



## Chapter Overview

At the very heart of Buddhism lie the Three Jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma (teachings), and the Sangha (community). The key to understanding the foundation of Buddhist philosophy is the concept that everything is impermanent. With these two points our exploration of this worldwide tradition can begin.

In the fifth or sixth century BCE, Shakyamuni Buddha—the historic Shakya prince Siddhartha Gautama—had a powerful awakening when he was around 36 years old. This awakening occurred when he was sitting under the Bodhi tree following six years of intense practice. He then proceeded to teach for 45 years, beginning at the deer park in Sarnath. From these teachings, understood as the “Instruction on the Middle Path,” and what developed from them, Buddhism branched into the three main schools: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. Each of these traditions accepts the concept of the Three Jewels but understands the individual components in slightly different ways, and thus the traditions developed diverse philosophies while holding on to a more unified core.

The cornerstone of Buddhist thought is the Four Noble Truths. These truths are suffering itself, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the eightfold path leading to that cessation. The eightfold path includes right understanding, right thought, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation. Because everything is impermanent, suffering has a point of origin and a point of cessation. Furthermore, the eightfold path is understood as training in morality, wisdom, and concentration. Existence is seen as having three characteristics: suffering, impermanence, and no-self. The latter means there is no unchanging, enduring entity, like a soul, but that beings are constantly changing. As well, there are twelve links in causation: ignorance, karmic formations, consciousness, body-mind complex, senses, sense impression, feelings, craving, clinging, the drive to be reborn (called “becoming”), rebirth, and old age and death. Further, the Buddhist teachings are divided into a three-section canon: the *Tripitaka*, which consists of *sutras* (discourses), *vinaya* (rules on monastic discipline), and *abhidharma* (systematic treatises).

The Buddhist community consists of *bhikshus* (ordained men), *bhikshunis* (ordained women), *shramanera(ka)* (novice men), *shramaner(ika)* (novice women), laymen, and laywomen. In the fourth century BCE, a controversy arose in the city of Vaishali, which eventually led to the division of Buddhism into the “Elders” and the “Great Sangha.” This then opened the door to the creation of numerous sects. While Buddhism was becoming diversified and developing local centers of power in India, it also became a state religion under Emperor Ashoka, who began exporting Buddhism to

other kingdoms like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan (ruled then by the Greeks).

Around the first century CE, another branch of Buddhism developed called Mahayana, with its own philosophy and practices. Some of the most important Mahayana teachings are that laypeople can also gain enlightenment and liberation, that there are three bodies of a buddha (Appearance Body, Body of Bliss, and Dharma Body), that followers should use skillful means to help guide others to spiritual attainment, and that the cosmos includes a multitude of spiritually advanced beings, including bodhisattvas, who can be petitioned for blessings. Two major schools of Mahayana that developed in India were the Madhyamika and Yogacara. The notion of merit transfer also helped in the formation of Pure Land thought, wherein those who have faith in Amitabha Buddha can be re-born in his realm where making progress towards *nirvana* is easy.

As Buddhism moved out of India into other parts of Asia, Mahayana schools were often transplanted. Perhaps of greater significance is the development of new Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions developed in different countries. In China, Chan (Japan: Zen), Tiantai (Japan: Tendai), Jingtū (Japan: Jodo) developed, and other Mahayana schools developed and were transmitted to Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. Nyingma, Kargyu, Gelugpa, and Karma-pa developed as Vajrayana schools in Tibet and the Himalayas, and some were transmitted to Mongolia. Vajrayana was also transmitted from India directly to China and from there to Japan.

The Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana schools each developed or emphasized various practices that were in line with their views of Buddhism. As a result there is a wide array of practices within the overall tradition. Most of these developed in India and were refined in other countries, but some developed outside of India.

Buddhism has shown that it has an incredible ability to adapt and adjust to circumstances radically different from the cultural and religious settings of its homeland, such as in China, Korea, and Japan, where cultural expressions of stupas, temples, and art, took on the distinct cultural elements of each particular country. More recently, Buddhism has again adapted as a result of its interactions with modernity in Asian countries and more recently in Western countries like Canada. Recent adaptations include the *bhikkuni* sangha, a renewed sense of mission, application to economics, and inter-Buddhist religious dialogue. These talents are serving it well: Buddhism has gained a global presence and is moving strongly into the twenty-first century.

## Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

- outline the context in which the Buddhist tradition arose in ancient India;
- know the story of the Buddha;
- understand the key teachings (*dharma*) of the Buddha;
- learn about the community of disciples (*sangha*) and how they were organized;
- examine early Buddhism, discord and divisions in the early movement and the importance of Emperor Ashoka;
- appreciate the key understandings and practices of each of the three vehicles of Buddhism: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana;
- know about the interaction and adaptation of Buddhism to ancient and medieval cultures of China, Korea, and Japan;

- outline the cultural expressions of the tradition;
- examine Buddhism in the modern world of India, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, Vietnam, China, Korea, Japan, and the “West.”

## Key Terms

**anatman** “No-soul,” the doctrine that the human person is impermanent, a changing combination of components.

**bhikshu, bhikshuni** An ordained Buddhist monk and nun, respectively.

**bodhisattva** In Theravada, a being who is on the way to enlightenment or buddahood but has not yet achieved it. In Mahayana, a celestial being who forgoes nirvana in order to save others.

**Chan/Son/Zen** A tradition centred on the practice of meditation and the belief that ultimate reality is not expressible in words or logic, but must be grasped through direct intuition.

**dharma** In Buddhist usage, teaching or truth concerning the ultimate nature of things.

**Hinayana** “Lesser Vehicle”; the pejorative name given by the Mahayana school to earlier Indian Buddhist sects, of which Theravada became the most important.

**karma** The energy of the individual’s past thoughts and actions, good or bad; it determines rebirth within the “wheel” of samsara or cycle of rebirth that ends only when *parinirvana* is achieved. Good karma is also called “merit.”

**Mahayana** “Greater Vehicle”; the form of Buddhism that emerged around the first century in India and spread first to China and then to Korea and Japan.

**nirvana** The state of bliss associated with final enlightenment; nirvana “with remainder” is the highest level possible in this life, and nirvana “without remainder” is the ultimate state, also called *parinirvana*.

**parinirvana** The ultimate perfection of bliss, achieved only on departing this life, as distinct from the nirvana with the “remainder” achievable while one is still in the present existence.

**Pure Land** The comfortable realm in the western region of the heavens reserved for those who trust in the merit and grace of its lord, the celestial buddha Amitabha.

**sangha** The “congregation” or community of Buddhist monks and nun. Some forms of Buddhism also refer to the congregation of laypersons as a sangha.

**Shakyamuni** “Sage of the Shakya clan,” a title used to refer to the historical figure of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha.

**sutra** A discourse attributed either to Shakyamuni himself or to an important disciple.

**Theravada** “Teachings of the Elders,” the dominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

**Three Jewels/Triple Gem** The Buddha, the Dharma (teachings), and the Sangha (community), three elements at the heart of Buddhism.

**Tripitaka** “Three baskets”; the collection of early sacred texts whose three sections consist of discourses attributed to the Buddha, rules of monastic discipline, and treatises on doctrine.

**Vajrayana** The tantric branch of Buddhism that was established in Tibet and the Himalayan region, and later spread to Mongolia and eventually India.

## Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. What are the Buddhist schools and vehicles and in what regions are they centralized?
2. How was Ganges Spirituality influential in the origins of Buddhism?
3. What are the various classes of “holy” people known in Buddhism?
4. What were the four sights that Siddhartha Gautama had and what did he do afterwards?
5. Where was the Buddha’s first teaching given and what was it about?
6. In detail, what are the three characteristics of existence?
7. Who was Ashoka and why was he important?
8. Who was Nagarjuna and what did he contribute to Buddhism?
9. What are the two main sects of the Chan (Zen) school and what is the unique emphasis of each?
10. What makes Buddhism work for so many people?
11. What are the three stages of the Chain of Dependent Origination and what does this chain mean in Buddhist thinking?
12. How was Buddhism transported to Sri Lanka?
13. What changes occurred in the role of the laity with the advent of the Mahayana tradition?
14. What is the doctrine of the Three Bodies (*Trikaya*)?
15. How has Zen Buddhism influenced Japanese art?

## Reflection Questions

1. It is curious that there are so many parallels between the birth story of Siddhartha Gautama and that of Jesus of Nazareth. What are the similar elements? What do you attribute to the numerous parallels?
2. King Milinda's questioning of Nagasena gets at the heart of the Buddhist concept of *anatman*. How can the chariot be a "chariot" when there is no specific part of it that is a chariot? How does this relate to the Buddhist understanding of a human being and the concept of *anatman*?
3. What does merit transfer have to do with taking a Bodhisattva vow? Are the Mahayana Buddhists correct in thinking that Theravada path is relatively selfish because of its focus in self-enlightenment?
4. According to Nagarjuna's philosophical thinking samsara is ultimately the same as nirvana. Ponder this paradox. How can this be? How does emptiness play a role in allowing for such an equation?
5. How did the Japanese occupation of Korea impact the Buddhist tradition in that country? Explain the Taego order and how this has helped and/or hindered Buddhist revitalization.

## Research Paper Topics

1. Buddhaghosa's commentary, *The Path of Purity*, lists three areas of instruction: morality, concentration, and wisdom. How do these connect to the Buddha's Eightfold Path as the prescription to suffering? Elaborate on the interconnected nature of these areas of instruction.
2. How was the early Buddhist monastic community formed? What role did gender play in the formation of these communities and which influential parties helped in founding the nuns' order?
3. King Ashoka converted to Buddhism after a particularly bloody battle. Compare Ashoka's rule as a king prior to the battle of Kalinga with his approach after the battle. Make an argument for or against the claim that Ashoka was an advocate for social justice and was therefore an "engaged" Buddhist.
4. Explain the relationship between Buddhism and the patronage of monarchs? How did this assist with its adaptation in some countries but not in others? What case can be made for volunteerism and lay groups as patrons in "Western" countries?
5. Select a form of Mahayana meditation. What steps are taken within the particular school to assist in the realization of *sunyata* or emptiness?
6. Who are the two assistants to the Chinese Jintu Buddhist buddha Amitufo? What roles do they play in relation to the buddha? How do Chinese practitioners interact with the two bodhisattva assistants?

7. How did Vajrayana Buddhism travel from India into Tibet? What adaptations were made to the tradition as a result? What compatibilities were found between the Vajrayana vehicle and existing traditions in Tibet?
8. The image of “Happy Buddha” is prevalent in parts of Asia and North American garden statues. What is the history of this figure? What are the various overlapping legends that inform the depiction of this image?
9. Who is B.R. Ambedkar and how did Gandhi and others who oppose the caste system affect his thoughts? What role did Buddhism play in his solution to Manu’s Law?
10. Immolation continues to occur in Tibet today. Discuss the case for and against this practice using Buddhist understandings to support both sides. What does this tell us about Buddhist precepts of “refraining from” doing something?

## Additional Resources

### Audio-Visual

*Buddhism*. Films for the Humanities and Sciences. 2006. 24 minutes.

*Journey into Buddhism*. PBS Distribution. 2007. Three-part series, 81–89 minutes each.

### Print

Blackstone, Kathryn R. 1998. *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therigatha*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Harvey, Peter. 2013 [1990]. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Wilson, Jeff. 2014. *Mindful America: Meditation and the Mutual Transformation of Buddhism and American Culture*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

### Internet

<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/index.htm>

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/index.html>

## Study Questions: Answer Key

1. The first vehicle is Theravada, located in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The second vehicle is Mahayana, and includes Madhyamika, Yogacara, Tiantai, Huayan, Zhenyan, Pure Land, Chan, and Nichiren and it is dominant in East Asia and Vietnam. Finally, the third vehicle is Vajrayana

which includes the Gelugpa, Kargyu, Karma-pa, and Nyingma and which is dominant in Tibet and the Himalayas. (p. 211)

2. Northern India was on the trade routes between the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea making the beliefs of its people easily accessible. Ideas like *abimsa*, the role of the deities, personal effort instead of asking for the god's assistance, karma, reincarnation, and others were influential in the origins of Buddhism. (pp. 187–189)
3. In Buddhism there are buddhas (one fully enlightened, teaching buddha), *pratyeka buddhas* (hermits who do not teach), bodhisattvas (those dedicated to achieving buddahood), and Arhats (“worthy ones”). (pp. 189–190)
4. After living a life of pleasure in a protected palace environment, Siddhartha Gautama went into the town on several outings. First he saw a sick man, second a suffering old man, third a dead man, and finally a monk. This led him to renounce the worldly life and to begin a new life as a wandering student seeking spiritual truth along the banks of the Ganges. (pp. 192–193)
5. The Buddha went to a deer park known as Sarnath near Varanasi. He taught the sermon “Wheel Turning” or “Instruction on the Middle Path.” This teaching was about the dangers of following a life either of indulgence or of asceticism and on the insights into suffering Buddha developed under the Bodhi tree. These details differentiated it from other teachings current in India at that time. (pp. 196–198)
6. “Suffering” refers to all forms of psychological and physical pain and deprivation humans are subject to. All of existence has an element of suffering associated with it. “Impermanence” is the passing nature of all things. Existence is really a process with everything passing away. The exception to impermanence is space and nirvana. Finally, there is the concept of no-self, eternal and unchanging, that exists. Since there is no “I” there can be no “mine” either. (pp. 200–201)
7. Ashoka was the grandson of the founder of the Mauryan dynasty who expelled the Greeks from India. He lived in the third century BCE. After conquering the kingdom of Kalinga on the East coast of India, Ashoka became a Buddhist and began promoting non-violence. He helped spread Buddhism across India, even ensuring that pillars with engraved teachings were set up and exported to other non-Indian kingdoms. His rule acted as an example of Buddhist governance for rulers in many countries over the centuries. (pp. 206–207)
8. Nagarjuna was the founder of the Madhyamika school of Mahayana in the second century CE. His philosophy developed an eightfold negation: nothing comes into being, nor does anything disappear. Nothing is eternal, nor has anything an end. Nothing is identical, or differentiated, nothing moves hither, nor moves anything thither. (p. 221)
9. The two main sects are the Rinzai (Linji in Chinese) and the Soto (Caodong in Chinese) sects. The Linji emphasizes koan (from Chinese *gongan*) practice, which uses paradoxical anecdotes, and the Soto emphasizes *zazen* (seated meditation). (p. 230)
10. The popularity of Buddhism lies in the continuing power of the Three Jewels to shape spiritual lives. Buddhists are confident in taking refuge in the Buddha as a great human being rather than as a god; in the dharma as a set of living teachings; and in the Sangha as a community committed

to following the Buddha's path as closely as possible. Followers also feel confident that when the wheel of dharma stops turning in the distant future, the future Buddha Maitreya will appear and turn the wheel again for the benefit of the next era. (p. 257)

11. Dependent Origination is divided into three stages: past, present, and future. The meaning represented by the chain is that everything that arises only does so because of other factors. Nothing is independent of other factors but is interrelated with other elements. Consequently, a human being is in process of death and re-birth (the chain) until he or she reaches nirvana. (pp. 201–202)
12. Emperor Ashoka sent his son Mahinda on a missionary trip to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE. Mahinda was a *bhikkhu* who, legend has it, used his psychic powers to travel to the island with his assistants, through the air. It is thought that Mahinda converted the king of Sri Lanka and all of its inhabitants. Later, Mahinda's sister travelled to Sri Lanka with a clipping of the bodhi tree under which the Buddha achieved his enlightenment. (p. 211)
13. Lay people would go on pilgrimage to relics that were buried within a stupa. They thought that this would enhance their merit or good karma. Prior to the increase in pilgrimages, the laity role was restricted to providing for the monastics in return for spiritual teachings and merit. Pilgrimages offered practitioners a way to pursue spiritual development and the possibility of attaining enlightenment in this lifetime. (p. 218)
14. The doctrine of the three bodies refers to the Mahayana understanding of the way in which Buddhist practitioners could experience the nature of buddhahood. The three bodies are the Appearance or Transformation body (*nirmanakaya*), the Body of Bliss (*sambhogakaya*), and the Dharma body (*dharmakaya*). The Appearance/Transformation body is the physical body of the buddha. The Body of Bliss is the body that presides over the buddha-realm. The final body is the Dharma Body which is the essence of the universe, the reality, the truth. (p. 218)
15. Zen monks were very influential in many aspects of Japanese art. For example the highly ritualized tea ceremony spread from monasteries to a cultural art form within Japanese society. The minimalism found with Japanese paintings and sand- or plant-based Zen gardens. Flower arranging is also a Japanese art that began in Buddhist temples and moved into mainstream Japanese culture. (p. 245)