



Buddhism

SESSION 2

| *How has Buddhism developed over time?*

Introduction

Siddhartha died around 480 BCE, having achieved great influence among a large group of followers.

As Siddhartha lay dying, his closest follower, Ananda, expressed concern over how subsequent followers were to remain faithful to Siddhartha's ideas. Siddhartha reminded Ananda that he had taught his followers everything he knew and had not withheld any secrets from them. He cautioned him not to waste time in futile speculation about unimportant issues but instead to concentrate on the basic issues regarding liberation and moral action.

Further, Siddhartha assured Ananda that the secret to liberation does not come from an outside teacher but is discovered from within. He said, "Be a lamp unto yourself, be a refuge unto yourself." The mysteries of salvation are to be discerned within each one of us individually.

Shortly after his death, however, his followers began to divide into various schools and groups that developed Buddhist ideas in a number of different directions.

Missionaries and Scriptures

The first development of Buddhism over time was the development of the canon of Buddhist scriptures. *Canon* simply means "official collection," and the purpose of gathering together texts into a canon is to make sure that ideas are kept in as original form as possible, so the next generations are able to learn from them.

Siddhartha himself had never written any books—in fact, he was deeply distrustful of writing down any of his ideas at all. He was afraid that if he did, over time



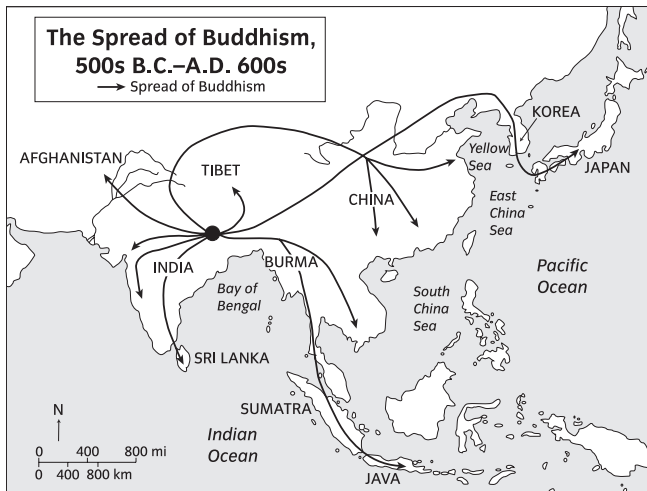
Siddhartha never wrote any books. He was deeply distrustful of writing down any of his ideas. He was afraid that if he did, over time people would start to worship his words and begin to treat him as a god. He wanted to be treated as a man, nothing more.

people would start to worship his words and begin to treat him as a god. This is an idea he specifically rejected. He was a man, nothing more, and wanted to be treated like a man, nothing more. So the thought that people would collect his words and treat them with worship was an idea that was horrifying to him.

But collect them they did. Eventually the words of Siddhartha, combined with secondary writings that were produced after his death, came to constitute a collection known as the Pali Canon. Over time, this group of writings became about ten times longer than the Bible.

Another development of Buddhism that occurred over time was the missionary desire to convert others to Buddhist thought. Again, this idea was horrifying to Siddhartha—he thought that no one could be forced into enlightenment, and converting people just for the sake of adding numbers made no sense.

Nevertheless, a series of councils met after Siddhartha's death to iron out doctrinal ideas, and the end result was the organizing of missionaries by Emperor Asoka around 250 BCE. Asoka ruled in northern India, and he



organized missionary activity to spread Buddhism all through East Asia. It was the influence of Asoka and his missionary zeal that led to Buddhism becoming a global religion.

Over time, the Buddhist idea has continued to develop into different groups, each with its own understanding of the original message.

Theravada Buddhism

The first branch of Buddhism to be developed is called *Theravada*, which translates as “doctrine of the elders.” Theravada Buddhism is located largely in southern India and the nations of Southeast Asia.

Along the way, many of the teachings of the Buddha became lost as Theravada leaders began debating larger metaphysical ideas. Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that seeks to understand the total picture of the larger structures of reality. Siddhartha himself had basically rejected metaphysics to focus on personal morality, but later teachers tried to speculate about how Buddhist teaching fit into an all-encompassing view of the universe. For instance, while Siddhartha wanted to talk about the fact that everything changes and decays over time, Theravada teachers began speculating on more abstract questions concerning exactly what it was about persons that changed and decayed.

Theravada Buddhism focuses more directly on the teaching of the Buddha than they do on the Buddha himself. They argue that to be a Buddhist requires rigorous training and therefore is for the few who can successfully go through this training. They focus on

the idea of monastic discipline, scholarly training, and strict adherence to the words of the Buddha. The Theravada ideal is to become an *arhat*, an enlightened one, so that a person can achieve enlightenment in this world and keep it despite all the troubles that life can bring.

Theravada Buddhism emphasizes meditation as a means to come to a sense of individual enlightenment. As a rule, it tends to be highly individualistic and strives for wisdom gained through personal devotion.

Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana, translated as “larger vehicle,” represents the largest and most diverse of the Buddhist offshoots. Geographically, Mahayana spread into East Asia, specifically China, Korea, and Japan. Its adherents saw Theravada as too elitist and sought a type of Buddhism for the common person, where everyone could find enlightenment, not just the arhats.

Mahayana finds its roots in a more mystical understanding of the teachings of Siddhartha. *Mysticism* can best be defined as a personal understanding of how the entire universe exists as part of the inner makeup of the individual. Mahayana thought took Buddhist ideas from a practical understanding of enlightenment and sought to expand them. Siddhartha went from being just a man to become a mystical being who exists in the heart of the individual believer.

One of the most influential of the Mahayana leaders was Nagarjuna. He was responsible for developing Buddhism as a mystical ideal. He argued that since so many of Siddhartha’s ideas and statements were difficult to understand, finite language can never comprehend the infinite truth behind our experience. So, Nagarjuna claimed, Siddhartha was being deliberately unclear in his teaching, in order to point to an “Absolute Infinite” that lay beyond the world we live in. Instead of calling this Absolute Infinite “God,” he called it “Emptiness.”

This idea of Emptiness became the most important notion in Mahayana thought. Since there is a gap between the finite world we live in and the infinite void of Emptiness, that gap has to be filled. And according to Mahayana thought, only the Buddha himself can fill that gap.

But here’s the good news: since the Buddha is really a mystical presence inside each one of us, each of us has the possibility of becoming a new Buddha, or *bodhisattva*.

Bodhisattvas are enlightened, like arhats, but go beyond that; all true bodhisattvas take vows to dedicate their lives to the care and liberation of others. This turns Buddhist thought away from individualism, toward the care of the entire community.

Thus, according to this, all Buddhists are possible bodhisattvas. In order to achieve this state, then, all believers need to cultivate the virtues of selflessness, compassion, wisdom, and service.

Branches of Mahayana

A number of offshoots of Mahayana have become hugely significant and have thoroughly shaped the way outsiders view Buddhism.

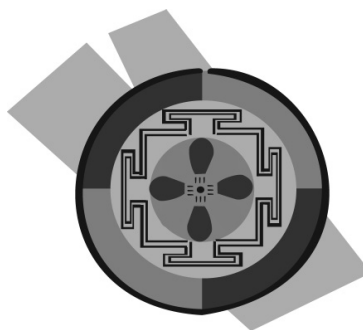
Pure Land—Also called *Shin*, this branch of Mahayana makes strong claims that there are unseen forces in the world around us: spirits, ghosts, gods. These unseen spiritual forces have a huge influence in our day-to-day lives. In fact, it is possible for you to pray to these spirits, and they will assist you in your life. Furthermore, there is a Pure Land (hence the name), a paradise where all true believers will go after they die, provided, of course, that they remain faithful to the teachings of the Buddha while they are alive. The Buddha becomes a savior, to take us from this world and lead us to the Pure Land.

Zen—Coming from a word meaning “meditation,” Zen is a branch of Mahayana that stresses personal holiness and a meditative outlook on life. Zen Buddhists can follow any pursuit of life, as long as it is done with a sense of meditation and purpose. Every activity of life, no matter how small, can be transformed into a spiritual exercise.

Meditation involves an intense contemplation of verbal puzzles called *koans*, confusing riddles that stump the mind and force you to think. A well-known koan is the question, “what is the sound of one hand clapping?” Questions like these force you to think outside regular patterns of thought, which could allow you to reach the Absolute Infinite and lead to personal insight, called *satori*.

Tantric Buddhism

Tantra is loosely translated as “magic,” and this branch developed largely in Tibet. In fact, it is often referred to as Tibetan Buddhism. This form tends to make a wide gap between common people and the elite. To reach enlightenment, you must be one of the elite, and your



Mandala

spiritual success in life is highly dependent on your relationship to a spiritual master, who acts as your teacher and guide in life. This practice clearly loses sight of many of Siddhartha’s ideas about the equality of people and their responsibility for their own enlightenment.

Another aspect of Tantric Buddhism is the emphasis on mantras and elaborate rituals. Mantras are repeated chants, the most well known of which is “*Om Mane Padme Hum*,” chanted during meditative times when contemplating the teachings of the Buddha. Mantras over time cast a sort of a spell, which is believed to protect the one doing the chanting. Tantric Buddhists consider that these spells can protect believers from the negative effects of karma.

A powerful symbol of Tantric Buddhism is the *mandala*, a visual symbol of the interconnected nature of all of life. The elaborate and time-consuming process of creating a mandala is considered a sign of great piety.

Buddhism in the West

Buddhism first reached Europe and North America in the mid-1800s, when the first copies of Mahayana and Theravada writings were brought to the West.

Increasingly, Buddhism has taken a larger and larger place in the American religious landscape. The number of Buddhists in American culture is increasing dramatically.

Buddhist writings were first given a wide American exposure in 1844 when the poet and philosopher Henry David Thoreau translated some of the Lotus Sutra from French to English. Later, other American poets, such as Walt Whitman, picked up and wrote on some broad Buddhist themes.

The first American writer to explicitly develop Buddhist ideas was Colonel Henry Steele Wolcott, who converted to Buddhism in 1880 in Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka).

The novelty of a Caucasian American becoming Buddhist in the heart of Asia was astounding and led to a reawakening of Theravadan ideas in Ceylon.

Modern American Buddhism

Buddhism as a way of life had become firmly entrenched in American culture by the mid-1930s. Broadly speaking, the growth of Buddhism has served two different but overlapping groups.

The first group is what is called “immigrant Buddhism,” that is, the Asian immigrant community coming into the United States beginning in the late 1800s. Large numbers of Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and, increasingly, Vietnamese immigrated to the United States and brought with them their religious traditions. Historically, Asian immigrants tended to settle on the coasts, but over time, more settled farther inland, until the point where there is no state without a significant population with Asian backgrounds.

Western contact with Buddhism was furthered by the Chinese takeover of Tibet in the 1950s. Tibetan Buddhist leaders were forced to flee, many ending up in India or the West.

- Sogyal Rinpoche founded the Shambhala Center, which organized a publishing company, established retreat centers in Colorado and Vermont, and started Naropa University in Colorado. Other publishers and retreat centers followed and have provided a flood of books and movies on Buddhism. Many famous celebrities in the music and movie industries have picked up the cause of Tibetan freedom and Buddhist ideas.
- Tenzin Gyatso, also known as the Dalai Lama, is the current leader of the Tibetan Buddhists and one of the most-known personages in the world. He was also forced to leave Tibet, and he took up residence in India. Since then, he has written and spoken extensively worldwide regarding the Buddhist faith and its relationship with other world religions. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.
- Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese from the Zen tradition, is probably the most prolific and best known of the Buddhist leaders in the West. He has written over one hundred books, many in English, and is active in world peace movements.

The other group that has seen huge growth, what is called “import Buddhism,” has been among native-born Americans. In fact, the largest growth of Buddhism in America has been among Americans themselves, those seeking a form of religious expression that meets their need for introspection, meditation, and personal fulfillment.

Over the course of time, demographic statistics have shown a steady decrease in the number of Americans who consider themselves Christian. At the same time, there has been a marked, steady increase in the numbers of other religious traditions. Buddhists occupy positions in business and government—there have even been a number of Buddhist senators and representatives. There are Buddhist chaplains in the military, in hospitals, and in prisons. An increasing number of cities and even small towns across the country have a meditation retreat center. More and more Christian groups incorporate Buddhist spirituality and meditation into their practices.

What has led to the steady growth of Buddhism in American culture? A number of things. First is the central message of assurance, tolerance, and personal responsibility. These attributes of dharma teaching are very attractive to those religious seekers who are searching for a meaningful religious tradition that stresses the importance of the individual and the growth of personal morality. Second, the increase in the number of American Buddhists has acted as an upward spiral and has helped spur evangelism among a largely American audience.

Third, and probably most important, is the profound but previously unspoken suspicion many Americans harbor toward fundamentalist Christianity. Dharma teachings have led many to question traditionally held Christian beliefs as a form of blind faith. Religious traditions that focus on obedience to an outside authority are considered by many to be inferior to a religious faith that focuses on the spiritual heart of the individual believer.

Into the future, Buddhism will become an even larger force in American culture, whether small town or big city, rural or urban.

About the Writer

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