



FIGURE 7.16 Statue of the Bodhisattva Kannon with blue sky. © Prisma/SuperStock.

monks of selfishly pursuing the arhat ideal, stressing their own personal awakening and nirvana, and ignoring the Buddha's emphasis on loving-kindness and compassion.

Mahayana Buddhism also stresses diverse practices for the achievement of nirvana. Any technique – chanting, devotional ritual, even folk practices – may be effective. In some Mahayana sects, the route to awakening is chanting the name of a special Buddha, other than Siddhartha Gautama. Others stress *prajna* (wisdom or intellectual awakening), moral action, or devotions.

One of the most venerated of the bodhisattvas is *Avalokitesvara*, the Buddha of Compassion, whose mercy for humans is captured in one of Buddhism's most popular mantras, “Om mani padme Hum,” “O, the jewel in the lotus.” Like other buddhas and bodhisattvas, *Avalokitesvara* exists in his own heavenly realm, where he will bring those who have faith and pray to him. In China, *Avalokitesvara* became female, and she was called

Kuan-yin. In Japan, she is known as **Kannon**, Mother of Mercy, with many arms stretched out to her devotees. She is often called the “Virgin Mary of East Asia” – comparing her to the mother of Jesus – because of the many temples dedicated to her, pilgrimages in her honor, and claims of visions of her. In Kyoto, the old capital of Japan, there is a temple with 3,000 different images of Kannon.

One path to awakening in Mahayana Buddhism is philosophical. The greatest thinker in this tradition was Nagarjuna (c. 150–250 CE). Following the reasoning of the Buddha, he taught that everything in the world of ordinary perception is ultimately unreal. According to his “Doctrine of Emptiness,” ordinary experience is “void.” Even nirvana is “void” or empty; it is characterized by a lack of self-existence. Moreover, since the world is unreal, language about it is not ultimately reliable. One of his best-known teachings is the Two Truths, which distinguishes between conventional, everyday truth and ultimate truth. Our ordinary experience can be considered more or less true, in that it helps us get on with our lives, but the ultimate truth is that there is really nothing to the world or to language.

Nagarjuna influenced a later movement called Dhyana (meditation) in India, Chan in China, and **Zen** in Japan, which not only teaches the Doctrine of Emptiness but questions words, concepts, rational thinking, and logic. Chan/Zen emphasizes meditation and sudden awakening, and is still a popular form of Buddhism today. This tradition is famous for its koans – questions that send the mind on a “wild goose chase” to show the unreliability of conceptual thinking. The most famous koan is “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” (We shall talk more about Chan/Zen in Chapter 8.)

Another form of Mahayana that is still popular is “Pure Land” Buddhism. Like many versions of Christianity, it emphasizes simple faith as the key to salvation. According to tradition, Pure Land Buddhism began with a monk, Dharmakara, who vowed to establish a Happy Land in a heavenly realm if he achieved nirvana. He did reach nirvana, and became the Buddha of Unlimited Light – **Amitabha** in Sanskrit, **Amida** in Japanese. He sits in his Pure Land heavenly realm – the land of Sukhavati (“The Land of Bliss”), helping people reach salvation by escaping from the sufferings of life. Among the ways to do this is to call the name of this Buddha at the moment of death, which will allow the person to be reborn in the Pure Land. Here the emphasis has shifted from becoming awakened to reaching a paradise. Some versions of Pure Land Buddhism add that, once in the Pure Land, the person will be coached by Amida Buddha himself in order to achieve awakening. (In Chapter 8 we shall say more about this tradition.)

VAJRAYANA Sometimes called the “Diamond Vehicle,” Vajrayana Buddhism began within Mahayana Buddhism in the 7th century, and split off from other Mahayana sects in the 8th century. From Hinduism it got yoga practices, including some practices known as tantric. Tantric practices are based on scriptures known as tantras that present Shakti – divine feminine power – as the most important deity, along with her consort Shiva. Some tantric practices deliberately break moral rules against sex and drinking alcohol. Vajrayana Buddhism was given a mysterious air by its association with the strict guidance of a **guru** (spiritual teacher) and by secret ceremonies and secret teaching, so sometimes it is called Esoteric Buddhism or Tantric Buddhism. However, the main feature that distinguishes



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The Dalai Lama and Religious Tolerance

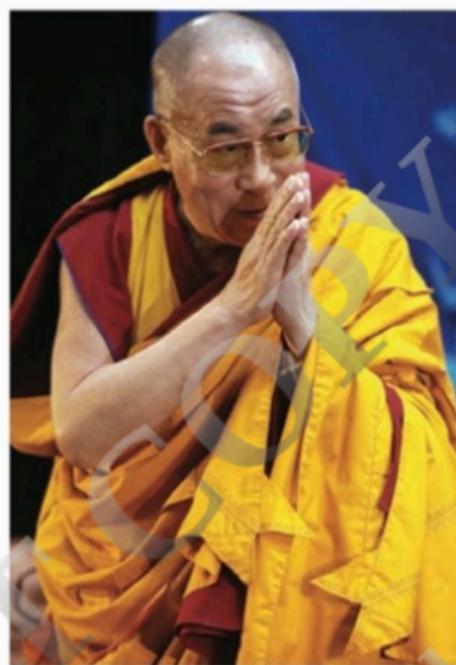


FIGURE 7.17 Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, is the best known representative of Vajrayana Buddhism. Mike Flokis/Getty Images.

When I was a boy in Tibet, I felt that my own Buddhist religion must be the best – and that other faiths were somehow inferior. Now I see how naïve I was, and how dangerous the extremes of religious intolerance can be today.

...Granted, every religion has a sense of exclusivity as part of its core identity. Even so, I believe there is genuine potential for mutual understanding....

An early eye-opener for me was my meeting with the Trappist monk Thomas Merton in India shortly before his untimely death in 1968. Merton told me he could be perfectly faithful to Christianity, yet learn in depth from other religions like Buddhism....

A main point in my discussion with Merton was how central compassion was to the message of both Christianity and Buddhism. In my readings of the New Testament, I find myself inspired by Jesus' acts of compassion. His miracle of the loaves and fishes, his healing and his teaching are all motivated by the desire to relieve suffering.

...The focus on compassion that Merton and I observed in our two religions strikes me as a strong unifying thread among all the major faiths....

Take Judaism, for instance. I... have learned how the Talmud and the Bible repeat the theme of compassion, as in the passage in Leviticus that admonishes, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

In my many encounters with Hindu scholars in India, I've come to see the centrality of selfless compassion in Hinduism too – as expressed, for instance, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which praises those who "delight in the welfare of all beings."

...Compassion is equally important in Islam – and recognizing that has become crucial in the years since Sept. 11.

"Many Faiths, One Truth." Op Ed in *New York Times*, May 24, 2010

Vajrayana from other forms of Mahayana Buddhism is its "deity yoga," through which the spiritual seeker may achieve nirvana in a single lifetime, rather than taking the "three countless eons" required by other Mahayana paths. Deity yoga involves visualizing oneself as a buddha, through specific rituals and complex meditation.

We shall continue to discuss Buddhism in the next chapter on China, but here we can note that, if Buddhism had not been transported to East Asia and elsewhere, it would probably have gone extinct, because in India itself it had died out by the 12th century as a result of successive invasions by Huns and Muslims, and the rise of popular Hinduism.

Buddhism Today

European colonization of Asia had a negative impact on Buddhism. Colonial powers often demanded that governments withdraw their support for Buddhist institutions, and some even destroyed monasteries.

The Communist takeover of Asian countries further hurt Buddhism. China, Mongolia, Vietnam, and North Korea launched campaigns to get rid of monks, calling them parasites on society and accusing them of superstition.

Nonetheless, Buddhism has survived and today is the fourth largest religious tradition in the world, with about 350,000,000 worldwide. Over 98% of Buddhists live in Asia. Mahayana Buddhists outnumber Theravada by a ratio of two to one. There are perhaps 700,000 Buddhist monks and nuns in the world today. In all Theravada countries except Sri Lanka, virtually every young man spends at least one year as a monk. There are far more monks than nuns, but there are strong lineages of Buddhist nuns in Taiwan and South Korea.

Today in most monasteries, begging is largely symbolic, as arrangements have been made with lay people for regular donations of food and necessary goods.

Most Buddhist communities have at least one stupa (shrine with relics of the Buddha or another important Buddhist personage), as well as stupas for ashes of important monks.

In the West, Buddhism has proven fascinating to intellectuals, beginning in the 1800s. Western intellectuals have often described Buddhists as rationalists who reject ritual and push social reform. The meditation techniques have been seen as ancient authentic practice



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compatible with science. Zen Buddhism became popular in the West after World War II. In the U.S. today, half a million people identify themselves as Buddhist. In the U.K. about 150,000 say they are Buddhist; in Europe, 3 million do, mostly in Russia.

Rituals

Two rituals established early on have always been central to Buddhism. First is the veneration of the Buddha, or in Mahayana, a Bodhisattva. This is done by showing respect for the figure, as by offering gifts, and by meditating on what that figure did. The second ritual is the interchange between monks and laypeople. Monks represent a higher level of spiritual merit, which they can share with laypeople. In return laypeople give the monks gifts such as food, robes, and blankets. In traditional monasteries, monks were not allowed to make or prepare their own food; it was only through the kindness of laypeople that they got to eat.

Another popular ritual that began early in Buddhism is making a pilgrimage to a holy site, such as a stupa.

Other rituals that have evolved are tied to the calendar. As noted, the Buddha's birthday is celebrated, as well as the day of his awakening and his passing into final Nirvana with the death of his physical body. In early Buddhism, and still in Theravada countries, services are held in temples four times each month, at the four main phases of the moon. There may be meditation exercises, flowers offered to the Buddha, and scriptures recited. In some places Buddhists celebrate the New Year and the harvest by carrying statues of the Buddha through the streets in procession, visiting Buddhist sanctuaries, and even having dramatic performances of episodes from the life of the Buddha.

As in most religions, too, there are rites of passage – rituals to mark important life changes. The most important are the two rites for initiation into the sangha, the religious community. In the first, the person renounces secular life and accepts the monastic life of a novice (beginner). In the second, which may occur years later, the person is fully consecrated as a monk. When the two rituals are combined, the postulant (person becoming a monk) typically shaves his head and beard and puts on the yellow robe of a monk. He bows to the abbot and sits with legs crossed and hands folded, saying three times the formula of triple refuge: "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the dharma, I take refuge in the sangha." He renounces secular life and accepts monastic life. Then the abbot consecrates him as a monk.

In many parts of Asia, funerals are the special province of Buddhists, even for people who are not religious or observant as Buddhists. Funerals typically revolve around a cremation, inherited from Hinduism, although in places where firewood is scarce the corpse may be buried. Buddhists generally think that a person's thoughts at the moment of death are important and determine their next life, so religious texts may be read to a dying person, or to a corpse, since the belief is that something of consciousness lingers around the body for three days. Mourners carefully dispose of the corpse, as in Hinduism and for the same reason – to make sure the dead person does not become a hungry ghost or a demon that will bother the living. Mourners may make donations and transfer the merit from themselves to the dead person to improve their lot when they are next reincarnated.

Conclusion: Religious Studies and Indian Traditions

At the end of Chapter 6, we noted that Religious Studies has had significant impact on the Western monotheisms. This is not surprising, given that Religious Studies developed in European and American culture. What about the impact of Religious Studies on Indian traditions?

Many scholars believe that the field of Religious Studies has had an enormous impact on the traditions of India and Asia more generally. Some scholars argue, in fact, that Religious Studies actually transformed the diverse traditions of Asia into Hinduism and Buddhism. By assuming that religion is universal and everywhere recognizable by a fixed set of criteria (even though there is no agreement about just what those criteria are), early scholars of religion imposed on Indian traditions a uniformity that did not exist. University of Michigan historian Tomoko Masuzawa titles her 2005 book accordingly *The Invention of the World Religions*. We shall return to this discussion in Chapter 10.

As in the case of Islam, some efforts to apply the tools of Religious Studies to Indian traditions have met with strong resistance. A 2001 edition of Paul Courtright's *Ganesha: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings* featured a picture of the god naked on the cover. This was considered insulting, but it was the scholar's highly Freudian analysis of the god's relationship with his parents that ignited outrage. The Indian edition was ultimately withdrawn and the publishers issued an apology for any offense it had caused. In 2003 University of Chicago scholar Wendy Doniger was pelted with an egg while lecturing at the University of London. Doniger has published a number of texts employing Freudian analysis of Indian gods. Doniger attributes such reactions to a right-wing politicization of Indian traditions, particularly in the late 20th century.

Whether Western scholars of religion "invented" Hinduism and Buddhism or not, many people today readily identify themselves as Hindus or Buddhists, and both traditions (or sets of traditions) remain diverse and flexible. The Buddha himself offered his teachings and techniques not as the absolute truth but as helpful suggestions for improving people's lives. If they work for you, he said, follow them. If they don't work, try something else. This practical attitude became especially prominent as Buddhism crossed the Himalayan mountains and became part of the culture of China, as we shall see in Chapter 8.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the similarities and differences between Indian views on moksha and nirvana and Western notions of salvation?
2. What are the major differences between Indian and Western notions of good and evil?
3. How do Indian notions of justice compare with Western views of morality?
4. Do you see any correlation between the polytheism of Indian traditions and religious tolerance in general?
5. Does the "impurity" associated with the dalits, the Untouchables, in India fit Mary Douglas's explanation?



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6. How would Marx describe the Laws of Manu?
7. The Buddha did not leave written instructions for his followers. How did this affect the subsequent history of Buddhism? Do you see any parallels here with other religions, such as Christianity?
8. The Buddha emphasized that everything changes. Is there anything about you that is exactly the same as on the day you were born? Is there anything about you that is exactly the same as yesterday?
9. For the Buddha, the unhappiness in life comes from our desires, our attachments. What would an advertising executive say about this? What do you think about it?
10. We suggested some similarities between the idea of a bodhisattva and the Christian understanding of Jesus. Can you think of any more similarities? Can you think of differences?

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