

Evangelism: Defending the Faith

Symbol of Buddhism



Origin

- Remember the **Buddhist and Shramana Period** (ca. 600 B.C.E.-300 C.E.) discussed in the formation of Hinduism
 - We began to see some reactions against the priestly religion of the Brahmins.
 - Brahmin -According to Vedic scriptures, a person with extensive knowledge, high intellect, mild behavior and simple lifestyle was considered a Brahmin. Brahmins were engaged in attaining the highest spiritual knowledge (brahmavidya) and adhered to different branches (shakhas) of Vedas. This was described to be a difficult path of discipline of body, mind, and intellect. A Brahmin's profession are scholar, teacher, priest, intellectual, researcher, scientist, knowledge-seeker, or knowledge worker. Brahmins have taken on many professions – from being priests, ascetics and scholars to warriors and business people.
 - These groups did not accept the authority of the Brahmin priests, nor did they accept the validity of the Brahmanical sacrificial system. Rejecting also the sacred literature of the Brahmins, they formed their own separate communities and represent the first examples of the monastic life in ancient India.
 - Brahmin priests would sacrifice on open air altars – milk, honey, clarified butter (ghee) and animals – along with a sacred drink that produced hallucinogenic episodes.
 - There were many Shramana groups but two in particular eventually developed into independent religions in ancient India: **the Jains and the Buddhists**
 - The founder of the Buddhist tradition was Gautama the Buddha – the “awakened” or “enlightened” one.

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- Buddhist tradition is a **mendicant** (begging for and living on charity/money given by strangers) tradition with a focus on meditation that enables a monk to attain enlightenment and eventually release (*nirvana*) from the frustrations of ordinary life.
 - Unlike Jains, the Buddhists followed a much more moderate regimen of yogic meditation, which they called the Middle Path, a middle way between sensuous indulgence, on the one hand, and extreme **asceticism** (*self-denying way of life*), on the other.
- It is the Buddhist and Shramana Period that we first see the emergence of devotion, or *bhakti*, to a personal god, and it appears that these devotional cults were originally outside the Brahmanical sacrificial framework.
- If you've ever thought of religion without thinking of God, or if you think that a religion has to have clear boundaries that separate insiders from outsiders, then you will be intrigued and challenged by your encounter with Buddhism.
- For over 2,000 years in Asia, and more recently in Europe and North Americas, the Buddhist tradition has said to bring joy, consolation and meaning to human life without affirming the existence of a personal God.
- As we've come to understand, Buddhism arose in India and the largest concentrations of Buddhists in the world can still be found in Asia. In places like Tibet, Sri Lanka and Thailand Buddhism is clearly the dominant tradition; in others such as China, Korea and Japan, Buddhism has not necessarily dominated the culture but has had a deep impact on the way people think through religious questions and deal with the crises in their lives.
- As the Buddhist tradition spread across Asia, it spawned many different varieties, and a surprising number of these varieties have made their way to North America.
- The most visible Buddhist community in some parts of the United States is a group known as the **Buddhist Churches of America (BCA)**.
 - BCA in the mainland U.S. consists of over 60 member temples and Sanghas.
 - In the suttas the word **sangha** (lit. "group, assembly") is usually used in one of two ways: it refers either to the community of ordained monks and nuns (bhikkhu-sangha and bhikkhuni-sangha) or to the community of "noble ones" (ariya-sangha) — persons who have attained at least stream-entry, the first stage of Awakening.

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- The BCA brings together a tradition of devotion to the Buddha Amida (the Buddha of Infinite Light) with many of the trappings of modern American religious life, from a Buddhist Sunday school to the Young Buddhist Association.
- In many communities in America you can find:
 - Centers for the practice of Zen, the Japanese version of an ancient discipline of seated meditation; centers of the Nichiren Shoshu of America (NSA), devoted to meditation on a Buddhist text known as the Lotus Sutra; Insight (Vipassana) Centers for meditation that is derived from the Buddhist practice of Southeast Asia; the centers for the study of the different varieties of Tibetan Buddhism; center
 - Even if I could name all the centers of Buddhism in America, we would still not begin to exhaust its influence on American cultural life.
 - Japanese attitudes toward nature significantly affected the way American painters and architects visualized the landscape as early as the 19th century.
 - Many of you remember the actor/martial arts experts, Bruce Lee – he brought the meditative tradition of the martial arts into American living rooms. Now you can hear echoes of Buddhist almost everywhere you look.
 - The rock group Nirvana took its name from the Buddhist ideal of release from the cycle of transmiration and the title of their album “Nevermind” is a direct reflection of the important Buddhist concept of “no-mind”.
 - Mushin (無心; Japanese mushin; English translation “no mind”) is a mental state into which very highly trained martial artists are said to enter during combat. They also practice this mental state during everyday activities. The term is shortened from *mushin no shin* (無心の心), a Zen expression meaning **the mind without mind** and is also referred to as the state of “no-mindness”. That is, a mind not fixed or occupied by thought or emotion and thus open to everything.
- Buddhism is so varied and has influenced American culture in many areas; we may ask what makes it Buddhist?
 - It would be helpful to point to a single doctrine or practice that we could identify as the “essence” of Buddhism. But Buddhists have been uncomfortable with any language suggesting that things have “essences”.

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The Buddha

- From a modern Western perspective, the history of Buddhism begins with the story of a man named **Siddhartha Gautama** who lived about 500 years before the Common Era in a small kingdom in the foothills of what is now southern Nepal.
- Buddhist tradition tells us that this man was born into a princely family and raised in a palace. He married, had a child, and then, in his early thirties saw four sights that burned into his consciousness an image of the decay and death that stalks human life.
 - He saw a sick person, an old person, a corpse, and finally an ascetic who was attempting to leave this suffering behind by renouncing the pleasures of ordinary life. He decided to follow the example of the ascetic and abandon the princely life.
 - He left the palace, gave away his princely ornaments, cut off his hair, and took up the life of a wandering holy man on the roads of northern India. Legends tell us that he studied with a series of teachers and starved himself until he was reduced almost to skin and bones.
 - Siddhartha found, however, that strict denial of the pleasures of the body did not produce the insight he was seeking. He decided instead to take up a balanced discipline known as the Middle Path, where he **would seek neither pleasure nor pain**.
 - On the Middle Path, he began finally to make progress. He sat down under a tree called the Bodhi Tree and after a series of temptations broke through to the realization that he no longer was subject to the suffering of human life.
 - He became, in the other words, a **Buddha** – someone who has been “enlightened” or more accurately, someone who has “woken up” from the sleep of ignorance that binds people in the suffering of this world.
 - Most of the details of the Buddha’s story come from traditions and legends that are now very difficult to confirm. Yet there is little doubt among scholars of Buddhism that something like this actually happened; there was a man who was raised in a princely setting, left it behind and achieved a breakthrough that became the basis of a world religion.
 - If you were to ask Buddhists where the story of the Buddha really begins, it is not just with the birth of Siddhartha Gautama. It has to be traced back many lifetimes to his career as a future Buddha, or *bodhisattva* (a Buddha-to-be).

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- Buddhism is rooted in the Indian doctrine of *samsara* a word that we translate as “reincarnation” or “transmigration” but it literally means a “wandering” from one life to the next.
- Because the whole doctrine of *reincarnation* within this religion is problematic because the whole idea of *samsara* continual being born and reborn again is quite frustration especially since their desire is to attain release from this cycle.
- This sense of disillusionment with the endless cycle of death and rebirth was what gave the story of the Buddha’s career its urgency and power.
- Siddhartha Gautama set out to find the solution to the problem of reincarnation, and the teaching that grew out of the experience of his awakening mapped a way for others to follow as they struggled to find their own passage through death and rebirth.
- Buddhists have elaborated the teaching, or the Dharma of the Buddha. It was meant to chart a path out of suffering and into an experience of freedom from the endless cycle.

Dharma: The Buddha’s Teaching

- The act of teaching is called the first “turning of the wheel of Dharma” and has become the moment the Buddha set the Buddhist tradition in motion.
- The Dharma is symbolized by a wheel, and the wheel has become the symbol of Buddhism. The words spoken by the Buddha after his enlightenment have been preserved by tradition. This teaching contains many of the insights that set the Buddhist tradition apart from other religions of the world.
- First sermon divided into Four Noble Truths
 - The truth of suffering
 - The truth of the origin of suffering
 - The truth of the cessation of suffering
 - The truth of the path that leads to cessation of suffering
- ✓ The first of these truths is expressed by saying “all is suffering” a claim that has given the Buddhist tradition an unjustified reputation for being the most pessimistic of the world’s religions
- ✓ “all is suffering” can be understood three ways
 - 1. There is an obvious sense in which some things are simply painful. To be run over by a bus or crushed by a raging elephant is painful, and that pain is a form of suffering

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- 2. The second form of suffering that comes when you become too attached to something that brings pleasure. If you try to hold on to things that bring great satisfaction, they eventually bring pain. Even the most satisfying things begin to change and slip away, and if you cannot let them go, they cause pain. This kind of pain is suffering that comes from change.
- 3. The third kind of suffering is more difficult to grasp. Buddhists say that “pleasurable” things can cause suffering even while they bring us pleasure, because the idea of “pleasure ” is based on a misconception about the nature of reality. The objects that we consider pleasurable or painful are no more than a series of “conditioned states” and the idea of “pleasure” or “pain ” is something that we in our ignorance and desire impose upon them.
- Clearly, we can see that the Buddhists analysis of suffering contains a clear warning against attachment – against the desire to freeze these moments of satisfaction and not let them go.