

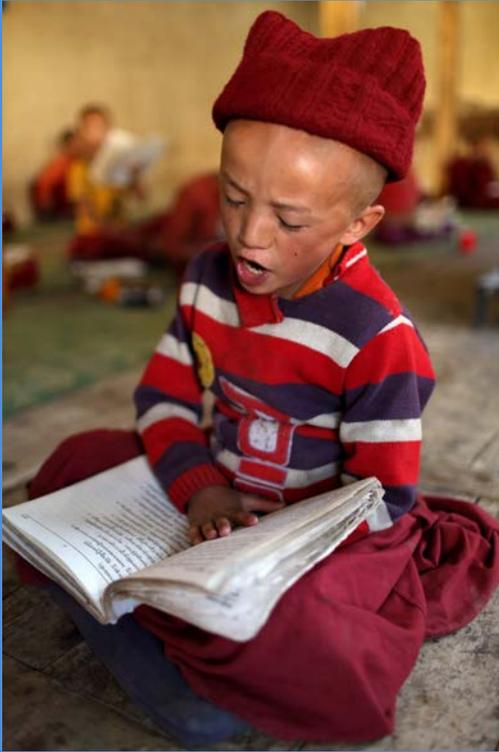
Buddhism



Introductory profiles adapted from
*On Common Ground: World
Religions in America*

Pluralism Project, Harvard University
Religious Literacy Project, Harvard
Divinity School
March 26, 2015

Lay people, monks, and nuns participate in
a ceremony at the Tharlam Monastery of
Tibetan Buddhism in Kathmandu, Nepal.
Wonderlane (2007), Flickr Creative
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Religion profiles are adapted from *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, a resource of the Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org/ocg).

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University
The Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School

"Ladakh, Likir monastery" by Dietmar Temps (2013) at Flickr Creative Commons.

Preface: How to Read These Profiles

In these religion profiles, our focus is on particular religious traditions with an emphasis on 1) their internal diversity, and 2) the ways that the traditions are always evolving and changing. Though we hope these profiles provide helpful introductions, this format is a bit misleading in that it can reinforce the idea that religions exist and develop in isolation from other social and historical forces, including other religions. While reading these profiles, please remember that religions always impact and are impacted by political, economic, social, and historical factors. Please see the Methods article for fuller explanation of these intersections and the Country Profiles for a demonstration of how to understand religious influences in particular social and historical contexts.

The Path of Awakening

In the sixth century BCE, a prince of India named Siddhartha Gautama is said to have given up his throne, left behind his family and his palace, and set out into the forest to seek answers to the haunting questions of suffering, disease, old age, and death. Through this ardent search and his deep meditation, he gained great insight. He became known as the Buddha, an honorific title meaning the "Enlightened One" or the "Awakened One," and is considered by many to be one of the archetypal spiritual pathfinders of history.

Within his own lifetime, the Buddha attracted a considerable following in India with his understanding of the suffering of living beings and his teachings about overcoming suffering through moral living, meditation, and insight into reality. Some followed him in the path of renunciation and became monks and nuns. Others remained as laity, learning from the Buddha's teachings, honoring the Buddha, and supporting the monastic community. While Buddhism has its roots in India, reverence for the Buddha and adherence to his teachings spread throughout Asia, and today the entire world. Buddhism can thus be considered a world religion in

that it is not specifically tied to a particular people or land.

There are currently two major streams of the Buddhist tradition: the Theravada tradition of South and Southeast Asia, including Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos; and the Mahayana tradition of China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. The Vajrayana tradition of Tibet, a subset of Mahayana, is large enough that it is sometimes recognized as a third major stream. While these streams are distinct, they are not entirely separate and have continually interacted in Asia.

Prince Siddhartha: Renouncing the World



An Indian Buddha at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, InSapphoWeTrust (2011), Flickr Creative Commons.

What we know about the life of the historical Buddha can be sketched from legends. One of the most beautiful literary renderings of the story is told by Ashvaghosha in the first century CE. Prince Siddhartha Gautama is said to have been born in the royal Shakya family, some say in the year 563 BCE, in a place called Lumbini, which is located in present-day Nepal, at the foothills of the Himalayas. At the time of his birth, seers foretold that he would either become a great king or an enlightened teacher. If the prince were to see the “four passing sights”—old age, sickness, death, and a wandering ascetic—he would renounce his royal life and seek enlightenment.

His father, the king, was determined that his son become a great ruler and tried to shield Prince Siddhartha from these four realities of life. However, at age 29, Siddhartha, with his charioteer, went out of the protected palace grounds and, for the first time, encountered suffering, which he understood to be an inevitable part of life. He saw four sights: a man bent with old age, a person afflicted with sickness, a corpse, and a wandering ascetic. It was the fourth sight, that of a wandering ascetic, that filled Siddhartha with a sense of urgency to find out what lay at the root of human suffering.

Siddhartha left the luxury of the palace. He studied and lived an austere life in the forest with the foremost teachers and ascetics of his time. Yet, he found that their teachings and severe bodily austerities did not enable him to answer the question of suffering or provide insight into how to be released from it. Having experienced the life of self-indulgence in the palace and then the life of self-denial in the forest, he finally settled on a “middle way,” a balance between these two extremes. Accepting food from a village girl, he recovered his bodily strength and began a journey inward through the practice of meditation.

Becoming the “Buddha”: The Way of Meditation

According to tradition, Siddhartha seated himself at the foot of a tree, which has since been called the Bodhi Tree, the tree of enlightenment. He vowed to sit beneath that tree until he had attained deep insight into suffering. As he sat through the night, a profound stillness settled upon his mind, like that of a lake on a windless day. This stillness enabled him to see ever more deeply and clearly into the cycle of grasping, clinging, and egotism found at the root of suffering.

The demon Mara rose to tempt him and to attack him with arrows of passion. Desire, fear, pride, and thirst rose to challenge his clear concentration of mind. But Siddhartha placed his hand on the earth, calling earth itself to witness his firm resolve. When the morning star appeared, Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha, literally the “Awakened One.” He had woken up to the nature of the changing world and the causes of suffering. This state of awakening was also called nirvana, literally the “blowing out” of the fires of ego-centered attachment which are the source of suffering.

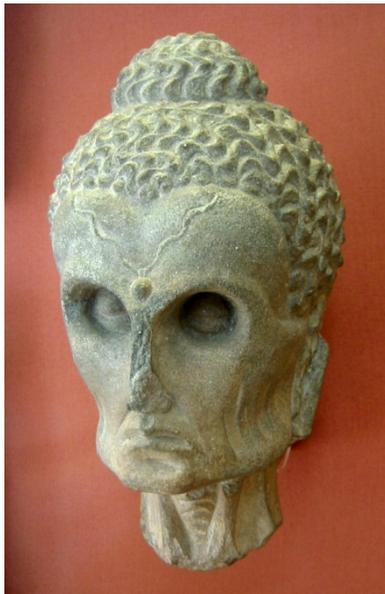
Siddhartha is called Shakyamuni Buddha, the “Sage of the Shakya clan” to make clear that this awakening is not uniquely his. Over time, there have been other individuals who have awakened to the truth and gained enlightenment, thereby becoming Buddhas. Among the most well-known and widely venerated are Amitabha (Amida) Buddha, Vairochana Buddha, and Bhaishajya-guru (better known as the Medicine Buddha). Indeed, sometimes Buddhas are depicted by the thousands, for the “Buddha nature” is the true awakened nature of all beings.

It is said that, out of great compassion, the newly enlightened Shakyamuni Buddha set out to show others the path he had followed so they might set foot on that path as well. After his awakening, the Buddha taught in the cities and villages of North India for some forty-five years.



A Thai woman meditates in Bangkok, longtrekhome (2007), Flickr Creative Commons.

The Dharma: The Teachings of the Buddha



A 2nd-3rd century statue of the “fasting Siddhartha” from the Swat Valley in current day Pakistan, British Museum, Wikimedia Commons.

The Buddha's sermons and teachings pointed toward the true nature of the universe, what is known within Buddhism as the Dharma. He gave his first sermon on the outskirts of the city of Varanasi at a deer park called Sarnath. This first sermon presents an overview of suffering and the way out of suffering. It is called the “Four Noble Truths.” The Buddha is often described as a physician who first diagnoses an illness and then suggests a medicine to cure the illness. The “Four Noble Truths” follow this pattern:

1. Life involves suffering, *duhkha*.

The “illness” that the Buddha diagnosed as the human condition is *duhkha*, a term often rendered in English as “suffering” or “unsatisfactoriness.” The Buddha spoke of three types of *duhkha*. First, there is the ordinary suffering of mental and physical pain. Second, there is the suffering produced by change, the simple fact that all things—including happy feelings and blissful states—are impermanent, as is life itself. Third, there is suffering produced by the failure to recognize that no “I” stands alone, but everything and everyone, including what we call our “self,” is conditioned and interdependent.

2. Suffering is caused by desire and grasping.

The Buddha saw that the impulse to crave, desire, or grasp something one doesn't have is the principal cause of suffering. Because of the impermanence and continuous change of all that we call "reality," the attempt to hold on to it is as doomed to frustration as the attempt to stake out a piece of a flowing river.

3. There is a way out of suffering.

This is the good news of the Dharma. It is possible to put an end to ego-centered desire, to put an end to dukkha and thus attain freedom from the perpetual sense of "unsatisfactoriness."

4. The way is the "Noble Eightfold Path."

To develop this freedom one must practice habits of ethical conduct, thought, and meditation that enable one to move along the path. These habits include:

- Right understanding. Really knowing, for example, that unwholesome acts and thoughts have consequences, as do wholesome acts and thoughts.
- Right intention. Recognizing that actions are shaped by habits of anger and self-centeredness, or by habits of compassion, understanding, and love.
- Right speech. Recognizing the moral implications of speech. Truthfulness.
- Right action. Observing the five precepts at the foundation of all morality: not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, and not clouding the mind with intoxicants.
- Right livelihood. Earning a living in ways that are consonant with the basic precepts.
- Right effort. Cultivating this way of living with the attention, the patience, and the perseverance that it takes to cultivate a field.
- Right mindfulness. Developing "presence of mind" through the moment-to-moment awareness of meditation practice, including mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of walking, and mindfulness of bodily sensations.
- Right concentration. Developing the ability to bring the dispersed and distracted mind and heart to a center, a focus, and to see clearly through that focused mind and heart.



The wheel with eight spokes represents the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhist art; a sculpture in Kanark, India (2012), saamiblog, Flickr Creative Commons.

The Sangha: The Buddhist Community



Paying respect to a monk in Thailand, Roberto Trm (2012), Flickr Creative Commons.

Those who followed the Buddha came to be called the Sangha—the community of monks (bhikshus) and nuns (bhikshunis). Those who became monks and nuns underwent an ordination ceremony of shaving their heads and donning robes to symbolize world-renunciation. They entered into the homeless life of wandering monastics who settled down in monasteries only during the months of the rainy season.

For some, the Sangha is the whole community of the Buddha’s followers. From the beginning, the Buddha’s disciples included laypeople who followed the Buddha’s teachings but remained householders.

Both the ordained and the laity followed the five precepts of basic ethics that are the foundation of religious life. In addition, a more extensive code of monastic rules, the Pratimoksha, eventually developed to govern the conduct of ordained persons.

The monastic and lay communities are interdependent. Even today, the laity receive teachings and guidance from monastics, while the monastics receive food, clothing, shelter, and in some cases all of their material requirements from the laity. Providing food and supplies to the monks is considered by many lay Buddhists to be an act of “merit-making,” earning good karma for oneself or loved ones.

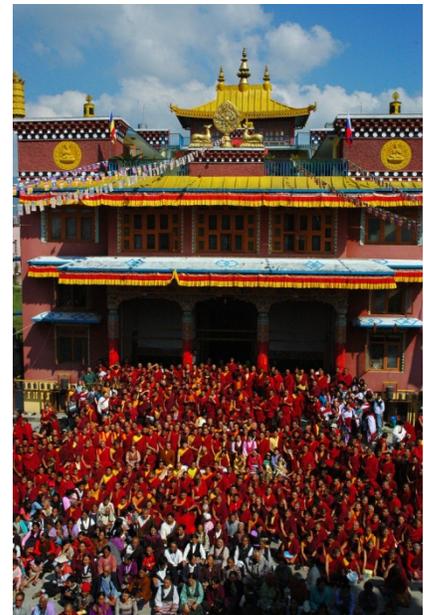
The Three Treasures

The “Three Treasures” of the Buddhist tradition are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Throughout the Buddhist world, Buddhists have these Three Treasures in common. To be a Buddhist means “taking refuge” in the Three Treasures, that is, to put one’s trust in them. Buddhists see as central to their lives the Buddha as well as enlightenment in general, the teachings of those who are enlightened, and the community that follows these teachings.

In the ancient Pali language the words of “taking refuge” are these:

- Buddham saranam gacchami. “I take refuge in the Buddha.”
- Dhammam saranam gacchami. “I take refuge in the Dharma.”
- Sangham saranam gacchami. “I take refuge in the Sangha.”

The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha continue to provide inspiration to Buddhists, but they are not understood in exactly the same way everywhere. A Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist might insist that the Buddha was a human pathfinder, nothing more. A Chinese Pure Land Buddhist might chant the name of Amitabha Buddha, seen as the eternal Buddha of Endless Light, with a prayer



Monks gather at Tharlam Monastery, Kathmandu (2007), Wonderlane, Flickr Creative Commons.

to be reborn in the Pure Land after death. A Japanese Zen master might shock one with the words, “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!” in recognition that grasping for the security of the Buddha creates as much suffering as any other desire.

The Expansion of Buddhism

In India, Buddhism began to wane in the sixth and seventh centuries CE when devotional Hinduism replaced Buddhism in the south and Hephthalite Huns invaded and sacked monasteries in the north. By the thirteenth century, repeated invasions by the Turks ensured that Buddhism had virtually disappeared. By this time, however, Buddhism was flourishing in many other parts of Asia. As early as the third century BCE the Indian emperor Ashoka, a convert to Buddhism, is said to have established the tradition on the island of Ceylon, or Sri Lanka. By the fifth century CE Buddhism had spread throughout what are now Myanmar and Thailand. By the thirteenth century, one of the early Buddhist schools, called the Theravada, “the way of the elders,” had become the dominant tradition of South and Southeast Asia.



A Zen Buddhist “sand” garden in a Japanese monastery, Kyoto (2010), Lars K, Flickr Creative Commons.

As early as the first century CE, Buddhist monks made their way over the “Silk Road” through Central Asia to China. By the seventh century, Buddhism had made a significant impact in China, interacting with Confucian and Daoist cultures and ideas. By this time the tradition was also firmly established in Korea. In the sixth century, the Buddhist tradition was also introduced into Japan, where it developed in a milieu shaped by both Shinto and other indigenous traditions. This form of Buddhism that first developed in India and later flourished in East Asia is known as the Mahayana, or “Great Vehicle.”

In the eighth century, Buddhism, shaped by the Tantric traditions of northeast India, spread to the high mountain plateau of Tibet. There, in interaction with the indigenous Bon religion, and with forms of Buddhism that had traveled to Tibet from East Asia, a distinctive and vibrant form of Mahayana Buddhism emerged known as Vajrayana, the “Diamond Vehicle.”

These streams of Buddhism are differentiated to some extent by their interpretations of the Buddha and the Buddha’s teachings, the scriptures they hold in special reverence, and the variety of cultural expressions they lend to Buddhist life and practice. It would be a mistake, however, to identify these streams of tradition too rigidly with either specific ideas or specific geographical areas.

Theravada: The Way of the Elders

The Theravada, literally “the way of the elders,” is the school of Buddhism most prominent today in the countries of Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. As the name suggests, it regards itself as the school most faithful to the teachings that have been passed down through the generations. In the United States, Theravada Buddhism has had its greatest growth since the 1960s when Euro-Americans started practicing vipassana, or “insight meditation.” At the same time, large numbers of immigrants from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and other traditional Theravadin countries traveled to the United States. The major characteristics of the Theravada can be summarized as follows:

1. The Pali Canon, comprised of scriptures and commentaries written in the ancient Pali language, is regarded as the most accurate source of the teachings of the historical Buddha. While other schools have various other versions of the canon or a broader interpretation of what the canon includes, the Theravadins believe that the Pali Canon is definitive.
2. The human and historical Buddha, the spiritual pathfinder, who lived 2,500 years ago in India is emphasized. While other schools of Buddhism might focus on the teachings of another Buddha or venerate multiple Buddhas, the Theravadins see Shakyamuni Buddha as central.
3. The ideal spiritual model of Theravada Buddhism is the arahant (arhat). Arahants, literally “worthy ones,” are Buddhist practitioners who attain nirvana and have perfected their discipline such that defilements and desires are extinguished.

Mahayana: The Great Vehicle

By around 200 CE, the beginnings of a new stream of the Buddhist tradition were visible within Indian Buddhism. This stream can be called the Mahayana, literally the “Great Vehicle.” In general, this movement of monks, nuns, and laity can be characterized as follows:

1. As the name implies, the Mahayana came to think of itself as “great” both in its interpretations of the Buddha’s teaching and in its openness to a broader group of people, especially lay people. The word yana means vehicle or raft which evokes the image of Buddhist teaching as a raft or vehicle that can help one cross over the river of suffering to the “other shore.” The Mahayana is, thus, the “Great Vehicle.”
2. The Mahayana tradition is more flexible about the orthodoxy of scriptures, regarding many new scriptures composed in the early centuries CE as authentic teachings. A number of new scriptures—the Lotus Sutra, the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, and the Pure Land sutras—focus on teachings such as the emptiness of all phenomena (shunyata), the importance of compassion (karuna), and the universality of Buddha Nature.
3. The ideal religious figure in the Mahayana tradition is the bodhisattva, an enlightened being engaged in helping others become free from suffering. The bodhisattva is motivated entirely by compassion (karuna) and informed by deep wisdom (prajna). The bodhisattva ideal is often contrasted with the monastic arahant (arhat) ideal, characterized by some Mahayana schools as being directed toward self-liberation and thus as too egotistical.

Mahayana Buddhism was the first major stream of Buddhism in the United States, brought by the Chinese and Japanese immigrants who arrived in the nineteenth century. Today, the two main expressions of the Mahayana tradition, Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, have both Asian-American and Euro-American practitioners. In addition, Korean and Vietnamese immigrants introduced their cultures' expressions of Mahayana Buddhism in late twentieth century America and have steadily gained their own followings.



Joan Halifax, an American Zen Buddhist teacher in California, *On Being*, (2007), Flickr Creative Commons.

Vajrayana: The Diamond Vehicle

In the seventh century, a major movement within Mahayana Buddhism arose. This stream of Buddhism, called the Vajrayana, is most prominent in Tibet and its surrounding regions, although forms of it are found in China and Japan. The Vajrayana, literally the “Diamond Vehicle” or the “Thunderbolt Vehicle,” understands itself to be an esoteric form of Mahayana Buddhism with an accelerated path to enlightenment.

This Tibetan tradition sees itself as embodying both the teaching and meditation practice of the Theravada monks, as well as the teaching of the “emptiness” of all conditioned things that is distinctive to Mahayana philosophy. Vajrayana is also called Tantrayana, because it is based on the tantras, the systems of practice which emphasize the indivisibility of wisdom and

compassion, symbolized as the union of male and female.

Three terms characterize the practice of Vajrayana, each one of which has overt ritual meanings, inner psychophysical meanings, and secret transcendent meanings:



Musicians at Tharlam Monastery, Kathmandu, Nepal (2007), Wonderland, Flickr Creative Commons.



A mudra displayed on a statue of the Buddha at the Chuang Yen Monastery in New York (2011). Dafyd Jones, Flickr Creative Commons.

Mantra—a syllable or phrase for chanting or meditation, containing within it the sacred power and cosmic energies of a Buddha or bodhisattva. The mantra literally “protects the mind” from negative mental states by invoking these divine energies within oneself.

Mandala—a “circle” or cosmic diagram for ritual or interior visualization, representing various realms of Buddhas and bodhisattvas and their cosmic energies in two- or three-dimensional forms.

Mudra—a “symbol” or “ritual gesture,” made by the position of the hands or body, and signifying the qualities and presence of various Buddhas and bodhisattvas in Vajrayana ritual.

Since the Tibetan uprising in 1959, more than 100,000 Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhists have become refugees in India and around the world. The Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso is head of one of the four major lineages of Tibetan monks and led the Tibetan government in exile in north India until 2011. At that time, the Dalai Lama proposed that the political leadership of the Tibetan people be separated from the spiritual leadership and that the political leader should be elected. A Harvard trained Tibetan legal scholar named Lobsang Sangay won the election and became Prime Minister in August of 2011.

Global Buddhisms

The Dalai Lama is undoubtedly the most famous face of contemporary Buddhism and is considered a spiritual leader among Buddhists from many different schools and traditions. Tenzin Gyatso has traveled widely as a teacher, scholar, and statesman promoting peace and nonviolence to a world audience. The annexation of Tibet by the Chinese in the 1950s and the subsequent establishment of the Tibetan Government in exile in Dharamsala, India have inspired Free Tibet movements around the world. Though the Chinese dispute this version of history, global admiration and support of the Dalai Lama and his message of peaceful coexistence is widespread and pervasive, leading many to associate Buddhism with a universal and uncompromising understanding of nonviolence. Other well-known Buddhists representing a nonviolent understanding of Buddhism are the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhất Hạnh who protested against the Vietnam War and continues to promote peaceful coexistence through his Center in France known as Plum Village, and the American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön who teaches about paths to individual spiritual enlightenment.



The Dalai Lama (2009), Michael Thibault, Flickr Creative Commons.

Other contemporary representations of Buddhism challenge the widespread association of Buddhism with nonviolence. For example, the Buddhist 969 Movement in Myanmar has targeted the ethnic Muslim Rohingya who are not recognized by the government and who comprise nearly one sixth of the Muslim population there. The leader of the 969 Movement is a monk named Wirathu. He justifies the ethnic cleansing campaign as a necessary protection of Buddhism, which is culturally aligned with ethnic Burmese nationalism in a nation that has long struggled with power imbalances between the dominant Burmese and other, smaller ethnic groups seeking integration or independence.

In Sri Lanka, a new form of Buddhist nationalism known as the BBS (Buddhist Power Force in Sinhalese) has recently emerged following the end of the nearly 30-year civil war with the separatist Tamil Tigers. Its leader Galagodaththe Gnanasara likened the defeat of the separatists to an ancient Sinhalese victory and justifies ongoing violence in defense of (Buddhist) Sri Lankan culture. In this same vein, he also promoted anti-Muslim rioting in 2014 in the southern villages. In both Myanmar and Sri Lanka there are Buddhist monks and lay leaders who are challenging the violent expression of Buddhism, but they are currently marginalized by other factions that are in positions of power. These examples demonstrate how Buddhism, like all religions, is internally diverse and interpretations of the tradition justify the full range of human agency.