

Buddhism

How the Buddha Taught

Lecture 16

Initially, [the Buddha] concluded that trying to teach his dhamma—his vision of reality and liberation—would be futile. ... But he had a change of heart when one of the great gods suggested that some beings in the world have “only a little dust on their eyes” and are languishing because they do not know the way to freedom.

Out of compassion for those still suffering in *samsāra*, the Buddha decided to teach his Noble Path to those who might be ready to benefit from it. For 45 years, he traveled throughout the Gangetic Plain of India teaching others how to find the bliss of the nibbanic life, beginning with the five *samanas* who had abandoned him when he forsook asceticism. His first lesson as a fully awakened being was brief and to the point, philosophical, and particularly suited for longtime seekers. It was not a discourse for beginners. Yet it had been so carefully crafted that it became the touchstone of the Buddha’s whole dhamma. The tradition calls this inaugural address “Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion.”

The Buddha explained that he had ascertained four essential facts about life he called the Four Noble Truths. The first truth is that *dukkha* is a fact of unenlightened existence. The second is that suffering comes from failure to apprehend impermanence and insubstantiality—in particular, attachment to the notion of self. The third truth is that beings can escape from *dukkha*. Finally, the fourth truth is that cultivating compassion and wisdom leads to freedom from *dukkha*.

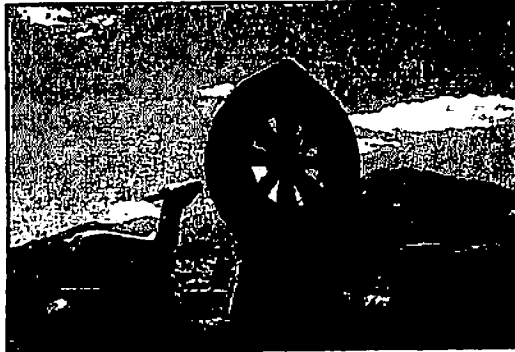
According to the Pāli canon, at the very moment the Buddha completed this discourse, the news of the dhamma reached the realm of the highest gods. One of the five *samanas* was immediately enlightened; shortly afterwards, the other four became arahants. These first five recipients of the Buddha’s dhamma formed the core of the sangha.

The Buddha then began to teach others—*samanas* and householders, men and women, and persons of all castes. Not all became monks; many

Notes:

continued to live as laypersons and helped support the monks and nuns. And not all who heard the teachings accepted them. The Buddha felt no urge to compel anyone to accept his teaching, but to those who were ready to receive his teaching, a personal encounter with the Buddha was transformative.

The Buddha's daily life was much like that of any of the other monks in the sangha. He wandered for nine months of the year, settling only during the rainy season. When possible, he preferred to sleep in the open. He arose early after a very brief sleep and practiced meditation. After daybreak, he would stroll the area and talk to those around him. Later in the morning, he would take his begging bowl to a home in the nearest village to receive food for his one daily meal. Sometimes he was offered nothing, and he moved on to another home. Sometimes he was invited in for an elegant meal, but he always ate moderately and washed his own bowl.



Card Stock Photo Library

The Wheel of Dharma, a symbol of the Buddha's first sermon. After his enlightenment, the Buddha set out on a life of teaching others, "setting the wheel in motion."

After the daily meal, he would nap. Later, he would receive visitors

and give instruction. When the others went to sleep, he sat in meditative silence—sometimes, the legends say, the gods would appear and ask him questions about the dharma—until it was time to sleep again.

This quiet existence was, of course, punctuated by many noteworthy events, too many to list them all. Many of them were encounters with humans who were suffering greatly, where the Buddha uttered a timely and compassionate word that immediately transformed the sufferer. In each instance, his lesson was tailored to the particular needs of his listeners and delivered at a timely moment. The Buddha claimed that he only taught about suffering and the end of suffering; but in many respects, he also taught much about how to

Notes:

teach, revealing himself as an astute observer of the human condition and a skillful communicator of wisdom. ■

Important Term

Four Noble Truths: The core doctrine of the Buddha's dhamma—namely, that *dukkha* is a fact of unenlightened existence, suffering comes from attachment, beings can escape from *dukkha*, and cultivating compassion and wisdom leads to freedom from *dukkha*.

Question to Consider

1. Have you ever personally experienced or witnessed a transformation from the right message uttered at the right time?

Lesson 15: How the Buddha Taught

Notes:

The Buddha and Buddhism

Lecture 17

Throughout his teaching career, the Buddha told his listeners, "All things in existence are subject to decay; everything that is born necessarily dies." ... Although he had attained the highest level of fulfillment of which any being was capable, the Buddha, too, was subject to this truth.

The last days of the Buddha's life are described in one of the great texts of the Buddhist tradition, the *Mahaparinibbanasutta*. According to this sutta, in his 80th year the Buddha increasingly felt the effects of aging and was afflicted by serious illnesses. Existence had become painful and tiresome, so he "renounced the life principle"—that is, he chose to allow the natural processes of decline to take their course. His final illness was from a meal of "hog's mincemeat"; his symptoms suggested dysentery or food poisoning.

Despite intense pain, the Buddha faced his illness in full awareness and complete equanimity. Lying down out in the open between two Sala trees with his monks and nuns gathered around him, he asked three times if they had any lingering questions about the dhamma. Three times there was silence. Satisfied, the Buddha uttered his final words: "All conditioned things are impermanent. Strive for liberation with diligence," then peacefully passed through the four states of deep meditation known as the *jhanas* and from there entered *parinibbana*. Like the crucifixion of Jesus, the Buddha's death was a lesson for his followers: For those who have awakened, death is nothing to fear. And if there is nothing to fear in death, then there is nothing to fear in life.

But what happens to a fully awakened being at the time of death? Does he or she still exist? The Buddha simply refused to answer this question because it is premised on dualistic thinking: the concept that something either exists or does not exist. The Buddha knew that any answer he might give would serve to reinforce this flawed pattern of thinking. As with seeing *nibbana*, the realization of *parinibbana* can only be described apophatically, with language

Not for:

that indicates what it is not. As you recall, the Buddha explained nibbana as the cessation of suffering, the end of ignorance, and the deconstruction of the illusion of the self. To these events, the parinibbana adds the final depletion of all energies that have sustained existence.

The body of the Buddha lay in state for six days after his death. On the seventh day, after the body was honored with perfumes and garlands, it was wrapped in oil-soaked cloth and burned on a pyre of aromatic wood at a sacred shrine near the site of the Buddha's parinibbana. Following the cremation, the ashes and other irreducible parts of the body were buried as relics in massive earthen mounds known as *stūpas*, which later became pilgrimage sites.

Today, over one-half of the world's population lives in an area where Buddhism was or is a principal cultural force.

For many years, Buddhism was merely one of many sects in ancient India. It was not until the missionary efforts of Emperor Aśoka the Great in the 3rd century B.C.E. that Buddhism attained the status of an

international religion. Buddhism became a dominant cultural and religious force in India until the 12th-14th centuries C.E., when it became all but extinct in the country of its birth.

Buddhism experienced a number of doctrinal disputes in its early history. Today, Theravada, which means "the way of the elders," is the oldest surviving form, practiced mainly in Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. Somewhere around the time of Jesus, the Mahayana, or "great vehicle," movement began in the monasteries of northern India, based on a collection of texts purported to contain teachings of the Buddha that had only been revealed to a select few of his students. Two developments in particular distinguish Mahayana from Theravada. First, Theravada had always maintained that Gotama Buddha was a human being; Mahayana believes him a transcendent reality known as the *dharma-kāya*, or the body of truth, giving him a more divine, godlike status. Second, in Theravada, bodhisatta was simply the title given to individuals prior to awakening, including the Buddha. In the Mahayana, the bodhisatta choose to forego entry into final nibbana and stay in *samsāra* to enable others to achieve awakening. Thus the

Notes:

Mahayana began to take on the qualities of a savior religion. The Mahayana came to China during the Han dynasty in the early centuries of the current era and spread to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, becoming the most popular variety of Buddhism over time and producing new schools such as Zen and Vajrayana. Through these traditional forms, Buddhism has traversed and influenced cultures throughout the entire continent of Asia. Meanwhile, an influx of Asian practitioners who have come to the West in the last few centuries and an increasing number of Westerners who have adopted Buddhism as their own are creating a new tradition. ■

Important Terms

jhana: A deep meditative state.

stūpa: An earthen mound containing a relic of the Buddha.

Question to Consider

1. What is the difference between a religious leader and a spiritual savior? What aspects of the Buddha's life and teachings show him as one or the other?

Notes:

Waking Up—The Buddha and His Teachings

Lecture 6

When most of us think of religion, we think of a God or gods, a divinely revealed text, and the concept of an eternal soul. Buddhism explicitly rejects these elements. For this reason, Buddhism challenges our very notion of what a religion is. Learning about Buddhism, therefore, expands our understanding of religion and the forms it can take.

A Way Out of Suffering

- What is it about Buddhism that has enabled it to transform the lives of countless millions of Asians and also enabled it to attract so many Jews and Christians, who often find it compatible with their monotheistic faiths? Buddhism claims to offer something that all of us dearly want—a way out of suffering.
- Buddhism is a tradition of tremendous diversity and many forms. When looking at the wide range of forms a tradition can take, we can ask, What elements unify a tradition, and what common features are shared among the many strands of Buddhism?

The Historical Buddha—Siddhartha

- One element that is shared by all Buddhists is a connection with the historical Buddha, born Siddhartha Gautama sometime in the 6th or 5th century B.C.E. The major themes of his story illustrate the central characteristics of Buddhism.
- There is no way of telling how historically accurate this story is. But what matters most is the meaning that this life story has had for millions of Buddhists throughout history. The story illustrates many of the most important Buddhist doctrines and practices.
- Because the Buddha's teachings were passed down orally for centuries before they were written down, they often feature

Notes:

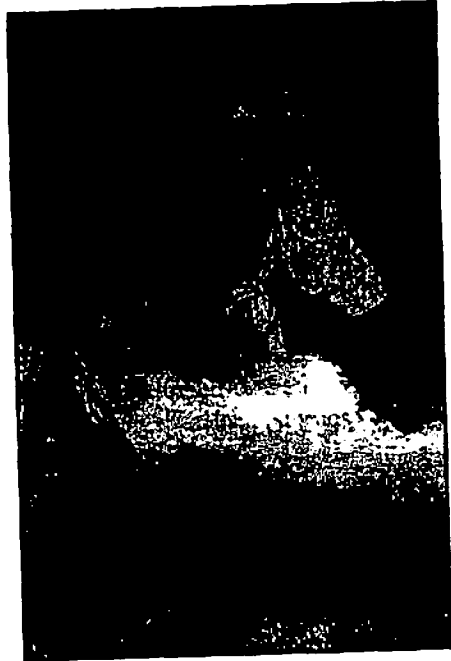
numbered lists, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, to help in the process of memorization.

- In many of these stories, known as Jataka Tales, Siddhartha is an animal who illustrates an important Buddhist virtue and thus accumulates the merit (essentially good karma) necessary to achieve the rebirths that would lead to his precious human life, one that would bring to the world an enlightened being.
- Eventually, this chain of connected lives leads to a prince born to a ruler of a small kingdom near the border of Nepal and India in the Himalayan foothills. The place of his birth, Lumbini in modern-day Nepal, is a pilgrimage site for Buddhists.
- A sage made a prediction about Prince Siddhartha's future, but it was one with two possible paths: He would either grow up to be a powerful ruler like his father, or he would become a great spiritual leader.
- The sheltered 29-year-old prince eventually persuaded his father to let him see the parts of his kingdom outside of the palace walls. Despite his father's efforts to ensure a pleasant, uneventful, journey, Siddhartha had four encounters that would change his life. He first encountered an old person, then a sick person, and then a corpse.
- Those three encounters represent the moments of realization when we confront our mortality. In light of this knowledge, Siddhartha now knew what awaited him as we die and are then reborn, die and reborn again.
- The fuel that keeps us cycling through the system (and determines what kinds of rebirths we will have) is karma, the law of cause and effect. The cycle of birth and death, known as samsara, is characterized by suffering and is something that many religious seekers of the time sought to liberate themselves from.

Note:

This quest for liberation is illustrated by the fourth encounter Siddhartha had: He saw a wandering renunciate; this showed Siddhartha that there are people pursuing liberation from the cycles of samsara. Siddhartha decided to leave his father's palace, a decision known as the Great Renunciation.

- From this moment, Siddhartha's quest was to find liberation from the cycle of suffering. He would find it, but not before he took two wrong, but instructive, turns. The first involved learning deep trance forms of meditation. As Siddhartha discovered, these states are temporary.
- The second path was one of severe asceticism. This was the attempt to conquer suffering by willing oneself to endure austerities, facing increasing deprivation and self-denial. Siddhartha virtually stopped eating, but he discovered that this path, too, did not give him the answers he sought.
- Siddhartha eventually made his final stand by sitting in front of a tree (which will become known as the bodhi tree, tree of awakening) and refusing to move until he had gained liberation. In a story that evokes elements of the life of Jesus, he had to face temptation.



The Buddha was born Prince Siddhartha Gautama, a young man of wealth and privilege, who turned his back on earthly power to seek spiritual liberation.

Notes:

- After overcoming this trial, Siddhartha began to enter deeper and deeper states of meditation, developing insights along the way. He then saw the way out, the gate through which he could enter into a new way of being in the world, a way free from suffering. He was transformed.
- His attainment, which, like all ultimate religious states within any tradition, must inevitably be discussed in terms of metaphor. (1) He was enlightened. (2) "He woke up." He woke up from a life of delusion and suffering to a way of truly seeing reality for the first time. (3) He attained nirvana.
- The site of his awakening became the second major pilgrimage site in Buddhism.
- At this point in the story, the Buddha has awakened. This brings us to the essential question: What did he wake up to? Here we come to the traditional formulation of the most fundamental teaching of Buddhism: the Four Noble Truths.

The Four Noble Truths

- The first Noble Truth is that "life is *dukkha*." One way to understand the First Noble Truth is as follows: "Life, as we ordinarily live it, is unsatisfactory." We never have everything we want, and we are therefore perpetually discontented. Everything we have, we can lose, so our sense of happiness is always accompanied by an undercurrent of anxiety that anything can change at any moment.
- This state is not inevitable. It has a cause that can be addressed, as its origin is in something that we do. This brings us to the Second Noble Truth.
- *Dukkha* is caused by our grasping, our craving. To see why grasping is such a problem, we have to keep in mind the Buddhist view of the world: Everything is impermanent. When we grasp at a world like this, we can never be satisfied.

Notes:

Center of Awakening - The Buddha and His Teachings

Of all the things in the world, what we grasp at most is our self. This brings us to perhaps the most radical teaching in Buddhism: the no-soul or no-self doctrine. Buddhism denies a permanent, unchanging self. The stable self and the sense of separateness are illusions that cause so much of our suffering.

- We now have learned the Buddhist teaching of the three marks of existence, or dharma seals. These are the three characteristics of all reality: impermanence, no-self, and *dukkha*.
- The good news: *Dukkha* can stop. This is the truth of cessation. The Fourth Noble Truth is the way out of *dukkha*—the Noble Eightfold Path. The eight aspects of the path are often grouped into three categories.
- The first category focuses on the importance of seeing the world in the right way. This involves two steps on the path: right view and right intention. The next three steps are right action, right speech, and right livelihood. The final three steps are in the category of meditation: right effort, right concentration, and vipassana meditation—meditation aimed at insight through mindfulness.
- Vipassana meditation differs in important ways from the absorption meditations the Buddha had mastered in the forests. Vipassana meditation is paying attention and seeing things clearly that liberates us from the self-imposed suffering created by our own minds.

Mindfulness

- This practice is addressed by The Buddha in the Satipathana Sutra, the "Foundations of Mindfulness." He begins by saying, "This is the only way for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the attainment of nirvana, namely the foundations of mindfulness." The first foundation is mindfulness of the body, which begins with awareness of the breath.

Notes:

- In mindfulness meditation, you observe all phenomena as they arise—your thoughts, emotions, body sensations—without getting caught up in them, identifying with them, or pushing them away. The meditator does not judge, but rather simply observes.
- The first noble truth is the diagnosis of our condition. We are all suffering from *dukkha*. The second noble truth is the origin of the disease—our *dukkha* is caused by grasping. The third noble truth is the good news that our condition is treatable. And the fourth noble truth is the prescription—the eightfold path.
- Since the problem can be seen as psychological (our mind creates our suffering), and the practice that addresses the problem is observational and empirical, the approach has been seen as rational and in accord with scientific worldviews in the West today.
- This is one reason why Jews and Christians find it largely compatible with their religion of birth. Practitioners of meditation are not required to accept any particular supernatural claims about the world; they are simply asked to observe their minds and bodies, to follow their breath and pay attention.

Creating the Sangha

- When we last left Siddhartha—now the Buddha—he had understood the nature of reality and liberated himself from suffering. Now he could simply enjoy a life free of discontent and mental anguish. Here, it is said that one of the gods told him that some human beings would respond. The Buddha devoted the rest of his life walking around India, teaching the body of knowledge and practice known as the dharma.
- His first sermon (or sutra) set this process in motion and is thus called “Setting in Motion Wheel of the Dharma” (the content of which we have been discussing here, such as the Four Noble Truths). The wheel—with eight spokes for the eightfold path—is an important Buddhist symbol.

Notes

We have now been introduced to what Buddhists know as the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma (his teaching), and the sangha (the community of Buddhist practitioners). When people become Buddhist or join a monastery, they recite the refuge formula, whereby they take refuge in these three jewels.

- At the age of 81, the Buddha died. The site of his death in Kushinagar is the fourth main pilgrimage site.
- The Buddha taught that our mental suffering is self-created. The discontent we experience is created by our clinging, which can be ended by waking up to the right perspective, living a moral life, and practicing meditation.

Suggested Reading

Armstrong, *Buddha*.

Bercholz and Chödzin, *Entering the Stream*.

De Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China & Japan*.

Embree, Hay, and De Bary. *Sources of Indian Tradition*.

Fronsdal, *The Dhammapada*.

Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English*.

Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*.

Kornfield, *Living Dharma*.

Matlins and Magida, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger*.

Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*.

Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*.

_____, *Peace is Every Step*.

Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*.

Sharma, *Our Religions*.

Smith, *The World's Religions*.

Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*.

Questions to Consider

1. What did the Buddha mean when he said that grasping or attachment causes *dukkha* (dissatisfaction or suffering)? Do you agree? Can you think of some examples?
2. How can the simple practice of sitting still and focusing awareness on the breath help to liberate a person from suffering?

Notes:

Vehicles to Nirvana—The Schools of Buddhism

Lecture 7

Buddhism today is a religion of hundreds of millions of people who live in virtually every region of the world. The path to Buddhism's becoming a world religion began when a group of disciples who followed the Buddha developed into a community of monks, known as the sangha, which continued to grow after the Buddha's death.

Major Buddhist Divisions

- The Buddhist world is divided into three major schools, known as vehicles. They are Theravada Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia; Mahayana in East Asia; and Vajrayana in Tibet, Bhutan, and other parts of South and Central Asia.
- Theravada Buddhism sees itself as the most authentic preserver of the historical Buddha. The name Theravada itself means "the doctrine of the elders." The other forms of Buddhism, generally speaking, do not reject the teachings of Theravada Buddhism but rather build on them and expand them.

The Precepts

- All committed Buddhists—monks and laypeople—commit to rules called the Five Precepts. These are not harming, not stealing, not lying, no sexual impropriety (for monks, this requires celibacy; for laypeople, this means sex only within marriage), and no intoxicants that cause heedlessness.
- When a novice monastic is initiated, he receives five additional precepts: No eating after noon (one meal per day), no sleeping on elevated platforms, no adorning oneself, no attending entertainment, no handling money.
- A monk adheres to 227 precepts, which make up the monastic code. A nun adheres to 311. Children can take lower ordination as a

novice at a young age, in some cases seven or eight, although more often near 13. Higher ordination normally occurs around the age of 20. Only some remain monks throughout their lives.

- Some monasteries are built in forests, allowing the monks to meditate away from society. In urban monasteries, the monks will perform a range of functions, including teaching, healing, performing rituals, and providing guidance. Theravada monks receive their food by begging from laypeople, who gain positive karma—merit—by donating.
- A major annual holiday in Buddhist countries is called Vesak. During Vesak, which falls in May or June, Buddhist laypeople will affirm their adherence to the precepts. People gather in temples for rituals. Monks also give sermons to laypeople.

The Mahayana Tradition and the Great Vehicle

- The term “Mahayana,” which means “great vehicle,” was first used around the 1st century B.C.E. The main early use of the word “Mahayana” may have been to refer to a bodhisattva—a being who is on the path to Buddhahood. In the Mahayana tradition, the bodhisattva chooses to stay in the cycle of samsara to liberate other beings from suffering. Earlier schools, such as Theravada, were labeled “the small vehicle,” because only one being at a time achieved liberation.
- One of the most popular bodhisattvas is the bodhisattva of compassion, whose name in Sanskrit is Avalokiteshvara. Others include Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, and Maitreya, who will eventually become the Buddha for the next historical cycle.
- In Mahayana, many new sutras were accepted and became very important well after the Buddha’s death. These include the Lotus Sutra and the Heart Sutra.

The Lotus Sutra and the Heart Sutra

- The Lotus Sutra contains narratives with lessons about Buddhism that could be easily appreciated by laypeople. One of the

Notes

characteristics of Mahayana Buddhism is that laypeople can advance to enlightenment.

- One important parable tells of a doctor and his sons. The sons accidentally consume poison, and they become so confused that they will not take the antidote offered by their father. To shock them into the realization that they must take this medicine (and take responsibility for their own healing), the father leaves home and sends back word that he is dead. The stunned sons take the medicine and are cured.
- In Lotus Sutra parables we discover the remarkable Mahayana transformation of the conception of the Buddha. The Buddha had to lead us to believe something that was not really true for our own good—that he was an ordinary person who died. The human life of Siddhartha Gautama was a manifestation of a transcendent Buddha who takes human form to lead human beings to the path of liberation.
- The other important Mahayana sutra is the Heart Sutra. These sutras teach emptiness, or *shunyata*. This means “empty of inherent existence” or “empty of a separately existing essence.” This is closely related to the no-self doctrine. Everything is what it is only because it is composed of other things. Nothing exists on its own.
- The flip side of emptiness is another very important Mahayana concept—interdependence. This is the essence of the teaching—every object is linked with every other object in the universe. It all “inter-exists.”
- So emptiness doesn’t mean nothing exists, but rather it tells us how things exist—they exist emptily. If everything is empty, then Buddhism itself is empty! Emptiness acts as a deconstructing idea that helps to prevent grasping at anything, including Buddhism itself.

Notes:

Vajrayana and Tantras

- The final vehicle is Vajrayana, which is known as the diamond or thunderbolt vehicle. The best-known version of this is Tibetan Buddhism, which developed around the 6th-7th centuries C.E. in India, and has its origin in texts called Tantras. Tantric texts contained esoteric teachings that often required initiation to be understood.
- One form of Tantra, the left-handed path, teaches that one can engage in traditionally forbidden practices on the path to liberation (you might have heard discussion of Tantric sex, for example). One uses desire to become free from desire. Because of the risks inherent in such an approach, one needs the guidance of a teacher so one would not be led astray.

The Three M's

- While some forms of Buddhism have a more unadorned aesthetic and emphasize simplicity—such as Zen—Tibetan Buddhism features rich artistic representations. One of the major themes of Tibetan Buddhism is transmutation: One transforms oneself into a Buddha. To do this, a wide range of practices are drawn on.
- Some of the most prominent practices are the so-called three M's: Mudras, which correspond to body, are gestures or positions that are most often made by the hands and fingers. Mantras, which correspond to speech, are sacred utterances that are repeated by the practitioner.
- The third M refers to mandalas. These correspond to mind. Mandalas are diagrams that contain concentric sets of circles and squares. Meditating on a mandala is a way to bring about wisdom and awakening in the mind; the creation of mandalas out of a variety of materials is itself a meditative practice.
- Because of the esoteric nature of this form of Buddhism, people must be initiated into the practices. There are many preliminary practices. These can include 100,000 prostrations, or 100,000

Notes:

recitations of a mantra. Through the initiation, the practitioner becomes connected with a guru who will be their spiritual guide.

- At the time of Buddhism's arrival in Tibet (7th century C.E.), Theravada, Mahayana, and Tantric Buddhism all existed. The Tibetan approach has been to synthesize all of these forms together. Whereas Theravada Buddhism can be seen as "original" or "authentic" early Buddhism, Tibetan Vajrayana can be seen as "comprehensive" Buddhism.

Returning to the Cycle of Samsara—the Example of the Dalai Lama

- In Tibet, the choice to return to the cycle of samsara is more structured than in most Buddhist societies. Highly advanced beings choose to come back to help others decide on their rebirths. The most famous example in Tibet is the Dalai Lama.
- The 14th Dalai Lama is Tenzin Gyatso, which means that he is the 14th rebirth in this line. Dalai Lamas are considered to be manifestations of the bodhisattva of compassion (Chenrezig in Tibetan). So the Dalai Lama is seen as the living manifestation of compassion.
- Clues as to the identity of the new rebirth are received in many ways. First, the previous Dalai Lama might leave a clue as to where he intends to be reborn. This could occur while he is alive or even after his death.
- When candidates are found, they are tested. If the child being tested identifies items that belonged to the previous Dalai Lama, that is a sign. The child is also confirmed by an oracle, after which he is educated and trained in a wide range of areas, including philosophy, traditional medicine, ritual, and the arts.
- The 14th Dalai Lama was enthroned at the age of 15, when the newly created Communist People's Republic of China was asserting its sovereignty over Tibet. In 1959, following a Tibetan uprising against China, the Dalai Lama and other Tibetans went into exile,

No test

eventually setting up a government in Dharamsala, India, where they remain to this day.

- Until 2011, the Dalai Lama was both the spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibetan people. In 2011, the Dalai Lama gave up his temporal authority so there would be a democratically elected prime minister, although the Dalai Lama retains his position as spiritual leader. For most Tibetans, he continues to serve as the symbol of the Tibetan people and is worshipped as a living bodhisattva.
- On the first day of the Tibetan New Year's celebration, called Losar, the Dalai Lama receives offerings, and wishes are made for his long life so that he can continue to serve his people.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead

- In Tibetan Buddhist thought, we are always moving from one state to another. But there are certain intersections between states that are



Urban Buddhist monasteries perform a range of functions in their communities, including teaching, healing, performing rituals, and providing spiritual guidance.

Notes

particularly potent—for example, the line between wakefulness and sleep, between ordinary consciousness and meditative states, and between life and death.

- These in-between states are called Bardos. Tibetans focus a number of practices on navigating these powerful in-betweens, as they offer opportunities for seeing into the true nature of reality and attaining wisdom.
- Tibetans believe that after death, one enters the postdeath Bardo state, where one exists in a form known as a *bardowa*, usually for 49 days (seven rounds of seven-day existences).
- The Tibetan Book of the Dead is a travel guide for the recently deceased. The book aims to get the person to accept death, to let go of attachments to this world, and ultimately to recognize their true nature as pure awareness, seen as light. One can thus be liberated from the cycle of rebirth.

Suggested Reading

Bercholz and Chödzin, *Entering the Stream*.

De Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China & Japan*.

Embree, Hay, and De Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition*.

Gyatso, *Freedom in Exile*.

Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*.

Kornfield, *Living Dharma*.

Matlins and Magida, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger*.

Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*.

Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*.

Sharma, *Our Religions*.

Smith, *The World's Religions*.

Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*.

Van Vorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*.

Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do the Buddhist Five Precepts compare to the Biblical Ten Commandments? What do the differences tell us about morality in Buddhism as opposed to biblical religions?
2. Choose an object that is important to you and trace as many links as you can from it to the rest of the universe. Do you agree with Thich Nhat Hanh that reality is characterized by interbeing? What are the ethical implications of this view?
3. What do you think of the idea that our lives can be understood as a series of in-betweens?

Notes:

East Asian Buddhism—Zen and Pure Land

Lecture 12

Where did the chubby, smiling Buddha figure come from? That representation—technically a bodhisattva, but one that over time came to be called the laughing Buddha—is a Chinese expression of a new Buddhist ideal. An image like that could not have arisen in India. Now we will learn about the new forms of Buddhism that arose in East Asia, like Zen, and also learn something about the process of religious transformation.

The Laughing Buddha—Chinese Buddhism

- There were deep tensions between the Indian Buddhist worldview and the Chinese worldview in the 1st century C.E. Despite this, after less than 500 years, there were tens of thousands of monasteries and more than 2 million monks and nuns in China.
- The laughing Buddha is a distinctively Chinese image that exemplifies worldly values—joy, the pleasure of a good meal, and sometimes children.
- There are two most popular schools of East Asian Buddhism. One is Chan Buddhism (also known as Son in Korea, or Zen in the West). The other school is Pure Land Buddhism. Both of these schools are forms of Mahayana Buddhism.
- The words “Chan” and “Zen” are simply the Chinese and Japanese ways to transliterate the Sanskrit word “*dhyana*,” which means “meditation.” So the Zen school is the meditation school. Zen was a call back to the original experience of the Buddha.
- Zen is a way of saying, just sit like the Buddha sat and observe your mind and body. The essence of Zen is in direct experience of the mind. You must discover it for yourself.

Lecture 12: East Asian Buddhism—Zen and Pure Land

Notes

- Students of Zen study with a master who has been recognized as awakened and qualified to teach the dharma by his or her own master—in other words, received “dharma transmission;” this master in turn received it from his or her master, and so on, all the way back to the Buddha.
- Bodhidharma is credited with bringing this wisdom from India to China, thus beginning the lineage of Zen in East Asia in the 6th century. When Bodhidharma arrived at the Shaolin Buddhist temple, the monks lacked vigor. This, legend says, was the origin of the development of Chinese martial arts (Kung Fu).
- After Bodhidharma gave dharma transmission to his successor, this started a new lineage. The key figure in the Chinese Zen lineage is the sixth patriarch, Hui Neng, whose teachings are said to be given in the most important sutra in Zen, the Platform Sutra.
- Hui Neng was said to have been an illiterate commoner, and this is significant because it shows that a great Zen master need not have any formal education. Hui Neng presents a radical teaching: You are already enlightened. All you need to do is to see into your own nature, to realize your own Buddhahood.
- In addition to changes in religious thought, there were changes in areas such as in approaches to work and food. In India, monks beg



The laughing Buddha epitomizes the new values Buddhism began to emphasize on as it took hold in China in the 1st century C.E.

© Comstock/Thinkstock

Notes

in order to sustain themselves. In Chinese monasteries, the monks began growing their own food instead of begging.

Another important change was that Chinese Buddhists—as well as Korean and Vietnamese Buddhists—put a greater emphasis on vegetarianism than Buddhists in many Southeast Asian Theravada countries.

Japanese Zen—Rinzai and Soto

- The two major schools of Japanese Zen—Rinzai and Soto—were founded by monks who visited China and brought the teachings back.
- In general, the Rinzai school is known as the “hard school” and the Soto school “the soft school.” Rinzai focuses on jolting the mind out of its usual patterns. Rinzai Zen features stories of dramatic awakening, the big moment of satori (the Japanese word for enlightenment).
- One of the most well-known and important Rinzai techniques is the koan. Koans are short, nonrational questions, statements, or dialogues that are given to monks to meditate on. The idea is that all of the monk’s attempts to “solve” the koan through reason or usual thought patterns fail. The mind finally gives up rational attempts and experiences a breakthrough.
- You might have heard of such koans as “Two hands clap and make a sound. What is the sound of one hand?” Koans were assembled into collections, and systems of koans were created so that monks could advance to a new one when they had completed their current one.
- Zen emphasizes that the Buddha is not outside of you but rather within. We can now understand the statement, “If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha.” If you encounter a Buddha somewhere outside of yourself, then it is not really the Buddha. You have to

Notes

break free from this attachment to something external—kill this “Buddha”—so that you will discover the true Buddha within.

- The other major form of Japanese Buddhism, Soto Zen, is all about the practice of sitting. Seated meditation is called *zazen*, and Soto Zen Buddhists emphasize *shikan taza*, “just sitting.”

Western Zen

- Zen has become one of the most popular forms of Buddhism in the West, and there are Zen centers throughout America, Canada, and Europe.
- In American Zen centers, throughout the week, there will be regular meditation sessions. If you decide to visit, wear comfortable clothes, as you will be sitting for a while. Always remember to take your shoes off when entering the meditation hall.
- The entire meditation period is usually passed in silence. Sometimes sitting meditation is supplemented with walking meditation. There are also ritual elements to these sessions, such as chanting and bowing. Many sessions will also include a dharma talk, a Buddhist version of a sermon, where the master talks about the practice and how it applies to our lives.

Zen Buddhism versus Pure Land Buddhism

- The most popular form of Buddhism in Japan is Pure Land Buddhism. It differs in some profound ways from Zen Buddhism. We already know that in Mahayana Buddhism there are conceptions of the Buddha as a more cosmic being. Pure Land Buddhism focuses on one of these Buddhas, known in Japanese as Amida.
- Amida was once a bodhisattva who made 48 vows to help sentient beings. In one, he said that he will create a special Pure Land for his followers and that any who call his name will be reborn there.
- Just like Zen, Pure Land is an example of a form of Buddhism that simplified or narrowed down Buddhism to one practice. In this case,

Notes

it is chanting the name of Amida Buddha. In Japanese the chant is, "Namu amida butsu," which means "I pay homage to Amida Buddha," and has the sense of "I take refuge in/rely upon Amida Buddha." Pure Land Buddhists can chant this aloud, either alone or in congregations; they can sing it; or they can recite it silently in their minds.

- Pure Land Buddhism emphasized the move from self-power (thinking that we can gain enlightenment through our own efforts) to other-power, relying on Amida's saving vow. If you perceive some similarities with Protestant Christian theology, you are not alone.

Pure Land Buddhism—Honen and Shinran

- The two most important figures in bringing Pure Land Buddhism to Japan are Honen and his disciple Shinran. One characteristic of Pure Land practitioners is their tendency toward humility. They embrace other-power, Amida, through what they call *shinjin* awareness, entrusting (or faith). The school that developed around Honen's teaching is known as Jodo Shu, the Pure Land School.
- His disciple Shinran is associated with the Jodo Shinshu, the True Pure Land School, known as Shin Buddhism. Shinran said that, since there is nothing we can do to bring about our own "salvation," there was no need for celibacy or following monastic discipline. In fact, since there is nothing we can do to bring about our own salvation, why even chant the nembutsu?
- Shinran explained that you chant out of gratitude for what has already been done—the extension of Amida's saving vow to all beings. When one experiences Amida's compassion, the desire to call on Amida with the nembutsu will arise spontaneously in one out of gratitude.
- Many people, on learning about Pure Land, think, "So all I have to do is chant? That is incredibly easy!" In fact, some find the act

Notes:

of fully opening up to other-power, entering into a relationship of complete trust, to be very difficult.

- Many Pure Land believers say that the Pure Land is a state of being, something that can be experienced in the here and now through faith.
- Pure Land Buddhists are congregational. People sit in pews or on chairs rather than cushions on the floor. There will be more Buddha images than one will usually find in a Zen temple or meditation center, especially images of Amida.
- The service prominently features chanting. The priest, usually married, will give a sermon. Relationships within the community and the family are important in Pure Land Buddhism.
- You might have noticed recurring themes in religions of East Asia—syncretism, the practice of combining religions in various ways; and pluralism, the belief that truth can be found in multiple traditions. Because of this, religious identity is understood very differently in East Asia than it is in the West. In both China and Japan, most people can be said to have multiple religious affiliation.

Japanese Religious Affiliation—Life Practices

- Japanese religious affiliation is an interesting topic. The majority of Japanese say that they are not religious. However, if we look at practice, we see high levels of involvement.
- In addition, when polls are taken asking Japanese people what religion they practice or are connected with, the number of checked religions is far greater than the total population of Japan. This means that most people check more than one religion.
- In general, the Japanese tend to practice a particular religion at certain moments in their lives that that religion is best suited to. For example, when a baby is born, a Shinto priest might be called in to conduct a ritual. But when someone dies, a Buddhist priest,

Notes:

in and Pure Land

who deals more with the issues of impermanence and death, will be called.

- Some call this approach to religion "contextualism," and many Chinese and Japanese see religions as dealing with different spheres of life. They are complementary, not conflicting.
- Why is the East Asian approach to religion so different from the Western approach? One perspective is that affiliation in the monotheistic religions is based largely on belief, and many of the beliefs are mutually exclusive. But if religious affiliation is more about practice, then being affiliated with more than one tradition becomes possible. This approach to religion is becoming more common in the West.

Suggested Reading

Beck, *Everyday Zen*.
 Beck and Smith, *Nothing Special*.
 Bercholz and Chödzin, *Entering the Stream*.
 Bloom, *The Essential Shinran*.
 Ching, *Chinese Religions*.
 Paper and Thompson, *The Chinese Way in Religion*.
 Prebish and Tanaka. *The Faces of Buddhism in America*.
 Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*.
 Sharma, *Our Religions*.
 Smith, *The World's Religions*.
 Suzuki and Dixon. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.
 Tanabashi and Schneider. *Essential Zen*.
 Thompson, *Chinese Religion: An Introduction*.
 Unno, *River of Fire, River of Water*.
 Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*.

Questions to Consider

1. Discuss some of the differences between the laughing buddhas of China and the meditative buddhas of India. What values does each version highlight?
2. What are the major differences between Zen Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism? To what extent do you rely on your own inner potential and your practices in your pursuit of spiritual goals, and to what extent do you rely on faith in a power other than yourself?
3. What do you think of the Japanese approach to religious affiliation, whereby a person can maintain connections with more than one religious tradition?

Notes: