

Buddhism: The Story of Enlightenment

Suffering, the origin of suffering, the destruction of suffering, and the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to release from suffering—that is the safe refuge, that is the best refuge. A person is delivered from all pains after going to this refuge.

The Buddha

Rather than portray Buddhism as a philosophy or a way of life, as it is so often characterized in the West, I prefer to view Buddhism as a religion to which ordinary people have turned over the centuries for the means to confront, control, or even escape the exigencies of life.

Donald Lopez Jr.

Buddhism is older than Christianity, older than Islam, deeper than the Ganges River [referring to Hinduism] and the Mekong [in Southeast Asia]. Today, more than five hundred million people worldwide practice Buddhism, and it manifests in many different forms. But whatever shape it takes, it always strives to free human beings from the life of suffering. It is a philosophy of emancipation.

Stephen Asma

The designation Buddhist without further qualification conveys virtually no insight into what a person believes or practices. There are as many schools of Buddhism as there are Christian Protestant denominations, but the teachings of many of these schools appear to be irreconcilable beyond a very general core.

Winfried Corduan

Part I: The Beginning

If Hinduism is the religion of infinite creation stories, Buddhism is the religion of none. According to Buddhist teaching, there is no beginning to the universe. Instead, what we call the universe is simply the combined experiences and actions of the universe's inhabitants as well as the physical elements that house these inhabitants. The life spans and living conditions of these residents are determined by the law of cause and effect—karma (“action”).

There are traditionally understood to be six realms in which the inhabitants of the universe live. Known as the Wheel of Life, these realms represent the places where all beings are born and reborn based on their actions in former lives.¹ Aside from the fact that Buddhism views these realms to be cyclical rather than linear as in the (Christian) West, these realms are not completely different from the medieval Catholic construal of the universe as containing four levels: heaven, purgatory, earth, and hell.

The highest realm in the Buddhist universe or Wheel of Life is that of the gods.² However, the luxury and prosperity of gods' lives covers their eyes to the truth of suffering, and thus they are eventually reborn in another realm. The next level, where we currently reside, is the realm of potential enlightenment.³ Here, humans are able either to seek awakening or to be consumed with the desire to acquire and possess. The next realm is that of the titans (demigods or demons), who are always fighting with the gods because they want to be like them. Next comes the realm of the ghosts. The ghosts are pitiable creatures whose necks are so thin that food is unable to pass to their perpetually hungry stomachs. The residents of the ghost realm live there because of their jealousy and greed in their former lives, although they were not so bad as to end up living in hell. The animal realm is marked by comfort, ignorance, and apathy. Finally, those living in the hell realm

1. As the Buddha said, “Some people are reborn. Evil-doers go to sorrowful existences. Doers of good go to happy ones. Those who are free from all worldly desires attain nirvana” (9.11), in *Dhammapada: Annotated and Explained*, annot. and rev. Jack Maguire (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2005), 41.

2. This reference to “gods” does not mean Creator Gods as in Judaism or Islam but rather to beings who have reached this level based on good karma.

3. As a Tibetan Buddhist monk explains, “Generally, there are three ways in which we can use our precious human life to realize its potential. We can use it to ensure that in future lives we will be born as a human being with all the conditions necessary for a happy and meaningful life; we can use it to attain complete liberation from suffering; or we can use it to attain full enlightenment, or Buddhahood, for the sake of all living beings.” See G. K. Gyatso, *Introduction to Buddhism: An Explanation of the Buddhist Way of Life* (Glen Spey, NY: Tharpa Publications, 2008), 40.

are tormented by fire or frozen in ice. The residents of this regrettable realm likely led angry and abusive former lives.⁴

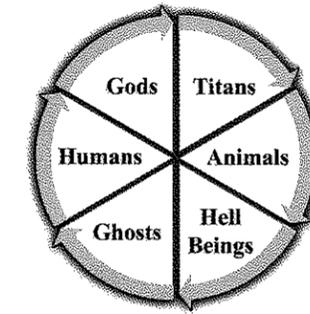


Fig. 2.1. The Wheel of Life in Buddhism.

Often portrayed at the center of this ever-turning Wheel of Life are a pig, a rooster (or bird), and a snake. Together these animals symbolize ignorance, attachment, and aversion, respectively, and are sometimes called the Three Poisons. As long as these types of vices or poisons are present in a living being, karma will dictate that he, she, or it will be born again in one of these different realms. It is only after desire or attachment is suspended that one's karma runs out like a shooting star, and one ceases to be imprisoned by the laws of cause and effect—which is the goal of enlightened human beings.

The question may arise concerning where karma originated, since karma is the source of power that holds everything together and continually gives birth to life and rebirth. Getting to the bottom of where or how karma originates, however, is a futile task. Like the God of the Bible, karma does not have a beginning. It has always existed. At the same time, however, although it is true to say that the universe—like karma—does not have a beginning as we understand this concept in the West, the universe does go through cycles.

Like Hinduism, Buddhism teaches that the universe develops through four periods or stages: creation, abiding, destruction, and nothingness.⁵ The universe is always in one of these cycles. We, for instance, are living during the second stage, when beings inhabit the different realms discussed above. After the universe is destroyed and becomes nothingness, karma—like the rustling of leaves in a windstorm—will blow into this nothingness and living beings will once again begin to

4. Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 30–36.

5. Huston Smith and Philip Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 19.

inhabit the universe. Or, to change images, after the universe is destroyed, karma—like a powerful magnet—will force all the bits of nothingness to unite. Then the period of abiding will be inaugurated.

It is sometimes difficult to understand the concept of how nothing can produce something or how something can come from nothing. As Christians, particularly Westernized Christians, we tend to think in a very linear fashion and highly value logical thinking. It is not easy for many of us to conceptualize—let alone visualize—how something can simultaneously exist yet not exist. This is a theme that my Buddhist friends point out to me regularly. Perhaps, then, there is an easier way to understand how Buddhism can say that the universe has *no* beginning while at the same time say that it *does* have a beginning.

The answer lies with the Buddha himself. As noted Buddhist practitioners and scholars Huston Smith and Philip Novak assert, “Buddha preached a religion that skirted speculation.”⁶ In other words, the Buddha intentionally refused to speculate about the origin of the universe and when or why or how the universe was created. Such questions, the Buddha thought, were fruitless. More to the point, the Buddha believed that attempts to probe these types of questions distracted a person from the ultimate issue of life: how to ease and altogether eliminate suffering. This was the only real question worth asking. An anecdote from the Buddha’s life illustrates his aversion to the question of the universe’s beginning:

Should anyone say that he does not wish to lead the holy life under the Blessed One,⁷ unless the Blessed One first tells him, whether the world is eternal or temporal, finite or infinite; whether the life principle is identical with the body, or something different; whether the Perfect One continues after death, etc.—Such a one would die, [unless] the Perfect One could tell him this.

It is as if a man were pierced by a poisoned arrow and his friends, companions, or near relations called in a surgeon, but that man should say: I will not have this arrow pulled out until I know who the man is that has wounded me: whether he is a noble, a prince, a citizen, or a servant; or: whether he is tall, or short, or of medium height. [Surely], such a man would die, [unless] he could adequately learn all this.

Therefore, the man who seeks his own welfare should pull out this arrow—this arrow of lamentation, pain, and sorrow.⁸

6. *Ibid.*, 25.

7. Although this statement may give the impression that the Buddha relied on God (“the Blessed One”), this is just a figure of speech. The gods, if they existed at all, really had nothing to do with achieving enlightenment. They are referred to sometimes in early Buddhist thought simply because they are residues of Indian (Hindu) thought.

8. Dwight Goddard, *A Buddhist Bible*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 35.

The arrow to which the Buddha refers is suffering. It is a poisoned arrow that directly leads to death. All that is important in this life is *the present*, namely, understanding that the arrow kills but that it can be eliminated. Theorizing about the past is pointless.

When understood in this context, we can see how Buddhism teaches that the universe has no beginning. For even if a person discovered exactly how or when or why the universe came into existence, this information would not bring us any closer to the reality of suffering and the attempt to eliminate it. In this way, we may say, the Buddha was hardly an abstract teacher or a theoretician. Rather, he was from beginning to end a practitioner—focused on the here and now rather than the there and then. As the Buddha said to his disciples, “greed for [speculation] tends not to edification.”⁹ What is most important is what is right in front of us: suffering.

Part 2: Historical Origin

Religious scholar Stephen Prothero summed it up best when he wrote that “Buddhism begins with a fairy tale.”¹⁰ Indeed, the lack of interest in a creation story in Buddhism is abundantly made up for by a rich and fanciful array of stories about the Buddha’s life. Because these stories were written down by various groups of followers hundreds of years after the Buddha’s death, there is a good degree of diversity in these writings and a fine line between historical fact and poetic license.

What Siddhartha Encountered	What It Symbolized
Sick person	Life is frail.
Old man	Age masters everyone.
Corpse	We will all die.
Ascetic	Liberation can occur.

The story of the Buddha’s life begins when a prince of the warrior caste named Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 BC) was born to the Shakya tribe in present-day Lumbini, Nepal. Just as Jesus’ birth was attended by praises from the angelic hosts (Luke 2:13–14), so Siddhartha’s birth was attended by “thousands of waiting-women looking on with joy in their

9. E. A. Burtt, *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (New York: Mentor Books, 1955), 32.

10. Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 169.

hearts."¹¹ Although born as a human being, Siddhartha "did not enter the world in the usual manner, [for] he appeared like one descended from the sky." He entered the world in full awareness because he had meditated for eons (in countless previous lifetimes) before his present birth. He took seven steps after being born, and his first words indicated his purpose in this life: "For enlightenment I was born, for the good of all that lives. This is the last time that I have been born into this world of becoming."¹²

Despite the auspicious circumstances surrounding Siddhartha's miraculous birth and the fact that his mother received the best medical care available at the time, his mother Maya died from complications shortly after giving birth to her prized and remarkable son. To protect his son partly from the pains of the world and partly from the prophecy stated over Siddhartha after his birth by a Brahmin (Hindu) priest that he would be a great world king if he was not exposed to suffering (otherwise, he would be a holy man), Siddhartha's father Shuddhodana made every effort to provide all that Siddhartha would ever need or desire in order to influence the likelihood of his becoming a ruler. But his plan backfired. Instead of becoming a great king, Siddhartha would become a holy man.

Unfulfilled in life even with the best that money and power could provide, including a beautiful wife and loving son, Siddhartha bid farewell to his life of luxury and comfort at the age of twenty-nine. The impetus for this decision occurred over the course of four successive trips during which he encountered the realities of sickness, aging, death, and liberation, respectively. Known as the Great Signs, these excursions that Siddhartha took with his chariot driver awakened him to the fact that suffering left its mark like a handprint on everything in this world. He also realized that he had lived completely secluded and sheltered from this reality. His only hope was to understand what it all meant so that he could help others, and to this end he left everything in pursuit of awakening.

The next six years of Siddhartha's life were as exhausting as they were ineffective. He first studied with two Hindu (*raja*) gurus, but eventually learned all they could teach him. Siddhartha then joined a group of ascetics—those who believe they can master themselves spiritually by manipulating their physical bodies like a blacksmith beats down and forms a piece of metal. Instead of attaining spiritual enlightenment, however, the great prince only managed to starve himself nearly to death. Siddhartha was so emaciated by his ascetic

11. Edward Conze, ed. and trans., *Buddhist Scriptures* (London: Penguin, 1959), 35.
12. *Ibid.*, 36.

lifestyle that, as he later stated, "when I thought I would touch the skin of my stomach I actually took hold of my spine."¹³



Fig. 2.2.
Siamese
Buddha statue
in Thailand.

Everything changed for Siddhartha as he sat down one afternoon under the Bodhi ("enlightenment") Tree in Bodh Gaya in India. After accepting a bowl of rice porridge from a country girl—the eating of which signaled his renunciation of asceticism—he entered the lotus (sitting) position and vowed not to get up until he had attained enlightenment. As in the case of Jesus when he battled with the devil for forty days in the desert before the inauguration of his ministry, Siddhartha warred with Mara, the Lord of Death.¹⁴ Mara tempted Siddhartha in many ways,

13. Clarence Hamilton, *Buddhism: A Religion of Infinite Compassion* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1954), 14.

14. Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures*, 48.

but each time the prince responded with concentration and resolve. Eventually Mara was defeated.

Alone under the tree, Siddhartha went deeper and deeper into meditation. Like a bucket of water penetrating the deepest levels of the well, Siddhartha reached the limits of what one's mind can see and apprehend. He first saw all his countless previous lives and deaths and rebirths, which made him mindful of all living beings. He then traced the cause of the endless cycle of death and rebirth (called *samsara*) to ignorance. This empowered him to recognize that karma ceases to have command over a being once ignorance is destroyed. And once karma is destroyed, a living being ceases to be imprisoned by the perpetual cycle of life.

As the dawn rose from the night, Siddhartha awoke with the universe and became forever known as the Buddha, "the Awakened One." The Buddha knew all things because he was one with everything. Although he attempted to get up, the peace, calm, and joy of his realization kept him seated under the tree for a week—and altogether for forty-nine days. At the end of this time, two of the principal Hindu gods, Brahma and Indra, implored the Buddha to share his realization with the universe:

O Buddha, Treasure of Compassion, Living beings are like blind people
in constant danger of falling into the lower realms.
Other than you there is no Protector in this world.
Therefore we beseech you, please rise from meditation equipoise and
turn the Wheel of Dharma.¹⁵

This is exactly what the Buddha did. He turned the Wheel of Dharma by teaching others what he realized in meditation. Like Jesus the Christ, Siddhartha the Buddha soon attracted disciples—eventually becoming a traveling guru who always tempered public teaching with private meditation. Also like Christ, the Buddha comforted, counseled, challenged, encouraged, and disciplined. Upon his death at the age of eighty in Kushinagar, India (the result of natural causes after he healed from accidental food poisoning),¹⁶ the Buddha's disciples surrounded him one last time. Because he had taught them all that was necessary

15. Gyatso, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 10. As the author explains, "The reason why Buddha's teachings are called the *Wheel of Dharma* ["Protection"] is as follows. It is said that in ancient times there were great kings . . . who used to rule the entire world. These kings had many special possessions, including a precious wheel in which they would travel around the world. Wherever the precious wheel went, the king would control that region. Buddha's teachings are said to be like a precious wheel, because wherever they spread, the people in that area have the opportunity to control their minds by putting them into practice" (10–11).

16. See the original story in E. J. Thomas, trans., *Buddhist Scriptures* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company), 112.

The lotus flower symbolizes purity. For just as a lotus flower is born in the mud but blossoms atop the water, so we are born in suffering but can attain purity of mind.

for them to know, his last earthly statement was just a summary of his overall teaching: "Decay is inherent in all things; be sure to strive with clarity of mind (for nirvana)."¹⁷

Council	Year	Country
1st	483 BC	India
2nd	387 BC	India
3rd	250 BC	India
4th	1st c. BC 1st c. AD	Sri Lanka Kashmir

Because the Buddha achieved nirvana (or "extinction" of existence as we know it) after his death through his achievement of enlightenment while on earth, he was no longer bound by the law of cause and effect (karma) and so was not reborn. His legacy, however, continued. For even while alive, the Buddha established the first religious monastic community in the world—the *Sangha* ("community"), a group of monks and nuns who put into practice what the Buddha taught. Like Muhammad, the Buddha did not indicate a successor. Instead, as his last words conveyed, it was the responsibility of each individual to discover the truth and test the Buddha's words against his or her own experiences.

As time went on, several Buddhist councils were formed to determine what the Buddha actually taught as well as to determine the parameters of Buddhist thought and practice. The first council, which occurred soon after the Buddha's death, was convened in order to recall and then memorize the Buddha's teaching since he, like Jesus, did not write anything down. These recitations became known as the Pali Canon or Tripitaka. The second council, meeting about a century later, convened as a result of a division within Buddhism. The dispute arose between those who followed a strict interpretation of the Buddha's teaching and those who followed a less strict approach.

Roughly another century later, the third council met to adjudicate how to handle the alarmingly high number of Buddhists who became practitioners of the religion after the emperor of northern India, a man named Ashoka (304–232 BC), converted to Buddhism.¹⁸ In the same way that Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in the early fourth century made Christianity more widespread among the Roman masses

17. Keown, *Buddhism*, 28.

18. Karen Armstrong, *The Buddha* (London: Penguin, 2004), vii.

and more susceptible to theological divergence, so Emperor Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism in the third century BC led to increased conversions to Buddhism. This caused certain Buddhists to be suspicious of the newcomers' orthodoxy and sincerity, and the third council met to discuss these matters. It was during this time that Buddhism spread beyond Greater India and into other parts of Asia. There it would flourish and grow more in influence than in India. Finally, two of the last initial Buddhist councils met in the first century BC and AD, respectively, to write down (rather than retain only in oral tradition) the Buddha's teachings as well as codify commentaries written by earlier monks on these sayings.

Part 3: Beliefs

Buddhism, like its parent religion Hinduism, is extremely diverse. In this way, Buddhists come in all shapes and sizes. Some, for instance, do not believe in a god, while others worship gods. Some believe that the Buddha was a great human teacher, while others believe that the Buddha was divine. Religious scholar Winfried Corduan summarizes this diversity of Buddhist thought well:

The designation Buddhist without further qualification conveys virtually no insight into what a person believes or practices. There are as many schools of Buddhism as there are Christian Protestant denominations, but the teachings of many of these schools appear to be irreconcilable beyond a very general core.¹⁹

Because Buddhism is so varied, it is customary to divide the religion into denominations or major schools of thought. This is the approach we will adopt.

Two Main Traditions: Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

The first school of thought in Buddhism is called Theravada Buddhism ("way of the elders"). Sometimes called Hinayana ("the small vehicle"), Theravada Buddhism is the oldest, most traditional, and most conservative of the many strands of Buddhist thought and practice. It is the denomination most similar to what the Buddha taught, and is most dominant in Southeast Asian countries such as

19. Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 220.

Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, and Cambodia. Although there are both monks and laypeople in Theravada Buddhism, the monks are primary. It is commonly believed that only they can achieve enlightenment, and the role of the layperson is to support them as they do so. Daily life as a monk includes meditating, begging for food in the morning, performing chores, and following strict rules outlined by the *Sangha* or Buddhist community. Lay Theravadins, by contrast, provide food and clothing to the monks, maintain temples, and follow ethical guidelines that are less strict than those for the monks.²⁰

	DENOMINATION	
	Theravada	Mahayana
Liberation	Achieved alone	Aided by divine powers
View of God	Atheistic	Pantheistic
Dominant	Thailand, Cambodia	Vietnam, Korea, Japan
Virtue	Wisdom	Compassion
Model	Arhat (Monk)	Bodhisattva (Savior)
Ritual	Meditation and study	Petition and prayer
Profession	Monk	Layperson
Focus	Inward	Outward
Buddha	Saint	Savior*

* Huston Smith, *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 13.

The second major school of thought in Buddhism is called Mahayana Buddhism ("greater vehicle"). It originated as a reaction against Theravada Buddhism—which its adherents believed to be too strict and narrow—and is most dominant in East Asian countries such as China, South Korea, and Japan. It is the larger of the two major Buddhist traditions. Whereas the focus of Theravada Buddhism is monks, the focus of Mahayana Buddhism is the laypeople. Anyone, monk or layperson, is able to achieve enlightenment. Other emphases in the Mahayana tradition are that the Buddha is understood as more than a saint or example; he is also a godlike figure. In addition to seeing the Buddha

20. The five rules are: (1) no killing, (2) no stealing, (3) no sexual misconduct, (4) no intoxicants, and (5) no lying. See Donald Lopez Jr., *The Story of Buddhism: A Concise Guide to Its History and Teachings* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 367.

as a god in a different realm, Mahayanists developed a theology of various saviors called *bodhisattvas* ("enlightened beings"). These are buddhas in the making, so to speak, who attempt to save all beings from ignorance.

Unlike Theravada Buddhism, which is more narrow and restricted in terms of thought and practice, Mahayana Buddhism is varied and vast. It can be subdivided into many additional schools of thought. One of these is called Pure Land Buddhism. It focuses on Amitabha ("Infinite Light"), a Buddha who created a paradise in heaven for average people to enter so that they could concentrate on enlightenment after death without all the distractions of life on earth. I once visited a Buddhist temple that was part of this school of thought. Most of the service was focused on two things: meditation and chanting. The chanting consisted of reciting the phrase *namu amida butsu* ("I worship the Buddha Amitabha") for many minutes at a time. The chanting of this phrase is believed to bring one closer to this Buddha. And one's faith in Amitabha enables one to attain the Pure Land after death.

Another school of thought in Mahayana Buddhism is called Zen Buddhism. This form is perhaps most popular in the West. Its spontaneity, spirituality, and simplicity have garnered a keen following in America, and it has made its way firmly into popular culture. Zen Buddhism, as its name means, focuses on meditation. Its aim is to crack the shell of our own egos. It is about opening up the "third eye" of our beings. As Japanese Zen Buddhist scholar and practitioner D. T. Suzuki explains:

Zen [Buddhism] . . . wants us to open up our "third eye" . . . to the hitherto undreamed-of region shut away from us through our own ignorance. When the cloud of ignorance disappears, the infinity of the heavens is manifested, where we see for the first time the nature of our own being.²¹

A Buddhist monk once explained to me the purpose and goal of meditation. In essence, he said, Buddhists meditate because they seek to purify the dirty water inside them. Like digging a well, he said, meditation allows a person to go deep into the recesses of who we are and find the clean, natural, and unpolluted water. To do so, we must move beyond our five senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling), our mind (awareness), and our ego (the illusory part of

21. D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2006), 4.

ourselves that believes we actually exist), so that we can enter the original mind, which leads us to enlightenment.

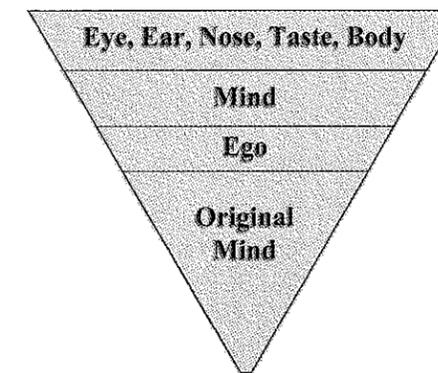


Fig. 2.3. Passing through the stages of Buddhist meditation.

The last major school of thought in Mahayana Buddhism is called Tibetan (or Vajrayana) Buddhism. It has become increasingly accepted and even trendy in the West because of the glowing personality of and widespread media attention focused on the Dalai Lama ("Ocean Teacher"), who is believed to be the fourteenth reincarnation of the *bodhisattva* Chenrezig (or Avalokitesvara). Because of his role as a *bodhisattva*, the Dalai Lama recites a daily prayer that is more than a thousand years old: "As long as space remains, as long as sentient beings remain, until then, so too may I remain, and dispel the miseries of the world."²² Like other branches of Mahayana Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhists believe in *bodhisattvas*—including the Dalai Lama—who vow to delay nirvana and be reincarnated countless times until all living beings attain enlightenment.

Important Buddhist Teachings

In addition to some of the major Buddhist schools of thought, there are many terms and concepts that are important in Buddhism. Although not every school of thought adheres to all these concepts, we will highlight those that are most common. We will begin where the Buddha began: with the Four Noble Truths, which he taught to his first disciples after his attainment of enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree.

22. *The Dalai Lama: Essential Writings*, selected with an introduction by Thomas Forsthoefel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 31.

Dependent Origination (or Arising)

1. "Old age and death depend on birth."
2. "Birth depends on existence."
3. "Existence depends on attachment [or clinging]."
4. "Attachment depends on desire [or craving]."
5. "Desire depends on sensation [or feeling]."
6. "Sensation depends on contact."
7. "Contact depends on the [six senses]."
8. "The [six senses] depend on consciousness."
9. "Consciousness depends on ignorance."^{*}

^{*} See *Samyutta Nikaya* 12.2, in *The Bible of the World: An Anthology of the Sacred Books of the Ten Principal Religions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 260–61.

The first of the Four Noble Truths is that all of life is marked by suffering. This does not mean that life is always gloomy—on the contrary, life can be full of joy and happiness—but it does mean that suffering is part and parcel of living. For no matter how much happiness we may experience at the moment, this happiness will eventually deflate like a balloon. That's because we are trapped in a continual cycle of aging, sickness, and death—what we call *samsara*—and we are almost powerless within this system. Death is not an escape. Rather, it is the trigger that shoots us into another body where we will experience suffering all over again.

The second of the Four Noble Truths is that we are trapped in *samsara* because we desire things and attach ourselves to them. This represents an inherent problem for the simple reason that life is forever changing and impermanent. So any attachment we make to something will necessarily cause us to suffer, since everything is always changing. There is an entire chain of events—often a sequence of nine to twelve—that leads one to desire or make an attachment to something.

Let's say you like a specific brand of coffee. When you first encountered it, you liked the smell of it as well as its color. When you drank it, you enjoyed the taste and the effects it produced in your body. Over time you became attached to it and desired it weekly, if not daily. Eventually, because everything is always in a state of change and because everything

is always related, something happens—whether you move to a different part of the country that does not import that brand of coffee, your doctor puts you on a diet that excludes caffeine, the coffee company goes out of business because of fraud, or the coffee beans that produced the coffee were destroyed during a hurricane. In any case, your desire for coffee will eventually result in suffering. This is the doctrine of dependent origination, the notion that everything is connected to something else—and that suffering is inevitable.

The last two of the Four Noble Truths go together. While the third truth teaches that suffering—the root cause of which is ignorance—can be eliminated, the last of the truths explains that suffering can be eliminated only by practicing the Noble Eightfold Path. The fact that there is a solution to the problem of suffering is the good news. However, the bad news is that this is incredibly difficult to do. The first path of the eight, for instance, sounds innocuous enough: we must have right beliefs. But this is much more challenging than we might initially think. That's because having right beliefs means seeing the world as it truly is—an extremely difficult thing to do. For instance, it took the Buddha years to see things as they truly were when he was Siddhartha Gautama—despite eons of lifetimes of practice before that lifetime! The remaining seven paths to enlightenment build on the first: right thoughts, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation.

To condense the Noble Eightfold Path into a paragraph, the attaining of enlightenment entails the following: (1) seeing things as they truly are and understanding the reality of and cause of suffering, (2) thinking accordingly, (3) speaking the truth, (4) acting and doing according to this teaching, (5) living in a manner that does not disrupt other life, (6) spending one's time doing good things and not becoming attached to anything, (7) being aware of one's thoughts at all times, and (8) focusing one's mind and concentrating.²³

The last important teaching of Buddhism that we will discuss is that of no-self or *anatta*. This is sometimes a difficult concept to understand. Traditional Buddhism contends that living beings (including deities) do not have souls, for the simple reason that souls are nonexistent. Souls, in other words, are imaginary. Such a radical notion, which would have been scandalous within an Indian context of myriad divinities, was a direct assault on Hindu thinking. In fact, the implications of this belief are just as provocative today as they were twenty-five centuries ago: Not

²³ For an explanation of the Noble Eightfold Path, see the *Samyutta Nikaya* (SN) 45.8, in *A World Religions Reader*, ed. Ian Markham and Christy Lohr (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 95–96.

only do deities not exist, but we do not even really exist. I do not exist, and you do not exist.

If that's the case, we might be wondering, what *does* exist? Buddhists have an answer. In short, they assert, living beings are composed of five different *skandhas* ("aggregates"). These five aggregates are matter, sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and consciousness.²⁴ Matter is an external thing such as a body part, while sensations are the feelings we have as we interact with this matter. The sensations we have through our contact with matter cause perceptions or the recognition of things. This leads to thoughts and the decisions we make as a result. Finally, our consciousness is our overall awareness of everything.

Together these "aggregates" or bundles of energy constitute our existence, and they are held together by, you guessed it, karma! When desire or attachment is broken, karma disbands like a withered rope and we cease to exist. Clinging to the notion of our own independent existence only tightens and strengthens the knot of *samsara*. As long as we believe that we exist and that we have a soul, we will be forever trapped in the cycle of suffering, sickness, and death. We will be free only after we recognize and accept that self-existence is an illusion.

Part 4: Religious Writings

The Buddha taught often but wrote nothing. As with Jesus, his parables, lessons, and discourses were immediately memorized by his disciples and only later put into writing. This occurred in the first century BC.²⁵ As is the case with Christianity, which has three different scriptural canons depending on whether a person is associated with Orthodoxy, Catholicism, or Protestantism, so there are different canonical scriptures in Buddhism based on the major schools of thought or denominations in Buddhism. The teachings of the Buddha serve as the core scriptures for each of these denominations, but the Buddha's teachings have been transmitted slightly differently in each of these schools of thought. What's more, unlike Christianity, which believes the Bible to be inspired by God, the Buddhist scriptures generally contain the words of the Buddha and his disciples—who were people and not gods. Indeed, just as the Buddha taught his disciples to question even him and to discover the truth for themselves, so the scriptures in Buddhism are guidelines to be used inasmuch as they are practical and functional.

24. Prothero, *God Is Not One*, 184.

25. Lopez, *The Story of Buddhism*, 106.

Scriptures of Theravada Buddhism

Pali Canon	Contents
<i>Vinaya Pitaka</i> ("Discipline Basket")	Rules for monks and nuns; stories about the Buddha's first disciples
<i>Sutta Pitaka</i> ("Saying Basket")	Sayings of the Buddha and his disciples
<i>Abhidamma Pitaka</i> ("Higher Truth Basket")	Sayings and summaries of the Buddha from his disciples

We will begin our discussion with the oldest of the Buddhist denominations. Known as Theravada Buddhism, this tradition looks to the Pali Canon as its standard collection of writings, so called because Pali is the language used—a language very similar to what Siddhartha spoke. The Pali Canon is often called the Tripitaka ("Three Baskets"), since it was kept in three separate receptacles or baskets when composed in written form.²⁶ The Tripitaka contains many sayings of the Buddha along with sayings and commentaries written by his disciples and later monks.

The first basket, called the *Vinaya Pitaka* or "Discipline Basket," contains three major works.²⁷ These texts focus on the conduct of monks and nuns, provide rules for etiquette for the *Sangha* (the Buddhist community), and contain stories of the Buddha's enlightenment. One of the stories I find most interesting in the *Vinaya* texts includes a report of the Buddha's interaction with his first disciples. After attaining enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree and remaining there for forty-nine days, the Buddha encountered five ascetics in a deer park and shared with them his testimony:

I have overcome all foes; I am all-wise; I am free from stains in every way; I have left everything and have obtained emancipation by the destruction of desire. Having myself gained knowledge, whom should I call my master? I have no teacher; no one is equal to me; in the world of men and of gods no being is like me. I am the holy One in this world, I am the highest teacher, I alone am the absolute Sambuddha [or fully enlightened being]; I have gained coolness (by the extinction of all passion) and have obtained Nirvana.²⁸

26. Armstrong, *The Buddha*, xiv.

27. The names of the three works in this first division of canonical books in the Pali Canon are *Suttavibhanga* ("Rule Analysis"), *Khandhaka* ("Collections"), and *Parivara* ("Accessory"). See the Pali Text Society at <http://www.palitext.com> for translations of the works in the Pali Canon included here and below.

28. *Sacred Books of the East*, *Vinaya Texts*, vol. 13, pt. 1, ed. Max Muller, trans. T. W. Rhys David and Herman Oldenberg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881), 91.

Notice in this passage that the Buddha “obtained emancipation” only after destroying desire. This resulted in nirvana or “extinction.” If the candle represents Siddhartha and the flame represents his desire, what he did in meditation under the Bodhi Tree was to extinguish the flame.

The next group of writings in the Pali Canon is the Sutta Pitaka or “Saying Basket.” There are five groups of writings in this division.²⁹ Known as the Suttas (“teachings”) or Nikaya (“collections”) texts, these writings contain thousands of sayings from the Buddha and his disciples. The last group of Nikaya texts contains hundreds of direct sayings from the Buddha and is called the Dhammapada (“Eternal Path”). It is perhaps the most beloved of all Buddhist scriptures, and without doubt my favorite Buddhist text to read. A few verses from the chapter on thirst reinforce the Buddha’s emphasis on desire in his teaching:

Those who are slaves to passion follow the stream of desires, as a spider runs down the web it has made. When they have ceased to do this, at last they make true progress, free from cares and leaving all pains behind (24.14).

Give up what is ahead, give up what is behind, give up what is between, when you go to the other shore of existence. If your mind is altogether free, you will not again enter into birth and decay (24.15).

If you allow yourself to be tossed by doubts and swayed by strong passions, and if you yearn only for what is sensually pleasing, your thirst will grow greater and greater, and you will make your bonds stronger and stronger (24.16).³⁰

As was the case with the Vinaya text quoted above, this passage from the Dhammapada explains that the goal of existence is to be released from the desire to have or possess. By giving up and releasing “what is ahead” (our future rebirth), “what is behind” (our previous lives), and “what is between” (our current lives), we are then ready to “go to the other shore of existence,” namely, nirvana. When we do so—and our minds are therefore “free”—we will exit the system of death and rebirth called *samsara*.

The last group of writings in the Pali Canon is called the Abhidamma Pitaka or “Higher Truth Basket.”³¹ This division contains seven

29. The names of the five works in this second division of canonical books in the Pali Canon are *Digha Nikaya* (“Collection of Long Discourses”) or DN; *Majjhima Nikaya* (“Collection of Middle-Length Discourses”) or MN; *Samyutta Nikaya* (“Connected Discourses”) or SK; *Anguttara Nikaya* (“Increased by One Collection”) or AN; and *Khuddaka Nikaya* (“Short Collection”) or KN.

30. *Dhammapada*, 105–6.

31. The names of the seven works in this last division of books in the Pali Canon are the *Dhammasangani* (“Psychological Ethics”), *Vibhanga* (“Book of Analysis”), *Dhatukatha* (“Discourse

works that discuss various issues related to the Buddha’s teaching. The following is an excerpt from the Kathavatthu:

Enlightened ones speak without anger or arrogance, with a mind not boiling over, without vehemence, without spite. Without envy they speak from right knowledge. They . . . delight in what’s well said and do not disparage what’s not [said well]. They don’t study to find fault, don’t grasp at little mistakes, don’t put down, don’t crush, [and] don’t speak random words. For the purpose of knowledge, for the purpose of [inspiring] clear confidence, counsel that’s true: That’s how noble ones give counsel. That’s the noble one’s counsel. Knowing this, the wise should give counsel without arrogance.³²

Because those who are enlightened have risen above the pettiness and transience of the world, they do not act angrily or arrogantly. At the same time, because they have discovered the truth, they are content to share this truth with others—but always in a way that is humble, kind, and practical.

Scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism

Although Mahayana Buddhism generally accepts the different scriptures above, its followers have additional writings. What’s more, and somewhat confusing to outsiders, some of the scriptures that Mahayanaists affirm that are similar to those of Theravadins differ slightly because they are transmitted in another language or found in another version.³³ To add even more confusion, different groups or traditions within Mahayana Buddhism have their own scriptures or at least emphasize certain writings over others. For this reason, we will take a very general survey of Mahayana scriptures.

In addition to the scriptures in Theravada Buddhism, the thousands of other texts that Mahayana Buddhists affirm are often called *sutras* (“threads” or “discourses” in Sanskrit). These *sutras* are customarily attributed to the Buddha or his disciples, although they were written down hundreds of years later and are the product of later Buddhist communities. One such *sutra* is called the Shurangama (“indestructible”) Sutra,

of Elements”), *Puggalapannatti* (“Designation of Human Types”), *Kathavatthu* (“Points of Controversy”), *Yamaka* (“Pairs”), and *Patthana* (“Conditional Relations”).

32. “Kathavatthu Sutta: Topics for Discussion” (AN 3.67), trans. (from the Pali) Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight* (July 3, 2010), <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/ano3/ano3.067.than.html>.

33. This is why some people may refer to what are called the Agamas (“scriptures”), which contain many of the same writings as the Pali Canon. One difference is that the Agamas were originally thought to have been written in Sanskrit rather than in Pali, but they have been transmitted to us in the Chinese or Tibetan language.

which is popular in Chinese Buddhism. As we learned about Mahayana Buddhism above, this text lauds buddhas in the making to become *bodhisattvas* who, rather than attaining enlightenment and escaping the cycle of death and rebirth, voluntarily abstain from the attainment of nirvana out of compassion for others:

I [Buddha] urge all Saints and holy men to choose to be reborn in order to deliver all sentient beings. You should make use of all manner of transformations, such as disciples, laymen, kings, lords, ministers, virgins, boy-eunuchs, and even as harlots, widows, adulterers, thieves, butchers, peddlers, etc., so as to be able to mingle with all kinds of people and to make known the true emancipation of Buddhism.³⁴

In other words, the Buddha teaches, people are not to pursue attainment just for their own release from the cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*) but rather to sacrifice themselves for the good of others. They are to make this sacrifice so that they can teach others how to attain enlightenment, which is the highest form of compassion that one can show.

Another *sutra*, called the Lankavatra ("Island Castle") Sutra, is a Mahayana writing I find informative. It focuses on the concept of nirvana in relation to the *bodhisattva*. The book represents a discourse between the Buddha, who always refers to himself as *Tathagata* ("One who has come and gone") in Buddhist writings—just like Jesus referred to himself as "the Son of Man" in the Gospels—and a *bodhisattva* named Mahamati. In the following excerpt the Buddha explains to Mahamati about those who are not able to enter nirvana:

There are two classes of those who may not enter the Nirvana of the Tathagatas [Buddhas]: there are those who have abandoned the Bodhisattva ideals, saying, they are not in conformity with the sutras, the codes of morality, nor with emancipation. Then there are the true Bodhisattvas who, on account of their original vows made for the sake of all beings, say, "So long as they do not attain Nirvana, I will not attain it myself," voluntarily keeping themselves out of Nirvana. But no beings are left outside by the will of the Tathagatas; some day each and every one will be influenced by the wisdom and love of the Tathagatas of Transformation to lay up a stock of merit and ascend the stages. But, if they only realised it, they are already in the Tathagata's Nirvana[;] for, in Noble Wisdom, all things are in Nirvana from the beginning.³⁵

34. Shurangama Sutra, quoted in *The World's Great Scriptures*, ed. Lewis Browne (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 193.

35. Lankavatra Sutra, quoted in *ibid.*, 200.

Here we learn something important about nirvana. Not only is it available to all—save those *bodhisattvas* who either broke their vow or delay it until all beings are liberated—it is only a matter of time before everyone will eventually attain this truth. And more interestingly, we are already in nirvana, if we only realized it.

I want to discuss one last Buddhist scripture that continues to garner a good deal of attention in the West. It is popularly called the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Sacred to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, which is an offshoot of the Mahayana tradition, this book gives direction to those who are about to die. It focuses on the *Bardo* (or "intermediate existence"), a Tibetan term that refers to the gap between death and life. The following excerpt guides a person who is soon to expire:

Since you do not have a material body of flesh and blood, whatever may come—sounds, lights, or rays—are, all three, unable to harm you: you are incapable of dying. It is quite sufficient for you to know that these aspirations are your own thought-forms. Recognize this to be the *Bardo*.

O nobly-born, if you do not now recognize your own thought-forms, whether of meditation or of devotion you may have performed while in the human world—if you have not met with this present teaching—the lights will daunt you, the sounds will awe you, and the rays will terrify you. Should you not know this all-important key to the teachings—not being able to recognize the sounds, lights, and rays—you will have to wander in the *Samsara*.³⁶

PART 5: WORSHIP PRACTICES

Worship practices within Buddhism vary widely depending on one's tradition, one's station in life, where one lives, and the individual's own preferences or habits. Although we in the West almost make Buddhism synonymous with meditation, not all Buddhists meditate. In fact, a great many do not. Instead, some Buddhists may venerate a statue of the Buddha, while still others may chant the Buddha's name or light incense in front of an image. This can be done at home or at a temple. For those Buddhists who do meditate, they usually do so silently in a seated position for a consecutive set of minutes or even hours.

Most of the services I have attended at Buddhist temples include chanting, meditation, teaching or *dharma* talk, and scripture reading. Unlike churches that have pews and seating during worship, many

36. Modified from W. Y. Evans-Wentz, trans., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 104.

Buddhist houses of worship have practitioners sit on the floor or stand during worship. If standing, Buddhists may circumambulate (or walk around) a statue of the Buddha or his relics (if in a stupa or "heap," which is a mound-like structure that contains relics of the Buddha) as well as bow and prostrate themselves.

If you should attend a Buddhist service, one of the first things you will be asked to do is, like Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:5), remove your shoes. You will then be greeted by a waft of incense, large statues, colorful designs, and beating drums. You may also see Buddhist practitioners standing in front of an image or statue of the Buddha, reciting prayers and bowing down—perhaps reciting the three refuges three times: "I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the *dharma*. I take refuge in the *Sangha*." This refers to one's devotion to the Buddha, his teachings, and the Buddhist community, respectively.

If traveling to South Asian countries like Thailand or Myanmar where Theravada Buddhism is prevalent, you will no doubt notice the many monks dressed in saffron robes who surround temples and carry bowls for begging from Buddhist laypeople. Although it may be tempting to enter into a conversation with monks or at least make eye contact as you walk past them, they typically keep to themselves and will not approach you. Instead, lay Buddhists provide food daily for the Theravadin monks in an exchange of merit. In a country where Mahayana Buddhism is present, practitioners may stop by the temple for a few minutes throughout the day or visit the temple only on special occasions, such as holidays or funerals.



Fig. 2.4.
(Theravadin)
Buddhist monk
with begging
bowl.

Part 6: Point of Contact

With such variety of beliefs and practices, it is sometimes difficult to know where a Christian would begin a conversation with a Buddhist. Should we talk about reincarnation? Death? The notion that we do not have souls? Although these are all good topics for conversation, I would like to focus on two important Buddhist topics in particular. The first relates to the *bodhisattva*. As you recall from our discussion above, a *bodhisattva* is a person who abstains from attaining nirvana so that he or she can help all other living beings attain enlightenment. Speaking metaphorically, a *bodhisattva* is one who arrives home (nirvana) after a long journey (life), but instead of entering his home, he intentionally pauses at the door and instead helps everyone else through the door and vows to enter the home only after every other being has entered safely.

As Christians, we cannot help but notice some interesting parallels between a *bodhisattva* and Jesus. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is the One who literally gave up his own life so that he could give life to others. Through his sacrificial death on the cross, we have access to eternal life. Just as Buddhists believe that the *bodhisattva* made a vow to emancipate all people, so Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, left his abode at the right hand of the Father and incarnated himself.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:5–11)

Rather than remain in God's presence and allow humanity to suffer endlessly, Jesus humbled himself on the cross. So whereas a *bodhisattva* delays nirvana by allowing himself to be reincarnated, Jesus allowed himself to be violently and shamefully killed so that he could provide salvation to the world.

The second topic I want to highlight is that of desire. Whereas not all Buddhists believe in a figure called a *bodhisattva*, most Buddhists affirm that desire produces suffering. So this is a good place to begin. Below is an excerpt from an Indian-born Hindu in the nineteenth

century, Sundar Singh (1899–1927), who renounced Hinduism as a teen and converted to Christianity. In one of his books, he discusses how Christians can converse with Hindus about desire:

Some say that desire is the root cause of all pain and sorrow. According to this philosophy, salvation consists in eliminating all desire, including any desire for eternal bliss or communion with God. But when someone is thirsty, do we tell him to kill his thirst instead of giving him water to drink? To drive out thirst without quenching it with life-sustaining water is to drive out life itself. The result is death, not salvation. Thirst is an expression of our need for water and a sign of hope that spiritual peace exists. Something can satisfy our thirsty souls. When the soul finds God, the author of that spiritual thirst, it receives far greater satisfaction than any thirsty man who receives water. When the soul's desire is satisfied, we have found heaven.³⁷

I am drawn to Singh's assertion that "thirst is an expression of our need for water and a sign of hope that spiritual peace exists." As Christians, we believe that Jesus is the true living water. We affirm that Jesus, just as he spoke to the woman at the well, is the only thirst-quencher on this earth. Whereas Buddhists believe that thirst should be overcome and mastered, we believe that thirst is a natural state of being that signals our need to be quenched. Our desire for water, in other words, does not need to be overcome. Rather, our desire for water needs to be brought to completion—we, again like the woman at the well (John 4:1–30), have to come to Jesus to quench our spiritual thirst and not overlook how God made humanity in such a way that our bodies oftentimes alert us to spiritual needs that need to be realized rather than overcome.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would the Buddha's vision of life on earth being marked ultimately by suffering affect one as a follower of his path? Can hope beyond escape really exist in this worldview? What is the Christian understanding of suffering?
2. Buddhism is distinct in its disinterest in the beginning of the world. Are stories of origin important? If so, why? In what ways does what one believes or knows about the past affect the present and the future?

³⁷ *Sadhu Sundar Singh: Essential Writings*, selected with an introduction by Charles Moore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 38.

3. Most Westerners, whether professing Christians or not, believe that people contain a "spirit" or a "soul." Classical Buddhism, in contrast, holds a core belief of *anatta* or "no-self"—no one really exists. How different is this concept from the basic belief of Western philosophy: "I think, therefore I am"? How can you interact with someone who thinks so differently?
4. As suggested in the final section of the chapter, two key opportunities for conversation between Buddhism and Christianity exist in the concept of a *bodhisattva's* relation to Christ as Savior and discussion on desire. How could a Christian best engage in these conversations? In addition to the passages listed above, what other biblical examples could one use to begin this dialogue?
5. What lesson does Buddhism have for Western Christians? Why do you think Buddhism has become so attractive to many in the West? What does Buddhism offer in this regard that is distinct from Judaism, Christianity, or other traditional religions in the West?

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