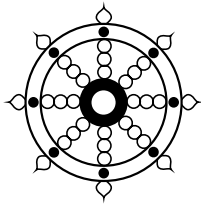
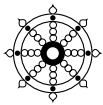


BUDDHISM: A PRIMER



The *Dharma* Wheel represents the totality of the Buddha's teaching and the interconnectedness of all things. The eight spokes denote the Noble Eightfold Path. Each phase of the Buddha's teaching is described as another turning of the *dharmawheel*.



ORIGINS

Buddhism is a Western term for a vast number of expressions of the philosophy of Siddhartha Gautama (c.563-483 BCE). Because of his privileged upbringing as an Indian prince of the Shakya tribe, Siddhartha was a young man

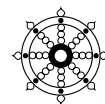
before he first saw illness, old age, death, and asceticism (a monk's voluntary rejection of worldly pleasures). Experience of these "Four Passing Sights" was life-changing for Siddhartha, leading him to try years of rigorous asceticism. Finally, seated in meditation, he discovered that enlightenment (buddhahood) is not to be found in the extremes of indulgence or ascetical self-denial, but rather, on a Middle Path between them. He had become "Buddha"—one who is awake, or enlightened. For the remainder of his long life, the Buddha—also known to his followers as Shakyamuni—taught this discovery.

- As Buddhism expanded throughout Asia, it developed three main branches, each with dozens of limbs.
- Theravada (Way of the Elders), the southern branch, took shape between 200 BCE and 200 CE. It became the dominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and most of mainland Southeast Asia.
- Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle)—the western branch—combined Buddhist teaching

with elements of Hindu practice. By 700 CE, a form of Vajrayana had become the official religion of Tibet.

- Mahayana (Great Vehicle)—the northern branch—developed in China from about 50 CE amidst Taoism and Confucianism. It often refers to Theravada Buddhism as Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle). Mahayana produced many variations as it spread to Viet Nam, Korea, and Japan—Pure Land, Nichiren, and Zen among them.

- Bodhidharma—the father of Zen—was a late 5th-century Indian sage who traveled and taught in China. Zen is a radical blend of Mahayana philosophy, elements of Taoism; and emphasis on seated meditation.



BELIEFS

- Buddhists "take refuge" in *Three Jewels*: the *Buddha* himself and his enlightenment, his *dharmawheel* (teachings), and *sangha* (the community of faith).
- Buddhism focuses on the notion of *dukkha* (suffering, i.e., anguish or unsatisfactoriness).



"love
your
neighbor
as
yourself"



The Buddha taught *Four Noble Truths*: 1) that life inevitably involves suffering; 2) that the origin of suffering is desire (either for things to be different than they are, or to stay as we want them); 3) suffering ends by extinguishing desire; and, 4) desire is extinguished by following the Noble Eightfold Path—Buddhism’s Middle Way of morality, concentration, and wisdom.

- Buddhism embraces the notion of *Samsara*—the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth—but not in the sense that souls migrate from one body to another. Rather, it teaches that all life is interconnected. What cycles endlessly is the accumulation of good and bad influences, like a flame passing from candle to candle. Enlightenment provides the exit, i.e., passage to *Nirvana*—a state words can never fully describe. At best, we can say only what *Nirvana* is not!

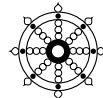
- In *Theravada* Buddhism, it is believed that *Nirvana* can be reached only by spending at least one lifetime as a monk. *Mahayana* Buddhists believe that *Nirvana* can be reached without being a monastic. Its ideal, however, is the *Bodhisattva*—one who attains *Nirvana* but refuses it in order to remain in *Samsara* and bring others to enlightenment. Followers of *Vajrayana* believe that its rigorous discipline can lead to *Nirvana* in a single lifetime. Its spiritual leaders—the *lamas*—are believed to be incarnate *Bodhisattvas*.

- *Mahayana* Buddhism says that the primary human virtues are compassion and wisdom—and the ability to use them on behalf of others. Its key concepts are *Emptiness* (the notion that nothing exists autonomously, everything being the result of cause and effect) and *Thusness* (the way things are before the mind organizes them).

- Pure Land (a form of *Mahayana*) is the most theistic and the most popular form of Japanese Buddhism. It teaches that the *Amida*

Buddha (the Buddha of Boundless Light) has prepared a place of bliss—a Pure Land—for all who place total faith in him.

- Zen is the most popular form of Mahayana in the West. Zen does not rely on written scriptures, Buddhas, or Bodhisattvas. It emphasizes “mind-to-mind” transmission of *dharmas* (teachings) from master to student. Zen is a means to develop the intuitive awareness of the unity of the nature of all things. That is, differences are merely exterior; all things share the same—the only—“buddha-nature.” Zen believes that sitting meditation (*zazen*) is the best way to experience this underlying unity of the cosmos. Sitting very still helps the



WRITINGS

- More than a half-million pages would be required to print all of Buddhism’s vast collection of sacred literature! No single collection of writings

is revered by all Buddhists. Each branch has its preferences, although there are overlaps in their choices. Individual sects continue to generate authoritative literature right up to the present time. While Buddhist literature is diverse, all of it rests on the teachings of

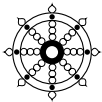
The Three Jewels

I go to the Buddha for refuge.
I go to the Dhamma for refuge.
I go to the Sangha for refuge.

the Buddha. All Buddhist sacred writings are said to be of human, not divine, origin.

- In the fourth century CE, Buddhist scholars met in Sri Lanka to determine what was authentic among all material said to be the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama. The result was the Pali Canon—a collection of thirty-two books named for the dialect of Sanskrit in which it was recorded. Because it has three divisions, Buddhists call it the Three Baskets (*Tripitaka* in Pali, *Tripitaka* in Sanskrit): Basket of Morality (or Discipline), Basket of Discourse, and Basket of Scholasticism. The best known portion of the second Basket is the *Dhammapadam*. The Pali Canon is authoritative for Theravada Buddhists.

- *Mahayana* Buddhists prefer collections of *sutras* (threads) of the Buddha's teachings. A few of the best known collections are the *Flower Garland Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra*, and *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. In China and Japan, some forms of *Mahayana* pay special reverence to the *Lotus Sutra*.
- Texts unique to *Vajrayana* include the writings of the Dalai Lama.



PRACTICE

- According to Buddhists, words cannot express what their faith is about; to understand it, one must practice it. Buddhism is not a body of doctrine, but a *yana*—a raft for getting to *Nirvana*. One boards this vehicle by living in accord with the two formulas the Buddha taught: the Noble Eight-fold Path and the Five Precepts.
- Daily devotional practices vary according to the form of Buddhism. These may include chanting, bell-ringing, bowing, and offerings of incense, flowers, and light. On new-moon and full-moon days. Some Buddhists recite the Eight Precepts and renew their pledge to live by them.

Noble Eight-fold Path

- Right understanding
- Right thought
- Right speech
- Right action
- Right livelihood
- Right effort
- Right mindfulness
- Right meditation

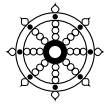
- Buddhist temples (*stupas* or *pagodas*) usually house a precious object—a relic or an ancient text. Some temples are ringed by family shrines to which flower, incense, or lamp offerings are brought.
- *Theravada* stresses monasticism. Monks spend hours in walking meditation. Huge stone Buddha images provide models of self-control. Lay people “make merit” (*dana*) by meeting the monks' needs, chanting ancient texts with them, and visiting shrines.

- Traditionally, Buddhist monks and nuns have shaven heads and wear long, simple robes. In America, some Buddhist monks do not shave their heads. Some might not wear robes in public.
- *Mahayana* is similar to *Theravada* practice, but lay people are more involved. One makes merit by serving or paying respect to others, by appreciating their good deeds, or by teaching, hearing, chanting, or meditating on the *dharmas*.
- Pure Land has adapted aspects of Protestant Christian worship to its use, (e.g., academic robe for the leader, hymn-singing, sermon).

- *Nichiren* Buddhists practice walking meditation while they chant of their devotion to the *Lotus Sutra* and bow to the buddha-nature in everyone they pass. There are a number of *Nichiren* Peace Pagodas in the United States.
- Zen Buddhists practice *zazen* (sitting meditation) in a hall called a *Zendo*. Some meditation halls feature statues of the Buddha, *Manjusri*, and *Kuan-Yin* (the personification of

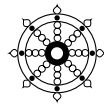
Infinite Light, Infinite Wisdom, and Infinite Compassion). The *Zendo* is furnished with carpets, straw mats, and cushions. Shoes are removed before entering. Services, conducted by the abbot and monks, may include chanting, *zazen* and a sermon which applies Zen teachings to everyday life. At this time, Zen practitioners also have the opportunity for individual training and evaluation from the abbot in a private meeting.

- *Vajrayana* employs images, *mandalas* (sacred drawings), *mantras* (formulas), seals, symbols, *mudras* (ritual hand-gestures), and ceremonial objects. Its rigorous yoga transforms the mind in order to give the body diamond strength.



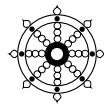
ORGANIZATION

- Each *sangha* manages its own affairs by an informal decision-making process. The *sangha* is administered by a senior monk (or abbot), which is a full-time occupation. The abbot teaches, leads services, counsels, and performs life cycle ceremonies. An abbot must have spent many years in study and monastic training, which has culminated in his own abbot's permission and order to teach. Funds to support all activities are obtained from donations by the community.



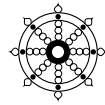
SOCIAL ACTION

- “Engaged Buddhism” names Buddhism’s activist side. American Buddhists may well participate in community activism on behalf of economic justice, environmental concerns, or world peace. Some Buddhists are involved in the hospice movement.



HOLIDAYS

- Buddhists from Asia have brought to the U.S. many colorful holiday customs their home countries. Some Buddhists originally from America adopt elaborate Asian holiday customs; others observe more simply.
- Buddhist holidays celebrate important moments in the life of the Buddha: his birth, enlightenment, and entry into Nirvana, his teachings, and aspects of the interaction of monks and layfolk.
- Buddhist holiday dates vary widely from one Asian country to another, and one tradition to Buddhism to another.
- Buddhist holiday practices may involve sitting meditation (*zazan*), chanting, singing, drumming, socializing, home decorations, pageantry, and processions.



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The Five Precepts

Not killing

Not stealing

Not being unchaste

Not lying

Not clouding the mind