

WHY BUDDHISM BAFFLES THE WEST

None of the world's major religions is more richly varied than Buddhism. From the time of its birth some 2,500 years ago in India, it was reworked and reshaped over and over again as it spread to the

many kingdoms of Asia—and, recently, to the West. In each of these lands,

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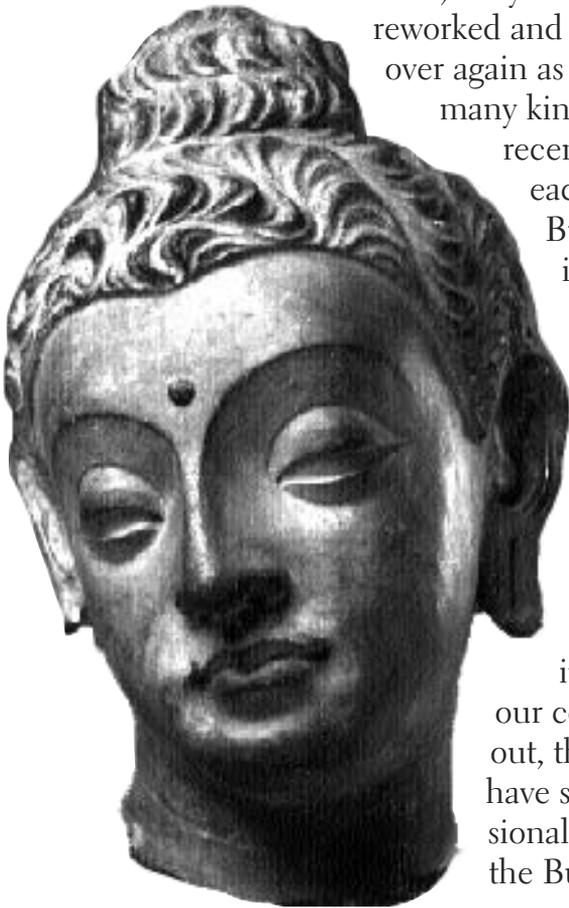
our contributors point

out, that Westerners today

have such a one-dimen-

sional picture of the faith

the Buddha spawned.



Buddhism Comes To Main Street

by Jan Nattier

Buddhism is big news in America these days. Whether through a *New York Times* article carrying the Dalai Lama's latest remarks or a CNN spot on a political fund-raising scandal at a Taiwanese branch temple in Los Angeles, whether by seeing Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* or following Tina Turner's life story in *What's Love Got to Do With It?*, Americans have become more aware than ever before of something called "Buddhism." But it is not only as interesting bits of cultural and political exotica that Buddhism has entered the American consciousness. Increasingly, Americans themselves are becoming Buddhists. Though precise statistics are impossible to come by, according to most estimates between one and two million Americans now consider themselves practicing Buddhists.

American Buddhists are a far from homogeneous lot. The austere minimalism of a Zen meditation hall contrasts starkly with the riot of color in a Tibetan Buddhist center, and the mostly Caucasian crowd of baby boomers arriving for a talk on meditation at a Vipassana center outside San Francisco bears little resemblance to the multigenerational gathering of Thai Buddhists assembling in Chicago for a celebration of the Buddha's birth.

And there are conflicts, as well as contrasts, within Buddhist America. Like many other religious groups, Buddhists frequently find themselves divided by class, culture, or ethnicity. At an outdoor lecture by a famous Vietnamese monk, three Asian-American friends cluster together, feeling the not altogether friendly stares of the mostly Caucasian (and overwhelmingly vegetarian) crowd as they try to enjoy their hot dogs and potato chips. At a small Japanese-American Buddhist church, the parishioners chafe at the identity of the new minister appointed to serve them: a Caucasian man in his thirties, who converted to Buddhism only 10 years before. The differences



Homeless Buddha (1992), by Nam June Paik

can be fundamental. Writing in the Buddhist journal *Tricycle*, Victor Sogen Hori describes how, at the conclusion of a week-long Chinese-style Zen retreat he attended, the white American and ethnic Chinese Buddhists offered profoundly different views of their experience. One Chinese woman broke down in tears as she described the deep sense of shame and repentance she had felt over her selfishness. Her white American coreligionists were often impatient with such sentiments. These participants, Hori writes, “spoke uniformly of how the long hours of meditation had helped them get in touch with themselves . . . and assisted them in the process of self-realization.”

How, then, can we get our bearings in this new and confusing territory? For Americans, especially those raised as Christians, doctrine might seem the obvious place to start. Yet there are relatively few propositions that would be accepted by members of all Buddhist communities. That a person known as the Buddha had an experience of “enlightenment,” that we live not once but many times, and that our karma (which simply means “actions”) will have an effect on us in the future, are all ideas that would be accepted by most Buddhists. But beyond this minimal consensus, differences emerge almost immediately, including disagreements over such fundamental matters as which scriptures are really the word of the Buddha.

Buddhist practices are diverse as well. While one group views medita-

tion as essential, the next insists that Buddhahood is accessible only through recitation of a certain mantra, and a third considers ritual empowerments by a guru to be required. Watching elderly Buddhists reverently offering small gifts of money or food to the Buddha in hopes of achieving a better rebirth, one realizes that in still other groups enlightenment, at least in this life, isn't the issue at all.

With some persistence, though, we can identify a few major fault lines within Buddhist America that can serve as basic points of orientation. First is the obvious distinction between those who were born into the faith and those who have become Buddhists by conversion. That the majority of “hereditary Buddhists” are Asian Americans is hardly surprising. Some observers have even argued that the fundamental divide within American Buddhism is a racial one, separating “white” and “Asian” practitioners.

The distinction is real, reflecting the perennial gap between the enthusiasm of the recent convert and the calm assurance of the hereditary believer as well as differences in cultural heritage. Yet recent converts to Buddhism are by no means all Caucasians. The membership rolls include African Americans and Latinos, as well as a few Asian-American “re-converts” who were raised in Christian or in nonreligious homes. To make sense of the landscape of Buddhist America, one must go beyond race and ethnicity to consider an entirely different factor: the ways in which these various forms of American Buddhism were transmitted to the United States.

Religions—not just Buddhism—travel in three major ways: as import, as export, and as “baggage.” (They may also be imposed by conquest, which, happily, is not a factor in this case.) Religions transmitted according to the “import” model are, so to speak, demand driven: the consumer (i.e. the potential convert) actively seeks out the faith. “Export” religions are disseminated through missionary activity, while “baggage” religions are transmitted whenever individuals or families bring their beliefs along when they move to a new place. It is these divergent styles of transmission, not matters of doctrine, practice, or national origin, that have shaped the most crucial differences within American Buddhism.

To begin with the import type, consider a hypothetical example: a college student living in the Midwest in the 1950s finds a book on Zen Buddhism in the public library and thinks it's the greatest thing he's ever heard of. So he buys a plane ticket, heads off to Japan, and begins to study meditation in a Zen temple. After several years of practice and some firsthand experience of Buddhist “awakening,” he returns to the United States and establishes a Zen center, where he begins to teach this form of Buddhism to other Americans.

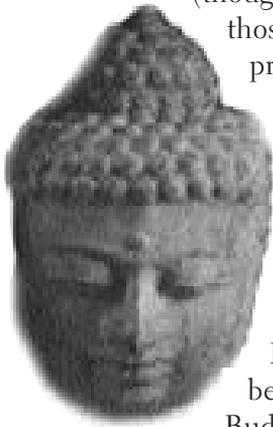
The important point to note here is that the importer (in this case, the

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college student) deliberately seeks out the product and takes the initiative to bring it home. But for this to happen, two crucial resources are required: money and leisure time. Buddhist groups of the import variety, in other words, can be launched only by those who have a certain degree of economic privilege. And not surprisingly, in these groups (as in other voluntary associations), like attracts like. Thus, the upper-middle-class status of the founders tends to be reflected in their followers, with such communities drawing a mostly well-educated, financially comfortable, and overwhelmingly European-American constituency.

A convenient label for the groups formed by the import process, then, would be “Elite Buddhism.” But this kind of Buddhism is more than a matter of socioeconomic background. At first glance, the groups belonging to this category would seem to span the full spectrum of Buddhist traditions: there are a number of schools of Tibetan Buddhism, various centers teaching meditation practices known as Vipassana (drawn primarily from Southeast Asia), and Japanese, Korean, and Chinese varieties of Zen. Yet a closer look reveals that what these groups all have in common is far more significant than the divergence in the sources of their inspiration. For the very names of two of these three types (Vipassana and Zen) mean “meditation.” On the level of practice, then, the most striking feature of Elite Buddhism in America is its emphasis on meditation.

Meditation is, of course, part of the traditional repertoire of most (though not all) Asian Buddhist schools, at least for those who have undertaken a full-time monastic practice. What is distinctive about Elite



Buddhism, however, is not its heavy emphasis on meditation but its scanting of other aspects of traditional Buddhism. For example, though monasticism has been the central Buddhist institution (and monastic life considered an essential prerequisite to enlightenment) in the vast majority of Buddhist countries, Elite Buddhists have been largely uninterested in becoming monks or nuns, preferring to see their Buddhist practice as a way of enhancing the quality of their lives as laypeople. While traditional

Buddhists have spent a great deal of energy on activities that are best described as “devotional,” Elite Buddhists, many of them still fleeing the theistic traditions of their youth, have little patience with such practices. And while codes of ethics have played a central role in traditional Buddhist societies, they have had little appeal for Elite Buddhists, many of whom were drawn to Buddhism by what they saw as its promise of a more spontaneous life. Indeed, until fairly recently, when scandals involving sexual affairs and financial mismanagement in several American Tibetan and Zen communities forced some serious rethinking, ethical codes were given almost no attention in Elite Buddhist circles.

Elite Buddhism thus represents not simply an Asian religion transplanted to a new environment but a curious amalgamation of traditional Buddhist ideas and certain upper-middle-class American values—above all individualism, freedom of choice, and personal fulfillment. These “non-negotiable cultural demands” have reshaped Buddhist ideas and practices in significant ways, yielding a genuinely new religious “product” uniquely adapted to certain segments of the American “market.”

The “export” process of transmission has produced American Buddhist groups of a strikingly different type. Because the transmission itself is underwritten by the home church, the potential convert does not need money, power, or time to come into contact with Buddhism of this sort, only a willingness to listen. Encounters with a missionary may take place on a street corner, in the subway, or even in one’s home. Export religion is thus something of a wild card: it can attract a wide range of adherents, or it may appeal to no one at all.

Since what fuels the formation of Buddhist groups of this type is energetic proseletyzing, an appropriate label for such groups is “Evangelical Buddhism.” And one Buddhist organization in America, above all, fits this category: the Soka Gakkai International. This group (whose name means Value-Creating Study Association) began its life in Japan in the 1930s as a lay association devoted to spreading the teachings of the Nichiren Shoshu school. According to this school (one of the many strands of Mahayana Buddhism), all beings have the potential for Buddhahood, but this inherent Buddha-nature can only be made manifest through chanting of the mantra “*namu myoho renge kyo.*” These words—which literally mean “homage to the *Lotus Sutra*,” one of the most popular Buddhist scriptures in Japan—are believed to be powerful enough not just to change the practitioner’s spiritual state but to improve his or her material circumstances as well. The Soka Gakkai, in other words, teaches a form of Buddhism in which both material and spiritual happiness can be attained not through many lifetimes of strenuous practice, or even weeks or months of meditation retreats, but through the daily recitation of a simple phrase.

Both the simplicity of the practice and the fact that this form of Buddhism addresses economic as well as spiritual needs has meant that the Soka Gakkai, from the time of its arrival in the United States during the 1950s, has had the potential to appeal to a very different, and far less privileged, audience than the Elite Buddhist traditions. Unlike the latter—most of whose members are college educated, with many holding graduate degrees—only about half of Soka Gakkai members have attended college, and barely a quarter hold bachelor’s degrees. Statistics compiled by the Soka Gakkai itself show a wide range of educational levels and occupations; my own observations suggest a center of gravity in the lower-middle class.

But it is in the ethnicity of its members that the distinctiveness of the Soka Gakkai is most obvious, for it has attracted a following that

includes large numbers of Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans (not all of Japanese ancestry). According to a 1983 survey compiled by the organization itself, fully 55 percent of its members had non-European ethnic backgrounds.

The fact that Evangelical Buddhism has undergone fewer changes in America than Elite Buddhism is the direct result of its mode of transmission. Because the Soka Gakkai was established by missionaries accountable to the home organization, its Japanese leadership has been able to limit the extent of its adaptation to American values. Indeed, one former member remarked that the only real difference between the American and the Japanese Soka Gakkai is that members in America usually sit on chairs.

Yet the remarkable success of the Soka Gakkai in the United States—at one point the organization claimed a membership of 500,000, though even Soka Gakkai officials now admit this figure was far too high—would not have been possible if its values had not harmonized with the aspirations of the audience it addressed. In particular, the Soka Gakkai has been able to tap into the “American dream” of upward mobility, a dream that has often been difficult to realize for those who find the obstacles of racism and exclusion in their path.

Finally we come to the category of “Baggage Buddhism”—though perhaps we should have begun with this type, for here at last we meet with Buddhists who were simply born into the faith of their ancestors. Like Export Buddhism, this type involves travel to America by Buddhists from Asian countries, but the migration is not for religious purposes. Instead, these Buddhists (or their ancestors) came as immigrants to the United States to pursue



Members of the Soka Gakkai attend a regular gathering in Philadelphia.

economic opportunity, or, especially in the case of recent refugees from Southeast Asia, to escape persecution at home.

Baggage Buddhists span the full range of schools and national origins, ranging from Theravadins from Cambodia to Mahayanists from Korea to Kalmyck Mongols of the Vajrayana school. But to the outsider, these organizations display remarkable similarities. Above all, they tend to be deliberately monoethnic in membership at the outset, for they serve not only religious purposes but operate as supportive community centers as well. Such temples may provide language lessons, a place to network for jobs, and above all a place to relax with others who share one's own cultural assumptions and to whom nothing needs to be explained. Though all Buddhists (of course) have their own ethnicity, it is only in Buddhist groups of this type that ethnicity serves as the primary defining feature. This type can therefore be labeled "Ethnic Buddhism."

Buddhism in America, at this stage in its history, thus includes participants of three quite different sorts. But though all would call themselves Buddhists, communication across (or even within) these three categories is often difficult, even nonexistent. Within the Elite category we do find considerable exchange; it is not at all unusual for participants to move easily from Vipassana practice to Tibetan Buddhism to Zen. Yet Elite Buddhists do not accord the same acceptance to members of Evangelical and Ethnic Buddhist groups. Since they do not practice meditation—so the reasoning goes—members of these two latter groups cannot be considered "genuine" Buddhists.

Such exclusion-by-definition has not, needless to say, been viewed kindly by those who are excluded—especially the Ethnic Buddhists, whose roots in the faith usually are many generations deep. But it is not only Elite Buddhists whose map of the Buddhist world renders other practitioners invisible. Evangelical Buddhists, too, operate on the basis of a narrow definition of "true Buddhism" (their expression), considering both Elite and Ethnic Buddhists to have missed something essential since they do not practice the chant taught by the Soka Gakkai. Ethnic Buddhists tend, in general, to be less critical of their coreligionists, in large part because they have not abbreviated the spectrum of "real" Buddhism so severely, retaining as they do a broad range of the moral, meditative, and ritual practices that were current in their homelands. Ironically, though, these Buddhists have little incentive to communicate with other Ethnic Buddhist groups, precisely because part of their mission is to preserve their own distinctive culture.

Even when attempts to cross the boundaries dividing these groups are made, the results can be discouraging. When Americans of non-Asian descent are drawn to Ethnic Buddhist temples, for example, the result is often what Paul Numrich of the University of Illinois calls, in *Old Wisdom in the New World* (1996), "parallel congregations": rather than merging to form a single organization, Asian and

non-Asian American Buddhists have often found their visions of Buddhism to be so incompatible that they simply meet at separate times in the same building.

Given these deep rifts within American Buddhism, we might well ask whether any of these subgroups will succeed in becoming a permanent part of the American religious landscape. For Ethnic Buddhists, the question is the one faced by all immigrants: will our children follow in our footsteps? For earlier generations of Asian immigrants, the value of remaining members of a religion viewed as “deviant” by mainstream society was not at all self-evident. Of the roughly 500,000 Japanese Americans in the United States today, for example, fewer than 20,000 are registered as members of the Buddhist Churches of America, the largest Japanese-American Buddhist organization in the country. The vast majority of Japanese Americans have either become Christians (virtually all of them Protestant) or claim no religious affiliation at all.

Things may be different today. Though Buddhists, especially Asian-American Buddhists, still encounter hostility and even violence in some parts of the country, the very fact that Buddhism is now relatively well known in the United States—and even carries, in some circles, significant prestige—may mean that more recent Asian Buddhist immigrants will view their ancestral religion as an asset, not a liability. So far, though, the evidence suggests that this may not be enough to stem the tide of religious assimilation. Ironically, recent Asian immigrants seem to be converting to Christianity (and increasingly its evangelical forms, as Stanford University religion professor Rudy Busto observed in *Amerasia Journal* last year) as rapidly as European Americans are becoming Buddhists.

For Evangelical Buddhists, the greatest challenge may arise not from circumstances in the United States but from events in Japan. In 1991, after years of wrangling between the Soka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, the Soka Gakkai was formally excommunicated by its parent organization. The real sources of the conflict appear to lie in a struggle between the priesthood and the lay organization for financial and political control, but each side has portrayed the dispute as resulting from the religious heresy and moral corruption of the other. The Soka Gakkai has attempted to take the rhetorical high road, likening its separation from the priesthood to the Protestant Reformation, but it remains to be seen whether its membership will find this representation convincing. While the American organization still seems viable, a serious decline in the number of subscribers to the organization’s weekly newspaper (which in recent years has dipped below 40,000) suggests that the schism may have dealt it a painful blow.

The Elite Buddhist groups, by contrast, would seem at first glance to be in good health: major bookstores offer entire shelves of publications on Tibetan Buddhism, Vipassana, and Zen, and mainstream

newspapers and magazines frequently carry articles on the subject. So thoroughly do Elite Buddhist concerns (such as “engaged Buddhism,” much of it the result of Western social activism exported to Asia and subsequently re-exported to the West) dominate the media’s picture of Buddhism that these groups often appear to be the only game in town.

Yet Elite Buddhist groups have one striking demographic peculiarity: virtually all of the communities now in existence were formed by people who came of age during the late 1960s and early ’70s, and members of succeeding age cohorts have joined in much smaller numbers. If such communities do not succeed in attracting younger members (and in retaining the children of the first-generation converts), they will soon fade from the American religious scene.

History offers American Buddhists a chastening lesson. During the 1890s, the United States experienced a “Buddhism boom” not unlike that of today. The *New York Journal* reported that “it is no uncommon thing to hear a New Yorker say he is a Buddhist nowadays,” the historian Thomas Tweed writes in *The American Encounter with Buddhism* (1992). A number of Protestant ministers worried in print that their congregations might be attracted to this strange faith. Public interest was strong enough to provoke the *Atlantic Monthly* to run a feature article titled “The Religion of Gotama Buddha.” Yet by the early 1920s the boom was over, and Buddhism became all but invisible in American life save for a handful of Asian-American congregations.

If today’s American Buddhists are to avoid the fate of their predecessors of a century ago, they must accomplish two things. First, they must move beyond the concept of Buddhism as a matter of individual “religious preference,” grounding it instead in the everyday practice of families and larger social networks. Second, they must create sturdy institutions to take the place of today’s informal associations of like-minded practitioners. In dealing with the first necessity, Ethnic Buddhists, who have always seen their religion as a family affair, are clearly in the lead. The Evangelical Buddhists, with their ready-made organizational structures imported from Japan, may well have the edge in establishing institutions.

Ironically, it is the Buddhists we hear the most about in the American media—the Elite Buddhists—who have so far attracted the least diverse membership, and thus have the greatest challenges to overcome if they are to survive into the next generation. Yet each of the main branches of American Buddhism clearly has much to learn from the others if all three hope to continue to flourish on American soil.

The Worldliness Of Buddhism

by Donald K. Swearer

Despite Buddhism's growing presence in the West, most Americans still badly misunderstand this ancient world religion. The leaders of Philadelphia's Thai community were rudely reminded of this unpleasant fact during the 1980s when they set out to buy land for a Buddhist temple and monastery not far from the City of Brotherly Love. After searching nearly a year, the Thais were delighted to find a lovely 10-acre site overlooking a lake in southeastern Pennsylvania's Chester County. All that was needed was the local zoning board's permission to use the site for religious purposes.

Arriving on the appointed day for their hearing before the board, the group's leaders were surprised to find an angry, standing-room-only crowd packing the room. One after another during the long evening, impassioned residents rose to vent their fears about the Buddhists' plans. A Buddhist presence would destroy the community's Christian and



The Three Jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma (symbolized by the lotus flower), and the sangha (the monk rising from the flower)

American values, some speakers said. Others worried that proselytizing Buddhists would brainwash their sons and daughters and lure them into esoteric religious practices. Buddhism to these Americans was barely distinguishable from the Hare Krishnas and other cults, an exotic threat to their world. The dismayed Thais immediately withdrew their application. No one had asked them about their intentions or aspirations. Nor did it seem likely that anyone would.

Unfortunately, the opponents of the Buddhist temple in Chester County were no worse informed about the nature of Buddhism than most other Americans. To be sure, the view of Buddhism as a mystical religion far removed from the realities of the workaday world has been a major part of the faith's appeal in the West. Yet whether this picture of Buddhism-as-esoteric-religion is seen in a negative or positive light, it is still a flawed and one-dimensional portrait. It is a portrait, however, with a long history. Some of the earliest Western explicators of Buddhism, such as W. Y. Evans-Wentz in *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrine* (1935) and Alexandra David-Neel in *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (1929), painted Tibetan Buddhism in shades of the exotic and esoteric. During the 1950s, D. T. Suzuki's depiction of Zen Buddhism as antirational and iconoclastic had great appeal to Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac (author of *The Dharma Bums* [1958]), and other members of the Beat Generation. The appeal spilled over into the counterculture movement, which made books such as Alan Watt's *Way of Zen* (1957) and Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922; translation 1951) part of the young's standard equipment. Today, Buddhism is probably personified for most people by the Dalai Lama and celebrity followers such as actor Richard Gere. (That is only the beginning: the Dalai Lama is featured in two upcoming Hollywood movies.)

The view of Buddhism held by many Westerners is one-sided, but not totally without foundation. From its very beginning some 2,500 years ago, there has been within Buddhism a tension between the this-worldly and the other-worldly. This tension was at the heart of many early doctrinal controversies about such matters as the nature of Nirvana, the purpose of monastic life, and the character of the relationship between monks and the laity. Its origins go back to the life of the founder, Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, or the Enlightened One.

Buddhism emerged in what is now southern Nepal during the sixth century B.C.E. The traditional dates of the Buddha's life are 563–483 B.C.E., although some modern scholars place his lifetime more than 100 years later. It was a time of unusual upheaval and change throughout the world, as the widespread adoption of iron tools and weapons revolutionized farming and warfare. During the Buddha's lifetime, the vast plains of northern India nourished by the Ganges River and its tributaries were being remade. The region's thick forests were disappearing as an expanding population

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In a 19th-century painting from Burma, the Buddha and his followers receive alms from a layman.

claimed more and more land for paddy rice and other cultivated crops. New towns and cities sprang up, and with them came a radically new political order as powerful rulers absorbed the region's many small, autonomous states into larger kingdoms and empires. The Buddha himself lived to see the land of his clan, the Sakyas, overrun by another kingdom, which itself later fell to an even larger empire.

Elsewhere in the ancient world, similar changes were bringing forth other thinkers and prophets, from Confucius and Lao-tse in China to Thales, Heraclitus, and other pre-Socratics in Greece. In India, the Buddha and other mendicant truth seekers—including Makkhali Gosala and Mahavira, the respective founders of the Ajavikas and the Jains—attracted small groups of disciples who followed an informal code of religious discipline and shared many of the same religious concepts. They set themselves against the dominant Brahmanism, which elevated a priestly caste to prominence. The charismatic challengers, although not revered as divine, were honored both for their teachings and for magical feats achieved through the disciplines of yoga, meditation, and asceticism.

Solid facts about the Buddha's life are scarce. The earliest sacred biographies, such as the *Buddhacarita* (The acts of the Buddha), written in the second century B.C.E., are mostly myth and legend. Buddhism's many different traditions have different versions of the Buddha story, and there even are variations within each tradition.

In the version accepted by Theravada Buddhists, who are predomi-



A monastery painting shows the chain of dependent origination. It is gripped by Mara, the personification of death. The animals in the center represent the cardinal faults (passion, hatred, and delusion); the big segments show the six spheres of existence.

nant in Southeast Asia, the Buddha was born Prince Siddhartha Gautama, the son of the ruler of the Sakya clan in the foothills of the Himalayas. Shortly after his birth, eight learned fortunetellers predicted that Siddhartha would become either a universal, world-conquering monarch or a fully enlightened Buddha. Distressed at the prospect that his son might not succeed him, Siddhartha's father surrounded him with material pleasures and possessions. At the age of 16 the prince married, and his father built him three splendid palaces, one for each season, where he was attended by servants and concubines and no less

than 40,000 dancing girls. During the next 17 years, according to legendary accounts, Siddhartha was “wholly given over to pleasure.”

The story takes a dramatic turn when the prince encounters a decrepit old man, a grievously ill man, a corpse, and finally an ascetic. These experiences threw Siddhartha into despair. His palace, “as splendid as the palace of the chief of the gods, began to seem like a charnal ground filled with dead bodies and the three modes of existence [past, present, future] like houses of fire.” He vowed to live the life of a wandering ascetic in a quest for an eternal truth beyond the transient truths of ordinary sense perception and beyond the inexorable realities of aging, sickness, and death. For six years he wandered northern India with five disciples (one of whom was one of the original eight fortunetellers). To no avail, he studied the teachings of the great philosophers and masters of yoga and practiced extreme forms of renunciation and asceticism, at times living on a single grain of rice per day, at others going completely without food. These years, says one Buddhist text, “were like time spent in endeavoring to tie the air into knots.” Finally, after he collapsed during a long fast and was given up for dead by his followers, the Buddha abandoned this path.

After he regained his health, the Buddha seated himself beneath a tree and resolved not to rise until he had found enlightenment. To achieve it he was forced to confront Mara, the lord of the senses, who is strongly associated with death. Again, accounts of this epoch battle between good and evil vary, but in the end Siddhartha defeats the hosts his foe sends against him, calling on the power of Mother Earth to defend himself. He spends the rest of the night in deep meditation, finally attaining insight into the nature of suffering, its cause and its cessation—a state of understanding and equanimity called Nirvana. The tradition dates this event to 528 B.C.E., and the Buddha’s first words uttered after his enlightenment have been passed down in poetry and legend:

Long have I wandered;
Long bound by the chain of life.
Through many births
I have sought in vain
The builder of this house [mind and body].
Suffering is birth again and again.
O housemaker [craving], I now see you!
You shall not build this house again.
Broken are all your rafters,
Your roof beam destroyed.
My mind has attained the unconditioned,
And reached the end of all craving.

The Buddha’s victory represents the core teaching of early Buddhism: suffering and death can be overcome only when ignorance and desire have been put aside. This message was encapsulated in the Buddha’s first post-enlightenment teaching, *Setting the Wheel of the Truth in Motion*. This discourse, delivered to his five disciples at what is now the Deer Park

in the holy city of Benares, enumerated the Four Noble Truths: that life's pleasures and satisfactions are ultimately unsatisfactory or unfulfilling, that this sense of dissatisfaction is rooted in selfish attachment and greed based on an erroneous perception of ego; that a deeper sense of purpose and meaning (Nirvana) is achieved when the false sense of ego is transcended, and that the way to this saving knowledge is by means of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Path's eight elements are right understanding, right intention, right speech, right conduct, right vocation, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Before the five followers would accept his teaching, however, the Buddha had to persuade them that in casting off his life as an ascetic he had not merely embraced its opposite, a life of pleasure. The path to enlightenment, he told them, required following a Middle Way, avoiding the extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence. The Middle Way is a life of simplicity, not discomfort. When the skeptical disciples finally accepted the Buddha's teaching they became the first members of the *sangha*, or religious order. They, too, eventually became, like the Buddha himself, *arhat* (perfected ones), though their enlightenment was not the equal of the full and perfect enlightenment of the Buddha.

Soon the *sangha* had 60 members, all of whom traveled to spread the Buddha's teaching within an area of perhaps 200 square miles in northern India, and all of whom became *arhat*. Their leader himself spent 45 years as a mendicant teacher. According to Buddhist accounts, he attracted followers from many social classes and walks of life, including merchants, aristocrats, and even ascetics such as the great yogi Kasyapa, whom the Buddha converted through feats of levitation and clairvoyance. After some debate, the Buddha reluctantly allowed women to undertake the monastic life. Mahaprajapati, who was the Buddha's aunt as well as his stepmother, became the first Buddhist nun.

The Western scholars and travelers who took up the study of Buddhism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were enthralled by this story of the Buddha's renunciation and enlightenment. In their writings they implicitly contrasted Buddhism with the faith-based theism of Christianity, portraying it as a rational religious philosophy pursued through a quiet life of renunciation and meditation. A few of these early observers emphasized the more mystical and esoteric aspects of Buddhism, but they shared with other Westerners a focus on what the famed German sociologist Max Weber called religious "virtuosos"—the Buddhist monks who performed heroic feats of fasting and meditation in pursuit of absolute truth.

It is largely because of these earlier writers, especially Weber, that the West has acquired a skewed portrait of Buddhism as a world-denying religion. Idealizing the *sangha* as a company of renouncers, they tended to dismiss the everyday devotional Buddhism of the faith's many ordinary adherents—including such things as their veneration of the *sangha* and of Buddha images and relics—as a corrupt form of Buddhism that arose as illiterate peasants throughout Asia embraced the faith after the Budd-



The vast ninth-century stupa and temple complex at Borobudur, on the Indonesian island of Java, is one of the most magnificent sites in the Buddhist world.

ha's death. In these writers' hands, Buddhism was made to appear a faith virtually without historical, sociological, and political dimensions.

But the "worldliness" of Buddhism may be said to have begun with the Buddha himself. He was, after all, a man of considerable charisma who worked ceaselessly after his enlightenment to show others the way to the truth. Among his most important early supporters were local kings and nobles in northern India, men who had been moved by his words and deeds, such as King Bimbisara, the ruler of the kingdom of Magadha.

The Buddha himself is said to have warned his followers on more than one occasion against worshipping him. In the *Samyutta-Nikaya*, he sends away an overly attentive disciple named Vatkali, saying "What good to you is this body of filth? He who sees the dharma [teachings] sees me." Yet in his own lifetime the Buddha received generous offerings from devoted lay followers, and veneration of his bodily relics may have begun immediately after his death (apparently from dysentery) and cremation in 483 B.C.E. According to Buddhist sources, the Buddha's cremated remains were divided among eight Indian rulers, who enshrined them in reliquary mounds (*stupas*) in their kingdoms. Legend also recounts that King Asoka, who ruled Magadha from about 273 to 232 B.C.E. and eventually extended his dominion—and the influence of Buddhism—over much of the Indian subcontinent, re-enshrined these relics at 84,000 locations throughout India. As Buddhism later spread throughout Asia,

ever more elaborate and beautiful *stupas* were built.

The cult of *stupas* was one of the earliest forms of Buddhist devotional religion. The *stupa* not only symbolized the Buddha but in a magical sense made him present. Freestanding images of the Buddha that began to appear as early as the first century B.C.E. served a similar purpose. In his own lifetime, the Blessed One and the *sangha* received offerings from their lay followers, who came not only to hear religious teachings but hoping to gain some boon or benefit—if not in this life then in some future one. After his death, pilgrims traveled to the *stupas* in order to be in his presence, bringing offerings of incense, flowers, and material goods. Monks, who were originally respected chiefly as teachers of the Buddha's dharma, came to be revered as representatives of his sacred wisdom and repositories of his power. They, too, were showered with offerings by hopeful laypeople.

Ordinary religious practice developed along different lines in different countries, but it generally combines a concern with otherworldly affairs with a very ordinary interest in such things as good health and good crops. The faithful may worship at home before their own shrines and at weekly temple rituals. Throughout the Buddhist world, ceremonies and festivals mark major events such as the lunar New Year, Buddha's Day, and changes in the agricultural cycle. Some holidays are unique to certain locales or specially attuned to local tastes. Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Buddhists honor their ancestors during All Souls feasts. In Tibet, the new year festival includes a ritual exorcism of evil; in Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, an image of the Buddha is paraded through the streets in hopes of ensuring the onset of the monsoon rains. A day at a temple fair with the raucous noise of hawkers and entertainers would convince most outsiders that Buddhism is not all about withdrawal and meditation.

These rituals, ceremonies, and festivals elevate life from the mundane and give meaning to the seemingly random nature of human experience by connecting it to a Buddhist narrative framework. Buddhism also helps to define social ethics for laypeople, upholding the virtues of generosity and loving kindness toward humans and animals and placing a high value on honesty and uprightness. All Buddhists are expected to embrace the Five Precepts—which forbid killing, stealing, lying, adultery, and the consumption of alcohol. From the renunciant elements of Buddhist practice comes an emphasis on the values of simplicity, equanimity, and non-violence. These values are not confined to the monastery. Lose your temper in a 20th-century Chiang Mai market, and ordinary Thais will soothe you with the words *jai-yen* (literally, have a cool head).

While Buddhists have evolved various conceptions of salvation, early Buddhism did not look for release in an eternal hereafter. The Buddhist conception of existence is cyclical, with escape from the pain of worldly existence possible only for those who attain Nirvana after many lifetimes of effort. In Buddhism there is rebirth but no reincarnation. The Buddha taught that the

idea of a self or soul is an illusion (a teaching that has caused endless debate among his followers). What is reborn is a consciousness conditioned by the sum of all past actions, or karma.

Buddhism's concern with earthly affairs began, in a sense, at the top. As it spread through Asia during the centuries after the Buddha's death, it owed much of its success to the support of powerful kings, many of whom were attracted to Buddhism because it provided a cosmological scheme legitimating a powerful, centralized rule, a scheme rooted in a cyclical view of history. In the golden age, a universal monarch presided over a realm free from poverty, violence, and wrongdoing. But in a world marked by strife, hostility, and greed, kings must maintain order in the secular realm, by force if necessary, while the *sangha* presides over spiritual life and guides monarchs to further the welfare of their subjects.

Probably not by accident, many of the important legends concerning kingship date from about the time of Buddhism's most famous royal patron, King Asoka. In about 264 B.C.E. Asoka conquered Kalinga, the most powerful kingdom in India still independent of his rule, but was so appalled by the horrors his armies had inflicted on the Kalingans that he embraced the Buddha's teaching of nonviolence and compassion. Asoka became convinced that the only true conquest was not by force of arms but by the force of the teachings of religion. If his heirs should also become conquerors, he wrote, "they should take pleasure in patience and gentleness, and regard as (the only true) conquest the conquest won by piety."

Asoka himself may not have been a practicing Buddhist, but there is no doubt that he was an active supporter of the faith. He generously subsidized the monastic order and did much to aid the spread of Buddhism. He was, by all accounts, a wise and humane ruler, and tolerant of other faiths (as were many later Buddhist rulers). On rocks and stone pillars he erected throughout the lands under his control—a number of them still standing—he engraved edicts extolling virtuous behavior, commending specific Buddhist texts, and encouraging his subjects to make the pilgrimage to Bodh-Gaya, the Buddha's birthplace.

A religion that lives by royal patronage can also die without it. Little more than 50 years after King Asoka's death in 232 B.C.E., when his empire passed into the hands of Hindu successors, Buddhism began to wane in the land of its birth. It would revive under royal patronage, but after the 10th century C.E. its last lights in India would flicker out under the combined assaults of a resurgent Hinduism and invasions by the followers of Muhammad.

Throughout Asia, the relationship between state and *sangha* would be vitally important to Buddhism's condition. In north China, Buddhism flourished until the Northern Wei emperor decreed in 446 C.E. that all Buddhist temples and *stupas* were to be destroyed. The religion was later revived but fell again after 846 when a T'ang

imperial edict led to the destruction of some 4,600 monasteries and 40,000 temples and forced more than 260,000 monks and nuns to return to lay life. Buddhism by then was too thoroughly integrated into Chinese life to disappear, but it would never regain the vibrancy it had once enjoyed. Today, in other parts of Asia, the state's role remains important, for better and for worse. In Thailand, Buddhism flourishes as the state religion, while in Cambodia, the faith is still recovering from Pol Pot's murderous assault on monks and religious institutions.

Asoka's patronage, however, was especially important in the history of Buddhism, for he not only sustained the faith at an important point in its development but spread it far beyond his own borders. According to Buddhist accounts, two of his children brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka, and another carried it to Central Asia. It was chiefly from Sri Lanka, especially around the 12th century C.E., that Buddhism spread to Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, and Vietnam. But Buddhism also traveled by many other routes. Central Asia became a major center of Buddhism by the first century C.E., and from there the faith spread along the Silk Road and into China and Korea. It also traveled from India across the Bay of Bengal to the region around Thailand. It was a two-way traffic. Pilgrims also journeyed to India from China and other far-flung regions in search of knowledge from the source.

They did not always find the same Buddhism—and for good reasons: the Buddha's teachings were not even written down until several centuries after his death, and *sanghas* existed in widely scattered locales, many nurturing their own distinctive interpretations and producing their own texts. Tradition has it that there were 18 different schools of Buddhism in these early days. But the main division, arising as early as the first century B.C.E., separated Hinayana Buddhists and reformist Mahayana Buddhists, who took for themselves the mantle of "Greater Vehicle," sticking their rivals with the "Lesser Vehicle" label.

There are within these great schools many lesser divisions. Theravada Buddhism, with roots in the Hinayana tradition embraced and transmitted by Asoka, is predominant in Southeast Asia. Mahayana Buddhism includes many schools—including Zen in China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, and Vajrayana in Tibet, and Jodo Shin Shu (or the Pure Land) in Japan.

The Theravada-Mahayana division has its origins partly in disagreements over the all-important rules of conduct governing monks, and partly in disputes over the meaning of certain Buddhist teachings about the nature of the self and the Buddha. Theravada Buddhists are said to be "original" Buddhists in that they adhere to the notion of the historical Buddha and the faith's early emphasis on monks striving for enlightenment. Mahayana Buddhism offers a more metaphysical reading of the Buddha, placing more emphasis on his previous lives as *bodhisattva*, or aspirant to Buddhahood. Many interpreters insist that Mahayana Buddhism makes the prospect of achieving Buddhahood more of a possibility for laypeople as well as monks, and that it encourages all Buddhists, as *bodhisattvas*, to work for the liberation of other people, just as the



Exiled Tibetan Buddhists gather at a temple in Dharamsala, India.

Buddha did. But this distinction is debatable. What can be safely said is that Mahayana Buddhism blurs the distinction between monk and laity far more than classical Theravada did.

Everywhere it took root, Buddhism assumed a different coloration, engaging the world as it adapted to local cultures and religious practices. In many places, relatively simple and unorganized animistic faiths prevailed, offering relatively little resistance to Buddhism. In Thailand Buddhism encountered the *phi*, in Myanmar the cult of *nats*. In Tibet, a form of Tantric Buddhism (itself related to mystical Hindu Tantrism) that arrived in the 8th century C.E. blended with the local Bön shamanism, creating a unique form of Buddhism. By the end of the 16th century, Tibet had become a Buddhist theocracy ruled by the Dalai (great ocean) Lama (teacher), revered as an incarnation of Avolokitesvara, the kingdom's protective deity. The current Dalai Lama is the 14th in this line.

Buddhism was most profoundly altered in China, Korea, and Japan, where Mahayana Buddhists faced well-established and sophisticated doctrines. In all of these countries, the monastic structure of Indian Buddhism gradually yielded to a more laity-based religious practice. In China, for example, Buddhism clashed with the secular, pragmatic doctrines of the Confucian elite, who could hardly have seen the "otherworldly" Buddhist pursuit of enlightenment and Nirvana as anything but alien and threatening. The withdrawal of monks from family and society, their dependence on others for their support, and their claims of independence from worldly government all cut distinctly against the Confucian grain. Chinese Taoism, too, with its

emphasis on the living and on achieving harmony with the forces of nature, did not readily give way before Buddhism. So Buddhism in its many forms accommodated itself to China, attaching itself to existing doctrines where it could and adapting in other cases. In the meditative traditions that developed in India, for example, enlightenment is a goal realized only after many lifetimes of arduous practice under great teachers, while in the most authentically Chinese forms of Zen, enlightenment is a sudden, spontaneous experience.

The coming of Western colonialism and Christianity beginning in the 16th century cast a pall over the Buddhist world. In Sri Lanka, for example, by the time the Portuguese were expelled (by the Dutch) in 1658, some 150 years after their arrival, only five ordained Buddhist monks remained. In places where the Westerners were less zealous in their efforts to convert those they conquered or where other circumstances were more auspicious, Buddhism fared better, but only Thailand and Japan completely escaped colonization.

By the 19th century, resistance to colonial rule in many Asian nations was beginning to coalesce around a new Buddhist nationalism. In 1918, the leaders of the Young Men's Buddhist Association in Rangoon used the British colonials' refusal to remove their shoes when entering Buddhist pagodas to launch a campaign for Burma's independence. The country's first leader after independence in 1948, prime minister U Nu, saw himself in the tradition of the classical Buddhist kings, and like other Buddhist nationalists often evoked Asoka's name. Before he was displaced in a 1962 coup, he tried to create a Buddhist socialism under which the basic material needs of all citizens would be met by the state, freeing them to pursue higher spiritual ends. Today many Buddhist monks risk prison or death to publicly support Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the democracy movement that struggles against the military dictatorship established after U Nu.

To Americans, modern Buddhism's engagement with the world was most memorably demonstrated in South Vietnam, where Buddhist protesters helped bring down the corrupt Ngo Dinh Diem regime in 1963. That year, the Venerable Thich Quang-Duc, one of many politically active Buddhist monks, set himself on fire in Saigon to protest the Diem regime's anti-Buddhist policies, an event engraved in the world's consciousness by photojournalist Malcolm Browne's famous photograph. The mobilization of Vietnam's Buddhist monks during the war years helped lay the foundation for a new kind of Buddhist involvement in the world.

During the past four decades, an international, ecumenical Buddhism has emerged, led by a trio of remarkable men. The chief inspiration for the worldwide "engaged Buddhist" movement, as it is known, has been Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen master and founder of the Tiep Hien Order of Interbeing, an international organization of laypeople, monks, and nuns headquartered at Plum Village, a meditation retreat in southern France. Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai layman, has led

efforts to fight rural poverty, prostitution, AIDS, and drug abuse in his native country—often battling the Thai government as well—and is the founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists. The groups in this alliance are transforming a monastery-based religion into a force against environmental degradation and the economic pressures that are destroying the social and cultural fabric of many developing countries. While friendly to Christianity and other faiths of the West, the leaders of this movement are critical of traditional Western views of nature and Western materialism.

The world's most widely recognized representative of engaged Buddhism is plainly the Dalai Lama. Living in exile in the northern Indian city of Dharamsala, where he fled two years after communist China occupied Tibet in 1957, he has gained worldwide stature. He lectures around the world on human rights, economic justice, and environmental protection, and challenges the international community to bring pressure to bear on China to end its policies of ethnic cleansing and ecological and cultural genocide in Tibet.

Accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the Dalai Lama dispelled any sense one might have of Buddhism as solely an otherworldly religion. His speech included concrete proposals for Tibet and the world, including the demilitarization of his native country and a ban on the manufacture, testing, and stockpiling of nuclear weapons around the world—a ban that is coming closer to realization every day. His was not the speech of a monk locked away from the world in a meditative trance. Indeed, he closed his address with a short prayer that exemplifies the Buddhist spirit of engagement with the world:

For as long as space endures,
And for as long as living beings remain,
Until then may I, too, abide
To dispel the misery of the world.

Engaged Buddhism thus joins a long and honorable roll of Buddhisms that have been born during the more than 2,500 years since the nativity of the founder. It is this very heterodoxy and diversity—so extreme that not all Buddhists bow to the same Buddha—that have proved to be the faith's great strength over the centuries.