

Challenging the Cults

11. History and Beliefs of Buddhism



Just what is Buddhism and what is its attraction to so many who are looking for meaning. The population of Buddhist worldwide numbers about 360 million¹. The Dali Lama², the leader of Tibetan Buddhism, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 often meets famous Hollywood celebrities, US Presidents and UN dignitaries. Many people in the West today are looking at Buddhism as an alternative to their traditional religious backgrounds.

The history of Buddhism in the United States can be traced back to the Chinese laborers who came to the United States to work on the railroads in the 1820. By 1875 there were 400 "Joss houses"³ in California. American Poet, Henry David Thoreau,

also popularized Buddhism with his translation of the *Lotus Sutra*, a third century Buddhist text. Authors D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts through their books on Zen Buddhism opened Buddhism as an alternative religion to Westerners.

As of 1993 there were over 1000 Buddhist centers including temples and monasteries in the United States, including multimillion dollar facilities in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York. This includes all of the three major forms, and many subsets of Buddhism. All these groups however can trace their origin back to an individual by the name of *Siddhartha Gautama*.

Hinduism the foundation of Buddhism



Lord Bhrama, creator and his consort goddess Saraswati of knowledge, part of the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses

To understand Buddhism, we have to understand the roots its basic its roots, which stem from *Hinduism*. Siddhartha was raised a Hindu, and many of the beliefs of Buddhism are common to Hinduism. Hinduism developed from ancient indo-Europeans known as *Arians* who migrated into northern India about 1500 BC from present day Iran. Their religion, known as *Vedism*, this name was from the collections of their sacred texts, the *Veda*.

The Veda adorned hereditary deities, who personified various natural and cosmic forces, such as fire (*Agni*), sun (*Sūrya and Savitr*), dawn (*Uṣas*), storms (the

¹ http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html, September 2002

² The Dali Lama represents the third major branch of Buddhism, Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist which account for 6% of the total Buddhist Population. Six million Tibetans believe He is the 14th earthly incarnation of the heavenly deity of compassion and mercy.

³ Joss houses The joss house would be the first community building constructed in the Chinese settlements, and it served as a center for worship, education, community fellowship,

Rudras), war and rain (*Indra*), honour (*Mitra*), divine authority (*Varuṇa*), and creation (*Indra*, with some aid of *Vishnu*).

The Arians unified the people of the Indus valley under this system which later became known as Hinduism. They also created a caste system to keep different segments of society separate and to prevent the mingling of people, and maintaining the priestly and warrior class.

(1) *brahmins* (Aryan priests);

(2) *kshatriyas* (warrior-nobility);

(3) *vaishyas* (the bourgeois, or middle class [businessmen/farmers], viewed as low class by those above them);

(4) *sudras* (servants, not allowed to recite or listen to the Vedas [Hindu scriptures]); and

(5) *outcasts* (the illegitimate, criminals, and those in unclean jobs [e.g., leather workers, barbers, etc.]).⁹⁻¹¹

Over time this caste system became burdensome to the people of India. Its during this time Siddhartha was born.

Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha)

The word *Buddha* is *Sanskrit*⁴ and means “Enlightened One”. The boy, Siddhartha Gautama was the son of King Suddhodana Gautama, the raja or chief of the Shakya clan, a family of the Kshatriya caste. He was born around 563 B.C.

After a hermit named Asita allegedly had a vision about the boy, he traveled to the Suddhodana court where he was shown the baby, and prophesied the following.

This Prince, if he remains in the palace, when grown up, will become a great King and subjugate the whole world. But if he forsakes the court life to embrace a religious life, he will become a Buddha, the Savior of the world.⁵

Siddhartha father, King Suddhodana, worked to prevent his son from seeing any misery or suffering, he ordered his servants to shield the boy from any contact with suffering. The king reportedly gave his son 3 palaces and 40,000 dancing girls.

At the age of sixteen, 500 women were sent to him as prospective brides. He choose his cousin Yasodhara, he won her hand by doing 12 marvelous archery feats.

Then one day the prince was about 29, out of curiosity or boredom, he fooled his father’s royal servants and was able to visit nearby, *Lumbini Park*, where he saw a world of suffering. This caused Siddhartha to draw several conclusions.

The first day he saw a man bent over as a result of age. The next day he saw a person with disease, the next time he saw a dead person and finally he met an ascetic⁶. On his way back to his palace he received news of his sons birth who, he named *Rāhula*, meaning “Fetter” or “Bond.”

The Great Renunciation

The young prince decided to make the “Great Renunciation”, to give up his royal power and became an ascetic who wanders. In the middle of the night, he went to his bedchamber to have a last look at his wife and son, and ordered his charioteer, Channa, to saddle his favorite horse. He left his city, *Kapilavatthu* that night and by morning had crossed the *Anoma River*. He gave Channa his garments and assumed the guise of an ascetic.

⁴ Old Indo-Aryan language, the classical literary language of the Hindus of India. Vedic Sanskrit, based on a dialect of northwestern India, dates from as early as 1800 BC

⁵ Buddhist Promoting Foundation (Bukkyo Denod Kyokai)

⁶ Ascetics were Hindi yogis who practiced self denials

The Search for Truth

The searching prince went south in search of truth. For the next six years, he searched for meaning. There he met the king of Magadha, Bimbisara, who was impressed with him and offered him half his kingdom to stay with him. Siddhartha refused but promised to return with truth if he found it. He studied meditation and philosophy his pilgrimage led him to two yogis (spiritual teachers).

The first, Ālāra Kālāma, who trained him to reach the “*Sphere No-thing*”. Siddhartha mastered Alara’s system, and Alara declared him an equal. He then went to Uddaka Rāmaputta, another great teacher, who taught him to attain the “*sphere of neither-perception-nor-nonperception*,” a higher mystical state than the sphere of no-thing. Gotama however, was not satisfied with this either, and he continued his search for the truth.

He then met five yogi or ascetics who practiced different from of asceticism, he wore coarse clothing, he refused to sit, and only crouched on his heels. He stopped washing his body, allowing dirt to fall off from its own weight. He slept in yard where birds would eat rotting human flesh. Through self-denial he hoped to understand life, but failed. He described his physical state.,

Because of so little nourishment, all my limbs became like some withered creepers with knotted joints; my buttocks like a buffalo’s hoof; my back-bone protruding like a string of balls; my ribs like rafters of a dilapidated shed; the pupils of my eyes appeared sunk deep in their sockets as water appears shining at the bottom of a deep well; my scalp became shriveled and shrunk as a bitter gourd cut unripe becomes shriveled and shrunk by sun and wind; . . . the skin of my belly came to be cleaving to my back-bone; when I wanted to obey the calls of nature, I fell down on my face then and there; when I stroked my limbs with my hand, hairs rotted at the roots fell away from my body.⁷

He realized that neither luxurious living nor asceticism brings truth near. He saw a *Middle Way*, like a fine tuned instrument, that is too tight the strings will break or too loose won’t play.

He demonstrated his newfound truth to his fellow ascetics. He ate a normal meal in front of them and they left him disgusted. Gautama then left for Gaya, a major northeastern city in India.

In Gaya, underneath a full moon in May, he spread a mat under a fig tree near the Meranja River and assumed a lotus position. He swore to remain in that position until he understood life’s mysteries. He was 35 years old that day.

The Great Enlightenment

After sitting under the tree, approached by Māra, the evil one, the tempter who is the lord of the world of passion, determined to defeat him, and prevent him from attaining *Enlightenment*. Mara approached Siddhartha with his hideous demonic hordes. Siddhartha, however, sat in meditation unmoved. Siddhartha was sustained by 10 *paramitas* (“great virtues”) that he had perfected during innumerable past lives as a *bodhisattva* (“buddha-to-be”) in order to attain Enlightenment. (In order to attain Buddhahood, all bodhisattvas [i.e., those who aspire to become buddhas] have to perfect, during innumerable lives, these 10 paramitas: charity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, effort, patience, truth, determination, universal love, and equanimity.) Māra was thus vanquished and fled headlong with his armies of evil spirits.

After stilling his mind, Siddhartha began meditating. Hours later, he allegedly saw an “infinite succession of deaths and births in an ever-flowing stream of life.” His vision supported the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation, a foundational teaching of the Brahman religion in which he had been raised:

Thus, with mind concentrated, purified, cleansed . . . I directed my mind to the passing away and rebirth of beings. With divine, purified, superhuman vision I saw beings passing away and being reborn, low and high, of good and

⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, 2004 edition, Buddha

bad color, in happy or miserable existences, according to their *karma* (in other words, according to that universal law by which every act of good or evil will be rewarded or punished either in this life or in some later incarnation).⁸

Siddhartha meditated until he reached complete enlightenment:

"I realized that rebirth has been destroyed, the holy life has been lived, the job has been done, there is nothing after this."⁹

Along with his vision came an internal perception of how to obtain liberation from *samsara*, or the cycle of rebirths. The young prince had lost his ignorance about the nature of this world. He understood everything. He had become the "awakened one," the "enlightened one"—the Buddha.

The Buddhist scriptures tell us that Siddhartha was under the tree for seven weeks, facing his first dilemma: should he keep his knowledge to himself or share it with others? It was common for monks in Gautama's to keep information to themselves, He choose to spread the information he learned.

One hundred miles from where he was "Enlightened" and two months later, Gautama gave his first sermon, Isipatana in the Deer Park. He presented the "*Wheel of the Doctrine*", which contained the *Four Noble Truths* and would serve as foundational Buddhist teachings.

After this Gautama founded the Sangha, (Community or order) composed of monks, nuns and disciples. Several months after his Enlightenment, he addressed his followers in his sermon the Buddha said,

Bhikkhus, I am freed from all fetters, both divine and human. You, too, are freed from all fetters, both divine and human. Wander forth, bhikkhus, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world. . . . Let not two of you go by one road [i.e., go in different directions]. Teach the Dhamma which is good at the beginning, good in the middle, and good at the end. . . . There are people who will understand the Dhamma. I, too, will go to Uruvelā to teach the Dhamma.¹⁰

For more than forty years the Buddha continued instructing all who would listen. Then, tragedy struck at Kusinara in the district of Gorakhpur. Chunda the blacksmith fed the Buddha either spoiled pig's flesh or poisoned mushrooms (truffles).⁹⁻³¹ The Buddha quickly fell ill with dysentery and died at the age of eighty.

Four Noble Truths

1. **Dukka, Life is filled with suffering**
2. **Tanha, (Attachment)**
3. **Nirodha (cessation)**
4. **The Buddhist Way (8 Noble Paths)**
 1. **Right Views (understanding):**
 2. **Right Aspirations (ambition)**
 3. **Right Speech (communication)**
 4. **Right Conduct (action)**
 5. **Right Livelihood (vocation)**
 6. **Right Effort (endeavor)**
 7. **Right Mindfulness (mind control)**
 8. **Right Concentration (deep meditation)**

Buddhism Basics

The collection of Buddha's beliefs is known as *dharma*, and they deal with one objective, how to escape *samsara*. *Samsara* is the rebirth cycle, or the concept of reincarnation. Once you escape *samsara*, you achieve nirvana, which represents heaven to the Buddhist, but means escape, deliverance from pain and sorrow a state of bliss.

The *dharma* instructs the Buddhist how to progress to nirvana. The journey is achieved by following the Buddha's Four Nobel Truths, called *Pativedhanana*, which means "The wisdom of realization" These four "truths"

⁸ Kingdom of the Cults, Walter Martin, October 1997

⁹ Henry Warren, Buddhism in Translations, 380-381, as quoted in Fry, et al., Great Asian Religions, 67-68

¹⁰ Encyclopedia Britannica 2004 Edition, Buddha

center around:

1. the universality of suffering;
2. the origin of suffering;
3. the overcoming of suffering; and
4. the way leading to the suppression of suffering.

THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH

Buddha proclaimed life is full of pain and sorrow. For anyone to believe otherwise is to believe an illusion. This is the First Noble Truth or *dukkha* (meaning a bone twisted out of joint).

People, according to Buddha, fool themselves to think life is also filled with happiness, because happiness can never compensate for all the suffering we experience.

THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH

Tanha, (Attachment) is the Second Noble Truth, teaches suffering is due to “false desires of our senses that deceive us into clinging to a temporary world. This is at the heart of the Buddha’s revelation.

—“the cause of suffering is desire, craving due to ignorance.”

Tanha is related to the Buddha’s claim that “All things in life” are insignificant and have no meaning. Ignorance (*avidya*) of this reality is a hurdle that must be overcome to gain freedom from *Samsara* (reincarnation). The dynamic pull between *tanha* (attachment to temporary things) and *avidya* (ignorance of life’s temporary state) is a complex concept. Broken down they fall into the following steps:¹¹

- Everything in life is temporal, fleeting, and passing. Nothing lasts forever. Possessions, institutions, nations, languages, ideas, and feelings come and go like the wind. They are here today and gone tomorrow.
- All things (e.g., family, friends, desires, etc.) are subject to time and are in the process of passing away. The Buddha interpreted this to mean that nothing has any real meaning or significance.
- According to the Buddha, everything in life is ultimately unreal because it is fleeting. But we ignorantly attribute reality to such things. By doing so, we give them a degree of ongoing significance and permanence and subsequently attach ourselves to them, which in turn causes suffering.

The dynamic has been compared to watching a movie, where someone interacts with their emotions about an event happening on the screen, that in reality is not happening.

THE THIRD NOBLE TRUTH

The Third Noble Truth is *Nirodha* (cessation), teaches the way out of suffering is separate yourself from false desires of the temporary self, to give up physical, emotional, and mental cravings because these are all delusions of permanence. All desire is the cause of suffering.

By this abandonment of “Temporary” helps the “Self” come to the realization of the temporary state of all things. When this is done in addition to living a “Righteous” life this one is on the can attain nirvana.

The Buddha’s teachings on rejection of desire and suppression of emotional attachment is seen perhaps best in the story of a monk named Sangamaji. Like Siddhartha, Sangamaji had left

¹¹ Kingdom of the Cults, Walter Martin, 1997 pg. 307

his wife and family to search for truth as a homeless wanderer. While sitting in meditation beneath a tree, his wife approached him and lay their child before him. She asked her husband to nourish her and their child. Sangamaji remained silent until finally the woman took the child and left.

Siddhartha, after observing the incident, reportedly commented, "He [Sangamaji] feels no pleasure when she comes, no sorrow when she goes: a true Brahman released from passion."¹²

THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH

The Fourth Noble Truth is the Buddhist way of life, the practical steps to attain nirvana. These eight branches, the Buddha taught must be adopted by someone who desires to be delivered from suffering. They are the *Noble Eightfold Path (Marga)*

Noble Eightfold Path¹³

(1) *Right Views (understanding)*: Belief that the Four Noble Truths are true, accurate, and reliable.

(2) *Right Aspirations (ambition)*: A "total commitment of body, mind, and will to the training and discipline required to extricate oneself from the human predicament."⁹⁻³⁹ One must resolve to maintain thoughts "free from lust, ill will, cruelty, or untruthfulness"⁹⁻⁴⁰ and "renounce the selfish self and sensual pleasures."⁹⁻⁴¹

(3) *Right Speech (communication)*: One's words "must be not only charitable but also free from egocentricity."⁹⁻⁴² One must abstain from "gossiping, lying, tattling ... harsh language, vain talk, or reveling" and speak "kindly, open, and truthful."⁹⁻⁴³

(4) *Right Conduct (action)*: A "beneficent behavior extended universally to all living things coupled with an abstinence from alcohol and drugs, for a person must have complete control over his mind to accomplish the difficult task of redemption."⁹⁻⁴⁴ One should abstain "from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct" and practice actions that are "peaceful, honest, and pure."⁹⁻⁴⁵

(5) *Right Livelihood (vocation)*: A "proper means of support ... in which a person does not inflict pain on other people or creatures."⁹⁻⁴⁶ A butcher, soldier, fisherman, or exterminator would not fit this path.

(6) *Right Effort (endeavor)*: A willingness to reach "deep inside oneself to draw upon all the energy a person possesses."⁹⁻⁴⁷ Showing such effort involves "self-training and self-control, self-discipline."⁹⁻⁴⁸ The disciple "puts forth will, he makes effort, he stirs up energy, he grips and forces his mind."⁹⁻⁴⁹

(7) *Right Mindfulness (mind control)*: Involves paying "close attention to one's mood, emotions, and feelings," because "all we are is the result of what we have thought."⁹⁻⁵⁰ Right mindfulness also means examining "every state of feeling in body or mind."⁹⁻⁵¹

(8) *Right Concentration (deep meditation)*: A special practice of meditation in which "thought itself ... [is] annihilated and the mind rests."⁹⁻⁵² This trance-like state of consciousness is induced through practicing intense concentration on one single object. It progresses through four stages, the end result being "rapture of utter purity of mindfulness ... wherein neither ease is felt or any ill."⁹⁻⁵³

Following this Noble Eightfold Path allows someone to eliminate desires the keep a person from reaching nirvana. Once a person reaches "Purity of thought and life" they become an *arahat* (someone who is freed from the need of Samsara (rebirth) and is ready for nirvana). The word, Nirvana comes from Sanskrit, and means "Blowing Out".

¹² *ibid*, pg. 308

¹³ *ibid* pg. 308-309

Nirvana

The concept of Nirvana originated in Hinduism and is similar to the Buddhist concept, meaning to Blow Out, extinguishing the flame. Conflict in understanding this term has led to divergent views of Buddha and Buddhism. Some Buddhist worship Buddha as a divine being other Buddhist view him as an ordinary man. Tibetan Buddhist, see the Dalai Lama as the reincarnated Buddha, who was not annihilated into Nirvana but choose to come back and help those still here.

The living process is likened to a fire burning. Its remedy is the extinction of the fire of illusion, passions, and cravings. The Buddha, the Enlightened One, is one who is no longer kindled or enflamed. Many poetic terms are used to describe the state of the enlightened human being—the harbour of refuge, the cool cave, the place of bliss, the farther shore. The term that has become famous in the West is nirvana, translated as dying out—that is, the dying out in the heart of the fierce fires of lust, anger, and delusion. But nirvana is not extinction, and indeed the craving for annihilation or nonexistence was expressly repudiated by the Buddha. Buddhists search not for mere cessation but for salvation. Though nirvana is often presented negatively as “release from suffering,” it is more accurate to describe it in a more positive fashion: as an ultimate goal to be sought and cherished.¹⁴

This view of Nirvana contrasts with the Brahman Hindu view that teaches that Nirvana means to be united with the Universal Soul. The Buddha believed according to some, that the souls elements along with individual identity are extinguished at Nirvana.

Karma

Karma is directly related to Samsara or (rebirth), Karma determines the circumstances into which someone will be reborn. Buddha's teaching differed from the Hindu concept in that he taught rather than the soul being reborn, only “Karmic matter” was reborn. Thus at rebirth these elements are rearranged rather than the whole soul being reborn as an identity into a new body.

Buddha taught that there is no personal “Soul” that continues to exist after someone dies. What is reborn is just karmic matter that was once a distinct individual. Finally, because of endless combinations of karma, these elements will be extinguished forever. This is *nirvana* to the Buddhist.

The only way of reaching nirvana in this present life is by becoming a Buddhist monk. This means leaving family, friends and joining a Buddhist monastery (*sangha*)¹⁵, which Buddha started for those seeking nirvana. Therefore a person who is not a monk must be reincarnated until they become a monk. The oldest Buddhist tradition, excludes women from reaching nirvana from this life, she must be reborn a male, who then becomes a monk. This includes Buddhist nuns also who must die and be reborn as male monks.

Buddhist Branches

There are many varieties of Buddhism with their distinct teachings, traditions and scriptures.. There are three main Buddhist Schools. The *Thervada* (monastic and conservative), *Mahayana* (liberal and lay-oriented) and the *Vajrayana* or Tibetan (the most esoteric).

Theravada Versus Mahayana¹⁶

Immediately after the Buddha's death, members of his original *sangha* sought to organize their master's teachings into a system of doctrines on which they could agree. They successfully did this and began sharing their beliefs with others. But disagreements soon arose regarding the Buddha's exact words and what he meant by those words. This occurred because his disciples, in accordance with the Indian tradition of oral preservation of spiritual teachings, had not

¹⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica 2004, Nirvana

¹⁵ An alms dependent order of Buddhist monks.

¹⁶ Kingdom of the Cults, Walter Martin Pgs. 310-315

written down any of the Buddha's discourses during his lifetime. Such writings were not compiled until four hundred years after the Buddha's lifetime.

The Buddha's *sangha* eventually split into a number of small groups holding to different interpretations of the *dharma*. Conflict over the meaning of the *dharma* arose not only between individual monks, but also between various monasteries. A severe fragmentation of Buddhism ensued, which by the third century B.C. had produced approximately eighteen different sects. The first major rift between schools occurred from about 200 B.C. to A.D. 200 and led to the formation of two traditions still in existence today—Theravada and Mahayana.

Within the Theravada tradition are Buddhist schools holding to a strict interpretation of the Buddha's teachings. This tradition is often termed the "fundamentalist branch" of Buddhism because it has preserved what is probably the original form of Buddhism.⁹⁻⁶²

Mahayana Buddhism includes individuals and schools who subscribe to teachings that are "modifications and amplifications of themes already present in the Theravadin heritage."⁹⁻⁶³

When this division took place, followers of the newer way called their belief system Mahayana, which means the "greater vehicle" of salvation, or the "expansive way." They disdainfully labeled the older schools *Hinayana*, which means the "lesser vehicle" of salvation, or the "exclusive way."⁹⁻⁶⁴

Theravada	Mahayana
<i>Buddha</i> —Although Siddhartha was a superior man of extraordinary intellect and exceptional talent, he was nonetheless only a human being. He is not worshiped.	<i>Buddha</i> —Siddhartha was a sacred manifestation of the Absolute, or <i>Brahman</i> . His body and physical actions were merely an illusion. He is often worshiped as a god.
<i>Deliverance</i> —Escaping the cycle of rebirth is dependent upon entrance into a monastery. Only there, through great self-effort, can one attain disengagement from the world and its false desires. Eventually, perhaps through several lifetimes, <i>nirvana</i> will be obtained.	<i>Deliverance</i> —Escaping the cycle of rebirth may be obtained through self-effort, but such effort is not mandatory, nor is joining a monastery. According to some sects, one may pray to the Buddha for deliverance. His compassion and grace can save everyone, even evil persons.
<i>Ideal</i> —One's life goal is simply to reach <i>nirvana</i> and exit this life. Becoming an enlightened one (<i>arahat</i>) without regard for others is the accepted attitude.	<i>Ideal</i> —The most important goal is to help others reach <i>nirvana</i> . One who is enlightened (a <i>buddha</i>) will postpone his own "salvation" in order to assist others.

Buddhists of both traditions look to the Buddha as their primary source of truth. But Mahayanists, unlike Theravadins, recognize numerous other Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* (those who help others toward enlightenment and *nirvana*). These personalities are said to be manifestations of the Absolute and, along with the Buddha, are regularly prayed to for assistance. Some are worshiped as gods.

The Theravada and Mahayana scriptures are different as well. The former tradition looks to the *Pali Canon* (written about 80 B.C.). This text—written in the Pali language and divided into a number of *suttas*—is called the *Tripitaka*, which means literally "three baskets." It is about eleven times as large as the Bible and is arranged in three main divisions: (1) the *Sutta Pitaka* (discourses of Siddhartha); (2) the *Vinaya Pitaka* (precepts and rules for the *Sangha*); and (3) the *Abidhamma Pitaka* (esoteric and philosophical interpretations of the *dharma*).

The Mahayana tradition accepts as authoritative an extensive list of texts called *sutras* (composed primarily between the sixth and first centuries B.C.). The Chinese canon alone encompasses more than 5,000 volumes.⁹⁻⁶⁵ Unlike the Theravadin *suttas*, which average only about twenty pages each, the Mahayana *sutras* are very long. They cannot be found in original form in only one language, but instead are written in Chinese, Tibetan, and Sanskrit.

Furthermore, since there is no clear limit to the Mahayana canon, recent writings are constantly being added to Mahayana scriptures. This has forced most Mahayana sects to choose favorite texts for common use:

The fact is that some such selection is necessary, for this extreme bulk of and breadth of the scriptures make it impossible for believers to be acquainted with, let alone understand and practice, the often contradictory teachings found in them.⁹⁻⁶⁶

Followers of Mahayana also take a different view of their scriptures than do followers of Theravada. The latter ascribe value to the Pali Canon because of its literal message. Mahayana Buddhists, however, attribute value to their holy writings not only because of the message contained therein, but also because they believe that the texts themselves possess magical powers which may be drawn upon for protection and material success.

Another difference exists between the Mahayana and Theravada traditions when it comes to *nirvana*. To Theravadins, escape from *samsara*—or the cycle of rebirth—is *nirvana*. It is a state marked by complete deliverance from all pain and sorrow. But in the Mahayana tradition, the whole purpose of becoming a *bodhisattva* is not to escape life, but to remain in life in order to help others reach enlightenment.

If the Theravada explanation of *nirvana* is coupled with the Mahayana concept of what it means to reach enlightenment, then hypothetically the most spiritually advanced persons would never reach *nirvana* because they always forsake escape from *samsara* in order to help others. Consequently, those in the Mahayana tradition have had to change the definition of *nirvana* to “the true state of spiritual perfection” rather than escape from rebirth:

Thus the perfected Bodhisattva becomes aware that just by being a Bodhisattva he is already in *nirvana*. ... For him *nirvana* and *Samsara* are not two different realms. ... Paradoxically put ... to renounce *nirvana* for oneself, in love for others, is to find oneself in *nirvana*, in its real meaning.⁹⁻⁶⁷

Despite their many differences, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists share many beliefs in common:

- (1) reincarnation;
- (2) karma;
- (3) the world is constantly changing and is impermanent;
- (4) the world’s changing nature brings suffering;
- (5) liberation from suffering is possible;
- (6) deliverance from rebirth and suffering takes place through a change in consciousness;
- (7) a liberating change in consciousness can be obtained only through following the teachings of the Buddha and/or reliance upon the Buddha’s love and mercy.⁹⁻⁶⁸

Vajrayana: Wisdom of Tibet

Vajrayana Buddhism—also known as Tibetan Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism, and Lamaism—is called the “diamond way,” which by implication means it is the precious, changeless, pure, and clear way. It developed during the fifth to sixth centuries A.D. as Buddhism spread through northern India, Nepal, and finally Tibet.

At that time, the prevailing belief of Tibet was the Bon religion, “a mixture of shamanism [a form of witchcraft], magic, and primitive nature worship.”⁹⁻⁶⁹ Vajrayana was born when these practices, along with magical formulae designed to obtain magical powers, were incorporated into Buddhism (A.D. 600–1200).⁹⁻⁷⁰ Included in the Vajrayana tradition are a number of advanced meditative techniques: yoga, special hand gestures (*mudras*), spells, and chants. It also derives many of its doctrines from Vedantic and Tantric influences.⁹⁻⁷¹

Vedanta is an Indian school of philosophy, which teaches that god (*Brahman*) and the soul (*Atman*) are one. In other words, there is only one ultimate reality—*Brahman*—and the individuality we see is nothing but an illusion. The maker (*maya*) of illusion is ignorance (*avidya*). Enlightenment occurs when one realizes that “the world is not real: only the Absolute, *Brahman*, is real.”⁹⁻⁷²

The Tantras are a series of A.D. sixth century scriptures associated with the worship of Shakti, Mother of the Universe. They are made available only to initiates of various Tantric religions (Tibetan Buddhism is only one of many Tantric belief systems). Study of these texts “is said to reveal clairvoyance, clairaudience, telepathy, psychometry, the power of sound, vocal expression, and the composition of music.”⁹⁻⁷³

The word *tantra* basically means “loom” and refers more specifically to the threads of a loom. This expresses the foundational teaching of Tantraism—all things are interwoven into one ultimate reality. Tantraism is also based on a variety of sex rituals that involve “breathing exercises, meditation, and the prolonged sexual contact known as *maithuna*.”⁹⁻⁷⁴

The sexual philosophy within Tantric Buddhism is linked to a number of ideas. There is the belief that erotic love is a profound experience that “opens the mind to a sense of awe and wonder akin to religious experience.”⁹⁻⁷⁵ Also present is the idea that during the act of sexual intercourse, a transcending of boundaries between participants occurs, leading to an experience of oneness with each other. There exists the additional notion that the best way to escape blinding passion—in this case sexual lust—is to “go into the act that is desired rather than to retreat from it.”⁹⁻⁷⁶

Perhaps the most important part of Tantric religions, including Tibetan Buddhism, is the belief that male and female energies reside in everyone. The male energy is said to be the dynamic, powerful, and moving force. The female energy is thought of as static and docile.

These two energies correspond to aspects of one’s spirituality. The female side is connected to inward properties such as “wisdom and realization” and is linked to “the more symbolic or intuitive aspects of understanding.”⁹⁻⁷⁷ The dynamic (male) side “relates to outgoing aspects such as compassion and strength,” as well as to cognitive knowledge.⁹⁻⁷⁸ The goal of Tantric sex practices is to unite the two spiritual forces through physical union.

Some followers of Tantric religions, however, believe that sexual intercourse is not necessary. They maintain that the sex acts depicted in Tantric art and literature are only symbolic representations of a spiritual unification of both energies that can, through meditation and other practices, lead to a uniting of the male and female energies.

Many of the occult aspects of Tibetan Buddhism also come from Tantraism. The Tantric tradition maintains a close relationship to magic and includes “secret teachings, scriptures in code, the practice of drawing symbols on the ground, and uttering spells to call up deities, supernatural powers that can be used for good or evil.”⁹⁻⁷⁹

According to Walt Anderson, author of *Open Secrets: A Western Guide to Tibetan Buddhism*, the Tantric Buddhist ideal is to yield: “Go ahead and do it, whatever it is, if you think you must and it doesn’t harm somebody else. But pay attention; be fully aware of what goes on in your mind and body, of how it really feels.”⁹⁻⁸⁰