

conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God. There are innumerable definitions of God, because His manifestations are innumerable. They overwhelm me with wonder and awe and for a moment stun me. But I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him.... Often in my progress I have had faint glimpses of the Absolute Truth, God, and daily the conviction is growing upon me that He alone is real and all else is unreal.... The instruments for the quest of truth are as simple as they are difficult.... The seeker after truth should be humbler than the dust. The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after truth should so humble himself that even the dust could crush him.

Gandhi 1957, Introduction

anthropologists such as Geertz have noted. They also show how they make sense of life by giving people ways to make their future more predictable and so controllable.

Funerals are, of course, the final rite of passage. After the death of a family member, the relatives prepare the body for cremation with ritual cleansing and dressing. Burning the corpse is seen as the ideal way to release the soul (sometimes called the "astral body"). Many believe that the soul will linger as long as the body is visible, so quick cremation is best. The body is carried to the cremation site as prayers are chanted to Yama, the god of death. At the site, the chief mourner, usually the eldest son, takes twigs of holy kusha grass from an ever-burning fire to the funeral pyre, the pile of wood on which the corpse rests. He walks around the pyre counterclockwise – because everything is backwards at the time of death – and then lights the fire. The dead person is now an offering to Agni, the fire. As in the most ancient Vedic times, the fire is seen as an offering to heaven.

When the corpse is almost completely burned, the chief mourner performs the "rite of the skull," using a bamboo stick to crack the skull, thus releasing the soul. After the cremation, the ashes are thrown into a river, ideally the Ganges, and the mourners walk away without looking back. Because corpses are impure, everyone takes a purifying bath after the funeral. The immediate family remains in a state of pollution for a set number of days (10, 11, or 13 in most places), after which close relatives gather for a ceremonial meal. During memorial services, *pindas* (rice balls) are offered to the spirit of the dead person. Some say that the *pindas* provide the dead with a symbolic transitional body.

## Buddhism

In much the same way that Islam began as a reform movement within the monotheistic tradition, and Protestantism was a movement to reform Roman Catholicism, Buddhism grew out of Hinduism as a movement that rejected certain features of Vedic religion. Buddhism accepted three important Hindu beliefs: karma, the natural justice of the universe; samsara, the cycle of rebirth; and the goal of moksha, to escape from this cycle.

In Buddhism, the release from rebirth is known as **nirvana**. One who achieves this state is called “awakened.” In fact, the title “Buddha” means “awakened.”

However, Buddhism rejected two key aspects of Brahmanic teaching (the teaching of the Vedas). It denied that there is a changeless Ultimate Reality, Brahman, and it denied that there is such a thing as one’s true “self,” Atman.

In addition to his denial of Atman and Brahman, the Buddha also questioned the social structure of Hinduism, especially the dominance of the brahmins, and their complicated sacrificial rituals. The Buddha made no sacrifices, and did not even talk about the gods. His major concern was practical – the nature of suffering and how we can reduce it. The caste system, he said, was not religiously sanctioned, so he accepted people of all social classes as his followers.

Besides the things Buddhism accepted from Hinduism and those it rejected, Buddhism added some things of its own. First, it created a new form of religious social organization, the **sangha**, the community of monks or nuns. Buddhist monasteries were built across Asia, usually with the financial backing of governments. They were not just what in the West would be called religious centers; they were in effect community centers, providing education, banking services, and often free medical care, as well.

The way of life promoted by Buddhism also had some new emphases. Two central virtues were universal compassion, and non-violence.

## ***History and Teachings of Buddhism***

Buddhism began in a simple way. One person asked some basic questions about life, and worked out some new answers. That person was Siddhartha Gautama, a kshatriya prince from the border between today's India and Nepal who lived between around 550 and 450 BCE. The questions he asked were: What is suffering? and How should we deal with suffering?

According to tradition, before Siddhartha was born, it was predicted that he would be either a king or a religious figure. At birth, it looked as if he might be headed for religious greatness. (His very long ear lobes were a sign of wisdom and his golden skin indicated serenity.) But his father wanted the boy to follow in his footsteps, so he shielded him from all the problems in life – and, as we saw in Chapter 2, it is the problems of life that often lead people toward religion. So Siddhartha grew up in luxury, knowing nothing of suffering, sickness, or death. When he was 16, his parents arranged a marriage to his cousin, a princess, and he lived comfortably in the palace for years. But when he was in his late 20s, riding in a chariot away from the palace, he saw a man bent with old age. The chariot driver explained that this is what happens when people get old. Then Siddhartha saw a sick man, and his driver explained about illness. Lastly, he saw a group of people grieving in a funeral procession, which troubled him most of all. The charioteer explained that everyone eventually dies.

All these experiences caused the prince to think about all the suffering and disappointment in life. He yearned to understand suffering and how people might best respond to it. Then he saw a monk with a shaved head wearing a yellow robe. Though the man had given up the ordinary pleasures of life – tasty food, a comfortable home, a loving family – he looked happy and at peace. (These things Siddhartha saw – the old man, the sick person, the funeral procession, and the serene monk – are known as the Four Signs.) So Siddhartha decided to





**FIGURE 7.13** Sculpture of the Buddha near starvation. Globus Images/Alamy.

leave his comfortable palace and loving family to find a different way of life. He spent some time with teachers who showed him how to attain mystical states of consciousness, but this did not answer his questions about suffering. So he joined a group of five ascetics and followed traditional yogic paths toward enlightenment, including extreme self-denial. At one point, so the tradition says, he was down to eating a single grain of rice a day.

However, none of these efforts brought the understanding Siddhartha sought. After several years, tradition tells us that Siddhartha Gautama sat down beneath a tree and meditated until he figured out the key to release from suffering. He achieved the ability to see his own and other people's past lives, allowing him to contemplate the overall scheme of how people pass away and are reborn. Ultimately he came to understand what Buddhists call the **Four Noble Truths** about suffering. His mind was liberated; he understood suffering and how to overcome it. Now he was the Buddha; he was Awakened.

For seven weeks he enjoyed the peace of nirvana. According to tradition, he wondered whether he should even try to teach anyone else the profound understanding that had come to him. Then he walked to a deer park near Benares in northeast India, where he preached his first sermon to the five ascetics he had been with earlier. Buddhists call this sermon “The Turning of the Wheel of Dharma.” Here “dharma” means the basic truths discovered by the Buddha, and the wheel became a symbol for it. The Four Noble Truths the Buddha had discovered became the foundation for Buddhism.

- The First Noble Truth is that human life is characterized by **dukkha**, the term for “suffering” in the Buddha’s language, Pali. Life is full of conflict, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction.
- The Second Noble Truth is that suffering is caused by desire or attachment, to sensual pleasure, to power, to emotional or intellectual gratification, etc.
- The Third Noble truth is that human beings can be freed from suffering if they free themselves of desire or attachment. When they break their attachment to things, they can achieve nirvana, liberation.
- And the Fourth Noble Truth is that the way to nirvana is the **Noble Eightfold Path**: right views, right aspirations (hopes), right speech, right action, right way of living, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

This Eightfold Path, the path of moderation, is known as the “Middle Way.”

Today when we think of nirvana, we may think of Kurt Cobain and the classic grunge rock band from Seattle, or else a state of bliss after death. However, the Buddha said that we can achieve nirvana in this life, and he thought of it as positive as well as negative. Negatively, it is the cessation of suffering and samsara, rebirth. The Sanskrit word *nirvana* is from the verb “to cool,” as if blowing out the fires of passion that create bad karma and keep people in the cycle of suffering and rebirth. Positively, nirvana is bliss, in which the illusion of enduring ego has evaporated (or been “blown out”). It is release from selfishness – from “the wound I bear within me, which is my ego,” as the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (d. 1973) put it – into a life of joyous freedom.

The Buddha’s sermon was so powerful, tradition tells us, that the five ascetics who heard it were immediately “awakened”; they became **arhats** – spiritual seekers who had successfully shed the burden of selfhood and achieved nirvana. They became the Buddha’s first followers – the sangha, the community of monks.

When the group of monks grew to sixty, the Buddha sent them out to enlighten more people and bring them into the sangha. Thus he created the first missionaries. Initially, the monks traveled through the countryside, preaching as they went. They were allowed to take refuge during the three-month rainy season, in any shelter they could find. Gradually, these settlements became more permanent. Some became rather elaborate, especially when wealthy people donated land for the building of monasteries. In some places, whole tribes joined at the same time.

Late in his life, the Buddha allowed women to form a sangha; they are called nuns. According to tradition, the Buddha was reluctant to ordain women, predicting they would have a negative effect on the movement, although this may well be a reflection of others’ misogynist misgivings.





**FIGURE 7.14** The Great Stupa at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh in India. © Hidekazu Nishibata/SuperStock.

For 45 years, the Buddha traveled and preached. At age 80 he died of food poisoning. As his life was slipping away, one of his friends began crying. The Buddha said, “Do not weep. Have I not already told you that separation is inevitable from all near and dear to us? Whatever is born, produced, conditioned, contains within itself the nature of its own dissolution. It cannot be otherwise.” (*Maha-parinibbana Sutta*, 35) His followers cremated his body and divided his ashes and bones to be enshrined in several **stupas** (Buddhist shrines).

### Understanding the Four Noble Truths

While the Four Noble Truths may sound simple, they are based on some revolutionary ideas about human beings, their minds, and reality in general. We are unhappy, the Buddha said, because we crave things, people, power, etc. And this craving is based on two fundamental errors: belief in Brahman – a stable, changeless, Ultimate Reality, and belief in Atman – a “true self,” which is really identical with Brahman. The Buddha not only denied a stable Ultimate Reality but also taught that nothing at all stays the same from moment to moment. This is known as the doctrine of impermanence (**anicca**). And it applies to the self as well as to things; there is no core identity of a person. This is known as the doctrine of “no-self” (**anatta** or **anatman**). What appears to be a stable “self,” the Buddha said, is really



## The Death of the Buddha

Then the Blessed One addressed the brothers, and said, "Behold now, brothers, I exhort you, saying, 'Decay is inherent in all component things! Work out your salvation with diligence!'" This was the last word of the Tathagata!...

Then the Blessed One, passing out of the state in which both sensations and ideas have ceased to be, entered the state between consciousness and unconsciousness. Passing out of the state between consciousness and unconsciousness, he entered the state of mind to which nothing at all is specially present. Passing out of the consciousness of no special object, he entered the state of mind to which the infinity of thought is the only thing present. Passing out of the mere consciousness of the infinity of thought, he entered the state of mind to which the infinity of space is alone present. Passing out of the mere consciousness of the infinity of space, he entered the fourth stage of deep meditation.... Then he passed out of the last stage of deep meditation, and immediately he died.

When the Blessed One died, those of the brothers who were not yet free from the passions, some stretched out their arms and wept. Others fell headfirst on the ground, rolling around in anguish at the thought, "Too soon has the Blessed One died! Too soon has the Happy One passed away from existence. Too soon has the Light gone out in the world!"

But those brothers who were free from the passions bore their grief collected and composed at the thought, "All component things are impermanent! How is it possible that [they would not pass away]?" (*Maha-parinibbana Sutta 6.10–14*).

a constantly changing bundle of the five **skandhas** (physical form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness).

After the time of the Buddha, some of his followers got into complicated philosophical debates about the nature of mind and reality. However, the Buddha himself did not engage in deep philosophical explanations. Instead, he said that his teaching was therapy; he was like a doctor prescribing for an illness. The "illness" was attachment to the idea of a self. When people insisted on explanations for his novel approach, the Buddha usually offered parables. He said, for example, that insisting on having explanations for his therapeutic teachings was like a person who is trapped in a burning building but refuses to leave until she finds out who started the fire, when, and how; or like a person who has been shot with a poisoned arrow but refuses to remove the arrow until he finds out who shot it and of what the poison consists. Again, he stressed that life is characterized by suffering, and his Middle Way was a prescription for ending the suffering.

Another famous parable is attributed to a monk named Nagasena, who was trying to answer the questions of a curious king. Think of a particular chariot, Nagasena said. It is



made up of wheels, an axle, the yoke, etc. No single part of the chariot constitutes the chariot itself; all the parts are replaceable. However, even if you replace the wheels, the axle, the yoke, and all the other parts, you will still think of it as the same chariot. In the same way, even though our physical cells and our mental and emotional states change constantly and entirely over a lifetime, we still think of ourselves as somehow the same.

Many people within and outside Buddhism have asked how the doctrine of *anatman* ("no-self") can be reconciled with karma and rebirth. If there is no self, no enduring substance, then what is it that gets reborn? Why should a person be suffering today for what an earlier person did? Again, the Buddha offered a comparison rather than an explanation. He described a flame being transferred from one candle to another. Is the flame on the second candle the same flame as on the first, or that on the third the same as on the second? The answer, he implied, is of no importance. What is important is that the current flame is there, and it was caused by the earlier flame. Similarly, when we die, our desires and attachments ignite new desires and attachments in those who are born after us. In this sense we are "reborn."

### The Ethics of "Awakening"

Many people also ask about the ethical implications of Buddhist teaching. If life is all about suffering and selves are not real, then why should we care what happens to people? From a Buddhist perspective, the illusory nature of the self explains empathy. It explains why we suffer when others suffer. If we were radically separate entities, then why would we feel other beings' pain? Because we are all part of the same reality, it is inevitable that we are affected by what happens to other people. As we awaken, the illusory isolation of self from other people ends and, we realize – as Will Smith put it in a "declaration of interdependence" at the Live 8 conference on July 4, 2005 – that "We are all in this together."

In other words, the end of the illusion of the self is the end of selfishness. It is reflected in the Buddhist **unlimited virtues**. The first is loving-kindness, friendliness to all people and animals. The second is compassion, resonating with the sufferings of other people and animals, and taking action to help them. Third is sympathetic joy, feeling happy instead of envious when others do well. And last is even-temperedness – keeping your cool, not being upset when things go badly for you and not being self-centered when they go well.

Buddhists also stress the ancient Vedic notion of non-injury, **ahimsa**. However, unlike the teaching of the Mahabharata, which allows for violence in some circumstances, Buddhism rejects violence and includes abstaining from taking life as the first of its Five Precepts – along with rejection of theft, sexual misconduct, lying, and the consumption of intoxicants.

### The Core of All Buddhist Traditions

The Buddha appointed no successor. Instead, he said that his teaching – the dharma – would be his successor. So after he died, the arhats decided they needed to establish exactly what he had taught. They all gathered, and called upon his assistant Ananda, who had memorized every sermon the Buddha had preached over his 45-year career. According to tradition, they did this annually in order to preserve the Buddha's teachings.



## The Three Jewels

Early on, people who wanted to follow the Buddhist way were encouraged to pledge themselves to the **Triratna**, the **Three Jewels**, or the **Three Refuges** – “I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.” Although Buddhism developed diverse expressions, the Triratna remains the core of all of them.

- “*I take refuge in the Buddha.*” The starting point for all forms of Buddhism is the “awakening” experience of the Buddha. All Buddhists want to “wake up” to see the true nature of reality, which is a liberating experience. Because this experience is central, all the traditions venerate or even worship the Buddha or other Buddha-figures. All Buddhist countries celebrate the Buddha’s birthday, the day of his awakening, the day he achieved nirvana. Venerating the Buddha may take the form of meditating on what he taught. Or, like Hindu worship, it can be offering food, flowers, or incense to a statue of the Buddha or to his relics preserved at a stupa. One simple popular ritual is to pour water into a vessel and chant some words of the Buddha. This consecrates the water, which then people may drink or use to bless themselves.
- “*I take refuge in the dharma.*” In Hinduism dharma was conceived as duty, the law. In Buddhism, it means teachings of the Buddha.
- “*I take refuge in the sangha.*” The sangha is the community of monks and nuns. This form of social organization is found in all Buddhist movements. It was missionary monks who brought Buddhism to the various parts of Asia and beyond.

Originally, as we saw, members of the sangha were itinerant, living on handouts from people. But then, as the sanghas became settled monasteries and convents, eighteen variants of the monastic code developed. However, there were general patterns among them, including democratic governance. Sanghas established near cities or villages set up a reciprocal relationship with the laypeople. The laypeople gave them material goods such as food and clothing. This kind of donation, called **dana**, earned them good karma, merit toward a higher rebirth. The monks and nuns, in return, provided advice, education, prayers, and the opportunity to earn merit; and conducted important rituals for the community, especially funerals. This relationship with the community remains important today.

While ordinary laypeople provided food and basic necessities for the monks, it was rich donors and kings who gave them land and money to build monasteries. The growth of Buddhism across Asia was supported by rulers who commissioned the building of monasteries, temples, and shrines. The monks showed their appreciation for government





**FIGURE 7.15** Buddhist laypeople putting food into the bowls of monks. © imagebroker.net/SuperStock.

support by conducting public rituals to insure the prosperity of the ruler and the state. An especially generous king might be hailed by Buddhists as a **bodhisattva**, a future Buddha. Even today, in Japan, Thailand, and Nepal, monks chant so that the ruler may have a long life. In Sri Lanka before the modern period, the king had the title of *sangha-raja*, Ruler of the Sangha.

In the eyes of early Buddhists, the ideal ruler was Ashoka, who ruled over most of the Indian subcontinent from 270 to 230 BCE. After he converted to Buddhism, he tried to build an empire based on Buddhist virtues, helping to spread the religion across India and beyond, to Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), and Thailand.

### The Development of the Three Main Traditions

Like any religious tradition, Buddhism changed over time. As a missionary movement – the world's first – it spread from northern India where it started, south, north, and east. As it spread, its followers developed different rituals and different interpretations of what the Buddha had taught. Indeed, on his deathbed the Buddha said that some of his rules would become unnecessary, but there was no agreement within the community about just which rules those might be. So by the early centuries of the common era, Buddhism had separated into two distinct groups, often called “vehicles.” The more conservative tradition claimed that it preserved all the Buddha's original teaching. It is known as Theravada, but is sometimes pejoratively called Hinayana or “Lesser Vehicle.” It is flourishing today in

Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. The other form, which started in India but then spread to China, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Singapore, is called Mahayana, the “Greater Vehicle.” Mahayana became the dominant kind of Buddhism in China, Korea, and Japan. It made some changes to Buddha’s original message, and it is the most popular kind of Buddhism today. A third tradition, **Vajrayana**, developed in the 6–7th century in India, and East and Southeast Asia. The version of this tradition that is best known is that of Tibet, because the Dalai Lama is its leader.

**THERAVADA (HINAYANA)** Theravada is the oldest school of Buddhist thought and practice, and is generally considered to be most like the Buddha’s own community. It stresses the Pali canon of sacred writings, the **Tripiṭaka** or the “Three Baskets” of discourses, which Theravadans believe contains precisely the Buddha’s original teachings. The first basket, the Vinaya, contains rules governing monks’ and nuns’ behavior. The others consist of ethical discourses, accounts of the Buddha’s teachings, and the Abhidhamma or scholastic interpretations of the Buddha’s teachings. In particular, Theravada Buddhism stresses the importance of strict adherence to the Vinaya, and careful reasoning and analysis of each individual’s experience in the path toward enlightenment or insight. This path of reasoning and analysis must be based on understanding of the first three of the Noble Truths, and disciplined practice of the fourth – the Eightfold Path.

**MAHAYANA** Mahayana Buddhism developed starting in the 1st or 2nd century BCE. Mahayanists developed their own texts, which tell of a second and third “turning of the wheel of dharma,” both attributed to the Buddha. According to Mahayana, the Buddha gave these teachings only to select disciples, which explains why these teachings came to the community relatively late. These teachings, known as the Perfection of Wisdom teachings and the Mind-Only teachings, are considered supplements to the Buddha’s original sermons.

Mahayana Buddhism reflects the diverse influences of the many communities where it became popular. The most obvious difference between Theravada Buddhism and this new movement is that Mahayanists believe that awakening can be facilitated by the spiritual power of bodhisattvas – “future buddhas” or awakened beings who are dedicated to becoming like the Buddha and helping others become awakened as well. Mahayana encourages all people to work toward bodhisattva status and to help others get there.

Both Theravada and Mahayana emphasize the Buddha’s past lives, and accept the Hindu teaching that the cosmos goes through four stages – it is created, abides, dissolves, and lies dormant, and then the whole cycle begins again. However, while Theravada teaches that there is only one Buddha per cycle (or world system), Mahayana allows for multiple buddhas at the same time. (Both Theravada and Mahayana think of the Buddha – or, in the case of Mahayana, buddhas – as beginning their careers as bodhisattvas.)

The Lotus Sutra, one of the first Buddhist scriptures to use the term “Mahayana,” speaks of bodhisattvas, as well as “solitary” (or “private”) buddhas – people who become awakened but who then die and are never heard of again. It also speaks of arhats – the highest spiritual level for monks in the Theravada tradition. The Mahayana thinkers accused the Theravada

