At approximately the same time that Mahavira was teaching the way of Jainism, the man who came to be known as the Buddha preached another alternative to the ritual-bound Brahmanism of India. The Buddha taught about earthly suffering and its cure. Many religions offer comforting supernatural solutions to the difficulties of earthly life. Early Buddhism was quite different: it held that our salvation from suffering lies only in our own efforts. The Buddha taught that in understanding how we create suffering for ourselves we can become free.

We might imagine that the discomfort of having to face ourselves and take responsibility for our own liberation would be an unappealing path that would attract few followers. But the way of the Buddha spread from his native India throughout East Asia, becoming the dominant religion in many Eastern countries. In the process, it took on devotional and mystical qualities from earlier local traditions, with various buddhas to whom one could appeal for help. And now, more than two and a half thousand years after the Buddha’s death, the religion that he founded is also attracting considerable interest in the West.

The life and legend of the Buddha

Although the Buddha was apparently an historical figure, what we know about him is sketchy. His prolific teachings were probably not collected in written form until at least four hundred years after his death. In the meantime they were apparently held, and added to, as an oral tradition, chanted from memory by monks, groups of whom were responsible for remembering specific parts of the teachings. Only a few factual details of the Buddha’s own life have been retained. While stories from the life of the Buddha are abundant in authorized Buddhist texts, these stories were never organized into a single canonical biography. Extant complete biographies of the Buddha date from four centuries after his passing on. These texts venerate the Buddha as a legendary hero, and were written by storyteller poets rather than historians. One example of such a sacred biography is Asvaghosa’s famous epic, the Buddhacarita (Acts of the Buddha), which was composed in the first century CE.

The one who became the Buddha (a generic term meaning “Enlightened One”) probably lived for eighty years during the fifth century BCE, though his life may have extended either into the late sixth or early fourth centuries. His father was apparently a wealthy landowner serving as one of the chiefs of a kshatriya
clan, the Shakyas who lived in the foothills of the Himalayas. The family name, Gautama, honoured an ancient Hindu sage whom the family claimed as ancestor or spiritual guide. His mother Maya is said to have given birth to him in the garden of Lumbini near Kapilavastu. The epics embellish his birth story as an immaculate conception in which a white elephant carrying a lotus flower entered his mother’s womb in her dream. He is portrayed as the reincarnation of a great being who had been born many times before and was drawn to earth once again by his compassion for all suffering beings.

The child—referred to in later texts as Siddhartha, meaning “wish-fulfiller” or “he who has reached his goal”—was reportedly raised in the lap of luxury. In early texts he is quoted as describing a life of fine clothes, white umbrellas for shade, perfumes, cosmetics, a mansion for each season, the company of female musicians, and a harem of dancing girls. According to the texts, he was also trained in martial arts and married to at least one wife, who bore a son. In the midst of this life of ease, Siddhartha was reportedly unconvinced of its value. According to the “Four Sights” legend, the gods arranged for him to see the “four sights” that his father had tried to hide from him: a bent old man, a sick person, a dead person, and a monk seeking eternal rather than temporal pleasure. Seeing the first three sights, he was dismayed by the impermanence of life and the existence of suffering, old age, and death; the sight of the monk suggested the possibility of a life of renunciation. At the age of twenty-nine Siddhartha renounced his wealth, left his wife and newborn son (whom he named “Rahul,” or “fetter”), shaved his head, and donned the coarse robe of a wandering ascetic. He was later said to have adopted a very difficult goal: finding the way of total liberation from suffering.

Many Indian sannyasins were already leading the homeless life of poverty considered appropriate for seekers of spiritual truth. Although the future Buddha would later develop a new spiritual path that departed significantly from...
Brahmanic Hindu beliefs, he initially tried the traditional methods. He headed southeast to study with a famous brahmin teacher who had many followers.

Still searching, Siddhartha then reportedly underwent six years of extreme self-denial techniques: nakedness, exposure to great heat and cold, breath retention, a bed of brambles, severe fasting. Finally he acknowledged that this extreme ascetic path had not led to enlightenment. He described his appearance after his long and strenuous fasting:

Because I ate so little, all my limbs became like the knotted joints of withered creepers; because I ate so little, my protruding backbone became like a string of balls; because I ate so little, my buttocks became like a bullock’s hoof; because I ate so little, my gaunt ribs became like the crazy rafters of a tumbledown shed; because I ate so little, the pupils of my eyes appeared lying low and deep in their sockets as sparkles of water in a deep well appear lying low and deep.1

Siddhartha then shifted his practice to a Middle Way of neither self-indulgence nor self-denial. He revived his failing health by accepting food once more and began a period of reflection. In an event now celebrated as having occurred on the night of the full moon in the sixth lunar month, as he sat in deep meditation beneath a tree at Gaya (now famous as Bodh Gaya), he finally experienced Supreme Enlightenment.

After passing through four states of serene contemplation, he reportedly recalled all his previous lives. Then he had a realization of the wheel of deaths and rebirths, in which past good or bad deeds are reflected in the next life. Finally, he realized the cause of suffering and the means for ending it. After this supreme experience, it is said that he radiated light. According to legend, he was tempted by Mara, the personification of evil, to keep his insights to himself, for they were too complex and profound for ordinary people to understand. But the Buddha compassionately determined to set the wheel of teaching in motion. He then spent decades walking and teaching a growing group of followers. This pattern was a familiar one in northern India, but this Enlightened One’s teachings and personality were apparently so compelling that many people were transformed by meeting him. The addition of his clan name and muni, or sage, led to his being referred to as “Shakyamuni Buddha.”

Out of the abundance and variety of scriptures later attributed to the sayings of Shakyamuni Buddha, historians agree on the validity and centrality of what became the essence of the dharma (Pali: dhamma)* that he taught: the Four Noble Truths about suffering and the Eightfold Path for liberation from suffering.

* Buddhist terms have come to us both in Pali, an Indian dialect first used for preserving the Buddha’s teachings (the Buddha himself probably spoke a different ancient dialect), and in Sanskrit, the language of Indian sacred literature. For instance, the Pali sutta (aphorism) is equivalent to the Sanskrit sutra. In this chapter Sanskrit will be used, as it is more familiar to Westerners, except in the section on Theravada, which uses Pali.
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<td>600</td>
<td>c.5thC Life of Gautama Buddha</td>
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<tr>
<td>300</td>
<td>c.258 King Asoka begins spreading Buddhism outward from India</td>
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<td>200</td>
<td>c.200 BCE–200 CE Development of Theravada Buddhism</td>
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<td>100</td>
<td>c.100 BCE–300 CE Perfection of Wisdom scriptures originally developed &lt;br&gt;c.80 Pali Canon written down in Sri Lanka</td>
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<td>500</td>
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<td>1500</td>
<td>1905 Zen Buddhism carried to the USA</td>
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<td>1900</td>
<td>1958 Sarvodaya movement begins in Sri Lanka &lt;br&gt;1959 Communist Chinese repress Buddhism in Tibet, Dalai Lama escapes to India</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>1998 Full ordination of 135 nuns from 23 countries</td>
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As he walked through the northern Indian countryside for forty-five years as a voluntarily poor teacher with a begging bowl, he gave sermons to people of all sects and classes. His son Rahul was one of those who became a bhikshu (Pali: bhikkhu), a monk emulating his life of poverty and spiritual dedication; others adopted his teachings but continued as householders.

The sangha—the order of Buddha’s disciples—was free from the caste system; people from all levels of society became Buddhists. His stepmother Mahaprajapati, who had raised him after the death of his mother, and his wife, Yashodara, became bhikshunis (Pali: bhikkhunis), members of the order of nuns that the Buddha founded. After the death of his father King Shuddhodana, the Buddha’s stepmother asked permission to enter the sangha, but the Buddha hesitated to admit her. Then she and five hundred women from the court reportedly shaved their heads, put on yellow robes, and walked a great distance to where he was, making the same request. At last he agreed, reportedly on the condition that nuns should observe Eight Special Rules which would make them forever subordinate to the monks, no matter how senior the nun or how junior the monk. His alleged reluctance is today a matter of much speculation. Some think that later monks may have added the rules or else that the rules were laid down with the monks’ weaknesses in mind. Be this as it may, in the context of patriarchal Indian society, for women to leave their homes and become itinerant mendicants would likely have been perceived as socially disruptive, as well as being difficult for women of the court. According to Hindu social codes, a woman could not lead a religious life and could achieve spiritual salvation only through devotion to her husband. By contrast, the Buddha asserted that women were as capable as men of achieving enlightenment. Also in contrast to some Hindu traditions, the Buddha forbade animal sacrifice, admonishing his followers to be kind to all living beings.

The traditionally accepted account of the Buddha’s death at the age of eighty bespeaks his selfless desire to spare humankind from suffering. His last meal, served by a blacksmith, inadvertently included some poisonous mushrooms or perhaps spoiled pork. Severely ill and recognizing his impending death, the Buddha pushed on to his next teaching stop at Kusinara, teaching a young man along the way. He sent word to the blacksmith that he must not feel remorse or blame himself for the meal, for his offering of food brought him great merit. When he reached his destination, he lay down on a stone couch. As his monks came to pay their last respects, he urged them to tend to their own spiritual development:

You must be your own lamps, be your own refuges. . . . A monk becomes his own lamp and refuge by continually looking on his body, feelings, perceptions, moods, and ideas in such a manner that he conquers the cravings and depressions of ordinary men and is always strenuous, self-possessed, and collected in mind.2

He designated no successor, no one to lead the order. But it survived and spread because, as his closest helper, Ananda, explained, before his passing away, the Buddha had made it clear that his followers should take the dharma and discipline as their support. They should study the dharma, put it into practice, and if outsiders criticized it, they should be able to defend it.

Another way in which the Buddha’s mission was spread was through dissemination of the bone relics from his cremated body. These were reportedly given to messengers from seven clans, who built memorial domes, or stupas, over them in
ten locations throughout India. These became great centers of devotion to the Buddha. Inscriptions dated back to the third century BCE or even earlier show that priests as well as laypeople made pilgrimages to these sacred sites, feeling that the Buddha was in some sense present there.

The dharma

Buddhism is often described as a nontheistic religion. There is no personal God who creates everything and to whom prayers can be directed. The Buddhists at the 1993 Chicago Parliament of the World’s Religions found it necessary to explain to people of other religions that they do not worship the Buddha:

Shakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, was not God or a god. He was a human being who attained full Enlightenment through meditation and showed us the path of spiritual awakening and freedom. Therefore, Buddhism is not a religion of God. Buddhism is a religion of wisdom, enlightenment and compassion. Like the worshippers of God who believe that salvation is available to all through confession of sin and a life of prayer, we Buddhists believe that salvation and enlightenment
are available to all through removal of defilements and delusion and a life of meditation. However, unlike those who believe in God who is separate from us, Buddhists believe that Buddha which means “one who is awake and enlightened” is inherent in us all as Buddhanature or Buddhamind.¹

Unlike other Indian sages, the Buddha did not focus on descriptions of unseen reality, the nature of the soul, life after death, or the origin of the universe. He said that curiosity about such matters was like a man who, upon being wounded by a poisoned arrow, refused to have it pulled out until he was told the caste and origin of his assailant, his name, his height, the color of his skin, and all details about the bow and arrow. In the meantime, he died.

Being religious and following dhamma has nothing to do with the dogma that the world is eternal; and it has nothing to do with the other dogma that the world is not eternal. For whether the world is eternal or otherwise, birth, old age, death, sorrow, pain, misery, grief, and despair exist. I am concerned with the extinction of these.⁴

The Buddha spoke of his teachings as a raft to take us to the farther shore, rather than a description of the shore or something to be carried around once we get there. The basic planks of this raft are insights into the truths of existence and the path to liberation; nirvana (Pali: nibbana) is the farther shore, the goal of spiritual effort, about which more will be said later.

The basic facts of existence

In what is considered his very first sermon, the Deer Park sermon, the Buddha set forth the “Four Noble Truths” around which all his later teachings revolved. These were:

1 Life inevitably involves suffering, is imperfect and unsatisfactory.
2 Suffering originates in our desires.
3 Suffering will cease if all desires cease.
4 There is a way to realize this state: the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Buddha is therefore neither pessimistic nor optimistic about our human condition. Sri Lankan monk and scholar Walpola Rahula speaks of the Buddha as “the wise and scientific doctor for the ills of the world.” To look at the diagnosis and treatment of our human condition one step at a time, the Buddha’s First Noble Truth is the existence of dukha, which means suffering or frustration. We all experience grief, unfulfilled desires, sickness, old age, physical pain, mental anguish, and death. We may be happy for a while, but happiness is not permanent. Even our identity is impermanent. There is no continual “I.” What we regard as our self is simply an ever-changing bundle of fleeting feelings, sense impressions, ideas, and evanescent physical matter. One moment’s identity leads to the next like one candle being lit from another.

The Second Noble Truth is that dukha has its origin in desire—for sensory pleasures, for fame and fortune, for things to stay as they are or become different—and in attachment to ideas. The reason that desire leads us to suffering, the Buddha taught, is that we do not understand the nature of things, of that which we desire. Everything is actually impermanent, changing all the time. We seek to grasp and hold life as we want it to be, but we cannot, since everything is in constant flux.
In Buddhism, unhappiness is understood as the inevitable companion of happiness. The sun will give way to rain; a flower will decay; friends will die; our bodies will surely age. As the contemporary monk Ajahn Sumedho points out, “trying to arrange, control and manipulate conditions so as to always get what we want, always hear what we want to hear, always see what we want to see, so that we never have to experience unhappiness or despair, is a hopeless task.”

What a Buddhist strives for instead is the recognition of dukha, anitya (Pali: anicca, impermanence), and anatman (Pali: anatta), the revolutionary and unique doctrine that there is no separate, permanent, or immortal self; rather, a human being is an interdependent, impermanent, composite of physical, emotional, and cognitive components. This realization of anatman is spiritually valuable because it reduces attachment to one’s mind, body, and selfish desires. Suffering is also useful because
it helps us to see things as they really are. When we realize that everything changes and passes away, moment by moment, we can become aware that nothing in this world has an independent, solid character. There are only momentary configurations within a continual process of change. Once we have grasped these basic facts of life, we can be free in this life, and free from another rebirth. Ajahn Sumedho explains:

_When you open the mind to the truth, then you realize there is nothing to fear. What arises passes away, what is born dies, and is not self—so that our sense of being caught in an identity with this human body fades out. We don’t see ourselves as some isolated, alienated entity lost in a mysterious and frightening universe. We don’t feel overwhelmed by it, trying to find a little piece of it that we can grasp and feel safe with, because we feel at peace with it. Then we have merged with the Truth._

The Third Noble Truth is that dukha can cease if desire ceases. Thus illusion ends, and ultimate reality, or nirvana, is revealed. One lives happily and fully in the present moment, free from self-centeredness and full of compassion for others. One can serve them purely, for in this state there is no thought of oneself.

The Fourth Noble Truth is that only through a life of morality, concentration, and wisdom—which the Buddha set forth as the Noble Eightfold Path—can desire and therefore suffering be extinguished.

**The Eightfold Path of liberation**

The Buddha set forth a systematic approach by which dedicated humans could pull themselves out of suffering and achieve the final goal of liberation. The Eightfold Path offers ways to burn up all past demerits, avoid accumulating new demerits, and build up merit for a favorable rebirth. Perfection of the path means final escape from the cycle of death and rebirth, into the peace of nirvana.

One factor is right understanding—comprehending reality correctly through deep realization of the Four Noble Truths. Initially, this means seeing through illusions, such as the idea that a little more wealth could bring happiness. Gradually one learns to question old assumptions in the light of the Four Noble Truths. Everything we do and say is governed by the mind. The Buddha said that if our mind is defiled and untrained, suffering will follow us just as a chariot follows the horse. If we think and act from a purified, trained mind, happiness will always follow us.

A second aspect of the Eightfold Path is right thought or motives. The Buddha encourages us to uncover any “unwholesome” emotional roots behind our thinking, such as a desire to hide our imperfections or avoid contact with others. As we discover and weed out such emotional blocks, our thought becomes free from the limitations of self-centeredness—relaxed, clear, and open.

A third factor is right speech. The Buddha cautions us to relinquish our propensity to vain talk, gossip, divisive speech, harsh words, and lying, and to use communication instead in the service of truth and harmony. He also advises us to speak in a positive manner to our own minds—to say to ourselves, “May you be well and happy today.”

A fourth factor, right action, begins for the layperson with observing the five basic precepts for moral conduct: avoid destroying life, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxicants. Beyond these, we are to base our actions on clear understanding. “Evil deeds,” said the Buddha, are those “done from motives of partiality, enmity, stupidity, and fear.”
Fifth is right livelihood—being sure that one’s way of making a living does not violate the five precepts. One’s trade should not harm others or disrupt social harmony.

Right effort, the sixth factor, bespeaks continual striving to cut off “unwholesome states,” past, present, and future. This is not a way for the lazy.

A seventh factor, right mindfulness, is particularly characteristic of Buddhism, for the way to liberation is said to be through the mind. We are urged to be aware in every moment. In the *Dhammapada* (Sayings of the Dharma, a very early text) there appears this pithy injunction:

*Check your mind.*

*Be on your guard.*

*Pull yourself out as an elephant from mud.*

The eighth factor, right meditation, applies mental discipline to the quieting of the mind itself. “It is subtle, invisible, treacherous,” explains the Buddha. Skillful means are therefore needed to see and transcend its restless nature. When the mind is fully stilled, it becomes a quiet pool in which the true nature of everything is clearly reflected. The various schools of Buddhism that have developed over the centuries have taught different techniques of meditation, but this basic principle remains the same.

Try to be mindful, and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool, and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha.

Achaan Chah, meditation master, Wat Pa Pong, Thailand

**The wheel of birth and death**

Buddhist teachings about rebirth are slightly different from those of Hindu orthodoxy, for there is no eternal soul to be reborn. In Buddhism, one changing state of being sets another into motion: every event depends on a cause. The central cause in this process is *karma* (Pali: *kamma*)—our actions of body, speech, and mind. These influence the level at which that personality-developing process we think of as “me” is reborn. The impressions of our good and bad actions help to create our personality moment-by-moment. When we die, this process continues, passing on the flame to a new life on a plane that reflects our past *karma*.

This wheel of birth and death is spun primarily by the negative intentions known as the Three Root Evils: greed, hate, and delusion. But to the extent that our actions are motivated by the opposites of these intentions—non-greed (such as generosity, renunciation for others’ sake), non-hate (such as friendliness, compassion, and patience), and non-delusion (such as mental clarity and insight)—we can ultimately leave the circle of birth and death.

In Buddhist thought, not only do life-forms take birth many times; they also incarnate in many forms, creating an interconnected web of life. This has important implications for one’s relationships with all life. One text explains:
In the long course of samsara [reincarnation], there is not one among living beings with form who has not been mother, father, brother, sister, son, or daughter, or some other relative. Being connected with the process of taking birth, one is kin to all wild and domestic animals, birds, and beings born from the womb.12

It is thought that the Buddha remembered all his past lives and told stories about them to illustrate moral lessons. Hundreds of these stories have been collected as

The Wheel of Life: in the center are animals representing the Three Root afflictions: lust, hatred, and delusion. The next circle shows the fate of those with good karma (left) and bad karma (right). The third circle represents the six spheres of existence from the gods to the infernal regions. The outer rim shows the chain of cause and effect. Grasping the wheel is a monster representing death, impermanence.
TEACHING STORY

The Great Ape Jataka Tale

When Brahmadatta was king of Benares, the Buddha took birth among the apes and became the powerful king of the eighty thousand monkeys living near the Ganges. Overhanging the river there was a great mango tree, with huge and delicious fruits. When ripe, some fell on the ground and some fell into the river. Eating these mangos with his monkeys, the Great Being foresaw that those that fell into the water would some day bring danger to the herd. He ordered that all the mangos growing on branches over the river should be plucked when very small and discarded. However, one fruit was hidden by an ant’s nest. When it was ripe, it fell into the nets which the king’s fishermen had placed into the river. When they pulled out the ambrosial fruit, they took it to the king in Benares. When he tasted it, he developed a great craving for more and insisted to be taken to the tree from which it came.

A flotilla of boats brought the king to the great mango tree. Camping beneath it, he ate mangos to his heart’s delight. At midnight, the Great Being and his monkeys came and leapt from branch to branch above, eating the mangos. The king woke up and saw them. He ordered his men to surround the tree and prepare to shoot arrows at the monkeys so that they could feast on mangos and monkey-flesh the following day.

Terrified, the monkeys appealed to the Great Being for help. He told them not to be afraid, for he would save their lives. So saying, he at once climbed to one of the branches over the river and then made a tremendous leap across the wide river to the opposite bank. There he cut a long bamboo shoot which he calculated would be long enough to reach across the river. Lashing it to a bush on the farther shore, he lashed the opposite end to his waist and then made a terrific leap back toward the mango tree where the monkeys were cowering in fear for their lives. The shoot being slightly short, he grabbed an overhanging branch so that his own body’s length filled the remaining distance. He signalled to the monkeys that they were to run across his body and then the bamboo shoot in order to escape to the other shore. Paying their obeisances to the Great Being and asking his forgiveness, the eighty thousand monkeys ran across him to safety. In the process, Devadatta [cousin of the Buddha, who reportedly once tried to poison him], who was one of the monkeys, took the opportunity to leap from an upper branch onto the great ape’s back, breaking his heart.

After all the monkeys had crossed to safety, the wounded Great Being was left alone, hanging from the tree. The king, who had watched the whole thing, was struck by the greatness of his self-sacrifice for the sake of his monkeys. At daybreak, he ordered his people to gently bring the great ape down from the tree, bathe him, rub his body with fine oil, dress him in yellow, and lay him to rest. Sitting beside the great ape, the king questioned him about his action. The Great Being explained to him that no worry nor death could trouble him, and that he had acted for the welfare of all those whom he governed, as an example for the king to emulate. After thus advising the king, the Great Being died. King Brahmadatta ordered funeral ceremonies due to a king for him, and then had a shrine built at the place of his cremation and had his skull inlaid with gold, which he then enshrined at Benares. According to the instructions of the Great Being, Brahmadatta then became a very righteous ruler and a traveler to the Bright World.

When the Buddha told this Jataka Tale, he revealed that the human king was Ananda, and that the ape-king was himself.

the Jataka Tales, or birth stories of the Buddha’s past lives as a bodhisattava. The one recounted here, “The Great Ape Jataka Tale” (see box), illustrates not only Buddhism’s role as a way of personal development but also its importance in guiding rulers and establishing moral precepts for monastics and laity alike.
There are thirty-one planes of existence. Whether interpreted as psychological metaphors or metaphysical realities, these include realms of hells, “hungry ghosts” (beings tormented with unsatisfied desires), animals, humans, and gods. Like the lower levels, the gods are imperfect and impermanent. Round and round we go, life after life, caught in this cycle of samsara’s worldly phenomena, repeatedly experiencing aging, decay, suffering, death, and painful rebirth, unless we achieve nirvana, which is beyond all the cause-and-effect-run planes of existence.

**Nirvana**

About the goal of Buddhist practice, nirvana, the Buddha had relatively little to say. The only way to end the cycle in which desire feeds the wheel of suffering is to end all cravings and lead a passion-free existence that has no karmic consequences. Thence one enters a condition of what the Buddha called “quietude of heart.”

Where there is nothing,” he said, “where naught is grasped, there is the Isle of No-beyond. Nirvana do I call it—the utter extinction of aging and dying,” “the unborn, . . . undying, . . . unsorrowing, . . . stainless, the uttermost security from bonds.” For the arhat (Pali: arhat, arahat), worthy one, who has found nirvana in this life:

No suffering for him
who is free from sorrow
free from the fetters of life
free in everything he does.
He has reached the end of his road . . . .

Like a bird invisibly flying in the sky,
he lives without possessions,
knowledge his food, freedom his world,
while others wonder . . . .

A nun leaves the meditation hall in Dharamsala, India, after sunrise practices.
He has found freedom—
peaceful his thinking, peaceful his speech,
peaceful his deed, tranquil his mind.16

When such a being dies individuality disappears and one enters the ultimate state of nirvana, about which the Buddha was silent. Why? At one point he picked up a handful of leaves from the forest floor and asked his disciples which were more numerous, the leaves in his hand or those in the forest. When they replied, “Very few in your hand, lord; many more in the grove,” he said:

Exactly. So you see, friends, the things that I know and have not revealed are more than the truths I know and have revealed. And why have I not revealed them? Because, friends, there is no profit in them; because they are not helpful to holiness; because they do not lead from disgust to cessation and peace, because they do not lead from knowledge to wisdom and nirvana.17

Buddhism south and north

As soon as he had attracted a small group of disciples, the Buddha sent them out to help teach the dharma. This teaching mission spread in all directions. Two hundred years after the Buddha died, a powerful Indian king, Asoka, led a huge military campaign to extend his empire, and then after seeing the tremendous loss of life on both sides, reportedly felt great remorse. He became a Buddhist and espoused non-violence. He had inscriptions written on rocks and pillars throughout his empire teaching the dharma, with an emphasis on developing an attitude of social responsibility. Under Asoka’s leadership Buddhism was disseminated throughout the kingdom and outward to other countries as well, beginning its development as a global religion. After Asoka’s death, brahmins reasserted their political influence and Buddhists were persecuted in parts of India. By the time of the twelfth-century Muslim invasions of India, Buddhism had nearly died out and never became the dominant religion in the Buddha’s homeland.

As the Buddha’s teachings have been expanded upon and adapted to local cultures, two primary divisions have developed. The form that tries to adhere closely to what it considers the original teachings is called Theravada, or “Way of the Elders.” It is prevalent in Southeast Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. The other major grouping is dominant in Nepal, Tibet, China, Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam, and Japan. Those of this group call it Mahayana, the “Greater Vehicle,” because they feel that theirs is a bigger raft that can carry more people across the sea of samsara than the stark teachings of the Theravadins. Both groups are in general agreement about the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the teachings about karma and nirvana.

Theravada: the path of mindfulness

Theravada is a conservative and traditional Buddhist way. Theravadin Buddhists study the early scriptures in Pali, honor the life of renunciation, and follow mindfulness meditation teachings. These characteristics are more obvious among intellectuals and monastics; the common people are more devotional in their practices.
The Pali Canon  Buddhists who follow the Theravada tradition study a large collection of ancient scriptures preserved in the Pali language of ancient India. This ancient canon, or authoritative collection of writings, is called the Pali Canon. It is also referred to as the Tipitaka (Sanskrit: Tripitaka), the “Three Baskets.” This label derives from the old practice of storing palm-leaf manuscripts in wicker baskets; thus, the “Three Baskets” are three collections of sacred writings: rules, teachings, and scholastic treatises. After the Buddha’s death, leading members of the community of monks started compiling an authoritative canon of teachings and monastic discipline. According to Buddhist lore, this was done by a council of five hundred elders who had studied directly with the Buddha, in which the Venerable Ananda reportedly recited his discourses from memory, and another close disciple rehearsed the discipline of the order. Then the elders agreed on a definitive body of the Buddha’s teachings, which were carried orally until the first
century BCE, when the *sutras* (Pali: *suttas*) were written down on palm leaves and stored in baskets. In addition to the Tipitaka, Theravadins also honor other non-canonical Pali works, such as later commentaries.

**The Triple Gem** Like all Buddhists, those of the Theravada School soften the discipline of the mind with devotion to the **Triple Gem** (or “Three Refuges”): Buddha (the Enlightened One), *dharma* (the doctrine he taught), and *sangha* (community of realized beings). To become a Buddhist, a person “takes refuge” in these three jewels by reciting the Pali formula, *Buddham saranam gacchami* (“I go to the Buddha for refuge”), *dhammam saranam gacchami* (“I go to the *dharma* for refuge”), *sangham saranam gacchami* (“I go to the *sangha* for refuge”).

One takes refuge in the Buddha not by praying to him for help but by paying homage to him as supreme teacher and inspiring model. In a sense, taking refuge in the Buddha is honoring the Buddha-wisdom within each of us.

The *dharma* is like a medicine, but it will not cure our suffering unless we take it. In the Pali chanting, it is described as immediate, timeless, leading to calmness, and known only through our direct experience and personal effort.

The *sangha* is ultimately the community of realized beings, and on the conventional level, the order of *bhikshus* and *bhikshunis* who have renounced the world in order to follow, preserve, and share the *dharma*. The Buddha established one of the world’s first monastic orders, and this core remains strong in Theravada. There are presently about half a million Theravadin monks in Southeast Asia. To simplify their worldly lives and devote themselves to studying and teaching the *dharma*, monks shave their heads, dress in simple robes, own only a few basic material items, eat no solid foods after noon, practice celibacy, and depend on the laity for their food, clothing, and medical supplies. Early every morning they set forth with an alms bowl, and the laypeople regard it as a merit-making opportunity to offer food to them. In this interdependent system, the monks reciprocate by offering spiritual guidance, chanted blessings, and various social services, including secular advice and education.

Buddhist monasteries are at the center of village life, rather than separated from it. The monasteries are open, and people come and go. The monks hold a revered social position as models of self-control, kindness, and intelligence. In Thailand it is common for young men to take temporary vows of monkhood—often for the duration of the rainy season when little farmwork can be done. They wear the saffron robes, set forth with shaven heads and alms bowls, and receive religious instruction while they practice a life of simplicity.

By contrast, there has traditionally been little social support for *bhikshunis*, or Buddhist nuns, in Southeast Asia. Provisions were made during the time of the Buddha for women monastics to live in their own monasteries, with the same lifestyle as monks, but the order of fully ordained nuns disappeared completely in Theravadin countries about a thousand years ago. Many of the early Buddhist scriptures take an egalitarian position toward women’s capacity for wisdom and attainment of nirvana, but spiritual power was kept in the hands of monks and there was little opportunity for nuns to grow into positions of teaching and leadership.

Over time, some of the monks and the texts they edited apparently became somewhat sexist. Even today a Thai Buddhist monk is not allowed to come into direct contact with a woman, with the idea that women are hindrances to monks’
spiritual development. Feminist scholars object to this interpretation. Thai Buddhist Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, for instance, asserts:

*Newly ordained monks who have not had much experience with practice and are very weak in their mental resolve may be easily swayed by sensual impulses, of which women are the major attraction. Even if no women are present, some monks still create problems for themselves by images of women they have in their minds. Women are not responsible for the sexual behavior or imaginings of men; the monks themselves must cope with their own sensual desires. Enlightened ones are*
well-fortified against such mental states and are able to transcend gender differences. The Buddha himself found no need to avoid women, because women no longer appeared to him as sexual objects. He was well-balanced and in control of his mental processes.18

There are now attempts to revive fully ordained orders of nuns in Theravadin countries. In 1998 a landmark occurred: the full ordination at Bodh Gaya of 135 nuns from many countries. According to the code of discipline, ordination of nuns is possible only if both ordained monks and nuns are present. The lack of ordained nuns had been used by conservative senior monks as a way of blocking women’s ordinations. But in China, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea, women’s orders had continued, and therefore it was possible to assemble the requisite number of ten bhikshus and ten bhikshunis in Bodh Gaya to preside over the full ordination of bhikshunis from Sri Lanka, where the order had become extinct, for the first time in almost a thousand years.

**Vipassana meditation** In addition to trying to preserve what are thought to be the Buddha’s original teachings, Theravada is the purveyor of mindfulness meditation techniques. *Vipassana* literally means “insight,” but the meditation methods used to develop insight begin by increasing one’s attentiveness to every detail as a way of calming, focusing, and watching the mind. As taught by the Burmese meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw, the way to begin *vipassana* practice is simply to watch oneself breathing in and out, with the attention focused on the rise and fall of the abdomen. To keep the mind concentrated on this movement, rather than dragged this way and that by unconscious, conditioned responses,

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*Some 135 women from 23 countries received full ordination as Buddhist nuns at Bodh Gaya in 1998, helping to revive orders of bhikshunis.*
one continually makes concise mental notes of what is happening: “rising,” “falling.” Inevitably other mental functions will arise in the restless mind. As they do, one simply notes what they are—“imagining,” “wandering,” “remembering”—and then returns the attention to the rising and falling of the breath. Body sensations will appear, too, and one handles them the same way, noting “itching,” “tight,” “tired.” Periods of sitting meditation are alternated with periods of walking meditation, in which one notes the exact movements of the body in great detail: “lifting,” “moving,” “placing.”

This same mindfulness is carried over into every activity of the day. If ecstatic states or visions arise, the meditator is told simply to note them and let them pass away without attachment. In the same way, emotions that arise are simply observed, accepted, and allowed to pass away, rather than labeled “good” or “bad.” By contrast, says dharma teacher Joko Beck, we usually get stuck in our emotions:

> Everyone’s fascinated by their emotions because we think that’s who we are. We’re afraid that if we let our attachment to them go, we’ll be nobody. Which of course we are! When you wander into your ideas, your hopes, your dreams, turn back—not just once but ten thousand times if need be, a million times if need be.

The truths of existence as set forth by the Buddha—dukha (suffering), anicca (impermanence), anatta (no eternal self)—will become apparent during this process, and the mind becomes calm, clear, attentive, and flexible, detached from likes and dislikes. Thus it is free.

**Devotional practices**

The actual practice of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia is considerably different from the contemplative and philosophical traditions described above. Lay Buddhists and also many monastics are more likely to turn to the Buddha in devotion, taking refuge in the sense of his protective presence and power. Thus temples, halls, and roadside shrines have been built with images of the Buddha before which the people bow, light candles, wave incense, offer flowers, press bits of gold leaf onto the images, and pray for help. Some monastics and intellectuals—including Protestant Christians who became interested in Buddhist studies in the late nineteenth century—have labelled such practices antithetic to the spirit of Buddhism, which they consider rationalistic, philosophical, nonritualistic, non-iconic, and nontheistic. Despite increasing commercialization of the veneration of objects, some commentators are now trying to trace the history of image-oriented worship. Popular devotional practices are so widespread and so influential in popular Buddhist practice that scholars have begun to examine them as perhaps being part of the mainstream of Buddhism after all.

A key text in this regard is the Pali scripture Mahaparinibbana Sutta, which describes the Buddha’s cremation and the dispersal of his body relics, and deals with the issue of devotionalism. According to this text, before his death the Buddha recommended devotion to relics in his memory alongside dedication to practice of the dharma, saying, “Whoever lays wreaths or puts sweet perfumes and colors [at a stupa honouring the Buddha] . . . with a devout heart, will reap benefit and happiness for a long time,” and simultaneously advocated devotion to
the dharma as a way of respecting, revering, and paying homage to the Buddha. When lay Buddhists recite the Three Refuges, taking refuge in the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha, they may experience this refuge not merely as a philosophical idea but as a metaphysical link with the timeless presence of the Buddha.

Consider one popular ritual: In northern Thailand, a network of threads attached to a large statue of the Buddha is used in special ceremonies to conduct his spiritual power to the sangha, to holy water or amulets, or to new images to be consecrated. The 108 squares formed overhead by the strings are believed to form a magical cosmos whose sacred energy touches the earth through cords hanging downward. People may wrap these cords around their heads during chanting of sutras by monks, and thus receive spiritual blessings. To consecrate new images of the Buddha, monks initially seal them by closing the eyes with beeswax and covering the heads with cloth. They chant, meditate, and preach about the Buddha and the dharma throughout the night to train and sacralize the images. In the process, the sangha is also drawn into a strong sense of unity with each other, with the dharma, and with the Buddha. At sunrise the coverings are removed from the images, and they are offered milk and sweet rice, for they are now in a sense living presences.

Similarly, followers consider the Buddha’s power to be present mystically in relics from his cremated body. These images of the Buddha are placed in stupas, reliquary mounds reaching toward the sky, perhaps derived from indigenous spiritual traditions. A tiny bone chip believed to be a relic from the Buddha, for instance, is enshrined at Doi Suthep temple in Chiang Mai in Thailand. To share this sacred relic with the people, the ruler was said to have placed it on the back

A relic purported to be a tooth of the Buddha is so revered that it is carried on an elephant palanquin in a huge yearly procession in Sri Lanka.
of a white elephant—legendary symbol of the Buddha—so that it would choose the best place for the temple. The elephant climbed a nearby hill until it reached the auspicious spot and went down on its knees. Today, flocks of pilgrims climb the 290 steps to the temple, praying for blessings by acts such as pressing squares of gold leaf onto an image of the Buddha, lighting three sticks of incense to honor the Triple Gem, lighting candles, and offering flowers. So great are the powers associated with relics that huge processions carrying what are thought to be the Buddha’s tooth relics have been used by the governments in Sri Lanka and Myanmar to legitimize their claims to temporal power.

Loving images of the Buddha proliferate in the temples and roadside shrines (which are almost identical to the indigenous spirit shrines, which are still quite common in Thailand, where Buddhism is a combination of indigenous spirituality, Buddhism, and Brahmanism). These physical images of the Buddha give a sense of his protective, guiding presence.

In Southeast Asia, aspects of Theravada Buddhism have often been adopted by shamans for greater efficacy in healing rituals. In Sri Lanka, the yakeduras invoke the power of the Buddha and the dharma to ward off evil spirits and thus help cure supernaturally afflicted people. In the cosmic hierarchy, the Buddha and dharma are considered the ultimate powers, and therefore useful in subduing lesser forces. During healing rituals, patients listen to Buddhist stories to help free and protect themselves by the power of the mind. Even monks are regarded as magical protectors of sorts, and the faithful can request chantings of blessings for protection.

Stupas, such as these bell-shaped monuments in Borobudur, Java, may house relics or statues of the Buddha and are sacred places for pilgrimage. The Buddha’s long ears symbolize long life; elders are valued because of their experience and wisdom. The raised upper part of his head represents higher consciousness developed through years of meditation practice. The flame at the top signifies extinction of the flames of anger, hatred, and delusion.
In all Buddhist cultures, Buddhist temples are important centers for community identity and integration. There the monks not only teach the dharma but also conduct agricultural festivals to improve the harvest, ceremonies to assist the dead to better rebirth, and ceremonies to please the deities in order to receive their blessings and to generate festive atmospheres for community joy.

**Mahayana: the path of compassion and wisdom**

Further Buddhist practices and teachings appeared in a wide range of scriptures from the early centuries CE. These innovations in thought and practice beyond the Pali scriptures gradually developed into what is called Mahayana, the Greater Vehicle. The Mahayana scriptures emphasize the practice of monastics and laypeople equally, toward the goal of liberating all sentient beings from suffering. The Mahayana traditions honor all the teachings set forth in the Pali canon and, in addition, accept the extensive Mahayana literature originally found in Sanskrit and later translated into Chinese, Tibetan, and other languages. This literature praises the deeds and qualities of innumerable Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and inspires practitioners to develop the compassion and wisdom needed to become Buddhas and bodhisattvas themselves.

The Mahayana scriptures emphasize the importance of religious experience. The dharma is not embodied only in scriptures; for the Mahayanist it is the source of a conversion experience that awakens the quest for enlightenment as the greatest value in life. Each school, and there are many branches within Mahayana, offers a special set of methods, or “skilful means,” for awakening. They are quite varied, in contrast to the relative uniformity of Theravada, but most Mahayana traditions have many characteristics in common.

**Bodhisattvas** An early Mahayana scripture, the Lotus Sutra, defended its innovations beyond the Pali Canon by claiming that the earlier teachings were merely skilful means for those with lower capacities. The idea is that the Buddha geared his teaching to his audience, and that his teachings were at different levels of completeness depending on the readiness of his audience to hear the full truth. This is explained by some researchers as a way to give credit to earlier teachings
while going beyond them. Like other Mahayana texts, the Lotus Sutra claimed that a higher goal was to aspire to become bodhisattvas (being dedicated to attaining enlightenment) and work to achieve perfect enlightenment for the sake of saving others. The Lotus Sutra says that all beings have the capacity for Buddhahood and are destined to attain it eventually. Both monastics and laity took the bodhisattva vow to become enlightened.

Today Mahayana Buddhists often express this commitment in the Four Great Bodhisattva Vows compiled in China in the sixth century CE by Tien-t’ai Chih-i (founder of the Tendai School of Mahayana Buddhism):

- Beings are infinite in number, I vow to save them all;
- The obstructive passions are endless in number, I vow to end them all;
- The teachings for saving others are countless, I vow to learn them all;
- Buddhahood is the supreme achievement, I vow to attain it.

As His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama says:

*The motivation to achieve Buddhahood in order to save all sentient beings is really a marvelous determination. That person becomes very courageous, warm-hearted, and useful in society."

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You are not just here for yourself alone, but for the sake of all sentient beings. Keep your mind pure, and warm.

_Seen Nakagawa-roshi_

Bodhisattvahood is not just an ideal for earthly conduct; numerous celestial bodhisattvas are available to hear the pleas of those who are suffering. On the path to Buddhahood, the bodhisattvas practice generosity, ethical conduct, patience, diligence, concentration, wisdom, and so on. As emanations of wisdom and compassion, they are sources of inspiration and blessing.

The most popular bodhisattva in East Asia is Kuan-yin (Japanese: Kannon), who symbolizes compassion and refuses help to no one. Although this being is depicted as a male (Avalokitesvara) in Indian images, the Lotus Sutra says that Kuan-yin will take any form that is needed to help others, and it lists thirty-three examples. In East Asia, Kuan-yin is typically represented as female, often as the giver or protector of babies. An image with a baby has become especially popular in East Asia as a source of inspiration and blessing for women and children.

**The Three Bodies of Buddha**  In Theravada, Buddha is an historical figure who no longer exists but who left his dharma as a guide. By contrast, Mahayana regards the Buddha as a universal principle. Metaphysically, Buddha is said to be an immanent presence in the universe with three aspects, or “bodies”: first, the enlightened wisdom of a Buddha, which is formless; second, the body of bliss, celestial aspect of Buddhahood that communicates the dharma to bodhisattvas; and the third body of transformation, by which the Buddha principle becomes human to help liberate humanity. It was in this third body that the Buddha appeared for a time on the earth as the historical figure Shakyamuni Buddha.

Both Theravada and Mahayana are nontheistic, in that the existence or non-existence of gods is not a primary concern, yet ordinary people are inclined to seek...
help in times of need. In Mahayana, the Buddhas are seen to embody perfect purity, boundless compassion, omniscient wisdom, and many other enlightened qualities. Although some may interpret the Buddhas and bodhisattvas as metaphors for various aspects of enlightened awareness, others regard them as living presences ready to impart blessings and guidance to those who call on them.

**Emptiness** Mahayana scriptures portray Buddhas moving swiftly through intergalactic space and time, cloning and appearing at different places simultaneously, dematerializing and materializing at will. However, practitioners are not to be attached to these appearances. Many schools within Mahayana also affirm, along with Theravadins, that there is an ultimate reality, which is the true nature of things, but this “suchness” is simply the lack of any essence or permanent, independent reality. In accordance with the universal law of cause and effect, all conditioned phenomena arise and perish continuously. Nirvana is in a different category since it is a non-regressive state of liberation from mental afflictions, suffering, and rebirth. In the Udana scripture from the Pali Canon, the Buddha stated, “O monks, there is an unborn, undying, unchanging, uncreated. If it were not so, there would be no point to life, or to training.”

Some of the most complex and paradoxical of Mahayana teachings concern the concept of **sunyata**, meaning voidness or emptiness. They were elaborated by
the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna around the second and third century CE on the basis of the earlier Perfection of Wisdom scriptures. According to Nagarjuna, all earthly things arise and pass away, as a process of events dependent on other events, and having no independent origin and no eternal reality. The world of phenomena—samsara—is therefore empty of inherent existence. Nirvana is also empty in the sense that it is a thought construct, even though it is not dependent on conditions. In the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures, the student to whom the lengthy teachings on sunyata are given is at last asked if he has understood them. The student declares, “In truth, nothing has been taught.”

Everything being empty, there is nothing to cling to, so one who realizes Emptiness is freed to experience reality directly and to be compassionate without attachment. The concepts of selflessness and emptiness help practitioners understand things “as they are” and also help them overcome attachment to things, including attachment to concepts. As Professor Ruben Habito explains:

One is able to celebrate every moment, every act, every thought, every sensation, as expressive of a dynamic, unobjectifiable, unfathomable, indescribable realm that, for lack of words, we call Emptiness. To experience each moment in this world of form as a manifestation of Emptiness is likewise to experience the world in the light of compassion. Having been freed of the notion of “self” as a “subject in here” grasping “objects out there,” one is also freed of this notion of “self” as separate from “other selves.”

The Perfection of Wisdom scriptures that celebrate the liberating experience of emptiness are foundational texts for most of Mahayana. What is distinctive and startling about Mahayana is the application of the idea of emptiness to all things, even including the teachings of the Buddha. In the popular Heart Sutra that is used liturgically throughout East Asia, the core doctrines of traditional Buddhism are systematically shattered: bodhisattva Kuan-yin sees that the five aggregates of a person (form, sensation, perception, reaction, and consciousness) are each empty of absolute self-nature; they exist only relative to other aggregates. With this realization, the bodhisattva becomes free of delusion. Next, birth and death, purity and defilement, increase and decrease are seen as empty; the six sense objects, the six sense organs, and the six sense awarenesses are seen as empty; the Wheel of Life is seen as empty; the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path are seen as empty. Even knowledge and attainment are proclaimed to be empty. With this “perfection of wisdom,” there are no obstacles, and no fear, and going beyond delusions one attains nirvana, having emptied Buddhism of its central objects. The Heart Sutra replaces the doctrines with a mantra: Gate, Gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi, svaha! (“Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone to the other shore. O enlightenment, all hail!”). As Professor David Chappell observes,

The systematic emptying of the central doctrines of the tradition is unparalleled in religious history. (Imagine a Christian saying that the Ten Commandments and Lord’s Prayer and Apostles’ Creed are empty!) And yet, insight into the impermanence of all things, and their connectedness, gives Mahayana a self-critical profundity and an inclusive acceptance of diversity, which provides balance in the midst of movement, and peace in the midst of compassion.
**Vajrayana: indestructible way to unity**

Of the many branches of Mahayana Buddhism, perhaps the most elaborate is **Vajrayana**. It developed in India, was transmitted to Tibet, and has also historically been practiced in Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Mongolia. Currently it is practiced throughout the Tibetan diaspora and increasingly in North America and Europe.

Prior to the introduction of Buddhism from India, the mountainous Tibetan region was home to a shamanistic religion called Bon (pronounced “pern”). In the seventh century CE a particularly powerful king of Tibet, Songtsan, became interested in the religion that surrounded his isolated kingdom. He sent a group of students to study Buddhism in India, but they all died in the searing heat of the plains. Only one member of a second group survived the arduous trip across the Himalayas, returning with many Sanskrit texts. After some of these works were translated into Tibetan, Songtsan declared Buddhism the national religion and encouraged Buddhist virtues in his subjects.

The Bon shamans are said to have kept trying to sabotage this threat to their power until a tantric adept, Padmasambhava, was invited to the country from Kashmir in the eighth century CE. On the way, it is said, he subdued and converted the local Bon deities. Along with his consort Yeshe Tsogyal, Guru Padmasambhava firmly established the tantric Buddhist teachings in Tibet. Although the Tibetans’ understanding of Buddhism was no doubt influenced by their earlier beliefs, and the use of prayer flags and an emphasis on practices for the dying may reflect Bon concerns, the Tibetans spent many centuries attempting to understand the Indian Buddhist teachings as purely as possible. After a period of decline in the tenth century, when some misinterpreted the tantric teachings, a teacher named Atisha was invited from the great center of Buddhist learning at Nalanda, India, to set things right.

Under Atisha, Tibetan Buddhism became a complex path with three stages, said to have been prescribed by the Lord Buddha. While the Buddha did not develop them to their current state, he is said to have supported the idea of different levels of teachings for the less and more evolved. The first of these is called Hinayana by the Tibetans: quieting of the mind and relinquishing of attachments through meditation practices. The second is Mahayana: training in compassion and loving-kindness. The third is the advanced esoteric path called Vajrayana (“the diamond vehicle”) or Tantrayana, said to be the speeded-up path that allows enlightenment within a single lifetime. It includes extremely rigorous practices derived from the tantric yoga of India. Adepts in this path attempt to construct an indestructible “diamond-body” for themselves that will allow them physically to sustain entries into the intense energies of higher levels of consciousness.
Vajrayana aspirants are guided through a series of tantric practices by teachers, the highest of whom are lamas. Some are considered as incarnate bodhisattvas and carefully trained from a young age for their role as those who have realized the Supreme Truth and can help others advance toward it.

The masses have their heads on backwards. If you want to get things right, first look at how they think and behave, and consider going the opposite way.25

Lama Drom Tonpa, 11th century

Vajrayana initiates practice deity yoga: meditating on one of the many deities who embody various qualities that the practitioner wishes to manifest. These radiant forms are themselves illusory. But meditating on them is considered a way of reflecting on and thus bringing forth one’s own true nature. Some of the deities are wrathful, such as Mahakala, defender of dharma. Buddhists understand that wrathful acts without hatred are sometimes necessary to protect truth and justice.

The highest form of Vajrayana is the use of the subtle vital energies of the body to transform the mind. A very high state of consciousness is produced after lengthy practice in which the “gross mind” is neutralized and the “subtle mind” manifests powerfully, as “the clear light of bliss.” This innermost subtle mind of clear light is the true empty quality of one’s own mind. Once it is realized, one is said to be capable of attaining Buddhahood in a single lifetime. The beloved seventh Dalai Lama of Tibet (1708–1757) gave this encouraging perspective:

Even the most seemingly evil person has the primordial clear light mind at the heart of his or her existence. Eventually the clouds of distortion and delusion will be cleared away as the being grows in wisdom, and the evil behavior that emanates
from these negative mindsets will naturally evaporate. That being will realize the essential nature of his or her own mind, and achieve spiritual liberation and enlightenment.26

The practices used to transform the mind also enable levitation, clairvoyance, meditating continuously without sleep, and warming the body from within while sitting naked in the snow. Milarepa, the famous Tibetan poet-saint, whose enlightenment was won through great austerities, once sang this song:

Blissful within, I don’t entertain
The notion “I’m suffering.”
When incessant rain is pouring outside.

Even on peaks of white snow mountains
Amidst swirling snow and sleet
Driven by new year’s wintry winds
This cotton robe burns like fire.27

Tibetans have suffered persecution by the communist Chinese, who overran the country in 1951, destroying ancient monasteries and scriptures and killing an estimated one-sixth of the people over decades of occupation. Since 1951, hundreds of thousands of Tibetans have escaped into exile. Among them is the highest of the lamas—the beloved fourteenth Dalai Lama, spiritual and political leader

Right The Chinese communists dismantled the system whereby one quarter of the men in Tibet were monks, supported by the laity and holding considerable secular power. But spirituality persists among the people, who include full-length prostrations in their prayers.

Far right One of the most beloved of Tibetan Buddhist deities is Tara. She is savior and mother of the world; she protects us and helps us to achieve our spiritual longings. (Detail of Tibetan thangka, 18th/19th century, tempera on cotton.)
His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Surely one of the best-known and most-loved spiritual leaders in the world, His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama is a striking example of Buddhist peace and compassion. Wherever he goes, he greets everyone with evident delight. Even when addressing an audience of thousands, he looks around the hall with a broad, childlike grin, which seems directed to each person individually. His example is all the more powerful because he is the leader in exile of Tibet, a small nation that knew extreme oppression and suffering during the twentieth century.

The simplicity of His Holiness’s words and bearing belie his intellectual power. His Holiness was only a peasant child of two in 1937 when he was located and carefully identified as the reincarnation of the thirteenth Dalai Lama. He was formally installed as the fourteenth Dalai Lama when he was only four and a half years old, thus becoming the spiritual and temporal ruler of Tibet. He was raised and rigorously educated in Lhasa in the Potala. One of the world’s largest buildings, it then contained huge ceremonial halls, thirty-five chapels, meditation cells, the government storehouses, national treasures, all records of Tibetan history and culture in 7,000 huge volumes, plus 2,000 illuminated volumes of the Buddhist scriptures. He was educated according to the traditional system of Tibet, which stressed broadening and developing the mind to acquire many kinds of knowledge and also to study and practice advanced Buddhist teachings.

Such a rigorous grounding in religion, maintains the Dalai Lama, brings steadiness of mind in the face of any misfortunes. He says,

*Humanitarianism and true love for all beings can only stem from an awareness of the content of religion. By whatever name religion may be known, its understanding and practice are the essence of a peaceful mind and therefore of a peaceful world. If there is no peace in one’s mind, there can be no peace in one’s approach to others, and thus no peaceful relations between individuals or between nations.*

The Dalai Lama’s equanimity of mind must have been sorely challenged by the Chinese invasion and oppression of his small country. In 1959, when he escaped from Tibet to lessen the potential for bloodshed during a widespread popular revolt against the Chinese, Tibet was home to more than 6,000 monasteries. Only twelve of them were still intact by 1980. It is said that at least one million Tibetans have died as a direct result of the Chinese occupation, and the violence against the religion, the culture, and the people of Tibet continues today as Chinese settlers fill the country.

In the face of the overwhelming military power of the Chinese, and in any case armed with Buddhist precepts, the Dalai Lama has persistently tried to steer his people away from violent response to violence. Asserting that “Nonviolence is the only way…. It’s a slower process sometimes, but a very effective one,” he explains:

*Practically speaking, through violence we may achieve something, but at the expense of someone else’s welfare. That way, although we may solve one problem, we simultaneously seed a new problem. The best way to solve problems is through human understanding, mutual respect. On one side make some concessions; on the other side take serious consideration about the problem. There may not be complete satisfaction, but something happens. At least future danger is avoided. Non-violence is very safe.*

While slowly, patiently trying to influence world opinion so that the voice of Tibet will not be extinguished by Chinese might, the Dalai Lama has established an entire government in exile in Dharamsala, India, in the Himalayas. There he and Tibetan refugees have built schools, orphanages, hospitals, craft cooperatives, farming communities, monasteries, and groups preserving traditional music and drama. From this base, he travels tirelessly, and with a punishing schedule. In his effort to keep the voice of Tibet alive, he has also emerged as a great moral leader in the world. His quintessentially Buddhist message to people of all religions is that only through kindness and compassion toward each other and the cultivation of inner peace shall we all survive as a species.
of the people. His speaking appearances around the world have been a major factor in the contemporary revival of interest in Buddhism. He has established his headquarters, Dharamsala, in the mountains of northern India. A repository of traditional Tibetan culture, it has become a magnet for spiritual seekers.

Despite persecution, religious fervor and ceremony still pervade every aspect of Tibetan life, from house-raising to ardent pilgrimages. Monks and laypeople alike meditate on thangkas and mandalas, visual aids to concentration and illumination, which portray a Buddha or bodhisattva surrounded by deities in a diagram symbolically representing the universe. Both also chant mantras. A favorite one is the phrase associated with the beloved Tibetan bodhisattva of mercy, Avalokitesvara: Om mani padme hum. It evokes awareness of the “jewel in the lotus of the heart,” that beautiful treasure lying hidden within each of us. Because some emphasis is placed on the number of repetitions, mantras are written out thousands of times and spun in prayer wheels or placed on prayer flags which continue the repetition of the mantra as they blow in the wind.

Zen: the great way of enlightenment

Buddhism was transmitted from India to China around 50 ce and thence to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, absorbing elements of Daoism along the way. Then, according to tradition, in the fifth century, Bodhidharma, a successor to the Buddha, traveled from southern China to a monastery in northern China. There he reportedly spent nine years in silent meditation, “facing the wall.” On this experiential foundation, he became the first patriarch of the radical path that came to be called Ch’an Buddhism, from the Sanskrit dhyana, the yogic stage of meditation. Although this traditional account of its origins and founder is not fully accepted by scholars as absolute fact, it is known that this way was transmitted to Japan, where its name became Zen.

Zen claims to preserve the essence of the Buddha’s teachings through direct experience, triggered by mind-to-mind transmission of the dharma. It dismisses scriptures, Buddhas, and bodhisattvas in favor of training for direct insight into the true nature of one’s own mind, known as Buddha-nature.

A central way of directly experiencing the underlying unity is zazen (sitting meditation). “To sit,” said the Sixth Zen Patriarch, “means to obtain absolute freedom and not to allow any thought to be caused by external objects. To meditate means to realize the imperturbability of one’s original nature.”

The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences.
When love and hate are both absent
everything becomes clear and undisguised.
Make the smallest distinction, however,
and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart.

Prescriptions for the manner of sitting are quite rigorous: one must take a specific upright posture and then not move during the meditation period, to avoid distracting the mind. Skillful means are then applied to make the mind
The ten Zen Oxherding Pictures metaphorically illustrate the stages along the spiritual path, with the meaning of each picture to be found through meditation. We are the herdsman (worldly self) who is searching for the elusive ox (our true nature) in the wilderness. In the second picture, the herdsman notices the footprints of the ox. In the third, he catches sight of the ox. In the fourth, he struggles mightily to grasp the ox. In the fifth, he tames the ox with tether and whip, until “well tended and domesticated, the ox grows pure and gentle.”

In the sixth stage (illustrated upper right), the seeker has found and tamed the ox and leisurely returns home riding high upon it, playing tunes “full of profound meaning.” In the seventh, he reaches his home but the ox disappears.

In the eighth stage (below left), both ox and herdsman have disappeared—“Whip, tether, person, ox: ALL IS EMPTY! Blue sky, all and all around.” In the ninth stage, Returning to the Source, “Inside his hut, he does not see any object outside.” The final, tenth stage (below right), the enlightened one returns to the marketplace with helping hands and a wide grin on his face.

*Brush and ink drawings by Gyokusei Jikihara*
one-pointed and clear. One beginning practice is simply to watch and count each inhalation and exhalation from one to ten, starting over from one if anything other than awareness of the breath enters the mind. Although this explanation sounds simple, the mind is so restless that many people must work for months before finally getting to ten without having to start over. Getting to ten is not really the goal; the goal is the process itself, the process of recognizing what comes up in the mind and gently letting it go without attachment or preferences.

As one sits in zazen, undisturbed by phenomena, as soon as one becomes inwardly calm, the natural mind is revealed in its original purity. This “original mind” is spacious and free, like an open sky. Thoughts and sensations may float through it like clouds, but they arise and then disappear, leaving no trace. What remains is insight into “thusness,” the true nature of things. In some Zen schools, this perception of thusness comes in a sudden burst of insight, or kensho.

When the mind is calmed, action becomes spontaneous and natural. Zen practitioners are taught to rest in the natural simplicity of their own Buddha-nature. It is said that two Zen monks, on gaining a glimpse of enlightenment, ran naked through the woods scribbling on rocks.

On the other hand, the Zen tradition links spontaneity with intense, disciplined concentration. In the art of calligraphy, the perfect spontaneous brushstroke—executed with the whole body, in a single breath—is the outcome of years of attentive practice. Giving ourselves fully to the moment, to be aware only of pouring tea when pouring tea, is a simplicity of being that most of us have yet to realize. Then whatever we give ourself to fully, be it painting, or serving tea, or simply breathing, reveals the “thusness of life,” its unconditioned reality.

Another tool used in one Zen tradition is the koan. Here the attention is focused ardently on a question that boggles the mind, such as “What was your original face before your parents were born?” As Roshi (venerable teacher) Philip Kapleau observes, “Koans deliberately throw sand into the eyes of the intellect to
force us to open our Mind’s eye and see the world and everything in it undistorted by our concepts and judgments.” To concentrate on a koan, one must look closely at it without thinking about it, experiencing it directly. Beyond abstractions, Roshi Kapleau explains, “The import of every koan is the same: that the world is one interdependent Whole and that each separate one of us is that Whole.”

The aim of Zen practice is enlightenment, or satori. One directly experiences the unity of all existence, often in a sudden recognition that nothing is separate from oneself. As one Zen master put it:

The moon’s the same old moon,
The flowers exactly as they were,
Yet I’ve become the thingness
Of all the things I see!34

All aspects of life become at the same time utterly precious, and utterly empty, “nothing special.” This paradox can be sensed only with the mystically expanded consciousness; it cannot be grasped intellectually.

**Pure Land: calling on Amida Buddha**

Zen is essentially an inner awareness in which great attention is given to every action, but this requires years of disciplined meditation practice. Other forms of Buddhist practice that developed in India and East Asia have much greater popular appeal. The most widespread Buddhist school in East Asia is known as **Pure Land** Buddhism. At times of great social upheaval (for instance, when the old Japanese feudal aristocracy was falling apart), it was widely thought that people had become so degenerate that it was nearly impossible for them to attain enlightenment through their own efforts. Instead, many turned to the saving power of **Amida** Buddha, the Buddha of Boundless Light. Amida (who first appeared in India under the Sanskrit name Amitabha) was believed to have been an ancient prince who vowed to attain enlightenment. After he did, he used his pure virtue to prepare a special place of bliss, the Pure Land, for all those who called his name.

Japan had an ancient tradition of worshipping mountains as the realm to which the dead ascend and from which deities descend to earth. The originally abstract Indian Buddhists’ concept of a “Pure Land” far to the west to which devotees return after death was transformed in Japan into concrete images. They depicted Amida Buddha riding on clouds billowing over the mountains, coming to welcome his dying devotees.
Many people contributed to the growth of Pure Land Buddhism into a mass movement. The thirteenth-century religious leader Shinran, who broke with monastic tradition by marrying, emphasized the principle that salvation comes through repeating the name of Amida Buddha with sincere trust, not by separating oneself from society. The Shin Buddhist path developed by Shinran’s followers has become one of the major Buddhist movements throughout the world.

The monk Genshin described the ineffable pleasures of being reborn into the Pure Land upon death:

*Rings, bracelets, a crown of jewels, and other ornaments in countless profusion adorn his body. And when he looks upon the light radiating from the Buddha, he obtains pure vision, and because of his experiences in former lives, he hears the sounds of all things. And no matter what color he may see or what sound he may hear, it is a thing of marvel.*

Many believers interpret these passages literally, anticipating that if they have sufficient faith in the saving power of Amida they will enjoy a beautiful life after death. But some understand the Pure Land as a state that can be achieved in this life—a metaphor for the mystical experience of enlightenment, in which one’s former identity “dies” and one is reborn into an expanded state of consciousness. Some modern thinkers have placed their emphasis on “Building the Pure Land in the Human Realm,” making their goal transformation of this world by purifying it of social evils such as oppression, pollution, and sexism.

**Nichiren: salvation through the Lotus Sutra**

While some Pure Land Buddhists despair of purifying themselves by their own efforts and therefore humbly submit to the grace of Amida Buddha, a thirteenth-century Japanese fisherman’s son, who named himself Nichiren, stressed the importance of striving to reform not only ourselves but also society. For Nichiren, the highest truths of Buddhism were embodied in the Lotus Sutra, a large compilation of parables, verses, and descriptions of innumerable forms of beings who support the teachings of the Buddha. Nichiren gave particular attention to two of these beings: the Bodhisattva of Superb Action, who staunchly devotes himself to spreading the Perfect Truth, even in evil times, and the Bodhisattva Ever-Abused, who is persecuted because of his insistence on revering everyone with unshaken conviction that each person is potentially a Buddha. Nichiren himself was repeatedly abused by authorities but persisted in his efforts to reform Buddhism in Japan and then spread its purified essence, the Bodhisattva ideal, to the world.

The phrase chanted by Nichiren and his followers, “Namu myoho rengekyo,” refers to faith in the entire Lotus Sutra. Today it is chanted by Nichiren monks and nuns by the hour, slowly revealing its depths as it works inwardly, beyond thought. In our time, some in the Nichiren tradition undertake long peace walks, such as one sponsored by Nipponzan Myohoji in 1995, in which people walked from Auschwitz in Poland to Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II with a plea for nonviolence and respect for all of life. They beat small hand drums while chanting “Namu myoho rengekyo,” and hope to contribute to world peace by truly bowing to the Buddha in each person, even if they encounter abuse. As the Most Venerable
Nichidatsu Fujii, who passed away in 1985 at the age of one hundred and who influenced Gandhi’s doctrine of non-violence, explained:

We do not believe that people are good because we see that they are good, but by believing that people are good we eliminate our own fear and thus we can intimately associate with them. To believe in the compassionate power of the Supreme Being which we cannot see is a discipline in order to believe in the invisible good in others.\(^3\)

Civilization has nothing to do with having electric lights, airplanes, or manufacturing atomic bombs. It has nothing to do with killing human beings, destroying things or waging war. Civilization is to hold one another in mutual affection and respect.\(^7\)

The chanting of “Namu myoho rengkyo” has also caused seventy Peace Pagodas to arise thus far in many countries, built with donated materials and labor by people of all faiths in hopes of world peace and the elimination of all weapons.

Another new offshoot of Nichiren’s movement is Soka Gakkai, based in Japan but having millions of members around the world. Its twentieth-century founders called for a peaceful world revolution through transformation of individual consciousness. The central practice is the chanting of Nichiren’s phrase (which they transiterate as “Nam myoho renge kyo”) combined with modern social activism in areas such as humanitarian relief, environmental awareness, human rights, literacy, and cultural and interfaith exchanges. Members are encouraged to develop their “unlimited potential” for hope, courage, and altruism.

Yet another new branch of Buddhism inspired by the Lotus Sutra is Rissho Kosei-kai, founded in the 1930s by Rev. Nikkyo Niwano and Myoko Naganuma to bring the message of the Lotus Sutra to the world in practical ways in order to encourage happiness and peace. Members meet to discuss ways of applying the Buddha’s teachings to specific problems in their own lives. The organization, which is active in international inter-religious activities, asserts that “The Eternal Buddha, invisible but present everywhere, is the great life-force of the universe, which sustains each of us.”\(^8\)

The Bodhisattva loves all living beings as if each were his only child.

*Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra 5*

**Buddhism in the West**

Images of the Buddha are now enshrined around the world, for what began in India has gradually spread to the West as well as the East. Much of this transmission occurred in the twentieth century, when the United States became a vibrant center of Buddhism. Scholars are studying Buddhist traditions at many universities, and many people are trying to learn Buddhist meditation practices.

The exodus of over 100,000 people from Tibet, including most of its highest lamas, has led to the establishment of Tibetan Buddhist centers in many Western countries as well as in India, the Dalai Lama’s home in exile. Several hundred thousand Westerners now have some spiritual involvement with Tibetan
AN INTERVIEW WITH KARMA LEKSHE TSOMO

Living Buddhism

Karma Lekshe Tsomo is an American from Hawaii who has become a very active Tibetan Buddhist nun. Her story illustrates the unusual pathways by which Westerners have come to adopt Buddhism. Karma explains, “I was very much attracted to the teachings of Jesus as a child but there were a lot of unanswered questions for me, especially about the meaning of life and what happens to us after we die. When I asked the ministers they would say, ‘If you are good you go to heaven, and if you are bad then you go to hell.’ It seemed a little bit too simplistic for me. I really wanted to know more. So I kept searching.

“I think I was about twelve when I read some books on Buddhism—The Way of Zen by Alan Watts and G.T. Suzuki on Zen Buddhism. At once I thought, ‘Wow, home free!’ At about nineteen I went to Japan for surfing, but I was studying Zen and reading Haiku. Still searching, I went on to Thailand, India, and Nepal. On the way I had a really clear and beautiful dream that I was a nun. I knew I wanted to be a nun, but where? It took me a long time (thirteen years!) from then until I actually became one.

“It wasn’t until I wound up in the Tibetan library in Dharamsala that I got a real systematic education. As I burst into the classroom for the first time, there on a cushion at the other end of the room was a little lama with a yellow pointed hat, and he was explaining, ‘At the second stage after death you will see a faint smoke.’ He was explaining in great detail exactly what happens to us after we die. I thought, ‘Bingo! This is it!’ So I sat at his feet for five years. I never missed a day of class. I just loved it.

“The more I studied Buddhism and the more I practiced, the more I liked it. I wanted to dedicate my whole life to it. It was in 1977 that I met the Karmapa and six months later I told them I was ready to be ordained. He said, ‘What will you do after you are ordained?’ I said, ‘I will go to India and study.’ He said, ‘Perfect. I am giving the ordination tomorrow. You will be the fifth.’ Five is an auspicious number, because the Buddha first ordained five monks. Then two monks cut my long strawberry blonde curls. I can’t describe the sense of joy I felt when I saw all that hair in my lap. The ordination ceremony is carried out by five monks. After prayers they give you a set of questions to make sure that you are without debts and that you have the agreement of your parents, spouse, or whoever might be responsible, and they endeavour to make sure that you are healthy and able to withstand the hardships of monastic life. They want to make sure that your motivation is pure in taking precepts. In the Tibetan tradition it is a lifetime commitment.

“Life in India at the center where I stayed was tremendously difficult. The Himalayas were icy cold in the winter. No indoor plumbing. I was living in a mud hut at seven to eight thousand feet. We are supposed to keep a certain dress standard, which does not include a sweater or jacket. Plus I was so poor. I had no support as a nun. The Tibetans take care of their own ethnic peoples, but they don’t feel any responsibilities for other kinds of people, and they don’t have a tradition of seeking alms. The Americans who have become Buddhists don’t have a tradition of supporting renunciates. They think, ‘What is different about your practice from mine? So why should I support you? Get a job.’ It’s a complete contradiction to the original idea, which is that you live like the birds of the air and the beasts of the field, depending on the goodwill of your followers. Things got really difficult, so I would go to the devotional ceremonies and get the prasad, and eat that. The fourth year an American women invited me to take lunch with her family for two rupees a day so I got some sort of a balanced meal once a day, otherwise it was very tough.

“I got skinny and really sick—hepatitis a few times—but somehow I survived. I was really determined to survive. Not only the climate, the difficulty of getting food, but also the visa to stay in India a long time was very difficult to get. And then there was living in that mud hut. There were rats living in the walls and scorpions under my pillow. Rats fell down on my head as I meditated. There were fleas and in the monsoon there were three or four months of torrential rains when it was never dry. One time we had an earthquake at the center where I stayed, and I immediately dived under the bed. Four rooms fell down in that earthquake. I had to rebuild them.

“Despite such many challenges, I knew without question that the best place to study Buddhism was right there. Not only because these were some of the greatest scholars the Tibetan tradition has ever produced, but also because study was combined with practice—meditation practices. The tenor of the teachings was to transform the mind. I thought, ‘I may not know the inner workings of Buddhist philosophy, but I think I am becoming a better person.’

“We began to notice that conditions for Buddhist practice for women were not the same as for men. Conditions and facilities for education for nuns have been lagging way behind. It was assumed that men would be the teachers, so they get given the education. Fortunately, since Buddhism is a rather logical and sensible path, once you question people if women have equal capacity for enlightenment and liberation, they have to admit that they do, because the Buddha himself said so. Sometimes, however, social reality doesn’t match theory. I work with Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women trying to gain equal opportunities for women to study, equal facilities for meditation practice, and also opportunities for them to become ordained if they so wish. It seems that once women get an opportunity for education they express a deep concern for the needs of others in their communities—the children, the old folks, the sick. I strongly feel that Buddhist women can contribute a great deal to society even on a very local level. There are 300 million Buddhist women out there. That is a tremendous source for peace, goodwill, and energy to work for the benefit of humanity.”
Buddhism. Zen meditation centers are also flourishing, with over 400 in North America alone, as well as Zen monasteries giving training in *zazen* and offering a monastic lifestyle as a permanent or temporary alternative to life in the world.

Intensive *vipassana* retreats of up to three months are carried out in Theravadin centers such as the Insight Meditation Society in rural Barre, Massachusetts. Theravadin teachers from Southeast Asia and Europe make frequent appearances to conduct retreats, and American teachers undertake rigorous training in Southeast Asia under traditional meditation masters.

The American monk Venerable Sumedho, classically trained in Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, has established monastic forest communities and meditation centers in England, Switzerland, Italy, and the United States. Many Buddhist centers in the West are led by women, in contrast to the cultural suppression of females in the East. They are explaining traditional Buddhist teachings to Westerners in fresh, contemporary ways. Some are also setting examples of dedicated spiritual practice, such as Tenzin Palmo, a British woman turned Tibetan Buddhist nun who lived alone for twelve years in a cave 13,200 feet high in the Himalayas, undergoing tremendous austerities in the quest for enlightenment.

The Vietnamese monk Venerable Master Thich Nhat Hanh now lives in exile in France, where he conducts retreats for both women and men in his Plum Village community. When he travels internationally, large audiences gather to be inspired by his teachings. He speaks simply, using homely examples, and

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A meditation teacher at the Buddhist Dharma School in Brighton, England, with her young students.
Side-by-side in still rows, with birdsong and sunlight streaming in through the tall windows, sit the monks and laypeople of Zen Mountain Monastery. For thirty-five minute blocks, separated by periods of attentive walking, they support each other by practicing zazen together in silence. With this group structure, many find it easier to carry on the rigorous discipline of serious Zen training than they would by themselves.

This particular monastery, located in the Catskill Mountains near Mount Tremper, New York, reflects the changing face of religion in the United States. A hundred years ago the main building was handcrafted of stone as a Benedictine monastery; later it became a Lutheran summer camp. Now back-to-back with the Christ on the cross on the outside of the building is a statue of Buddha on the altar in the zendo. The monastery houses eleven fully ordained monastics (six of them women) who have taken lifetime vows of service, several novices and postulants in training (an aspect adopted from Western monasticism), lay residents who stay for up to a year, and groups of people who come for special retreats and classes. Increasingly these are professionals and family people from the mainstream culture, rather than the hippies who embraced Buddhism in the 1960s and 1970s. They do not come for a comfortable vacation, for zazen is hard work and the teachers are dedicated to creating snags that help people discover the places where they are not free. They are expected to practice intensely and then leave, carrying what they have learned back into the world. As the monk Shugen observes, “If Zen doesn’t work in the world, it’s not working.”

In addition to long sessions of silent sitting and walking, dharma talks by the resident Zen master John Daido Loori Sensei (an American ordained in both authentic Zen lineages), and private coaching by the monks, monastery residents participate in structured nontheistic liturgical services designed to foster attentiveness and appreciation. They chant in Japanese and English, with frequent bowing to each other, to their meditation cushions, and to the Buddha on the altar in identification.
with all beings and gratitude for the teachings. Zen master Daido notes that liturgy reflects the innards of a religion: “In Catholicism, cathedrals are awe-inspiring, the chants expansive; in Zen the form is simple and the chanting is grounded, not otherworldly.”

The rest of the day is devoted to caretaking of the buildings and 200-acre (81-hectare) nature sanctuary, mindful practice done in silence, and work practice. Those with office jobs combine ancient and modern arts: they sit cross-legged on low cushions before their computers and use calligraphic skills to hand-letter signs. Meals are simple and include coarse breads donated by a nearby whole-grain bakery. Every action—even brushing one’s teeth—is treated as liturgy, in the sense of bringing total attentiveness to the sacredness of even the most “mundane” activity as a teaching that enlightenment takes place in one’s everyday experience.

Following the lead of their teacher Daido, who is at once highly disciplined in the pure mind-to-mind dharma transmission and very down-to-earth, approachable, compassionate, and married, monastery residents are human, playful, and loving. The women monks shave their hair when ordained and keep it very short thereafter, but for them near-baldness feels like freedom rather than self-sacrificing asceticism. The monk Myotai observes:

I could feel every breeze, and being bald definitely altered the way I saw the habit patterns I brought to my interactions with other people, clarifying how much “extra” was still there, to a degree that surprised me. There is a several-year entry period before ordination, to get clear on what it means, but one aspect of actually having no hair was that it really opened up the male–female dynamic. I no longer felt myself relating to men as a woman. That was very freeing. It was also wonderful to have this daily reminder of what I was doing with my life.
emphasizes bringing the awareness fostered by meditation into everyday life, rather than making spirituality a separate compartment of one’s life. He says:

When we walk in the meditation hall, we make careful steps, very slowly. But when we go to the airport, we are quite another person. We walk very differently, less mindfully. How can we practice at the airport and in the market?  

Buddhism has often been embraced by Westerners because of their longing for the peace of meditation in the midst of a chaotic materialistic life. Many psychotherapists are studying Buddhism for its insights into the mind and human suffering. Richard Clarke, who is both a Zen teacher and a psychotherapist, feels that a discipline such as Zen should be part of the training of therapists:

Emptiness is . . . the source of infinite compassion in working with people: to really feel a person without any agenda, to be spacious to that person, to will that they be the way they are. When a person experiences that in someone’s presence, then they can drop away those things that they’ve invented to present themselves with. Those faces, those armors, those forms of the self become unnecessary.

But are Westerners able to achieve enlightenment by taking Buddhist workshops here and there? Particularly in the case of Tibetan Buddhist practices, Westerners often want to be initiated into the highly advanced teachings without years of patiently practicing and being inwardly transformed by the step-by-step foundational teachings. A further question is whether teachings developed within a specific cultural context can be directly transplanted into the soil of an entirely different culture. Most Westerners who are adopting Buddhist practices are living in highly materialistic rather than monastic settings. And in their impatience to get results, many keep shopping around from one teacher to the next rather than persisting over a long time in one path. As Alan Wallace remarks,

In Tibetan society, fickleness is considered to be one of the worst of vices, while reliability, integrity, trustworthiness, and perseverance are held in high regard. So a few of the finest lamas are now refusing even to come to the West. Some are feeling—given the brevity and preciousness of human life—that devoting time to people with such fickleness and so little faith is time not very well spent.

Another issue that has arisen is training of teachers for the West. Two large Tibetan Buddhist organizations from the Gelukpa order, for instance, have opened nearly six hundred centers for study and meditation around the world but do not have enough fully trained lamas to staff them all. Traditional training takes up to twenty-five years of rigorous study and debate of the finer points of Buddhist philosophy, logic, meditation, cosmology, psychology, and monastic life. Close guidance by an advanced teacher has traditionally been considered essential, but this is not possible for all the Western aspirants, given the shortage of qualified teachers and the language problems.

Given the differences in culture, background, and motivation, are Western students and their teachers in the process of creating new forms of Buddhism adapted to Western ways? Some observers feel that Western Buddhism is actually closer to what they construe as the earliest practice of Buddhism than are its later developments in the East, in that there is an emphasis on inner practice rather than outer forms, and that people have to make a conscious choice of taking up the religion since they have not been born into it. Contemporary Western
Buddhists also tend to be oriented to the goal of achieving enlightenment by their own efforts, which is reportedly what the Buddha prescribed for his followers. Whether or not Western Buddhism conforms to early patterns, it seems to be evolving in different directions from contemporary Asian versions, with some Westerners remaking Buddhism in their own image. For instance, the American Buddhist Stephen Batchelor argues in his book *Buddhism Without Beliefs* that what the West needs is Buddhism stripped of belief in reincarnation and *karma*, emphasizing instead a secularized version, an “existential, therapeutic and liberating agnosticism.” Another difference between Western Buddhism and the historical developments in Eastern Buddhism is the Western tendency to support equal participation of women, as renunciates and teachers as well as practitioners.

As Asia entered the modern world, many of its peoples lost interest in their traditional religions, which became superficial re-enactments of ceremonial practices. But as Westerners themselves are taking strong interest in Buddhism, those who have grown up as Buddhists are reassessing their religion and finding new depths in it. There are now many Eastern laypeople interested in studying meditation, and their teachers include women.

Buddhist women from West and East have joined hands to hold international gatherings to enhance the role of women in Buddhism. The international Association of Buddhist Women, Sakyadhita or “Daughters of the Buddha,” is working to improve conditions for women’s Buddhist practice and education, full ordination of women, and training of women as teachers of Buddhism.

### Socially engaged Buddhism

An emerging focus in contemporary Buddhist practice is the relevance of Buddhism to social problems. Contrary to popular assumptions, the Buddha did not advise people to permanently leave society to seek their own enlightenment. Sri Lankan Buddhist monk Walpola Rahula explains:

> It may perhaps be useful in some cases for a person to live in retirement for a time in order to improve his or her mind and character, as preliminary moral, spiritual, and intellectual training, to be strong enough to come out later and help others. But if someone lives an entire life in solitude, thinking only of their own happiness and salvation, without caring for their fellow beings, this surely is not in keeping with the Buddha’s teaching which is based on love, compassion, and service to others.

Buddhism, like other world religions, has always been engaged with the wider society and political life. In Thailand, for instance, the king is the bearer of the Buddhist heritage, and thus has sacred legitimization. But Thailand also has a tradition of socially-conscious lay practice of Buddhism. The renowned Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993) was a great critic of capitalism, teaching that it increases egoism and selfishness, thus causing distress both to the individual and to society.

In Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh and other socially active Buddhists refused to take sides with the governments and military movements of either North Vietnam or South Vietnam during the Vietnam War, for they felt that both were oppressing the common people and also American soldiers. All were victims of an ideological conflict between communism and anti-communism. Buddhists
worked hard to bring a negotiated end to the war, and helped the suffering people as best they could by evacuating villagers caught in the midst of battles, helping to rebuild damaged buildings, taking care of orphans, and providing medical care to people from all sides. They believed that all life is interdependent—violence and suffering affect everyone. Thus they meditated to generate selfless compassion, according to the teachings of the Buddha, who said:

Hatred is never appeased by hatred. It is appeased by love. This is an eternal law. Just as a mother would protect her only child, even at the risk of her own life, even so let one cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings. Let one’s thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world."

However, Buddhism’s link with politics has not always been primarily altruistic. In Sri Lanka, a selective interpretation of Theravada Buddhist tradition was used to bolster nationalistic sentiments among the Sinhalese Buddhist majority against the Tamil (mostly Hindu and Muslim) minority. As in many contemporary fundamentalist movements elsewhere, a chauvinistic, rigid version of the religion developed in response to rapid modernization and Westernization by colonial powers. The reaffirmation of Buddhist identity became a tool of ethnic oppression of the minority, leading to a violent separatist movement among the Tamils and ultimately civil strife which has disrupted life on the lovely island for decades.
In general, however, the Buddha’s emphasis on compassion has prevailed, and even when Buddhists have been social activists, they have tended to be non-violence activists. In this posture, some contemporary Buddhists have tried to correct injustice, oppression, famine, cruelty to animals, nuclear testing, warfare, and environmental devastation. E. F. Schumacher preached what he called “Buddhist economics,” to affirm human beings’ willingness to live simply, generously, and humanely with each other. Ajahn Pongsak, a Thai Buddhist monk, was so troubled by the devastation of the northern Thai forests that he rallied 5,000 villagers to reforest an area by building a tree nursery, terracing the eroded hillsides, planting nearly 200,000 seedlings, laying irrigation pipes, and fencing the area to protect the new trees. He taught them the importance of a respectful relationship with the forest as their own home, their own parent. He says:

A mind that feels no gratitude to the forest is a coarse mind indeed—without this basic siladhama [dharma], how can a mind attain enlightenment? . . . The times are dark and siladhama is asleep, so it is now the duty of monks to reawaken and bring back siladhama. Only in this way can society be saved.

Venerable Maha Ghosananda of Cambodia has led numerous long marches to promote peace in his country. Even though the country is now beginning to heal after decades of war, the walks continue, carrying a message about the necessity of developing inward peace through meditation and “learning and listening with mind and heart.” Monks, nuns, and laypeople walk through still-dangerous areas that are heavily landmined, facing issues such as domestic violence, AIDS, deforestation, and dire poverty. Maha Ghosananda explains,

We must find the courage to leave our temples and enter the temples of human experience, temples that are filled with suffering. If we listen to the Buddha, Christ, or Gandhi, we can do nothing else. The refugee camps, the prisons, the ghettos and the battlefields will then become our temples.

Buddhism was returned to its native India after some one thousand years’ absence by the bold action of a converted Buddhist activist, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956). Born an untouchable Hindu, he was the chief architect of India’s new democratic constitution, and built into it many provisions designed to end the oppression of the traditional Hindu caste system. In his personal search for a religion offering freedom and dignity to all human beings, he chose Buddhism. And when he publicly converted shortly before his death, he was the inspiration for almost half a million untouchables to do likewise. Despite this, he openly questioned and changed certain Buddhist teachings. Among them, he reinterpreted the Second Noble Truth that suffering results from desires and ignorance. He felt that such a concept may prevent recognition that some people are victims of oppression rather than their own faults, and thus may prevent action to end social injustices. Another traditional Buddhist ideal he challenged was the emphasis on renunciation and meditation rather than active social engagement, helping the people. His slogan was “Educate, Agitate, and Organize.”

In the midst of the civil strife between the Sinhalese Buddhist majority and the Hindu and Muslim Tamil minority in Sri Lanka, the Buddhist monks of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Sangamaya movement have tried to promote harmony and rural development. The founder, a Buddhist schoolteacher named Dr. A. T.
Ariyaratne, asserts that renunciation is not the best path for most people. Rather, they can best realize their spiritual potential in the midst of society, working for its betterment. He and the monks of the Sarvodaya movement have engaged people of all religions in thousands of villages in work camps where they come together to eliminate social decadence and poverty by developing schools, nutrition programs, roads, and irrigation canals and to learn to live by the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Dr. Ariyaratne encourages people to look at their own egotism, distrust, greed, and competitiveness and to recognize that these are the cause of their suffering and inability to work together for progress.

Sulak Sivaraksa, founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, explains that socially engaged Buddhism does not mean promoting Buddhism per se:

*The presence of Buddhism in society does not mean having a lot of schools, hospitals, cultural institutions, or political parties run by Buddhists. It means that the schools, hospitals, cultural institutions, and political parties are permeated with and administered with humanism, love, tolerance, and enlightenment, characteristics which Buddhism attributes to an opening up, development, and formation of human nature. This is the true spirit of nonviolence.*

Even when one intends to be nonviolent in one’s approach to life, difficult ethical questions may still arise. For example, contemporary scholars of Buddhist medical ethics are trying to determine how best to apply Buddhist principles to issues such as abortion, reproductive technologies, genetic engineering, organ transplants, suicide, coma patients, and euthanasia. Although the issues seem modern, some of them were actually addressed during the time of the Buddha, according to the scriptures. Euthanasia, for instance, is the subject of a number of stories in the texts. The general principle which seems to be applied is to avoid taking human life, even when the person requests help in dying. However, careful reading of the texts seems to allow a dying person to refuse life-extending technology, for death is ultimately one of the realities of life that must be faced.

Buddhism is thus as relevant today, and its insights as necessary, as in the sixth century, when the one who became Shakyamuni Buddha renounced a life of ease to save all sentient beings from suffering.

**Suggested reading**


**Key terms**

**Theravada**  
The remaining orthodox school of Buddhism, which adheres closely to the earliest scriptures and emphasizes individual efforts to liberate the mind from suffering.

**Mahayana**  
The “greater vehicle” in Buddhism, the more liberal and mystical Northern School, which stressed the virtue of altruistic compassion rather than intellectual efforts at individual salvation.

**Zen**  
A Chinese and Japanese school emphasizing that all things have buddha-nature, which can only be grasped when one escapes from the intellectual mind.

**bhikshu** *(Pali: bhikkhu)*  
A monk or nun who renounces worldliness for the sake of following the path of liberation and whose simple physical needs are met by lay supporters.

**bhikshuni** *(Pali: bhikkuni)*  
Feminine bhikshu.

**nirvana** *(Pali: nibbana)*  
The ultimate egoless state of bliss.

**dukkha**  
According to the Buddha, a central fact of human life, variously translated as discomfort, suffering, frustration, or lack of harmony with the environment.

**karma**  
Our actions and their effects on this life and lives to come.

**samsara**  
The continual round of birth, death, and rebirth.

**Study questions**

1. Describe the historical origins and subsequent geographic expansion of Buddhism. Discuss Shakya, Maya, Middle Way, Mara, Buddha, caste, Rahul, Pali, Sanskrit, *sangha*, monks and nuns, animal sacrifice, stupas, and Asoka.

2. Explain the basic Buddhist *dharma*. Discuss gods, salvation, Enlightenment, meditation, life after death, nirvana, the Four Noble Truths, rebirth, *karma*, the Three Root Evils, and *samsara*.

3. Explain the history, geography, and main beliefs of Theravada. Discuss *vipassana*, devotions, *sangha*.

4. Explain the history, geography, and main beliefs of Mahayana. Discuss bodhisattvas, sutras, Kuan-yin, Avalokitesvara, three bodies, Emptiness.

5. Explain the history, geography, and main beliefs of Vajrayana. Discuss Bon, Padmasambhava, Atiśa, lamas, deity yoga, Milarepa, 1951, Dalai Lama, mandalas, mantras, Tara.

Refer to Pearson/Prentice Hall’s *TIME Special Edition: World Religions* magazine for these and other current articles on topics related to many of the world’s religions.

- **Buddhism**: Buddhism in America; The Dalai Lama – “It’s Time to Prepare New Leaders”; Essay – Lost Without a Faith

Chapter 5 continues the study of religions originating in India and focuses on Buddhism and its variations. For further research in this area, use the tools available to you in Research Navigator:

*As you investigate Buddhism, consider this question: “What is the role and value of meditation in the varieties of Buddhism?”*

- **Ebsco's ContentSelect**: Search in the Religion and Sociology databases using terms such as “Buddhism,” “Zen Buddhism,” “Meditation,” “guru.”
- **Link Library**: Search in the Religion and Sociology databases under the categories: “Religions from India: Buddhism” and “Buddhism.”
- **The New York Times on the Web**: Search in the Religious Studies and all other databases for current articles on related topics.