, which required the ascetic life, was not especially attractive to them. However, a bit later, Mahayana missionaries arrived, and since persons could practice Mahayana with the help of heavenly figures and could remain in the midst of life as a practitioner, this was the form that took root in China.

From China, Buddhism moved to Manchuria and then into Korea. In the sixth century CE, the king of Paekche, one of the three kingdoms in Korea, sent an image of the Buddha, some Buddhist texts, and a letter to the emperor of Japan stating that the Koreans had found a religious faith that provided great benefits to its adherents and suggesting that Japan should explore it. Unfortunately, at the same time these articles arrived, so did a plague. The foreign gods were blamed, and the Buddha image was thrown into a canal. This happened again, but when the plague did not end after the Buddha image was again thrown into a canal, it was decided that perhaps it was the Buddhist deities who were angry at how they had been received.⁵ Thus, late in the sixth century, a member of the royal family became a Buddhist, and the religion spread through the nobility and beyond.

In the seventh century, Mahayana Buddhism spread into Tibet, where it encountered an indigenous religion called Bon, which had many similarities to Buddhism. Thus, the Buddhism of Tibet is Mahayana blended with Bon. It is known as Vajrayana Buddhism,

or the “Vehicle of the Thunderbolt.” When the Mongols conquered Tibet in the thirteenth century and Kublai Khan accepted the faith, Vajrayana Buddhism became the dominant faith of the Mongols. Thus, over a period of 1,800 years, Buddhism covered most of Asia.

BUDDHIST SCRIPTURES

Each of the divisions within Buddhism has its own canon, but there is significant overlap between them. The foundational text is the Tripitaka, the “Three Baskets,” and is the text of Theravada Buddhism. As its name suggests, it contains three divisions. The first contains the rules for monastic life. The second contains the teachings of the Buddha, as well as stories about his prior lives. The third basket contains philosophical texts covering “advanced topics.” The Mahayana canon is not separated into categories, as is the Theravada, but there is significant commonality, with various additions used by schools within the Mahayana realm. Likewise, the Vajrayana Buddhists have their own canon, having sent people to India to copy scripture. It is somewhat different from that of the other two groups, but it contains material on monastic discipline and the teachings of the Buddha common to all.⁶ Both Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism have many additional texts unique to themselves and to the various groups within their frameworks.

— THERAVADA PHILOSOPHY —

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The heart of the Buddha’s enlightenment is captured in what are known as the Four Noble Truths. They are as follows:

1. Life is suffering.
2. Suffering is caused by desire.
3. Suffering will cease when desire ceases.
4. Desire will cease by following the Eightfold Path.

The first Noble Truth refers to life on the rounds of rebirth. The word used for suffering carries the sense of a wheel out of round. It goes bump, bump, bump, and becomes uncomfortable and disturbing. This is the way with life. By clutching at things that are constantly

changing, we create suffering for ourselves, because the things of the world slip out of our grasp. This is the import of the first part of the Buddha's final words to his disciples. He said, "Decay is inherent in all component things."⁷ Nothing is permanent. Trying to hold on to the transient can only cause pain and suffering, because we are bound to lose that for which we reach. Thus there is sickness, death, divorce, grief, and sorrow in life. This does not mean that Buddhism is a sad religion. It is not. Rather, it is highly pragmatic and realistic, noting that permanent happiness cannot be found when immersed in the transitory character of the world. Buddhism thus invites people to go beyond the moment.

The above leads logically to the second Noble Truth: suffering is caused by desire or grasping. Again, grasping for that which disappears creates pain. We grasp for and try to hold on to all sorts of things—objects, ideas, opinions, rites, rituals, and especially the "I." Every one of them slips away, including the "I," which is, as are all things, impermanent.

The third Noble Truth affirms that when grasping ceases, suffering will cease, and it is certainly the logical consequence of the first two assumptions. Finally, desire or grasping will cease if persons follow the Eightfold Path.

THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

Theravada Buddhists expect people to walk the eight steps of this path one at a time. The first five steps can be done as laypeople without the necessity of withdrawing from the world. The sixth step can be begun as laypersons but also bridges into the seventh step, which must be accomplished as part of the ascetic or withdrawn life.

The first two steps may be grouped under the heading of *study* and are (1) right view and (2) right attitude. Right view means that a person understands the Four Noble Truths and realizes that reality is different from the way it is usually perceived. Right attitude requires persons to be free from hate, anger, or confusion, which cloud perception. People must lay aside their usual attitudes of judgment and classification and be open to new and different possibilities.

The next steps are classified under *conduct* and constitute the ethical norms of Buddhism. These are (3) right speech, (4) right

action, (5) right livelihood, and (6) right effort. Right speech means that people's speech is first and foremost helpful and compassionate. It is free of gossiping, lying, backbiting, and so on. Right action means people's actions are helpful and compassionate (i.e., they do not kill, steal, or have sexual relations outside of marriage). Right livelihood defines the parameters within which vocations should be carried out. As above, persons in their vocations should be helpful and compassionate and should embody the previous principles. Buddhists would not normally be sellers of slaves or animals for slaughter, soldiers, drug dealers, butchers, fishermen, or hunters, nor should they accept a vocation involving deceit. There is, however, a great deal of variation in the way this step is carried out among Buddhists. They certainly farm, which entails taking a certain amount of life. Those who live by the sea may fish, since it is their only source of food or income. In Buddhist countries, some serve in the armed forces. Finally, right effort means to overcome those things which are holding people back spiritually and to develop those things that move them further along the path of spirituality, all of which involves significant self-examination.

The final two steps are (7) right mindfulness, and (8) right concentration. Right mindfulness is the ability to be aware of what is going on around oneself and see reality as it is. In reality, most of us wander through life on autopilot, never seeing the beauty and intricacy of life. We are always going somewhere and are rarely fully present in the moment. Our eyes are not open. We see little or nothing. Our spouses deserve us to be present with them mentally as well as physically. We should not be at the office or in the classroom or designing a project or worrying about the children when we are on a date or sitting down to dinner. The goal of Buddhism is not to be mesmerized by the things of the world, but rather to be fully awake, to be present in the moment, and to see things as they are at any given instant.

Right concentration means to be able to focus on one thing to the exclusion of all other competing elements. This is accomplished through proper meditation, the goal of which is to stop the "monkey mind" from bounding from one thought to another like a monkey bounds from tree to tree, with no specific plan. For all of the

religions at which we have been looking, the mind gets in the way of knowing reality, which can be found only through an encounter with it, not by thinking about it. Right concentration is the path to that encounter.

According to Theravada Buddhism, if one walks the entire Eightfold Path step by step, that person will be led to enlightenment. It will take multiple lifetimes to travel the whole distance, but enlightenment should be the goal.

KARMA

Since Buddhism arises from the soil of Hinduism, the basic principles are much the same. There is the concept of karma, but it is not the karma matter of Jainism; rather, it is the cosmic, nonmaterial karma of Hinduism. All karma will one day come to fruition, giving consequences to prior actions. Similarly, the idea of reincarnation is very present. Persons live multiple lifetimes and may live in multiple life-forms before they find release from the rounds of rebirth.

In the previous religions, reincarnation takes place through the process of transmigration, in which souls move from one life to the next. But suppose that a religion does not believe in the reality of a soul. Can reincarnation take place? The offhand answer is usually “Of course not.” Yet Buddhists do not believe that there is a soul, and they still believe in reincarnation. How can this be?

SKANDHAS

The answer lies in a concept known as the *skandhas*, which are the five temporary constituents of being, or as Jack Kornfield calls them, the collection of “five changing processes.”⁸ The five elements are a physical body, feelings, perceptions, responses, and a flow of consciousness. It is these that make me who I am at any moment, but everyone knows that they are constantly changing and that they ultimately fall apart. Those of us who are aging know we are in flux as we watch our chests slide somewhere around our waists, our hair thin, and wrinkles appear, or as we need lifts in our shoes and find ourselves replacing various body parts. In the end, if our bodies were just buried and then dug up a year later, it would be obvious that we had fallen apart. The doctrine of the skandhas is highly pragmatic.

It recognizes that nothing is permanent and that all things are in the process of change.

REINCARNATION

But what about reincarnation? Many of us have either played with or seen sealing wax. We know that it can be melted and then have a seal pressed into it to leave a visible image. Buddhists ask in this illustration whether anything has transmigrated from the seal to the wax, and the obvious answer is that it has not. Yet there is a clear impression in the wax. Reincarnation is similar. After death, if the things which keep persons on the wheel have not been eliminated, individuals will return. Thus, a puddle of unformed skandhas appears. It contains a generic body, for it is unknown what form it will take. It could be a human, a deer, or a rabbit, all of which the Buddha experienced, according to the stories of the Buddha's previous lives. In addition, unformed feelings, perceptions, responses, and flow of consciousness are added. They are stamped with my impression accumulated over hundreds and perhaps thousands of lifetimes, and once again I reappear. What stamps the skandhas? It is my karma, accrued over all my lifetimes. Remember that karma is not material in Buddhism but cosmic in nature. Because it is my karma, I am the one who is reborn. Thus Buddhism has a doctrine of no soul, but still the doctrine of reincarnation is present.

NO SOUL

This doctrine of "no soul" or emptiness is captured by the word *shunyata*, which may be translated as "emptiness" and is a doctrine most fully developed in Mahayana Buddhism. This doctrine does not mean, according to the Buddha, that reality does not exist. It does exist, but it is "transparent to analysis."⁹ This means that no matter how much we may analyze various phenomena or ourselves, we can never nail down the underlying reality. We cannot find it. It is much like being in a room. We know it contains space, but we can never find it, define it, or identify it; yet we know it exists. So it is with ultimate reality. Roger Corless states that reality for Buddhists is more like the concept of space than of particles and is thus indescribable. Consequently, the word *shunyata* has a variety of

translations—“emptiness” or “transparency”—but the one which best captures what we have just said is the Chinese “spaciousness.”

Atomic physics has certainly shown us that everything which we consider to be solid is really more space than substance. There are immense spaces between the atoms that make up material life, but for the Latter-day Saints, there is concrete reality that continues eternally. This is different from the Buddhist view of things. For Latter-day Saints, matter, energy, and intelligence are eternal. The spirit composed of “finer matter” with which the Father clothes our intelligence will continue through mortality into the eternities. There is nothing impermanent about it. So also the body, which is temporarily laid down at death, will be raised, and is at a minimum immortal, never to die again no matter what degree of glory it may occupy. Thus, a major difference in perspective between Latter-day Saints and Buddhists would be over the issue of transiency versus permanence.

— MAHAYANA PHILOSOPHY —

Most of what has been discussed above has been part of Theravada Buddhism, the Buddhism of south Asia. Mahayana Buddhism, by contrast, is the Buddhism of east Asia. The principle difference between Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism is that the former has a number of helping beings from whom practitioners can receive aid in gaining release from the rounds of rebirth. But how is that Buddhism, if Theravada is what the Buddha taught? The answer from a Buddhist perspective is that, while it is true that the Buddha taught the Theravada way, he also taught the Mahayana way to those who were prepared for a higher path. In a sense, it is like Jesus, who preached a public message to the crowds in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) but gave additional knowledge to his inner circle of disciples in the Gospel of John. Likewise, both ways arise from the Buddha.

BODHISATTVAS

The concept of the *bodhisattva* is central to Mahayana Buddhism. The first point of contact with the idea is at the individual level. It says, “Take the challenge to unlock the Buddha nature within you desiring to become a Buddha, and when you do, you become a

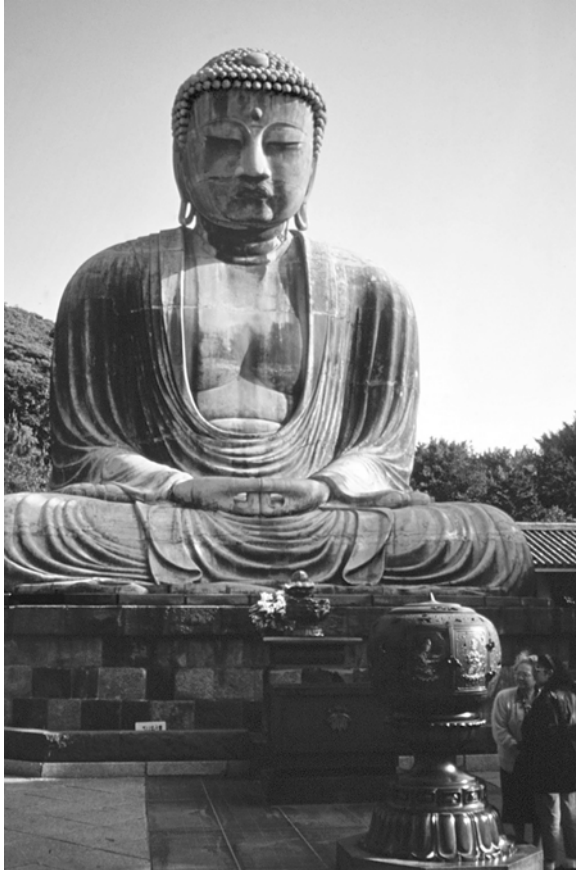
bodhisattva, a Buddha to be, a compassionate being.” In Mahayana Buddhism the purpose for attaining Buddhahood and release from the rounds of rebirth is so that the individual may turn back and help all life find release. Essentially, the “Buddha to be” takes a vow of eternal compassion or eternal helping. But persons do not need to wait until some future life to help people. That service can begin here and now, and it is no accident that many Buddhists involve themselves in all kinds of compassionate service, such as hospice or hospital volunteering.

In addition, Mahayana also offers a cloud of already-enlightened heavenly beings that are committed to helping persons on earth through their profound compassion. There are two categories of these: (1) cosmic Buddhas and (2) cosmic bodhisattvas.

Cosmic Buddhas. At each of the major compass points, there exists a heavenly land, and a cosmic Buddha presides over each of these four lands. Amitabha or Amida presides over the western paradise, with others over each of the other three lands. In the center is Vairocana, the generator of the four others. Hence, there are only five cosmic Buddhas, four of whom preside over heavenly paradises.

Cosmic bodhisattvas. Perhaps because the cosmic Buddhas appear somewhat exalted and distant from us, there are cosmic bodhisattvas who bridge the gap between them and us. They fill a role somewhat akin to that of the saints in Roman Catholicism, and each has taken the eternal vow of compassion to help sentient life. Each of the Four Lords of Lands has a number of cosmic bodhisattvas surrounding him, but it is the Lord of the Western Land who receives the major attention. The structure of the other lands is similar to that of the west, and it is the west that we will explore here.

The principal cosmic bodhisattva associated with Amida is Avalokitesvara, who was created by a ray of light from the third eye, or eye of enlightenment, of Amida. Avalokitesvara is one of the most popular compassionate figures, especially in his feminine form as Kannon (Japan and Korea) or Kwan Yin (China). The statues of Kannon or Kwan Yin, who is known as the Madonna of Buddhism, are lovely and graceful. She is usually shown with multiple heads, implying that she misses nothing, and with multiple arms, since nothing escapes her safety net. Women and children often turn to



Amida, cosmic Buddha who presides over the western paradise.

Kannon for assistance with problems ranging from exams for children to childbirth or family problems for adults. Kannon is near and is profoundly compassionate to those in need.

Usually, there is a third figure presiding over the western land. This third personage in addition to Amida and Kannon is usually Maitreya, the cosmic bodhisattva who will come at the end of the age. All of these Buddhas and bodhisattvas may be accessed through prayer, and they may aid a petitioner. In Tibetan Buddhism, Avalokitesvara's compassion is so great that he descends and dwells among us as the Dalai Lama, head of Tibetan Buddhism, who is currently in exile in India. For his work on behalf of Tibet and Tibetans, the Dalai Lama has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

SCHOOLS OF MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

Pure Land and True Pure Land sects. The Pure Land and True Pure Land sects in Japan worship Amida, Lord of the Western Paradise or the Pure Land. The founder of the Pure Land sect, Honen (1133–1212), held that to show one's faith in Amida's power to release persons from the rounds of rebirth, one should pronounce the name of Amida as many times as possible during the day. Honen would pronounce the name sixty to seventy thousand times daily. One of his followers, Shinran (1173–1262), founded the True Pure Land sect believing that it was necessary to call on Amida only once in a lifetime, because there was nothing that any person could do to save himself or herself. Humanity was so depraved that even faith was a gift, so having received it, persons could not fall out of grace. They were guaranteed salvation at death. Thus, in both sects, salvation comes through faith in Amida. The founders would have agreed with Martin Luther that "by faith alone are you saved," but this did not excuse a person from a life of good works for any of the above. In the cases of Honen and Shinran, one had to live a life acceptable to Amida, just as the life of a disciple is expected from those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lutherans or Latter-day Saints.

— ZEN BUDDHISM —

Since we have talked all through these first three religions about meditation, we will spend some time with Zen and examine what the meditative life actually involves. Zen Buddhism, while a Mahayana school, returns to the self-help Buddhism seen in Theravada. Zen has become quite attractive to Americans looking for something they have not found in traditional Christianity. There are no divine figures from whom one can gain assistance, although the bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjushri, serves as a model of the insight one is seeking. The founding of Zen is usually attributed to Bodhidharma (ca. third to fourth century CE), an Indian. It is said that Bodhidharma meditated facing a cliff for nine years until he came to enlightenment. Having attained this goal, he decided to take his knowledge to China and to teach the monks. Upon arriving in China, he found the monks physically unfit for the rigors of meditation, so after watching animals, he developed a series of exercises to get the monks in shape.

These exercises form the foundation of the techniques of karate today. But for Bodhidharma, they were not the end of the path, only the beginning. They prepared the monks for the spiritual dimension of life, and too many karate instructors have either forgotten this or never knew it. The black belt is not an end but a beginning. The tradition that Bodhidharma developed is known as Ch'an Buddhism in China and Zen Buddhism in Japan.

The focus of Zen is sitting meditation, which takes place in a meditation hall. Various forms of meditation occupy the attention of the monks or nuns. One tradition chooses to simply focus on the breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils. We learn to be present in each moment, and therefore while sitting, one is just sitting and aware of it, and when one breathes, one is just breathing and aware of it. Awareness leads to seeing the world as it truly is.

Around the interior of the meditation hall is a raised platform, about five feet wide and a foot and a half above the floor, upon which people place their sitting cushions. The cushions are placed on the platform so that persons meditating are facing the wall—like Bodhidharma did his cliff—to limit distractions, since meditation is done with the eyes open. In addition to the sitting meditation, there are many activities during the day in a monastery, and every activity is a form of meditation. Whether one is working, eating, studying, sitting, or walking, all activities are to be done mindfully. Periodically, a gong may ring, and persons stop what they are doing in the garden, in the kitchen, or on other work sites to come back to the breath and refocus. Even at meals, persons are to continue in the meditative state and contemplate how their food arrived on their plates. If one takes this exercise seriously, it leads to an understanding that there is no existence in isolation. Everything is connected and part of a larger whole. Think of the hands all over the world that harvested the grain, made the equipment, made the boxes, shipped the food, and so on. It does not take long to see that all things are linked. This larger whole is like a fishing net. If I cut a knot out of it, the knot has no meaning separated from the other knots in the net. So it is with human beings, who have meaning only as we are united with the universe and each other. Seeing ourselves as one with the universe is a partial definition of enlightenment.

A regular part of monastery life is to talk with the head of the monastery (the Abbot) sitting on cushions knee to knee. The topic may be any aspect of life, and the purpose is to allow the Abbot to guide the student. Another practice is to participate in a concentrated period of meditation, which runs five to seven days. The day begins at 5:00 a.m. and ends at 9:00 p.m., and the entire time is spent in the meditation hall except for trips to the restroom. All meals are taken in the hall in a highly stylized manner which emphasizes mindfulness. Sitting meditation is dominant, but it is broken by lectures, slow walking meditation, and meals. The first objective is once again to quiet the monkey mind, which may take three or four days before it is quiet enough that other things can begin to happen. It is in this concentrated period that someone often comes to enlightenment, the reality of which is weighed and validated by the Abbot.

The essence of enlightenment is the loss of our individuality into the oneness with the cosmos. As one Zen master put it, "To come to Self-realization you must directly experience yourself and the universe as one."¹⁰ Reality is not captured by thoughts. In enlightenment, a person experiences reality as it is.

As we have seen, meditation in Buddhism is primarily aimed at quieting the monkey mind, which bounds from thought to thought to thought. If Latter-day Saints could do that, it would undoubtedly improve their prayer life. But meditation in Latter-day Saint terms focuses more on scriptural content or on the person of the Father or the Son. Meditation on any of these is mental knowledge about scriptural passages or understanding of the Father and the Son and their work. But if we push meditation further, it can lead to a deepened *relationship* with the Father and Son through openness to the Holy Ghost. In the end, this should be the goal of meditation, for as in Buddhism, real knowledge is experiential, not intellectual. We may know much *about* God, but the ultimate challenge is to *know him* through the Spirit, so that his mind and will are ours. This is more than intellectual understanding. Perhaps persons who have become enlightened in other traditions have experienced something akin to this union of the human spirit with the Holy Ghost. It would certainly be in harmony with Elder Dallin Oaks's assertion that manifestations of the Holy Ghost are available to persons who are not Latter-day Saints.¹¹

—VAJRAYANA PHILOSOPHY—

Vajrayana Buddhism, or the “Vehicle of the Thunderbolt,” is the Buddhism of Tibet and Mongolia. It builds on Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism and, like Mahayana, views itself as established by the Buddha for those ready for the highest way. It compares the three forms of Buddhism to the three forms of the Buddha. His human form is comparable to Theravada Buddhism. His divine form is comparable to Mahayana, and his formlessness is comparable to Vajrayana.

There are some unique elements in Tibetan Buddhism. One is the concept of terma. Terma are hidden treasures of various kinds, but most especially texts. Terma were hidden in the past for a future generation. These texts are written in unknown languages. The person who finds and translates them is called a tertön. As noted, the message was for a future day and time and was hidden away to await the appointed age. Not only can tertöns translate these hidden texts, but they may also receive texts directly with no intervening medium. Such texts are considered as sacred as are those that came through some physical medium.

The concepts of terma and tertön may send chills up the backs of Latter-day Saints, for terma sound remarkably like what the Book of Mormon is—an ancient text hidden in the past for our specific time. That would, of course, make Joseph Smith a tertön—one who has the gift to translate the hidden text, as well as the ability to bring new texts to light without any physical medium. The latter would be comparable, for example, to the story of Enoch in Moses or the many other revelations received by Joseph.

The heart of Tibetan meditation is the practice of visualization. Persons seek to identify with a cosmic Buddha or bodhisattva, making the heavenly figure’s attributes their own. This is done through mental and physical practices, since individuals may identify with the heavenly being through body, speech, and mind. Identity with a heavenly figure like Avalokitesvara (the bodhisattva of compassion) moves individuals to think beyond themselves and expands their kindness, compassion, intelligence, and wisdom, because they take upon themselves those attributes from the deity. Thus, they see the needs of others more clearly and can communicate with them and help them as would the deity. Latter-day Saints living in close harmony with the Spirit experience these very qualities.

Bodily identification with a deity is accomplished through various hand positions, each of which has a specific symbolic meaning. For example, the right hand on the left in a meditative posture is the hand position of compassion.

Identification in speech is through chanted sounds that connect a person with a heavenly figure. The syllables may or may not have meaning, but that is not the point. At the vibrational level the sound is the deity. Thus, the chant *Om mani padme hum* (“Ohm manny padmay hoom”) is Avalokitesvara in sound.¹² The mantra has power as it is chanted.

Persons identify with the mind of a deity by remembering and accurately performing the hand positions and chants. Both hand positions and chants have power in themselves, but that power is enhanced immeasurably when done with remembrance.

Another tool in visualization is sand paintings. A sand painting portrays a world not captured in the rounds of rebirth. Its two-dimensional picture is actually a three-dimensional sphere that encloses and protects the three-dimensional palace, at the center of which is a deity. Students must memorize minutely the sand painting, which they can then visualize at any later time. This practice is called “deity yoga,” and one acts as if he or she is the deity, reflecting as suggested above all the deity’s wisdom, compassion, and other attributes.¹³ Thus, the Vajrayana practitioner operates as if he or she has attained the goal of unity with the visualized heavenly figure, while other forms of Buddhism are paths leading to that goal.

It may seem as if there is no connection between sand paintings and the Latter-day Saints. However, a sand painting is the home of a deity. The goal is to be fully identified with that figure. The temple of the Latter-day Saints is in a sense a sand painting because it requires, as does a Buddhist sand painting, that practitioners pass by the gods who are guardians to reach the highest realm in which one can dwell with the ultimate of all realities. There are actions and words in the temple which help the Latter-day Saint identify with the Father and his Son and which are highly symbolic. In the end, the worshiper dwells in the presence of the Father, and in a similar way the Vajrayana Buddhist encounters the deity of the sand painting.

— WORSHIP AND RITUAL —

There are many rituals in Buddhism, but they differ dependent upon whether one is talking about Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana Buddhism. The basic rituals in Theravada Buddhism focus on what are known as the three refuges: “I take refuge in the Buddha,” “I take refuge in the Dharma” (teaching of the Buddha), and “I take refuge in the Sangha” (the Buddhist Order). When chanted, these are repeated three times and are believed to purify, uplift, and strengthen the heart. Taking refuge in the Buddha means that persons take the Buddha as the ultimate model for what persons may become. Refuge in the teachings in short form would be to follow the Eightfold Path, and refuge in the Order would be to take guidance, support, and direction from others following the path. In Mahayana Buddhism, refuge in the Buddha can include refuge in the cosmic Buddhas and bodhisattvas, such as Amitabha or Avalokitesvara. In Zen the refuges are internalized. Thus, to take refuge in the Buddha means to turn to one’s own Buddha nature and to find enlightenment there. The teaching is truth, and the Order is purity.¹⁴ In Tibetan or Vajrayana Buddhism, there are additional refuges. The first is taking refuge in one’s teacher or lama, who is believed to be the embodiment of the refuges. One then enters into the three refuges already mentioned under the teacher’s guidance. The next refuge would be the personal deity that the person will worship and visualize. Further, there will be purification rituals, the most strenuous one being the grand prostration, which begins with persons standing, then going to their knees, and then completing the prostration by extending themselves fully on the floor facedown. This is done one hundred thousand times, and after the physical pains are transcended, there is joy.

The use of images is common to all forms of Buddhism. In Theravada Buddhism, the image of the historical Buddha or a symbol of him reminds persons of the various spiritual qualities that are necessary for them to gain. While this is also true for Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, there is an added dimension in which the spirit and power of the deity represented are present in the image.¹⁵

The temple is a place where persons may show devotion to the refuges. The Buddha is represented by a statue, a stupa (a dome-shaped



Pagoda with golden Stupa. At the temple, persons may show devotion to the refuges of Buddhism. © Val Brinkerhoff.

structure), or the tree under which the Buddha was enlightened. The teaching is present through sermons or informal teaching, and the Order is visibly present in the monks and nuns themselves. Often, temples are circled clockwise as an act of reverence. Apart from the temple, the home plays a principal role in the lives of Buddhist lay-people. There, worship is carried out, the goal of which is to reverence and honor the three refuges. Normally, bowing before an altar, which may contain symbols or statues of the Buddha, is prominent. The bows are normally done three times out of respect for the three refuges and may be acts of repentance. Offerings of flowers may also be given, and chants may be performed.

Other aids to worship are incense, which symbolizes the odor of sanctity about the Buddha; light using small lamps, symbolizing the Buddha's enlightened state; and chanting, which aids the memory, holds persons' interest, and creates joy and calm in the practitioners. Rosaries may be used to count the chants. Pilgrimage has also been popular among Buddhists, with sites related to the life of Siddhartha Gautama being especially favored.

Two festivals are directly tied to the Buddha. The first celebrates the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and taking of nirvana (i.e., his death) and occurs on the night of the full moon in May. It is a joyous time, and homes are decorated. The second festival remembers the Buddha's renunciation of family and society and his first sermon, and it is also the beginning of the rainy season, which begins in July in south Asia. During this season, monks remain in the monasteries, and many laypersons take temporary ordination and withdraw to monasteries for about three months.¹⁶

Finally, devotion plays a major role in Mahayana Buddhism, and two principal figures receive the majority of that worship. They are Avalokitesvara and Amida. Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, will immediately respond to anyone who turns to him in faith. Common in the worship of these figures is the prayer wheel, which may be a small handheld one or a huge one that is mounted in a temple for Avalokitesvara or his female manifestation, Kwan Yin or Kannon. On its outside, the prayer wheel has a chant reflecting the divine figure, and inside is the same chant written multiple times on a piece of paper that is then folded and inserted into the wheel. The large wheel at a temple has the chant written on numerous pieces of paper, and thus the chant appears thousands of times. One turn of the wheel is equivalent to reciting the chant the number of times it appears both on and in the wheel. Goodness and power are gained as the prayer wheel is turned.¹⁷

The other figure who receives faith and prayers is Amitabha or Amida, who is the Lord of the Western Land or Paradise. Essentially, a person purifies his or her mind by thinking on Amida or by reciting his name or chant. Since a chant is primarily the deity manifest in sound, the sounds *are* Amida. Reciting the syllables awakens faith in Amida and rids one of egoistic power in exchange for the power of Amida.¹⁸

— WOMEN —

Buddhism is a patriarchal faith in practice, although there is nothing male or female about the teaching of the Buddha. The Buddha held that both males and females could gain enlightenment and release but resisted letting women into the Order, saying that if he did not admit them, the Order would last for a thousand years. If he did admit them, it would last for only five hundred years. Finally, he admitted women to the Order, but with prescribed constraints. The principal restrictions defined nuns as always subordinate to monks. Even the most senior nun, no matter how old or how long ordained, must bow before the newest and most junior monk, even if he is only eight years old. Secondly, no nun may teach men.

With these restrictions, an order of nuns was established, and nuns were present in all the Theravada countries, as well as in the Mahayana and Vajrayana ones. The lineage for Theravada nuns was lost in the fifth century CE, but it still exists in China, Korea, and Vietnam and could be reestablished in the Theravada countries. Powerful monks have resisted its reestablishment, though the Dalai Lama supports its renewal.

Unfortunately, nuns are not as highly regarded as monks, especially ascetic women in Theravada countries. The laity tend not to support ascetic Buddhist women in the way they do men, and perhaps that is due to the lack of formal ordination in the Theravada countries. By contrast, women who become Buddhists in Western countries are usually articulate and well educated and are good teachers of the dharma. They may bring respect to the female practitioners of Buddhism that has been lacking to this point.

— CONCLUSION —

Buddhism, while having its own distinctive worldview which is quite different from that of the Latter-day Saints, forces Latter-day Saints to think seriously about the things they presume to be ultimate reality. In the end, there is permanence in the elements of the universe in the Latter-day Saint view that is not present in Buddhism. Also, Buddhism has no concept of an ultimate deity, for all things are in flux.

— NOTES —

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