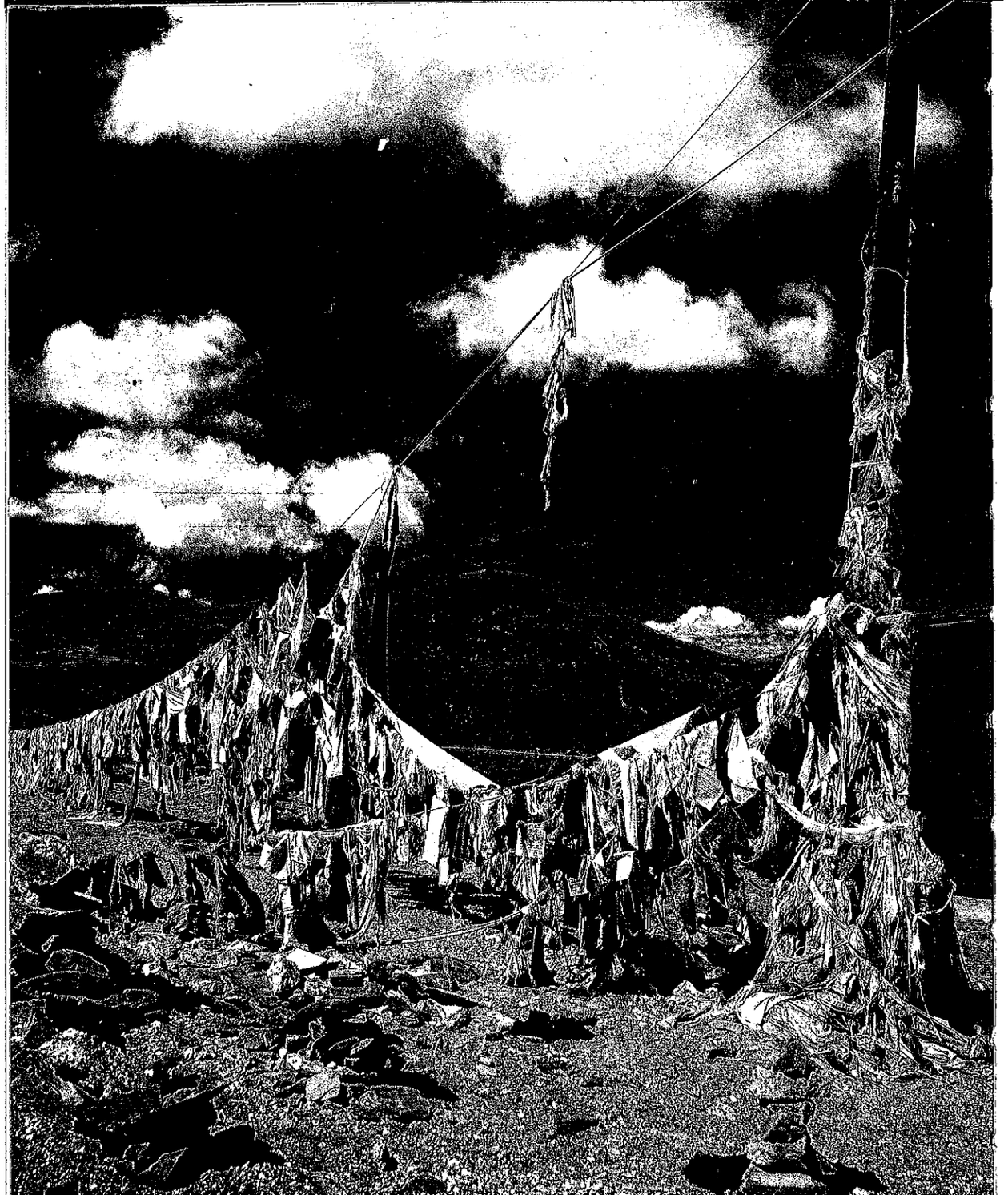


Chapter Five

BUDDHISM

Malcolm David Eckel

A 14th-century Nepalese gilt bronze figure of Maitreya, one of several celestial beings who feature prominently in the Mahayana Buddhist traditions of Asia (see pp.176–7).

OPPOSITE *Buddhist prayer flags—strips of material bearing sacred texts—in the Kambala Pass in central Tibet. The motion of the wind is believed to activate the prayers.*

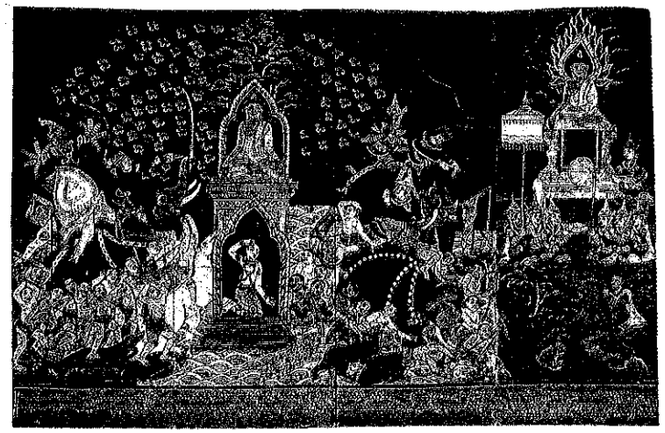
INTRODUCTION

Buddhism takes its name from Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 566–486BCE), who was revered by his disciples as the Buddha, or "Awakened One." In the course of only a few centuries, his teaching spread across the Indian subcontinent and into many other parts of Asia. Although it later almost died out as a living religion in the land of its origin, Buddhism has had a profound impact on religious life and cultural development outside India, from Afghanistan in the west to China, Korea, and Japan in the east, and through southeast Asia from Myanmar (Burma) as far as the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali. Today, Buddhism is also a vibrant part of the religious landscape of Europe and North America.

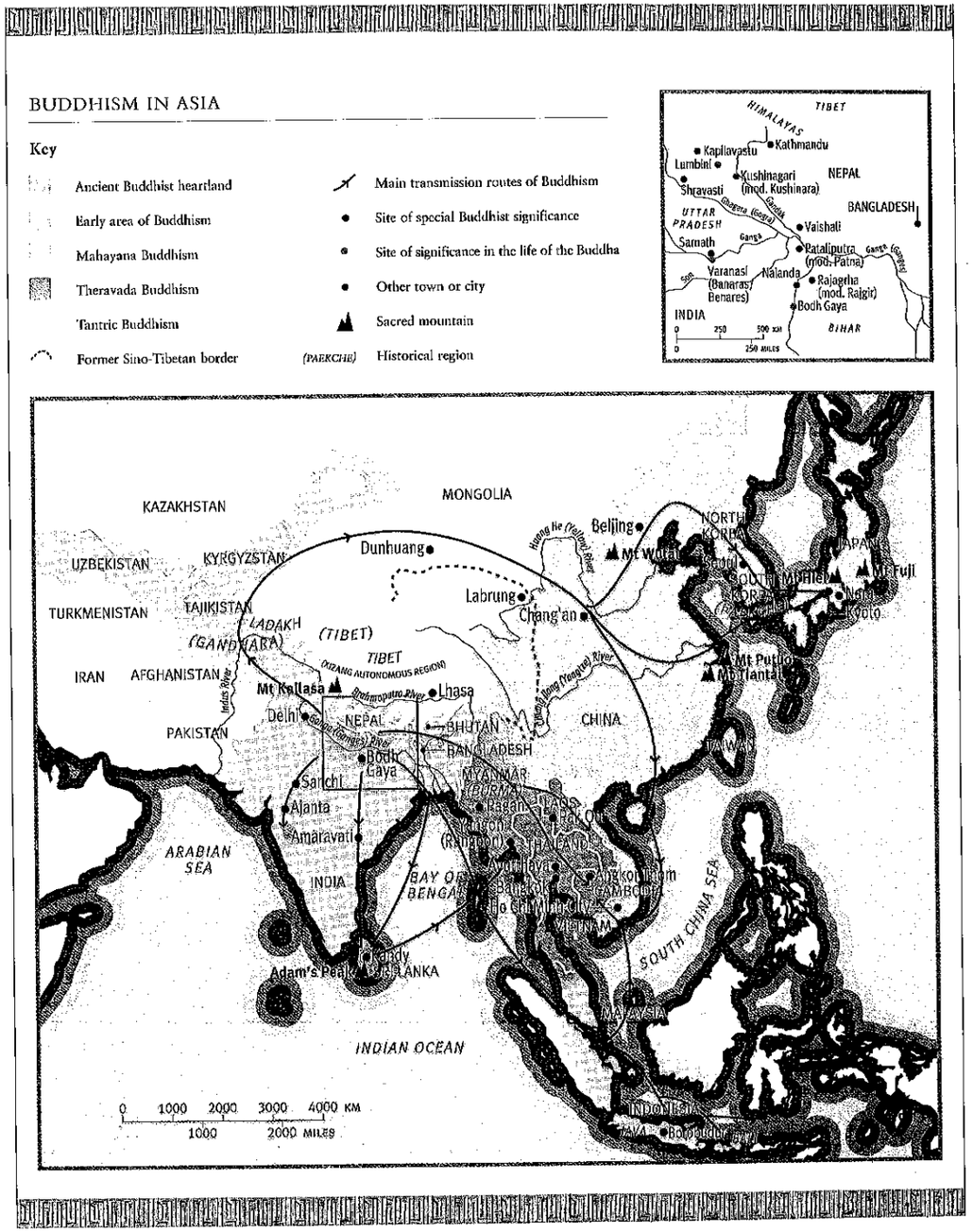
In the course of their migrations, Buddhist practices and teachings have shown a remarkable flexibility and capacity for adaptation to meet the needs of new host cultures and traditions. In fact, Buddhism has produced so many different varieties that it is sometimes difficult to recognize particular practices or beliefs as being distinctively "Buddhist."

At the heart of the tradition is the figure of the Buddha. Born an Indian prince, he renounced his royal life to seek release from *samsara*, the eternal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (see p.192). After long study, meditation, and self-scrutiny, he experienced the enlightenment or "awakening" (*bodhi*) that made him a *buddha* (it should be noted that while Siddhartha is called *the* Buddha, he was not the first, or the last, to attain "*buddha*-hood"). Eventually he began to preach and to win his first disciples. He went on to summarize his insights in the doctrines of the "Four Noble Truths" (see p.171) and the "Noble Eightfold Path" (see pp.184–5).

The Buddhist tradition evolved in many complex ways, but it has



This early 19th-century Burmese manuscript of the life of the Buddha depicts Siddhartha Gautama sitting in meditation at Bodh Gaya before his enlightenment (left). He is assailed by the forces of the demon king Mara (see p.170), but resists their attack and they flee in disarray. On the right, various celestial beings pay homage to the newly enlightened buddha.



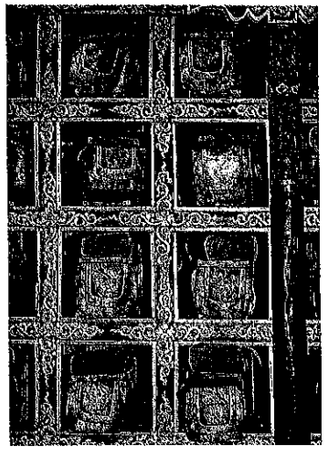
retained its practical focus. The Buddha was not considered to be God or a supernatural being, but a man who had found the answer to the deepest dilemmas of human life and had made that answer available to others. For millions of Asians and for many Europeans and Americans, Buddhism conveys a sense of the sacred and a sense of social and cultural cohesion without reliance on the concept of a creator God.

About a century after the Buddha's death, disputes over discipline led to the first splits in the Buddhist community. Eighteen rival "schools" (*nikayas*) arose, of which only Theravada, the dominant tradition of present-day southeast Asia, survives. In the third century BCE, the patronage of the Indian emperor Ashoka brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka, whence it traveled to southeast Asia, including Indonesia. In the second century CE, monks took Buddhism along the Silk Road to China, from where it passed to Korea and thence to Japan. Tibetan Buddhism took root in the seventh century CE and today is one of the most recognizable Buddhist cultures, largely through the figure of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (see p.194).

The success of Buddhism in northern and eastern Asia was enhanced by the emergence of the Mahayana, or "Great Vehicle" movement, in India, around the beginning of the Common Era. The Mahayana brought with it a new body of scriptures (the Mahayana *sutras*); a new emphasis on the importance of laypeople alongside monks and nuns through a reinterpretation of the ideal of the *bodhisattva*, or "future *buddha*" (see pp.176–7); and a new way of thinking about the Buddha himself. Tantric Buddhism, an offshoot of Mahayana, appeared in the seventh century CE. With its emphasis on symbolism and ritual and its vision of *buddhas* as "wrathful" deities, Tantra is one of the most striking and intellectually challenging varieties of Buddhism. Schools of Tantric Buddhism are found in China, Korea, and Japan, and Tantra is the predominant tradition in Tibet and Nepal.

The institutional and intellectual expansion of Buddhism was fostered by a series of remarkable personalities, beginning with the Buddha's early followers, called *arhants* ("worthy ones"). Both Mahayana and Theravada produced a series of scholar-monks, such as the Theravada scholar Buddhaghosa, who gave intellectual shape to the monastic tradition of southeast Asia. Buddhism has produced religious and social reformers such as Shinran and Nichiren in Japan (see pp.254–5), and it has a tradition of political engagement, from the ancient emperor Ashoka to the two recent Buddhist recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (see pp.183, 194) and Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi (see p.197).

There have also, of course, been generations of ordinary Buddhists whose stories have not been preserved but who have given meaning to their lives through the simple gestures of Buddhist worship; by observing the "Five Precepts" (see p.185); by offering food to monks; by celebrating rites of passage; by participating in celebrations of the Buddha's birthday or of Buddhist "saints"; or by going on a pilgrimage. All of these aspects of Buddhist practice seem to express, in one fashion or another, the same fundamental impulse: to find serenity in a world of suffering and change.



Sacred Buddhist writings in silk wrappings, part of the library of the monastery of Gompa, Ladakh, in the western Himalayas.

CHRONOLOGY

ca. 566–486BCE • Life of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha
ca. 486BCE • First Buddhist Council; formation of the nucleus of Buddhist canon
ca. 383BCE • Second Buddhist Council; first splits in Buddhist community
327–325BCE • Greeks under Alexander in India
268–239BCE • Reign of Ashoka, who sends Buddhist missionaries to Sri Lanka
ca. 100BCE • First Mahayana *sutras* appear
1st century • Buddhism arrives in China
220–236 • Buddhism flourishes under south Indian Satavahana dynasty
320–540 • Time of the Gupta dynasty, the "classical age" of Indian Buddhism
4th century • Buddhism arrives in Korea; Buddhaghosa codifies foundations of Theravada Buddhism
6th century • Buddhism arrives in Japan
7th century • Emergence of Tantric Buddhism
606–646 • Reign of Harsha in north India
7th–8th centuries • "First Diffusion of the Dharma" in Tibet; first Tibetan monastery founded at bSam-yas
800–1200 • Time of the Pala Dynasty; great monastic universities in eastern India
838–842 • Reign of Glang-dar-ma of Tibet
10th century • "Later Diffusion of the Dharma" in Tibet
11th century • Emergence of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism
1040–1123 • Life of Tibetan saint Mi-la-ras-pa
1100–1200 • Monasteries in eastern India destroyed; Buddhism declines in India
1173–1210 • Reign of Narapatisithu in Sri Lanka
12th–14th centuries • Theravada adopted from Sri Lanka by Indochinese peoples
1357–1419 • Life of Tsong-kha-pa, founder of Tibetan dGe-lugs-pa school
1391–1475 • Life of Tibetan monk dGe-'dun-grub, (retrospectively "1st" Dalai Lama)
1543–88 • Reign of bSod-nams rGya-mtsho of Tibet, who gains title Dalai Lama
1617–82 • Reign of Ngag-dbang-blo-bzang rGya-mtsho, "Great 5th" Dalai Lama; Potala built in Lhasa
1801–52 • Life of Eugène Burnouf, pioneer French translator of Buddhist texts
1844 • First Buddhist text published in US (translated from French by H. D. Thoreau)
1881 • Pali Text Society founded, England
1864–1933 • Life of A. Dharmapala, Sri Lankan reformer
1891–1956 • Life of B. R. Ambedkar, who revives Buddhism in India
1893 • Leading Asian Buddhists at World Parliament of Religions, Chicago
1935 • Birth of bsTan-'dzin rGya-mtsho (Tenzin Gyatso), 14th Dalai Lama
1950 • Chinese invasion of Tibet
1966–76 • "Cultural Revolution" in China: Buddhists in Tibet persecuted

South Korean monks recite prayers to mark "Buddha's Day," which falls in April or May and is widely celebrated throughout the Buddhist world (see p.191).

THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

The Buddhist tradition has its origins in the life of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, also known as Shakyamuni or "the Sage of the Shakya Clan," who was born in the Himalayan foothills at the end of the sixth century BCE. From a Buddhist point of view, the story of the Buddha begins with the story of his previous lives as a *bodhisattva* or "future *buddha*." According to the ancient doctrine of rebirth (*samsara*), a person's life is the result of a long series of actions (*karma*) accumulated over a process of many lifetimes, and Siddhartha Gautama was no exception. A body of traditional texts known as the *Jataka* tales (see box, opposite) tells us that he prepared for his final life as a *buddha* by passing through many lifetimes, in which he received teaching from previous *buddhas* and exhibited many of the great moral virtues of the Buddhist tradition.

According to the accepted scholarly chronology, Siddhartha Gautama was born in 566BCE and died aged eighty in 486BCE, although southeast Asian Buddhists accept 623BCE for his birth and 543BCE for his death or *parinirvana* ("final *nirvana*"). There is little disagreement about the basic facts of his birth or about the legend that grew up around his life. He was born at Lumbini in what is now southern Nepal to royal parents of an Indian people, the Shakya. He spent most of his years in the central Ganges basin, in the vicinity of Varanasi, Patna, and Vaishali (see map, p.165).

SIDDHARTHA'S MIRACULOUS BIRTH

The Buddha's birth is associated with a series of supernatural omens and events that portended the significance of his career. According to the *Buddhacharita* ("Acts of the Buddha"), an account of the Buddha's life by the poet Ashvaghosha (second century CE), when the future Buddha was conceived, his mother, Queen Maya, dreamt that a white elephant painlessly entered her side. When the time came for the young Siddhartha to be born, he sprang from his mother's side, took seven steps, and said: "I have been born to achieve awakening (*bodhi*) for the good of the world: this is my last birth."

Siddhartha's father, Shuddhodana, asked his court sages to interpret these marvels. The sages saw wheels on the palms of the child's hands and on the soles of his feet. Siddhartha, they said, would therefore grow up to be a *Chakravartin* ("Wheel-Turner"), quite literally a "revolutionary": either a great conquering king or a great religious teacher.

The wondrous birth and first 7 steps of the Buddha (see sidebar, above); a Tibetan painting of the 18th century.

Buddhist tradition relates that Siddhartha was raised at Kapilavastu in the palace of his father, King Shuddhodana, and married a princess, Yashodhara, who bore him a son, Rahula. In his early thirties, Siddhartha became curious about life beyond the palace, which he had never left, and asked to go beyond its walls. In the park just outside the palace, he witnessed three sights that brought home the reality of human suffering: a person in old age, a sick man, and a corpse.

On another trip outside the royal residence, Siddhartha saw a fourth sight—a wandering ascetic (*shramana*)—and vowed to follow his example and seek release from the world of suffering. At first his father tried to restrain him, but Siddhartha Gautama left the palace—according to legend with the help of the gods, who cast a pall of sleep over the court—and gave up his princely identity in order to assume the life of a wanderer. This event, known as the Pravrajya ("Going Forth"), is reenacted in Buddhist communities whenever anyone decides to take up the life of a monk or a nun.

The earliest stages of Siddhartha Gautama's withdrawal from society were marked by strenuous fasting and self-denial—so much so that he almost died. Convinced that this route to salvation was unproductive, he accepted a gift of food from a young woman and began to follow what is known in Buddhist tradition as the "Middle Way," a mode of discipline

THE STORY OF VESSANTARA

The *Jataka* ("Birth") tales tell of the Buddha's previous lives before his final rebirth as Siddhartha Gautama. The story of Prince Vessantara, the paragon of generosity, is one of the most popular of the tales. Vessantara, it is said, ruled a kingdom blessed by the presence of a white elephant with magical powers that brought abundant rain to the land. One day, the ruler of another kingdom sent messengers to ask for the elephant as a gift. With extreme generosity, Vessantara gave the elephant away. In protest, his subjects drove him into the forest together with his wife and children. There, an evil *brahmin* (member of the priestly caste) called Jujaka asked for Vessantara's children as slaves. The prince happily consented.

Fearing that Vessantara would even give away his wife, the god Sakka assumed human form and asked for her. Vessantara handed her over, but Sakka returned her to the prince at once, explaining that, because she was a gift from a god, Vessantara must now keep her forever. Vessantara's fortunes soon began to turn. His children were ransomed from the evil brahmin and soon the prince's kingdom was also restored and he returned with his family in triumph.

Like other *Jataka* tales (such as the account of the Buddha's incarnation as a deer that offered itself in sacrifice to save a doe), the story of Vessantara is widely venerated throughout southeast Asia as an example of the virtue of generosity. This quality is particularly important for the Buddhist laity in their role as donors and patrons of monasteries. Vessantara's munificence and exile in the forest also anticipated the act of renunciation that set Siddhartha on the road to *nirvana*.

A Tibetan tangka *(portable icon) of ca. 1700CE illustrating stories of the previous incarnations of the Buddha, who sits on a pedestal in the center.*

that seeks to avoid the extremes of self-indulgence and self-denial. Siddhartha's wanderings eventually brought him to a tree on bank of the Nairanjana river at Bodh Gaya that became known as the Bodhi Tree or "Tree of Awakening." He seated himself beneath the tree for a final, determined effort to win freedom from death and rebirth (see pp.192–3). He was assailed by the evil god Mara, the Buddhist tempter (see illustration, p.164), who sent his voluptuous daughters to distract him and his fierce sons to frighten him away. But Siddhartha withstood Mara's onslaught and, during one final night of meditation, became enlightened about the *dharma* ("truth," "law") of human existence (see sidebar, opposite). With this he could properly be called a *buddha* ("awakened one").

At first, it is said, the Buddha wanted to keep his insights to himself and sat in meditation for several weeks before resolving to pass on his newly found wisdom. He walked to the deer park at Sarnath near Varanasi, where he met five former companions on the spiritual quest. He taught them a sermon, or discourse (*sutra*), known as the "First Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma [Law]" (Dharmachakrapravartana). The story of Buddhism as an organized religious tradition begins with the serene and newly wise teacher conveying the results of his awakening to a handful of companions, who formed the nucleus of the Buddhist *samgha* ("community"). For the remaining forty-five years of his life, the Buddha wandered the roads of northern India, preaching the Dharma and expanding the boundaries of the community. He is even said to have ascended to heaven to teach the Dharma to his late mother. Finally, in the town of Kushinagari, he delivered a closing discourse (the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*) to his disciples, lay down between two trees, and died; or, in Buddhist terms, achieved his "final nirvana" (*parinirvana*), never to be reborn.

Following the Buddha's own instructions, a group of lay followers cremated his body, distributed his ashes as relics, and enshrined them in funerary mounds, or *stupas* (see pp.186–7). The veneration of these remains provided the model for the tradition of Buddhist worship, which came to be directed not only at relics but also at other objects, images, and sites sanctified through their association with events in the Buddha's life. In Buddhist tradition these constitute the Buddha's "Form Body," while his teaching is known as his "Dharma Body" (see p.179). In the two types of "body" (often understood quite differently in different parts of the Buddhist world), the Buddha continues to be a presence in the wider Buddhist community.

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BUDDHA

The earliest representations of the Buddha are symbols or scenes associated with the Buddha's life without actually depicting his physical form. Two of the most common symbols of the Buddha in these so-called "aniconic" images are the Wheel of the Dharma (representing the first sermon; see illustration, opposite) and the throne beneath the Bodhi Tree, where he achieved his Awakening. Aniconic representations of the "Great Departure," when Siddhartha left his palace to become a wandering ascetic, show an empty horse shielded by a parasol, with a group of lesser Indian deities muffling the sound of the horse's hooves, according to one legend. A common example of this early type of representation is simply the mark of the footprints left behind by the Buddha.

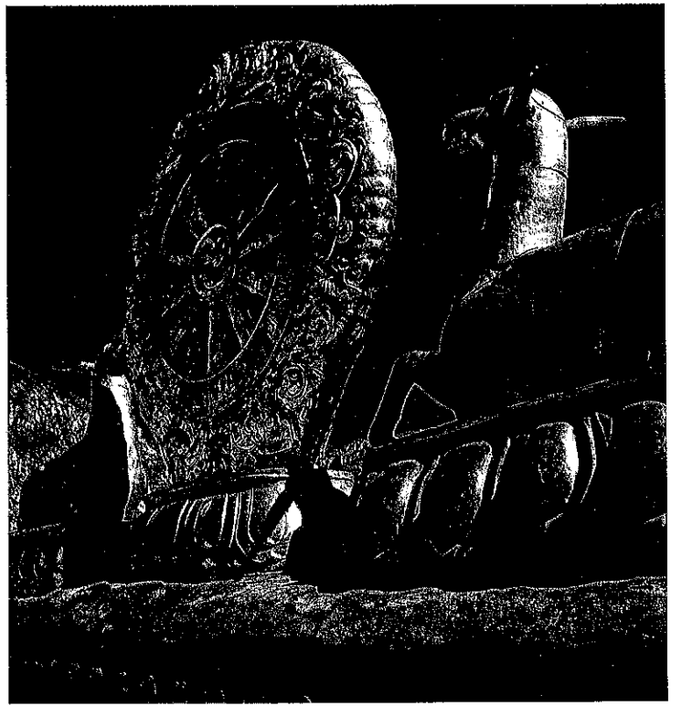
Early in the Common Era, Buddhists began to represent the Buddha's physical form. In the region of Gandhara, on the present-day border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, figures of the Buddha were very strongly influenced by the Hellenistic art of the Greek kingdoms of Afghanistan and western Central Asia. In the region of Mathura, in the middle reaches of the Ganges river, the Buddha was represented in a robust, down-to-earth style derived from the traditional Indian decorative arts. These two styles coalesced during the period of the Gupta dynasty of Indian rulers (320–540CE) to produce the classic representations of the Buddha that have had such wide impact throughout the Buddhist world. The Gupta style is also evident in the paintings on the wall of the Buddhist caves at Ajanta in western India and in the serene, elegant, sensuous, but otherworldly depiction at Sarnath of the Buddha teaching.

Hellenistic influence is striking in the expression, stance, musculature, and drapery of this 2nd-century CE schist statue of the Buddha from Gandhara. The "wisdom bump" on the head is a specifically Buddhist element, and the hands, now missing, were probably shown in raised and lowered open-palmed gestures of blessing.

THE "FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS"

The first of the Buddha's profound insights at Bodh Gaya was the knowledge of his previous births. This was followed by the knowledge of the births of others, and finally by the knowledge of the "Four Noble Truths": the "truth of suffering," the "truth of the origin of suffering," the "truth of the cessation of suffering," and the "truth of the Path." This can be explained as follows. The Buddha's "awakening" began with his realization that all life is filled with suffering, in particular the suffering that comes from seeing a beloved person, object, or experience pass away, as it inevitably must. He perceived that the origin of suffering lies in desire, and that desire comes from an ignorant misconception about the nature of things, in particular the nature of the self.

With his discovery of the Four Noble Truths came the conviction that he, Siddhartha, had brought suffering to an end. According to the Buddha, suffering ceases when the process that generates it is reversed, bringing about *nirvana*, an end of desire and ignorance (see pp.192–3). The Buddha believed that *nirvana* could be attained through the "Noble Eightfold Path" (see p.184).



Flanked by deer, this ornate "Wheel of the Dharma" adorns the roof of a temple in Lhasa, Tibet. It represents the the Buddha's sermon in the deer park near Varanasi (see main text).

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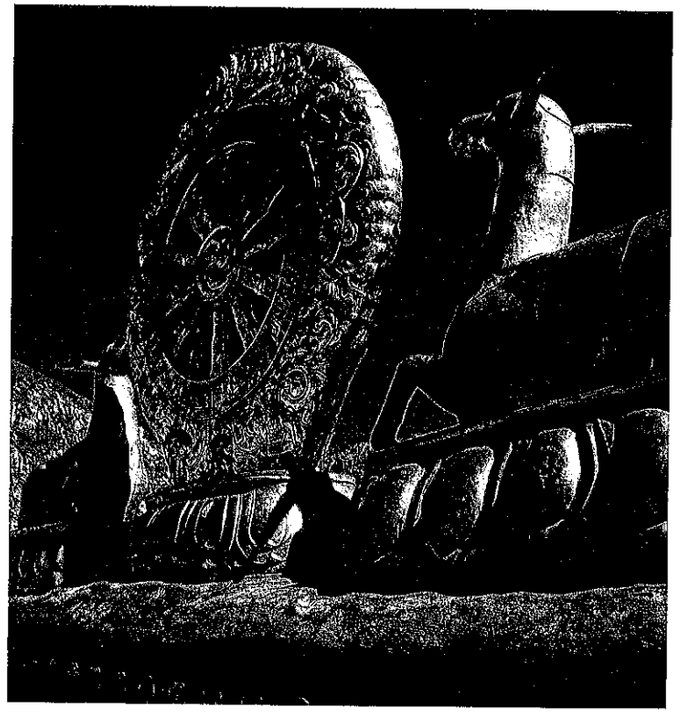
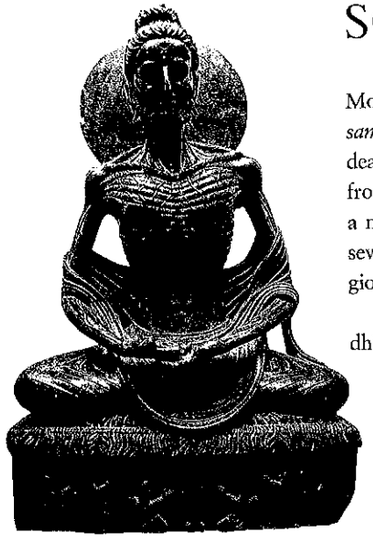


Flanked by deer, this ornate "Wheel of the Dharma" adorns the roof of a temple in Lhasa, Tibet. It represents the the Buddha's sermon in the deer park near Varanasi (see main text).



A Gandhara sculpture of the 3rd century CE depicting the Buddha emaciated as a result of fasting during the ascetic stage of his quest for enlightenment (see p.169).

SCHOOLS AND VEHICLES

Most of the evidence for the early history of the Buddhist community, the *samgha*, comes from texts written five centuries or more after the Buddha's death. It is therefore difficult to establish for certain how the *samgha* grew from a small band of disciples around a single charismatic leader to become a major force in India and beyond. However, Buddhist tradition records several stages of institutional development that made it possible for the religion to play an important role in the development of Asian civilization.

A short time after the Buddha died in 486BCE (or 543), a "First Buddhist Council" is said to have been held in the city of Rajagrha. In one account, the Buddha's disciple Kashyapa was traveling with a group of monks when he heard that his master had died. One monk openly rejoiced, saying that the death of the Buddha freed them from the constraint of monastic rules. Fearing a breakdown in discipline, Kashyapa proposed the calling of a council to restate the Buddha's teaching and monastic regulations and set down a common body of doctrine and practice to guide the Buddhist community. The council produced what was to become the nucleus of the Buddhist canon.

Another tradition tells of a second council, called about a century later in the city of Vaishali to discuss variations to the monastic code introduced under the pressure of the community's regional expansion. However, the issues were not fully resolved and gave rise to Buddhism's first big schism, between the Sthaviras ("Elders") and Mahasamghikas ("Great Community"). This was the start of the fragmentation of the *samgha* into the Eighteen Schools (*nikayas*), and anticipated the eventual split between Hinayana ("Lesser Vehicle") Buddhism and Mahayana ("Greater Vehicle") Buddhism (see sidebar, opposite).

The expansion of the early community owed much to royal patronage, both within India and beyond. The great Mauryan emperor Ashoka (268–239BCE), who ruled northern India from his capital at Pataliputra (modern Patna), made an explicit and public conversion to Buddhism. As part of his policy of "righteous conquest" (*dharmavijaya*), he promulgated Buddhist values throughout his kingdom and actively supported the spread of the religion beyond his frontiers. For example, his son Mahendra (Pali: Mahinda) is said to have gone to Sri Lanka at the head of a mission.

At this time it seems there were also Buddhist monks in the region of Afghanistan and central Asia, where they came into contact with Hellenic kingdoms established after Alexander the Great's invasion of India in 327–325BCE. At least one Greek king, Menander (Pali: Milinda), is said to have converted to Buddhism. The religion also received support from the Sakas, a Scythian tribe who invaded Afghanistan ca. 130BCE, and from

BUDDHISM'S DECLINE IN INDIA

In India, by the thirteenth century CE, the rise of Hindu devotionalism (see pp.132–3) seems to have undermined the appeal of Buddhism to the common people, while centuries of Buddhist and Hindu interaction at a popular level had apparently eroded the differences between the two traditions. The position of India's monasteries was also precarious, because they were vulnerable to persecution by the enemies of the kings and princes on whom they relied for support. When Muslim invaders destroyed the monasteries of Nalanda in 1197 and Vikramashila in 1203, Buddhism's active influence on Indian culture effectively ended. A few monks clung on in the ruined monasteries, but from this time until the twentieth century (see p.197), Buddhism was of little significance in the land of its origin.

King Kanishka, who dominated parts of northern Afghanistan ca. 100CE. In southern India, the support of the Satavahana dynasty (220BCE–236CE) produced a flourishing Buddhist culture in what is now Andhra Pradesh.

For the first six or seven centuries CE Buddhism was central to a great flowering of Indian culture, notably in the period of the Gupta dynasty (320–540CE) and the reign of King Harsha (606–646). Buddhist monasteries were sophisticated centers of learning, training monks in philosophy, religion, medicine, astronomy, and grammar. Later, as northern India came under growing pressure from foreign invaders, the focus of monastic life shifted down the Ganges toward Bihar and Bengal. Under the Pala dynasty (ca. 800–1200CE), monastic centers such as Nalanda and Vikramashila continued to elaborate the traditions of earlier times.

The history of Buddhism in southeast Asia goes back to Ashoka's missionaries in Sri Lanka. For a thousand years or more, the Buddhism of this region was an eclectic mix of traditions that mirrored the diversity of Indian Buddhism. From the eleventh century CE, when the influence of Indian monasteries began to wane (see sidebar, opposite), a number of Buddhist monks and kings in Myanmar and Thailand turned to Sri Lanka for guidance. In the reign of Sri Lanka's King Narapatisithu (1173–1210CE), Theravada (one of the Eighteen Schools) came into the ascendancy. Following the example of Sri Lanka, the Theravada orthodoxy was adopted

A Buddhist stupa *at Mihintale, where Mahendra (Mahinda), the missionary son of King Ashoka, is said to have preached the first Buddhist sermon in Sri Lanka. Theravada Buddhism spread from the island to southeast Asia in the 13th century CE.*

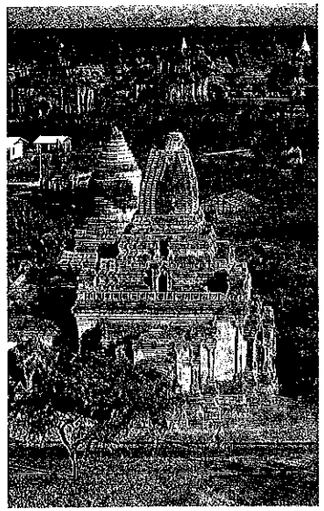
MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

Around the beginning of the Common Era, in circumstances that are still poorly understood, a Buddhist reform movement appeared that called itself Mahayana, or "Great Vehicle," in contrast to what it considered the Hinayana, or "Lesser Vehicle," of the Eighteen Schools (see main text).

Mahayana tradition traces its history back to the Buddha himself. According to Mahayana texts, the Buddha held a special assembly at the Vulture Peak in Rajagrha and delivered a sermon known as "the Second Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma" to a select group of disciples. This teaching, it is said, remained hidden for a period and was then revealed to the rest of the Indian Buddhist community.

Whether the Mahayana emerged in one region of India or developed in several different centers is uncertain. But it is clear that its emphasis on the *bodhisattva* ideal (see pp.176–7, 184) incorporated the interests of lay Buddhists, both men and women, in a new way. A *bodhisattva* did not seek to renounce the world to attain *nirvana*, as in the traditional monastic ideal, but returned to the world out of compassion for ordinary humanity.

Mahayana Buddhism developed a mythology of celestial *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas* that shows kinship not only with forms of worship found in Iranian and Middle Eastern religion but with the emerging mythology of Hinduism.



Pagan, the ancient Burmese capital, where the remains of more than 5,000 sacred Buddhist buildings have been found. The city flourished for 2 centuries until it fell to the Mongols in 1287.

in Thailand and Myanmar, and this branch of Buddhism predominates in the region to this day. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, southeast Asian Buddhists were confronted by European colonialism, but generations of reformers rose to the challenge and developed a distinctively "modern" Buddhism (see pp.196–7).

Buddhism came to Tibet in two waves, known as the "First" and "Second Diffusion of the Dharma." The first began in the seventh century CE, when the wives of the Tibetan king Srong-btsan-sgam-po (Songtsen Gampo) brought images of the Buddha to the capital, Lhasa. The first monastery was established at bSam-yas (Samye) in the late eighth century CE with the collaboration of the Indian Tantric saint Padmasambhava, the Indian scholar Shantarakshita, and the Tibetan king Khri-srong-lde-btsan (Thrisong Detsen). The history of Tibetan Buddhism is characterized by the elements that these three founders represent: Tantric ritual and meditation (see sidebar, left); monastic intellectual discipline; and royal secular power.

This "First Diffusion" came to an end during a period of persecution that began in the reign of King Glang-dar-ma (Langdarma, 838–842CE). Buddhism was reintroduced to Tibet at the end of the tenth century CE in what is known as the "Later Diffusion," and by the end of the eleventh century the four main sects of Tibetan Buddhism had been clearly distinguished. One, the rNying-ma-pas (Nyingmapa), traced its origin back to Padmasambhava. The others, the Sa-skya-pas (Sakyapa), bKa'-gdams-pas (Kadampa), and bKa'-rgyud-pas (Kargyupa), claimed to be rooted in the saints and scholars who came after the great persecution. From the bKa'-gdams-pas sect sprang the dGe-lugs-pa (Gelukpa) lineage that eventually produced the Dalai Lamas (see box, opposite).

Buddhism entered China in the first (or possibly second) century CE along the Silk Road (see map, p.201). As in southeast Asia and Tibet, the religion's greatest initial challenge was how to express the richness and complexity of Indian Buddhism in an indigenous form. However, by the time of the Tang dynasty (618–907CE), Buddhism had become thoroughly acculturated and was playing an important role in Chinese civilization. This period saw the emergence of the classic Chinese Mahayana schools, including the meditation tradition of Chan (from Sanskrit *dhyana*, "meditation") and the philosophical schools of Tiantai and Huayan. Chinese Buddhism was also deeply influenced by the Mahayana tradition of celestial *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas*, especially Amitabha (Amituo Fo), Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin; see p.211), and Maitreya (Mile Fo; see pp.176–7).

As a "foreign" faith, Buddhism was occasionally persecuted, even in its Tang heyday (see p.206), and the Neo-Confucian revival of the Song dynasty (960–1279CE; see p.205) ensured that Buddhism never regained the dominance it had enjoyed in Tang times. But it remained important as one of China's revered "Three Teachings" (see p.200).

TANTRIC BUDDHISM

Mahayana Buddhism spawned a movement that seemed to challenge the most fundamental commitments of the tradition. It is known as Tantra from the name of the texts that convey its teachings, and also as the Mantrayana ("Vehicle of Sacred Chants") and Vajrayana ("Vehicle of the Thunderbolt").

Tantric Buddhism stresses ritual and symbolism, especially the *mandala* or "sacred circle" (see p.177), and promotes practices aimed at achieving an immediate experience of "awakening." The radical quality of this awakening is most vividly expressed in Tantric art by the depiction of the Buddha as a "wrathful deity." A Tantric *siddha* or "saint" understands that there is ultimately no difference between peacefulness and anger, and that the awakening experience is present in even the most basic of human emotions.

The Chinese variety of Buddhism was introduced to Korea in the fourth century CE and to Japan in the sixth century CE (see p.243). Vietnam also came to adopt Chinese Buddhist traditions, although the religion may originally have penetrated the region as early as the second century CE. A form of Chan Buddhism (Japanese: Zen), with its emphasis on meditation and the experience of "awakening," occurs in all three lands, as does a degree of devotion to celestial *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas*.

By the mid-twentieth century, almost all of the major Buddhist schools and traditions had also come to be represented in the West, both among immigrant communities and Western converts (see sidebar, right). In monasteries, temples, and meditation halls from Scotland to San Francisco, Buddhism has put down vigorous roots in environments quite different from that of the middle reaches of the Ganges, where it came into being.

BUDDHISM COMES TO THE WEST

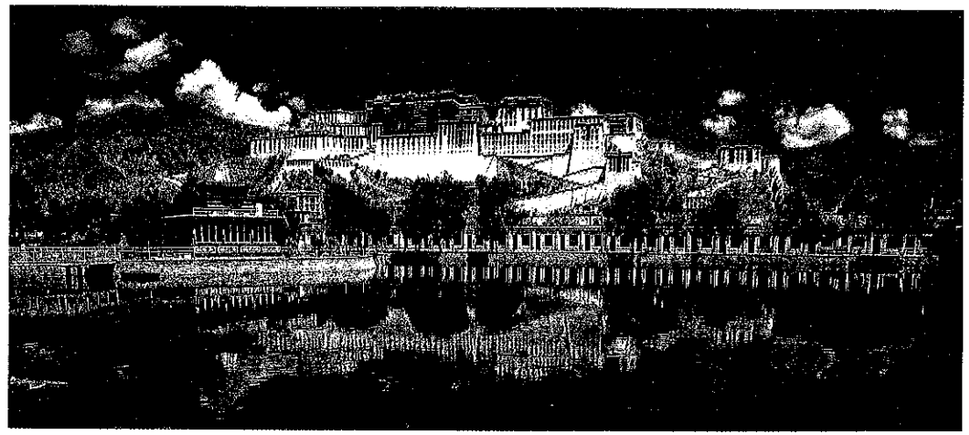
Scarcely known in the West except to scholars before ca. 1850, Buddhism had begun to spread actively by 1900, partly owing to an ex-US Army colonel, Henry S. Olcott (1832–1907), and a Russian mystic, Helena Blavatsky (1831–91). They took up the cause of reviving Theravada Buddhism in colonial Sri Lanka, and their own Theosophical Society owed much to Buddhist precepts. The faith's profile was also raised by the World Parliament of Religions (Chicago, 1893), attended by many important Asian Buddhist figures.

THE PRIEST-KINGS OF TIBET

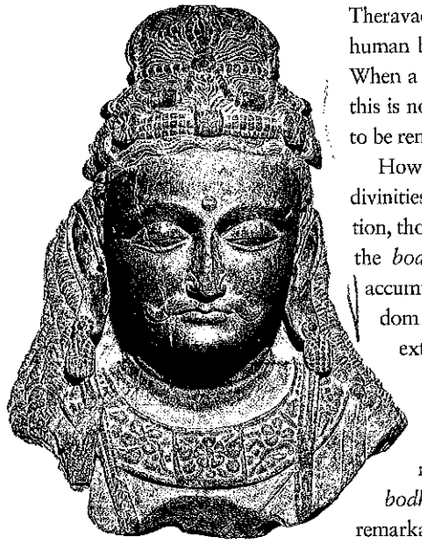
The title Dalai Lama (literally "Ocean Teacher," the first word presumably meaning "Ocean of Wisdom") was first given to the Tibetan king bSod-nams rGya-mtsho (Sonam Gyatso, 1543–88CE) by the Mongol chief Altan Khan. However, Tibetan Buddhists consider bSod-nams rGya-mtsho to be the third in a line of reincarnations that leads back to the monk dGe'dun-grub (Gendun Dup, 1391–1475), who is therefore regarded as the true "first" Dalai Lama.

During the reign of the "Great Fifth" Dalai Lama, Ngag-dbang-blo-bzang rGya-mtsho (Ngawang Losang Gyatso, 1617–82), the Dalai Lamas became the full secular and religious leaders of Tibet. Under their leadership, Tibetan Buddhists maintained their traditional way of life until the Chinese invasion of Tibet (1950) forced bsTan-'dzin rGya-mtsho (Tenzin Gyatso), the fourteenth Dalai Lama, into exile. Since that time, he has been the focus of efforts to preserve Tibetan culture, both in Tibet and among communities of converts and exiles around the world (see also p.194).

The Potala Palace in Lhasa, built by the "Great 5th" Dalai Lama, Ngag-dbang-blo-bzang rGya-mtsho, in the 17th century and the seat of the priestly rulers of Tibet until 1950.



CELESTIAL BEINGS



The bust of a bodhisattva *from Gandhara. In Mahayana literature, a* bodhisattva *is portrayed as one who looks down on the world, feels its suffering, and saves beings from danger.*

Theravada Buddhism insists that Siddhartha Gautama was very definitely a human being, who achieved a final *nirvana* and died never to be reborn. When a Theravada devotee makes an offering to an image of the Buddha, this is not the act of divine worship but a means to gain karmic merit and to be reminded of the Buddha's virtues, which one should strive to cultivate.

However, this does not mean that Buddhism has nothing resembling the divinities of, for example, ancient Indian tradition. In the Mahayana tradition, those who progress to the highest stages of the path to *buddha*-hood—the *bodhisattvas* ("*buddhas*-to-be," or "future *buddhas*")—are said to accumulate such power from their many works of compassion and wisdom that they acquire the ability to act in a quasidivine manner. These extraordinary figures are known as "celestial *bodhisattvas*." They can intervene miraculously in this world, and can even create heavenly realms where people may be reborn into bliss for reasons that depend as much on the compassion of the *bodhisattvas* as on the merit of the individual worshipper. At the end of their careers as *bodhisattvas* they become "celestial *buddhas*" and attain even more remarkable powers. But many *bodhisattvas* deliberately postpone their *buddha*-hood in order to assist ordinary devotees on the path to *nirvana*.

The concepts of the celestial *bodhisattva* and *buddha* made it possible for Mahayana Buddhism to develop an elaborate "pantheon" of quasi-deities. One of the most important is the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara ("Lord Who Looks Down"), who has been called the personification of the compassionate gaze of the Buddha. Avalokiteshvara's compassion is invoked by pronouncing the *mantra* "*Om Mani Padme Hum*" ("O Jewel in the Lotus"; *Om* and *Hum* are untranslatable sacred syllables; see p.140).

In Indian Buddhism, Avalokiteshvara became associated with a female *bodhisattva* called Tara, who embodied the feminine side of his compassion. In China, where Avalokiteshvara is worshipped under the name Guanyin, the *bodhisattva*'s male and female identities became compounded, and Guanyin came to be worshipped mainly in female form (see p.211). Tibetans feel a special kinship with Avalokiteshvara (in Tibetan, Spyan-ras-gzigs, or Chenrezig). They claim that he has taken a vow to protect the nation of Tibet and is manifested in the person of every Dalai Lama.

Important celestial *bodhisattvas* also include Maitreya, the "*buddha* of the future age," who will be the next *bodhisattva* to enter the world to become a *buddha* (see illustration, p.163). Like Avalokiteshvara, Maitreya is said to rescue people in danger: in China, where he is called Mile Fo, messianic movements have at times proclaimed his imminent arrival and the transformation of society on Buddhist lines. Other celestial *bodhisattvas* are Manjushri, the *bodhisattva* of wisdom, and Kshitigarbha, the consoler of the dead and protector of travelers, pilgrims, and children. (See also p.184.)

The best known celestial *buddha* is Amitabha ("Infinite Light"), who is said to have established a paradise, the "Pure Land," on becoming a *buddha* (see p.193). Anyone who chanted his name with faith, especially at the moment of death, would be reborn in the Pure Land and come face to face with Amitabha himself. Amitabha Buddha had a great impact in China and Japan, where he is called Amituo Fo and Amida Butsu respectively (*fo* and *butsu* = *buddha*). Indeed, during the Kamakura era (1185–1333CE), Amida became one of the most important elements in Japanese Buddhist life. The great reformer Shinran (1173–1263) made a radical claim about reliance on the grace of Amida rather than on one's own efforts (see p.254).

Other important figures include the physician-*buddha* Bhaishajyaguru ("Teacher of Healing") and the "Sun Buddha" Vairochana ("Radiant"), the central *buddha* in many Tantric *mandalas* (see box, below). He is identified with the sun and was important in the acculturation of Buddhism to Japan, where the sun goddess (see pp.246–7) heads the Shinto pantheon.

SIDDHARTHA THE *BODHISATTVA*

The line between a *bodhisattva* and a *buddha* can be indistinct. According to the *Lotus Sutra* (see p.181), the Buddha himself was merely the manifestation of a great *bodhisattva* whose long career has not yet ended. Realizing that people in this world needed an example of a fellow human being who had experienced the process of attaining *nirvana*, he manifested himself as Siddhartha Gautama and went through a show of achieving *parinirvana* (final *nirvana*). But this was not the end of his career: he continues to manifest himself in a compassionate way as long as there are others who need his help.

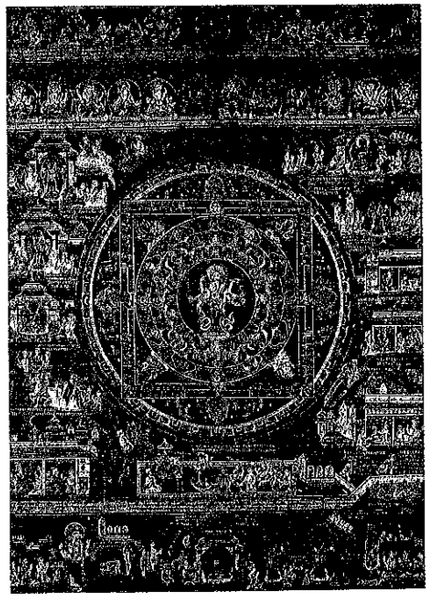
POPULAR DIVINITIES

Buddhism has always found room for the reverence of local deities and spirits. The Buddha himself is said to have been protected by a *naga* (in Indian tradition, a *naga* is a snake deity that controls the rain; in Buddhism, *nagas* also guard the treasures of the tradition). *Stupas* (see p.186) are often associated with *yakshas* (gods of wealth and good fortune) and *yakshis* (fertility goddesses). In southeast Asia, Hindu gods such as Indra and Vishnu are important Buddhist guardian figures, and the faith embraces many regional deities in China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet.

TANTRIC *MANDALAS*

In Tantric Buddhism, the universe is often represented as a *mandala*, or "sacred circle," that symbolizes the macrocosm and the microcosm: it represents both the universe and the mind and body of the individual practitioner. *Mandalas* are used in ritual and meditation to help the devotee to unify his or her vision of the cosmos; to contemplate the integration of the self and the world; and to overcome the distinction between *nirvana* and the realm of death and rebirth.

One of the most common of these sacred images is known as the "*Mandala* of the Five Buddhas" and plays a central role in the Tantric Buddhism of Tibet and in the Shingon tradition of Japan. It takes as its starting point a configuration of five celestial *buddhas*: Vairochana in the center, Amitabha in the west, Amoghasiddhi in the north, Akshobhya in the east, and Ratnasambhava in the south. The *mandala* is expanded and elaborated by a process of symbolic association to include five colors, five personality traits, five wisdoms, and so on, with each element of every pentad associated with one of the five *buddhas*. The *buddhas* are also associated with five goddesses located at the center of the mandala and at the four intermediate points of the compass.



A Nepalese mandala *of 1860 depicting Vairochana in the central circle and the 4* buddhas *in the corners of the square. The* mandala *also depicts numerous other sacred beings.*

WORDS OF THE DHARMA

After the Buddha's death, his followers are said to have called the First Buddhist Council to reiterate his teaching, the Dharma (see p.172). The council established a procedure for memorization and recitation that allowed the teaching to be transmitted orally for almost five centuries before it was committed to writing. Written versions of the canonical collections exist in all Buddhist cultures and are often treated with great reverence, but the oral tradition is still of central importance throughout the Buddhist world.

Owing in part to this ancient practice of oral transmission, Buddhism has no single canon of scripture. Different schools and traditions regard different collections of texts as authoritative, representing the various ways of understanding the Dharma down the ages. The Pali canon of the Theravada tradition (see box, below) contains much very ancient material from the earliest stages of the oral tradition alongside texts possibly composed in the second century BCE. The Chinese and Tibetan canons contain a wide range of Mahayana literature from as late as the twelfth century CE. Even where a canon is formally closed (as with the Pali canon), its contents may exist in different versions. For example, some texts in the Burmese version of the Pali canon are noncanonical for Sri Lankan Buddhists.

While Buddhist canonical literature is variable and new texts have often been added, it is still considered a source of authority, not only because it provides a record of the Buddha's teaching but because it provides access, in a certain sense, to the Buddha himself. Buddhist sacred texts represent the most important, enduring aspects of the Buddha, what Buddhists refer to as his "Dharma Body" (see p.171). A line in the Pali *Samyutta Nikaya* says: "What is there, Vakkali, in seeing this vile body? He who sees the Dhamma [Pali for "Dharma"] sees me; he who sees me sees the Dhamma." The Dharma/Dhamma functions as the continuing presence of the Buddha in the Buddhist community, and is as worthy of respect as the Buddha himself. Buddhist texts are often recited or copied as acts of devotion, and it is not uncommon, especially in the

THE PALI CANON

The most conservative canon of Buddhist writings are the *Tipitaka* ("Three Baskets") of the Theravada tradition. Written in Pali, an old Indian language closely related to Sanskrit, they are often referred to simply as the Pali canon. The *Tipitaka* (Sanskrit *Tripitaka*) is said to have been written down in 29BCE under King Vattagamani of Sri Lanka.

The three "baskets" are the three sections of the canon: the *Sutta* (Sanskrit *Sutra*) *Pitaka*, *Vinaya Pitaka*, and *Abhidhamma* (Sanskrit *Abhidharma*) *Pitaka*. The *sutras* of the *Sutta Pitaka* generally consist of the Buddha's doctrinal discourses and range from short poems to long prose narratives about the Buddha's previous lives. It also contains verses attributed to the Buddha's earliest followers: the *Theragatha* ("Verses of the Male Elders") and *Therigatha* ("Verses of the Female Elders"). The *Vinaya Pitaka* is concerned with rules of discipline, including a commentary on the *Patimokkha* ("Monastic Precepts") and stories intended to illustrate Buddhist moral principles. The *Abhidhamma Pitaka* provides a systematic analysis of the categories of Buddhist thought.

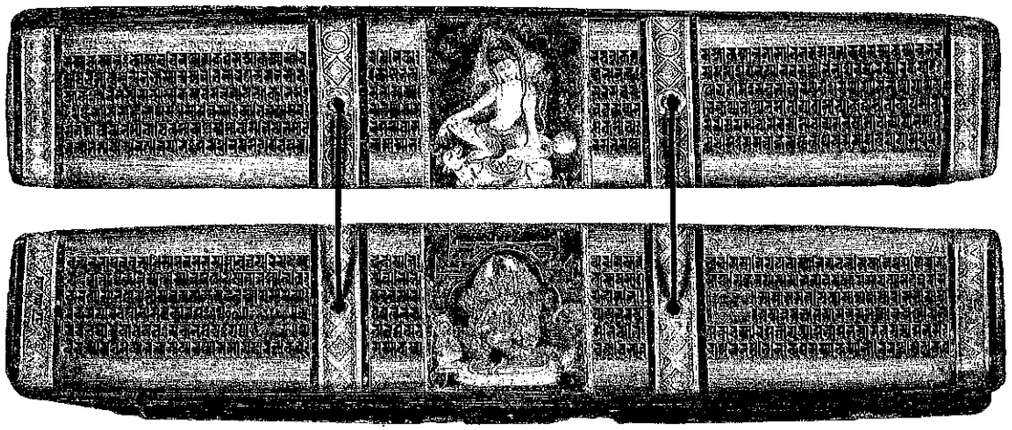
Portions of the canonical collections of some of the other Eighteen Schools (see p.172) have also survived. For example, the school of Sarvastivadin ("Those who hold the doctrine that all things exist") has left behind parts of its own "Three Baskets," in Chinese and Tibetan translations as well as the original Sanskrit. These often vary quite substantially from the *Pitakas* of the Pali canon.

The traditional interpretation of the Pali canon owes a great deal to the monk Buddhaghosa, who came to Sri Lanka from India in the fifth century CE. He collected and translated a large body of Sinhalese commentaries on the Pali texts and his most important work, the *Visuddhimagga* ("Path to Purification"), is an authoritative guide to the practice of Theravada Buddhism.

The first printed version of the Pali canon was made at the instigation of King Chulalongkorn of Thailand in 1893. The version most commonly used by Western scholars was produced in London by the Pali Text Society, founded in 1881 to disseminate the texts of the Theravada tradition.

A section of the Pali canon inscribed in Burmese on a strip of gold. Dating from 5th century CE, it is the oldest extant Buddhist text from Myanmar (Burma).

A Buddhist devotee turns a "prayer wheel" in a temple at Kyicho, Bhutan. Each "wheel" is a cylinder containing sacred prayer texts, which are believed to be activated when the cylinder is spun by the worshipper. Prayer flags function in a similar manner (see p.163).



"Perfection of Wisdom" sutras *written on palm leaves threaded together ("thread" is the literal meaning of* sutra*).*

THE "PERFECTION OF WISDOM"

The *sutra* portions of the Chinese and Tibetan canons both include a section called the "Perfection of Wisdom" (Sanskrit *Prajnaparamita*), which provides some of the most basic accounts of the *bodhisattva* ideal (see p.184) and the concept of "Emptiness." Taking a fairly short text as their starting point, the Perfection of Wisdom *sutras* range from one hundred thousand lines to brief texts such as the *Diamond* and *Heart sutras*.

Attempts to give a systematic account of the doctrine of Emptiness in the Perfection of Wisdom literature gave rise to the two major schools of Mahayana philosophy: the Madhyamaka ("Middle Way") and the Yogachara ("Practice of Yoga"). The Madhyamaka, which predominates in Tibet, interpreted Emptiness to mean that all things are empty of any real identity and that their "reality" is only conventional or illusory. The Yogachara, prominent in China and areas of Chinese influence such as Vietnam, understood Emptiness to signify that the mind is empty of any real distinction between subject and object.

Mahayana tradition, for texts to be placed on altars as objects of worship, alongside, or even instead of, images of the Buddha.

The development of the Mahayana tradition is intimately connected with the evolution and dissemination of its scriptures. The earliest Mahayana texts can be dated on linguistic grounds to the first century BCE. Important Mahayana writings were translated into Chinese as early as the second century CE, and texts that came to assume canonical status were produced in India after 1100CE. India never produced a Mahayana canon that was as clearly fixed as the Pali canon, although informal Mahayana collections existed as early as the second century CE.

The oldest extant catalog of Chinese Buddhist canonical literature dates from 518CE. The first printed version of the Chinese *Tripitaka* was made during 972–983CE, at the beginning of the Song dynasty. The Tibetan canon was collected by the scholar Bu-ston (1290–1364CE) and was first printed in its entirety in Beijing in the early fifteenth century.

The Chinese and Tibetan canons each give the impression of being a codification of a monastic library. Clearly, for both canons, the concept of "canonicity" was quite loose. There was a core of literature (known in Sanskrit as *sutra* and in Tibetan as *bKa'*) that bore the direct authority of the *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas* (see sidebar, left). Around this core accumulated a body of doctrinal, philosophical, and interpretive literature known in Sanskrit as *shastra* and in Tibetan as *bsTan*, or "teaching."

The most extensive collection of Tantric texts is found in the Tibetan canon. Like other Buddhist canonical literature it ranges widely in form, from the simple songs of the Indian Tantric saints to elaborate commentaries on Tantric ritual, meditation, and symbolism. The Tibetan tradition generally classifies Tantric texts in four categories: ritual (*kriya*), practice (*charya*), discipline (*yoga*), and highest discipline (*anuttarayoga*). The

Mahavairochana Tantra ("Tantra of the Great Vairochana"), a text that had central significance in Chinese and Japanese Tantra, belongs to the *charya* category. To the *anuttarayoga* category belong texts such as the *Hevajra Tantra* and *Guhyasamaja Tantra* that focus on the immediate realization of Emptiness. Buddhist Tantric literature in India evolved gradually from the seventh to the twelfth centuries CE.

Other important Mahayana collections are the *Buddhavatamsaka* and the *Ratnakuta* ("Heap of Jewels"). The *Buddhavatamsaka* contains the *Gandavyuha Sutra* that tells the story of Sudhana, a young pilgrim whose journey is illustrated on the wall of the great *stupa* at Borobudur in Java. The *Ratnakuta* contains the *sutras* that inspired the Mahayana tradition of devotion to the *buddha* Amitabha ("Infinite Light").

The enormous range and variety of Buddhist scripture has led to many controversies about scriptural authority and interpretation. Members of the Eighteen Schools (see p.172) attacked the validity of the Mahayana by claiming that its *sutras* were not the actual teaching of the Buddha. The Mahayana responded by saying that the teaching of the Schools was merely a preparatory teaching, which the Mahayana superseded. Within the Mahayana, the Madhyamaka school argued that only certain Mahayana texts were definitive in meaning (*nitartha*), while others had a meaning that required interpretation (*neyartha*). The Chinese and Tibetan traditions produced several complex schemes of classification to reconcile contradictions and determine which texts could be relied on for the most definitive teaching. The Tantric tradition dealt with issues of interpretation by insisting that the meaning of the *tantras* was deliberately veiled and could be correctly interpreted only by a qualified teacher (Sanskrit *guru*; Tibetan *lama*).

Young monks learning the Buddhist scriptures at Kunje temple, Bhutan.

THE *LOTUS SUTRA*

The *Lotus Sutra* has functioned in east Asia almost as a compendium of Mahayana doctrine and is one of many texts that have had a wide impact on the religious and philosophical development of the Mahayana tradition, but are not part of any standard subdivision of the canon. The *sutra* is the source of a famous parable in which the Buddha is represented as a father who lures his children out of a burning house by promising them different "vehicles." When the children get outside, he gives them "one vehicle," the "great vehicle" of the Mahayana. This parable provides an image of the relationship between Mahayana teaching and that of the "lesser" vehicles associated with the earlier schools.

The *Lotus Sutra* also advocates devotion to the text itself as a way of expressing devotion to the Dharma Body of the Buddha. This practice has had particular significance in Japan, most notably among the devotees of Nichiren (see also pp.251, 254–5).

IN THE MASTER'S FOOTSTEPS

A novice monk in debate with his teacher (left) at Labrang monastery in northeastern Tibet.

To be a "sacred person" in the Buddhist tradition is above all to imitate the Buddha. The most basic way to do this is to embark, like the Buddha, on a monastic life in pursuit of *nirvana* (see pp.184–5). The greatest exemplars of the monastic ideal were the Buddha's first followers, such as his chief disciple, Shariputra (in Pali, Sariputta), who was born into an Indian *brahmin* family in Nalanda. Shortly after his conversion by the Buddha, he became an *arhant*, or "worthy one"—one who, like his master, had attained *nirvana*. Shariputra had a great reputation for wisdom and is often depicted in Mahayana *sutras* as one of the first to ask the Buddha a question. Converted at the same time as Shariputra was his friend Maudgalyayana (Pali, Moggallana), who also came from a *brahmin* family. He was reputed to possess the magical ability to quell the hostile forces of nature and to travel at will to the highest levels of the cosmos. He became popular in Chinese Buddhist legend as Mulian, who traveled to Hell to intercede for his mother.

One of the most remarkable of the Buddha's disciples was Angulimala ("Garland of Fingers"), who is revered as a prime example of how one can make a radical break with the past on taking up a monastic life. Before he met the Buddha, it is said, Angulimala was a mass murderer who wore his victims' fingers as a necklace. Yet he became a monk and attained *nirvana*.

The Indian monasteries of later centuries also produced personalities renowned for their courage, learning, or meditative attainments. Among the products of the sophisticated monastic culture of Bihar and Bengal were the Mahayana philosophers Shantarakshita, who presided over the foundation of the first Tibetan monastery, and Atisha, who helped reintroduce Buddhism to Tibet during the "Later Diffusion" (see p.174).

The development of Buddhism in east and southeast Asia and Tibet is inseparable from the activity of Buddhist monks. An Indian monk, Buddhaghosa, shaped Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka (see p.178); the monks Shenxiu and Huineng founded respectively the Northern and Southern schools of Chan in China; the Japanese monk Dogen gave classic form to Zen (see p.252); and the Tibetan monk Tsong-kha-pa (1357–1419) formulated the dGe-lugs-pa tradition that produced the Dalai Lamas. Monastic engagement continues today with such widely revered figures as Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–), a Vietnamese monk who headed the Buddhist Peace Delegation during the Vietnam War and has preached the Buddhist virtue of "mindfulness" in the West. For many, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, perhaps the most visible living example of the "Buddha ideal" is the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (see p.194).

The Mahayana idea of the *bodhisattva* (see pp.176–7, 184) is also in principle open to any ordinary devotee in any age, including laypeople as well as monks and nuns. Some of the most influential Mahayana *sutras* gave vivid accounts of the lives of lay *bodhisattvas*, such as Vimalakirti, who demonstrated that there is no real difference between the attainments of a monk and a layperson. His example had particular appeal in China, where the Buddhist idea of cutting family ties to join a monastery sat uneasily with Confucian concepts of filial piety (see caption, p.219).

SACRED KINGSHIP

One of the most important institutional developments of the *bodhisattva* ideal was its extension to include a form of sacral kingship, a tradition that has existed in Buddhism since the third century BCE and the time of the emperor Ashoka (see p.172), who assumed a special status for Buddhists as protector of the Dharma.

As the Mahayana tradition developed, revered Buddhist princes and kings came to be regarded as *bodhisattvas*. Such figures include Prince Shotoku, who played a crucial role in the introduction of Buddhism to Japan (see p.243), and the Dalai Lamas of Tibet (see p.175), whom Tibetan Buddhists venerated as the incarnation of the celestial *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara (see p.176). The respect accorded to their status as *bodhisattvas* enabled the Dalai Lamas to assume responsibility for the secular as well as the religious governance of Tibet.

BUDDHIST HOLY WOMEN

Not all examples of the monastic ideal have been men. The Buddha agreed to ordain women and create an order of nuns, and the early tradition contains many moving songs attributed to these first nuns. Today the lineage of nuns has died out in most Buddhist countries, but there are active female orders in China, and movements are afoot in other countries to revive orders there as well.

Among the Buddhist laywomen revered as *bodhisattvas* is Queen Shrimala, protagonist of the *Shrimaladevisimhanada* ("The Lion's Roar of Queen Shrimala") *Sutra*. She expresses similar ideas to those of the male *bodhisattva* Vimalakirti (see main text).

TANTRIC MONKS AND SAINTS

In the Tantric tradition, especially in Tibet, there has been a complicated interaction between the ideal of the scholar-monk in a monastic community and that of the solitary *siddha* or "saint." The Indian Tantric tradition tells of *siddhas*, such as Maitrigupta (or Maitripa), who achieved their meditative breakthroughs on the fringes of civilization, working with unconventional and charismatic *gurus*. Padmasambhava, the Indian Tantric saint who shared in the foundation of the first Tibetan monastery, is pictured as a solitary figure with extraordinary powers. His consort, Ye-shes-tsho-gyal, was a powerful figure in her own right.

The Tibetan "saint" Mi-la-ras-pa (or Milarepa; 1040–1123) worked for many years with the irascible guru Mar-pa before he achieved his great insights and retired into the mountains to live as a solitary *siddha*.

Tantric practices have also been drawn into the life of the monastery in ways that enrich but do not contradict traditional monastic values. Tibetan monks often bring the practices of a Tantric *siddha*, a Mahayana *bodhisattva*, and a traditional monk together in the complex fabric of a single life.

A large copper gilt figure of the Tantric "saint" Padmasambhava, cofounder of Tibet's earliest monastery at bSam-yas (Samye). He is shown in dhyanasana *("meditation posture"), with his legs crossed in the lotus position.*

THE *BODHISATTVA* IDEAL

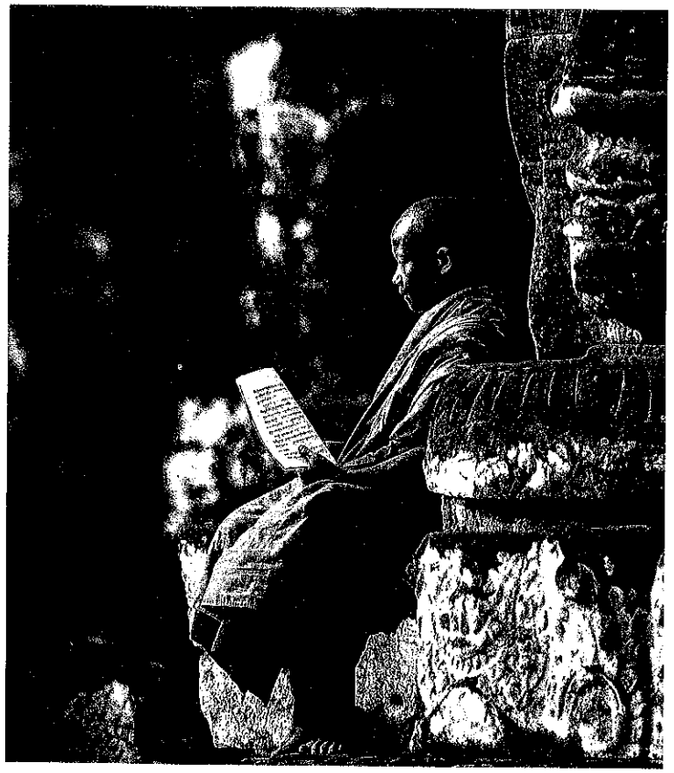
In the Mahayana lands of north and east Asia, the ethical ideal of the *bodhisattva* became the central principle of moral practice for Buddhist monks as well as laypeople. The *bodhisattva* cultivates the virtues of compassion (*karuna*) and wisdom (*prajna*). These two principles are expressed in the "*bodhisattva* vow": "May I attain *buddha*-hood for the sake of all other beings!"

The first principle is an active ideal, centered on relieving the suffering of others. This includes helping others to attain *nirvana*, even to the extent of postponing one's own entry into *nirvana* in order to do so. The second ideal is more contemplative. It focuses on seeing through the "veil of illusion" that shrouds ordinary experience, thereby becoming free from suffering oneself.

THE PATH TO *NIRVANA*

The spirit of Buddhist ethics is expressed in the story of a man named Malunkyaputta, who confronts the Buddha and tells him that he will not listen to his teaching until he has answered a series of speculative questions, such as "How was the world created?" and "Will the Buddha exist after death?" The Buddha responds by comparing Malunkyaputta to a man who has been shot by a poisoned arrow but refuses to let it be pulled out until the physician can tell him what the arrow is made of, who shot it, and so on. For Buddhists, all speculation is subject to one practical principle: it is valuable only if it can directly help a person to remove the "arrow of suffering" and find the way to *nirvana*. Any other type of speculation, like Malunkyaputta's questioning, is incidental.

The basic guide to the attainment of *nirvana* is the "Noble Eightfold Path," a process of discipline with eight components: "right understanding," "right thought," "right speech," "right action," "right livelihood," "right effort," "right mindfulness," and "right concentration." Alternatively, the fundamental prerequisites for *nirvana* can be expressed as three principles: abstention from harmful actions (*shila*, "moral conduct"; see sidebar, right); a disciplined mind (*samadhi*, "mental concentration"); and a proper understanding of the self and the world (*prajna*, "wisdom"). These principles are related to the traditional Buddhist understanding of the law of *karma*, or moral retribution, that governs the process of death and rebirth. A person should abstain from harmful actions because they will lead to punishment in a future life and thus make it doubly difficult to escape the cycle of death and rebirth. "Mental concentration" helps remove the desires and hatreds that lead to harmful actions. And "wisdom" removes the false sense of self that feeds the whole process of desire, hatred, and harmful action.



A monk sits in contemplation of Buddhist scriptures at the great temple complex of Angkor Thom, Cambodia.

Buddhist accounts of the law of *karma* insist that all rewards are related in kind to the actions that produced them. Thus sin causes a person to suffer in the next life; good actions bring happiness; and an action that is a mixture of good and bad will bring results that are a mixture of suffering and happiness. When monks come to a layperson's home on their morning begging round to receive donations of food, the more generous a person can be, the more he or she will prosper in a future life. People who are angry or cruel, disrespectful to parents or elders, or who cause dissension or strife, will suffer in future lives as a consequence. The model for this lay ideal is the Buddha, not so much as the ideal monk, but in his previous lives as an ordinary layperson, when he prepared for *buddha*-hood by performing actions of extraordinary loyalty, self-sacrifice, or generosity (see p.169).

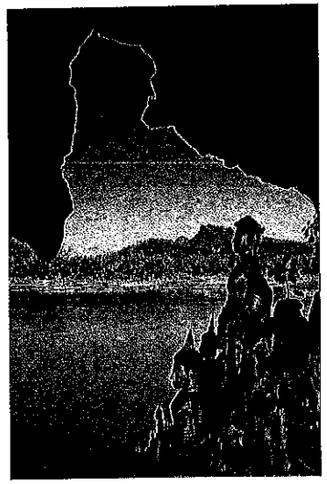
The practice of "mental concentration" (*samadhi*) can take many different forms in the Buddhist tradition. One of the most basic techniques is to sit in a stable position, with a straight back and crossed legs, and cultivate "mindfulness" (Sanskrit *smrti*, Pali *sati*) of one's breathing. The purpose is to calm the mind, diminish harmful emotions, and become more fully aware of the flow of reality that makes up the self and the world. Other forms of concentration or meditation involve a deliberate cultivation of mental images, often of *buddha*s or *bodhisattva*s, to serve as the focus of worship.

The cultivation of "wisdom" (*prajna*) also takes many forms. In the Theravada tradition it is associated with the study of the *Abhidhamma*, the third section of the Pali canon, and its key concept is the doctrine of "No-Self." To be wise (or, in the words of the Noble Eightfold Path, to have "right views") is to see that there is no permanent identity in the self that endures from one moment to the next. To understand this truth in a deep and practical sense is to be freed from the selfish illusions that feed the cycle of death and rebirth.

A 12th-century Chinese painting depicting disciples of the Buddha giving alms to the poor, an example of a "good action" that will aid the soul's progress toward the attainment of nirvana.

THE "FIVE PRECEPTS"

For Theravada Buddhist laity, and indeed most other Buddhists, "moral conduct" is summarized in the Five Precepts: no killing, no stealing, no abusive sex, no lying, and no intoxicating beverages. Novice Theravada monks observe five further precepts: no eating after midday, no use of ornaments, no attending entertainments or shows, no use of money, and no use of soft beds. However, once fully ordained, monks are bound by more than two hundred rules found in the *Vinaya Tipitaka*, the section of the Pali canon (see p.178) dealing with monastic discipline.



The earliest Buddhist temples were established in natural caves, where many shrines may be found today. These images of the Buddha are in the sacred Pak Ou caverns in Luang Prabang province, Laos.

PLACES OF DEVOTION

In his final instructions to his disciples, as recorded in the Pali *Maha-parinibbana Sutta*, the Buddha requested that his body should be cremated and the remains enshrined in a series of *stupa*s, or funerary mounds, to serve as focal points for worship and meditation. The basic form of a Buddhist shrine replicates one of these early *stupa*s, with a large central mound surrounded by a railing and topped by a square structure with a central post holding a series of parasols. In the earliest *stupa*s, the relics of the Buddha were housed in the square structure, but later they were enshrined inside the central mound. As the form of the *stupa* evolved in India, the mound came to be decorated with representations of the Buddha, events of his life, or important stories from Buddhist texts. To pay homage to the Buddha at one of these traditional shrines, a worshipper could make offerings in the same way a Hindu devotee might make offerings to an image of a Hindu god, with flowers, candles, incense, and so on; or a person might walk around the *stupa* in an act of ritual circumambulation.

The basic *stupa* was elaborated in many different ways in different lands. In southeast Asia, shrines commonly retain the low, rounded shape of a traditional *stupa*. In Tibet, the *stupa* has been elongated vertically into the shape of a *mchod-rten* (*chorten*) or "offering place." In China, Korea, and Japan, the soaring shape of a pagoda is derived from the graceful parasols that used to grace the top of *stupa*s in India.

SHAMBHALA: THE SACRED LAND

The apocalyptic *Kalachakra* ("Wheel of Time") *Tantra*, one of the last Tantric texts to appear in India, tells the story of a mythical kingdom named Shambhala, which lies hidden in the mountains to the north of India and is ruled by a righteous Buddhist king. The text prophesies a time when the forces of evil have conquered the world. Shambhala will then become visible and the righteous king will emerge from his citadel, surrounded by his armies, to defeat the forces of evil and reestablish the rule of the Dharma.

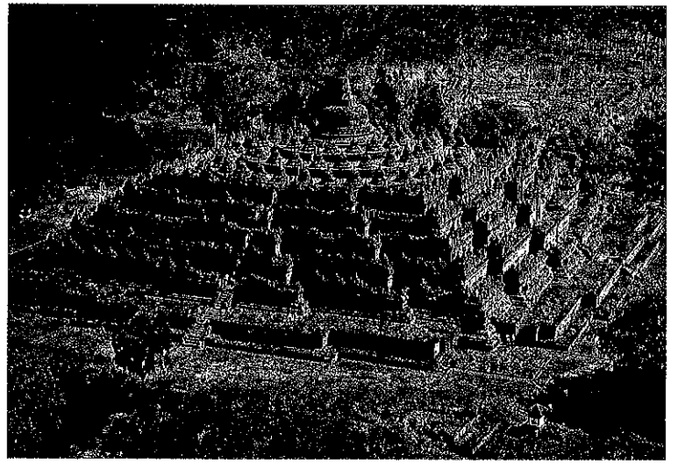
The prophecy of the *Kalachakra* represents a type of messianic speculation that has had important influence at certain stages of Buddhist history. For Tibetans, it serves not just as an image of an ideal Buddhist kingdom but also as an idealized symbolic goal for a *yogi* to attain through the process of meditation.

As the utopia of "Shangri-la," Shambhala has become bound up in the Western imagination with the idea of Tibet itself as an idealized Buddhist paradise, its ancient and sacred way of life preserved for centuries from outside influence by the impregnable mountain barrier of the Himalayas.

At the great Buddhist temple at Borobudur in Java, the simple path of circumambulation has been elaborated into a series of ascending galleries, decorated with the story of Sudhana, a young Mahayana pilgrim in search of enlightenment. On the top of the structure, the worshipper is confronted by an open platform with an array of individual *stupa*s, each revealing an image of the seated Buddha. In the center of the platform stands a large, vacant *stupa* representing, it seems, the empty clarity of the Buddha's awareness. There are few more elegant and powerful representations of the Buddha's awakening in all of the Buddhist world.

Indian Buddhists established a tradition of temple-building following the Hindu style. The earliest Buddhist temples were created in caves in western India. Typically, the cave entrance led into a large open space where worshippers could sit or stand in front of a small *stupa* or an image of the Buddha. Sometimes the Buddha-image was in a separate room similar to the *garbha-grha* or "womb-house" of a Hindu temple. In recent years there have been efforts to rebuild some of the important Indian Buddhist temples that were destroyed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. For example, a Buddhist organization called the Mahabodhi ("Great Awakening") Society has led the restoration of the temple at Bodh Gaya, on the site where the Buddha achieved his awakening.

Indian Buddhist temple architecture was highly influential throughout the Buddhist world. The Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Sri Lanka, and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok, Thailand, are sacred to the royalty of both countries and have served as symbols of royal power. The Jokhang in Lhasa is said to house the oldest image of the Buddha in Tibet and has functioned for centuries as an active center of Buddhist pilgrimage. The great temple at Nara, Japan, played a



The great Buddhist temple of Borobudur on the island of Java, Indonesia. It is at once a representation of the cosmos in 3 dimensions and one of the most remarkable transformations of the traditional Buddhist stupa.

THE SACRED LANDSCAPE

In India and elsewhere the definition of a Buddhist temple or shrine could be quite fluid, and a place that was sacred on account of its association with the Buddha did not have to be marked by a major architectural monument. Many travelers' tales from ancient India tell of small but unusual features of the landscape that were linked with the life of the Buddha. It was claimed that marks on rocks in a stream near Sarnath had been made by the Buddha's robe as he crossed the stream. A ravine in a town near Shravasti had opened up, it was said, to swallow one of the Buddha's enemies.

In many places there has been a lively cult of the Buddha's supposed footprints, most notably perhaps at Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka. According to Theravada tradition, the Buddha used his magical power to fly to Sri Lanka, and left the footprints as a mark of his visit.

A worshipper performs a ritual cleansing of a statue of the Buddha at the Shwe Dagon temple in Yangon, Myanmar (Rangoon, Burma).

decisive role in establishing the relationship between Buddhism and the Japanese imperial dynasty.

In the twentieth century, Buddhist temples have become common sights in Europe and North America. Los Angeles is sometimes called the most complex and varied Buddhist city in the world, and its many sacred sites include the sprawling Hsi Lai temple complex, established by a thriving Taiwanese Buddhist community.

The holy space created by Buddhist sacred architecture can be understood on a cosmic scale. For example, the central dome of a *stupa* stands for Mount Meru, the Buddhist cosmic mountain that marks the center of the world, and the parasols that rise above the *stupa*'s central axis represent the levels of heaven occupied by different categories of gods in ancient Indian tradition. Above the parasols, in the empty space of the sky, lies the formless realm attained by Buddhist "saints" in the highest levels of meditation, and the "*buddha*-fields"—the dwelling places of celestial *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas* of Mahayana tradition. Thus to perform a ritual circumambulation of a *stupa* is not simply to recall and venerate the life of the Buddha, but also to orient oneself firmly at the center of the cosmos.

In Indian tradition, the concept of the sacred center was particularly associated with the throne of the Buddha's awakening, or *bodhimanda*, at Bodh Gaya. According to Indian popular legends, all *buddhas* come to the same throne to achieve their awakening. The stone structure now visible under the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya was said to be the top of a diamond throne extending down to the middle of the earth. The concept of the sacred "seat of enlightenment" can also be applied to sacred mountains, such as Mount Kailasa in Tibet and Mount Wutai in China,

which are revered as the thrones of powerful *buddhas* or *bodhisattvas*.

Conversely, the idea of the sacred seat also serves to sanctify the simple space in which the ordinary Buddhist sits to meditate. Devotees of Zen habitually remind themselves that the spot upon which they sit for meditation is the throne of all the *buddhas* of the past and future.

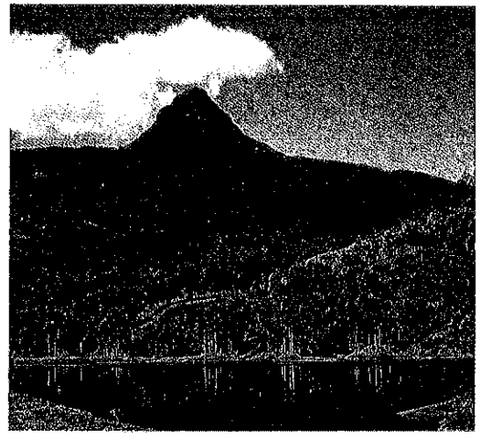
In the Buddhist tradition, the bodily relics and physical images of the Buddha that are venerated in shrines constitute his "Form Body." His teaching, known as his "Dharma Body," is also the object of veneration, often quite literally. Some of the early Mahayana *sutras* say that any place where the Dharma is expounded should be treated as a "shrine" (*chaitya*) of the Buddha, and classical Indian writings describe shrines where a copy of a Mahayana scripture is set up with great pomp and ceremony to serve as the focus of worship. Archaeology has shown that many Indian *stupas* contained sacred texts in place of the relics of the Buddha. Reverence for the physical scripture is also seen in Tibetan temples, where copies of the Mahayana *sutras* lie on or around the altars, and in the esteem and power accorded to the *Lotus Sutra* by the Japanese sects tracing their origins to Nichiren (see p.254).

PILGRIMAGE SITES

For centuries, the sacred sites of the Buddhist tradition have been the object of pilgrimage. As indicated by the Chinese story *The Journey to the West* (see p.217), places in northern India associated with the Buddha's life attracted pilgrims from as far away as China until the destruction of Indian Buddhism made such journeys impossible. Buddhists throughout southeast Asia make pilgrimages to sites sacred in their tradition, such as Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka.

Tibetans journey to central Tibet to the holy sites of Lhasa, and they make the grueling journey to the west of the country to circumambulate Mount Kailasa. Other mountains are also regular pilgrimage destinations. Chinese Buddhists make a journey to Mount Putuo on a small island off the coast of Zhejiang Province to pay homage to the *bodhisattva* Guanyin, who is said to reside there, and seek her favor. In Japan, Mount Fuji is venerated by many Buddhist sects (see p.261).

The history of Japanese Buddhism is rich with the recollections of well-known pilgrims. Some, like the Zen founders Eisai and Dogen (see p.252), traveled to China to pursue their quest for the Dharma. Others, like the poet Matsuo Bashō (1644–94), lived out their quest for awakening on the roads of Japan.



Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka, at the top of which is a depression in a rock that is traditionally said to be a "footprint" of the Buddha. The mountain is a popular destination for pilgrims.

A Burmese boy has his head shaved prior to entering a monastery for a period of training as a novice monk.

MONASTIC ORDINATION

In the Theravada countries of southeast Asia, monastic ordination often serves as a rite of passage for young men in their early teens to symbolize their transition from childhood to adulthood. Once ordained, a youth may spend no more than a few months or years in the monastery, just long enough to learn the rules of monastic practice, or how to read and write, or—in the lore of Thai Buddhism—to become "ripe" for marriage. However, he may decide to take the necessary vows and become a permanent member of the monastery. The ordination ritual reenacts the events of the Buddha's own renunciation. Amid communal festivities, the young man has his head shaved, dons monastic robes, and pronounces the phrases that indicate his entry into the order.

In the Mahayana lands, there is less stress on ordination as a coming-of-age ritual. But for the few young men or (in China) women who choose the monastic path, it is an equally decisive transition into another way of life.

HONORING THE WAY

Many Buddhist festivals are closely associated with events in the life of the Buddha or with the history and doctrines of Buddhism. The most important Buddhist holiday throughout the Theravada world is "Buddha's Day," which commemorates the Buddha's life (see sidebar, opposite). Tibetans also celebrate the key events of the Buddha's career, but on separate occasions at different times of the year. Most significant is the festival of the Buddha's conception, or incarnation, on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, one of a range of events that mark the Tibetan New Year.

Celebrations may also center on personal relics of the Buddha. At Kandy, Sri Lanka, Buddhists turn out in July or August to witness the procession of what is believed to be one of the Buddha's teeth in a great festival that is more than a thousand years old (see illustration, opposite). Faxian, a ninth-century Chinese pilgrim, wrote one of the earliest eyewitness accounts of this ancient celebration.

There are festivals in many Buddhist countries to honor important Buddhist teachings or scriptures. Theravada devotees celebrate the Buddha's first sermon on the full moon of the eighth lunar month, a date that coincides with the beginning of the monsoon season, when monks go on an annual retreat. In Laos, the story of the generous Prince Vessantara, one of the Buddha's previous incarnations (see p.169), is celebrated annually. Tibet celebrates the *Kalachakra Tantra* (see p.186) every year, and Chinese and Japanese Buddhists have annual festivals in honor of Buddhist *sutras*, most notably the *Lotus Sutra*.

Theravada lands also mark significant events in the history of Buddhism. The beginning of the *samgha*, the Buddhist community, is widely celebrated on the full moon of the third lunar month. Individual countries commemorate the arrival of Buddhism on their own shores, while monasteries honor the date of their foundation.

The end of the monks' annual monsoon retreat is marked by a big, lively festival in which laypeople join the monks and make offerings to provide clothing and other necessities to sustain the monastic community for the coming year.

Rites of passage are as important to Buddhists as they are in other religious traditions. People in Theravada countries observe a series of rituals as a child moves from birth to adulthood. In Myanmar there is a whole string of special childhood rites, including a pregnancy ceremony; a birth ceremony; a head-washing ceremony after the child is born; a naming ceremony; an ear-piercing ceremony for girls; and a hair-tying ceremony for boys. Frequently there is little in such ceremonies that can genuinely be said to owe its origin to Buddhism, although it is not uncommon for Buddhist monks to be present to recite chants or prayers.

The same ambiguity often pertains to "Buddhist" weddings. It is difficult to look to the Buddha himself as an affirmative model of marriage, since he left his wife and family to take up the life of a wandering monk. In southeast Asia, Buddhist monks are often invited to weddings to receive offerings and chant auspicious texts, but the specifically Buddhist element in the ceremonies seems peripheral, if not entirely absent. In China, even for Buddhists, the ritual of marriage is traditionally governed by the indigenous values of filial piety and reverence for ancestors (see p.226). In Japan, traditional weddings, and indeed several other rites of passage, usually take place in a Shinto, rather than Buddhist, context (see p.264).

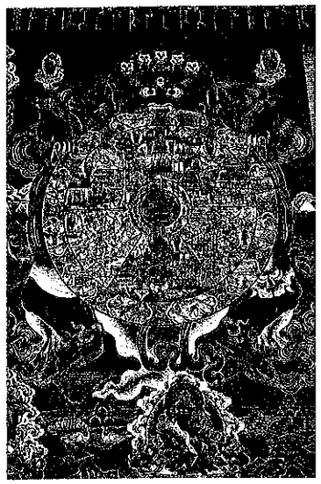
However, funerals are a different matter. The Buddha's renunciation of his home and earthly comforts was provoked by a vision of old age, sickness, and death, and the rituals surrounding death are decisively linked to Buddhist values. In China, Korea, and Japan, people turn to Buddhist monks and priests to perform their funerals, and family ties with particular temples are often reinforced by yearly acts of offering and remembrance in honor of the deceased. In southeast Asia, funerals frequently last for several days and involve offerings and the chanting of *sutras*. These are intended to bestow extra merit on the deceased for their benefit in the next life.

"BUDDHA'S DAY"

In Sri Lanka and other Theravada countries of southeast Asia, the most important Buddhist festival is "Buddha's Day," or Vishakha Puja, which falls on the day of the full moon in the lunar month of Vishakha (April–May). The festival commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha.

Devotees mark the occasion by visiting monasteries, venerating shrines or images of the Buddha, and listening to traditional sermons about his life.

Worshippers in Kandy, Sri Lanka, celebrate during the annual festival in which the sacred relic of a tooth allegedly belonging to the Buddha is paraded through the streets.



A wallpainting from the monastery at Taisicho Dzong, Bhutan, depicting the "Wheel of Life"—a visual representation of the cycle of samsara.

THE CYCLE OF REBIRTH

Buddhists have a tradition of reflection on death that began when Siddhartha Gautama viewed the "Four Sights"—a sick man, an old man, a corpse, and an ascetic—that led him to renounce his royal life (see p.169). His vision of renunciation held out the promise that, with moral and spiritual discipline, the problem of death could be overcome.

Traditional Buddhist ideas about death are predicated on the ancient Indian doctrine of *samsara*, variously translated as "reincarnation," "transmigration," or simply "rebirth," but literally meaning "wandering" from one lifetime to another. By the time of the Buddha, Indian religion had come to view existence as cyclical: a person is born, grows old, dies, and is then reborn in another body to begin the process again. Rebirth can be as a human being, deity, ghost, or animal; or else a person may be reborn to punishment in Hell.

The nature of an individual's reincarnation depends on *karma*, or the law of moral retribution. The greater the merit accumulated in the course of a life, the higher the form in which one will be reborn, and the reverse applies to those who acquire more sin than merit. Before they can be reincarnated in a different form, the worst offenders have to eradicate their demerits by suffering in one of the layers of Hell, which are ranked according to the severity of their punishments. The lowest and worst level is reserved for people who have killed their parents or teacher. Just as the inhabitants of Hell can wipe out their sins and be reborn as a human once more, those who rise to divinity can exhaust their merit and slip back into the human realm. No state is permanent.

Traditionally, people endeavor to avoid evil deeds and to accumulate merit through acts of worship or donations to monks, in the hope of receiving a better birth in the next life. But Siddhartha Gautama saw *samsara* as an eternal grind of deaths and potential suffering and set out to break the cycle. His act of liberation, the cessation of rebirth, is known as *nirvana*, literally the "blowing out" of the fire of ignorance and desire, which the Buddha perceived to be the "fuel" of *samsara* and the source of suffering (see p.171). According to Buddhist tradition, the Buddha achieved *nirvana* in two stages. Under the Bodhi Tree, at the moment of his "awakening" (see p.170), he realized that he was no longer fueling *samsara* by performing karmic actions—in other words, all desire in him had ceased. Decades later, at the moment of his death, known as his *parinirvana* or "final (or 'complete') *nirvana*," all the Buddha's residual *karma* was exhausted and he was completely released from *samsara*, never to be reincarnated. With this death, he ceased to exist.

Monks and nuns have attempted to follow the Buddha's example and achieve the same liberation from rebirth by renouncing their own attachment to the pleasures and responsibilities of lay life and practicing meditation and good moral conduct. For all Buddhists, the way to *nirvana* involves following precepts such as the "Noble Eightfold Path" (see pp.184–5).

Buddhist funerals are intended to assist the deceased into a better birth. Tibetan funerals go a step further, aiming if possible to ensure the person's liberation from *samsara* (see box, below). This practice seems to be directed as much at the living as the dead. It helps mourners to come to terms gradually (over seven weeks) with their loss, and to prepare themselves for their own transition out of this life. (See also pp.156–7.)

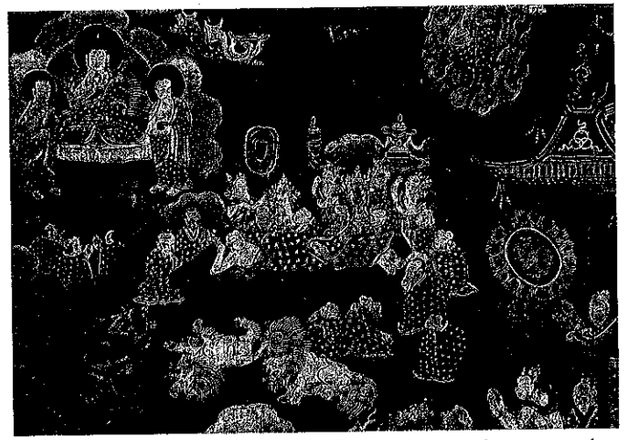
ZEN POEMS ON THE THRESHOLD OF DEATH

Japanese Zen Buddhism has a tradition of composing a poem at the moment of death. This poetry often gives powerful expression to the sense of wisdom and detachment that infuses the story of the Buddha's own death. One Zen warrior, forced to commit suicide out of loyalty to his feudal lord, wrote of death as the sharp-edged sword that cut through the void, and compared it to a cool wind blowing in a raging fire. It was as if his own sword were the sword of the Buddha's wisdom that cut through the illusions of life and blew out the fire of existence, just as the Buddha's own *nirvana* had "blown out" the fire of death and rebirth.

THE *BOOK OF THE DEAD*

One of the best-known Buddhist funeral texts is the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*. Over a period of as long as forty-nine days—said to be the length of time it takes for a person to be reborn in another life—a *lama* chants the words of the text, at first in the presence of the corpse and later before a picture of the deceased.

The text describes an array of benevolent and wrathful *buddhas* who will appear to the deceased in the "intermediate realm" (*bar-do*) between death and rebirth, and explains that a person should recognize these forms as nothing but manifestations of his or her own mind. According to the book, it is possible for the deceased to unite with these forms and thereby be liberated from the cycle of death and rebirth. For those who are not successful in uniting with the *buddha* forms, the *Book of the Dead* goes on to explain how to achieve a positive incarnation in the next life.



An 18th-century Tibetan image of the Buddha in parinirvana, *dying never to be reborn. The* Book of the Dead *seeks to help the deceased to attain this state.*

THE "PURE LAND"

The tradition of Pure Land Buddhism, which is found principally in China, Japan, and Tibet, holds that if a believer chants with faith the name of the celestial *buddha* Amitabha (Chinese Amituo; Japanese Amida), the latter will visit the believer at the moment of death, together with a throng of celestial *bodhisattvas*. Amitabha will then convey the devotee to rebirth in Sukhavati, the heavenly "Pure Land," or "Western Paradise" where he reigns. Here, free from earthly distractions, the devotee can prepare for *nirvana*, which is guaranteed to all who attain the Pure Land.

The belief and practice of Pure Land Buddhism, or Amidism, has its roots in the ancient Indian idea that meditation on a particular deity at the moment of death will help ensure rebirth in that deity's celestial domain. Amidism continues to dominate the understanding of death in some of the most popular forms of Japanese Buddhism (see pp.253–4).

His Holiness bsTan-'dzin rGya-mtsho (Tenzin Gyatso), the 14th Dalai Lama, in exile. His spiritual authority remains largely undiminished among Tibetan Buddhists, both at home and abroad.

ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

The Buddhist community, or *samgha*, has four traditional divisions: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. The monks and nuns attempt to follow the Buddha's example by renouncing the duties of ordinary lay people and living lives of simplicity. The laity take responsibility for maintaining the fabric of a Buddhist society. They marry and have families; grow crops; accumulate wealth and distribute its benefits; fight wars and maintain order; and do all the things that make it possible for the inhabitants of the monasteries to pursue *nirvana*. The simple divisions of Buddhist society are made more complex, however, by the different roles that exist within the monastic community; by the complexity of occupations and functions within the lay community; and by the shifting relationships that bind the two orders of society, monastic and lay, together.

The monastic community began as a group of wanderers who followed the Buddha as he went through the towns and villages of northern India. As time went on, the monks and nuns adopted a more settled mode of life. The monsoon rains that come to northern India during the months of July and August made roads impassable, and the monastic community adopted the practice of staying in a fixed location during the period of the rains. Out of this practice grew the institution of the monastery (*vihara*), which in time became the central institution in Buddhist life. Supported by the patronage of kings and wealthy donors, the great Indian monasteries became centers of learning, not just in Buddhist philosophy and ritual, but in secular arts such as literature, medicine, and astrology. The Buddhist lands of southeast Asia in particular developed sophisticated monastic traditions that often were closely linked to royal power. Sometimes this link has been quite direct, as in the case of King Mongkut of Thailand (see p.196).

The tradition of Buddhist kingship looks back to Ashoka, a ruler of the Maurya empire in northern India in the third century BCE (see p.172), as the ideal *dharmaraja* or "righteous king." According to tradition, Ashoka converted to Buddhism after a particularly bloody military campaign and attempted to promote a policy of *dharmavijaya*, "righteous conquest," by means of the Dharma rather than by force of arms. Buddhist monarchs have traditionally viewed themselves as "righteous rulers" in the style of Ashoka and have protected the monasteries in return for monastic recognition to legitimate their rule.

The most unusual variant of the institution of Buddhist kingship (see p.182) occurred in Tibet, where the "Great Fifth" Dalai Lama took advantage of the weakness of his rivals to become the country's full secular *and* religious leader, a position perhaps analogous to that of the papacy before the loss of its temporal realm in the nineteenth century. Tibet was governed by this distinctive combination of monastic and royal leadership until the Chinese invasion in the 1950s (see sidebar, opposite, and p.175).

While respecting the large and socially influential monasteries, Buddhists also retain a reverence for the individual "saint" who retires in solitude or with a small group of companions to seek *nirvana* away from the affairs of society. The forest-saints of Sri Lanka or Thailand are often treated as the great heroes of the tradition and provide an important counterweight to, and critique of, life in the major monasteries and society as a whole. When Dogen, the founder of the Soto Zen sect in Japan (see p.252), rejected the requests of an imperial envoy to involve himself in the life of the Japanese court, and threw the envoy out of his monastery, he was enacting an ancient Buddhist ideal of withdrawal from the affairs of state.

The relationship between monks and ordinary laypeople is best seen in the ancient practice of the morning begging round, still observed in southeast Asia. Each day, monks leave the monastery and go from house to house to beg their food for that day. This simple ritual ties the monks and laity together in a network of mutual support. The monks receive

Young monks line up to receive their morning alms from a Bangkok householder.

PERSECUTION IN TIBET

Traditional Buddhist life continued in Tibet much as it had for centuries until 1950, when the newly founded People's Republic invaded the country to enforce its claims to hegemony. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, bsTan-'dzin rGya-mtsho (Tenzin Gyatso), a youth of sixteen, remained in office but was forced to acknowledge Chinese overlordship.

In 1959 an uprising against Chinese rule provoked harsh intervention and the Dalai Lama fled to India. From this time, the Tibetan monasteries suffered severe persecution and many were destroyed, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). However, in the 1980s, controls on religious activities were relaxed and monastic life began again in some of the traditional monastic centers.

From exile in India, the Dalai Lama has continued to call for peaceful efforts to preserve Tibet's culture and autonomy. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. But China has been unreceptive to his appeals and seeks to control Tibetan religious affairs, notably in the selection of its own approved "reincarnations" of such figures as the Panchen Lama and other high-ranking monastic officials.

A worshipper at Thien Hao pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam.

the alms that aid their quest for *nirvana*, and laypeople are offered a daily opportunity to practice generosity and thereby accumulate merit that will lead them to a better rebirth in the next life. This reflects the broader idea of "interdependent causation" taught by the Buddha. According to this, every person has a distinct role to play in the framework of Buddhist society, but all are bound together in a network of mutual dependence.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the traditional structures of Buddhist society in southeast Asia have been shaken by the challenges of European colonialism, secularism, Communism, and modern science. Under the influence of the modernist and scientific vision of Buddhism developed by the Theosophical Society (see p.175), the Sri Lankan monk Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) led an important movement in the early part of the twentieth century to rationalize Buddhist practice, strip away "superstitious" aspects, and mobilize the Buddhist community in a struggle against British colonial rule. Since Sri Lanka (as Ceylon) gained independence in 1948, Buddhist institutions have flourished there, but not without struggle. Ethnic violence between Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils has introduced an element of religious conflict into modern Sri Lankan society that seems difficult to reconcile with the image of Buddhist tolerance and peace.

Myanmar is particularly notable for its distinctive vision of the active relationship between Buddhism and politics. After independence (as Burma) from Britain in 1948, the first prime minister, U Nu (1907–95), promulgated a program of reform referred to as "Buddhist Socialism." U Nu said that a true socialist state should promote equality, discourage acquisitive instincts, and provide enough leisure so that the people may

REFORM IN THAILAND

Of all the Buddhist royal lineages, that of Thailand (formerly Siam) has survived most vigorously into the twentieth century. Spared the difficulties of European colonial rule, Thailand charted its own distinctive route into the modern world under the guidance of its monarchs. King Mongkut (1804–68) spent twenty-five years as a monk before assuming the throne, in which period he became a supporter of a reformist branch of Buddhism known in Thai as Thammayut (from Pali Dhamma-yuttika, "Those who adhere to the Dharma"). As king (from 1851), he continued to support the Thammayut reform program, characterized by efforts to modernize and tighten the discipline of the Thai monastic community.

Mongkut's son Chulalongkorn (ruled 1868–1910) continued his father's policy of promoting a form of Buddhism consistent with modern Western science (Chulalongkorn is the bicycling monarch depicted in the musical *The King and I*). To this day, the Thai king continues to play a central role in his country's political and religious life.

devote time to meditation and the pursuit of *nirvana*. Ousted by the military in 1962, U Nu lived in exile in India for a number of years before returning to Myanmar in 1980 and becoming a Buddhist monk.

More recently, Aung San Suu Kyi has brought Buddhist principles to bear in a campaign to restore Burmese democracy (see box, below). As her career demonstrates, it is possible for women to play an important role in the political life of the modern Buddhist countries of southeast Asia. But traditional ideas of male dominance are still deeply rooted in the culture of this and other regions.

Outside Tibet, Buddhism has also faced the challenges of living under secularizing Communist regimes in Indochina, where the degree of religious oppression has varied considerably. In Vietnam, for example, Buddhist institutions have remained fairly active, but in Cambodia they suffered massively from the devastation wrought nationally by the Khmer Rouge government of 1975–79 and are still recovering.

The twentieth century has also seen an attempt to revive Buddhism in its homeland of India as part of a critique of the traditional caste system. Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), an "Untouchable" from the Indian state of Maharashtra, saw in Buddhism an ideal of equality and social justice that could relieve the oppression of the disadvantaged castes in Indian society (see p.159). He created an important social movement based on Buddhist principles that continues to play a role in Indian religious life and politics.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI

Modern Myanmar (formerly Burma) provides one of the most celebrated examples of a woman bringing Buddhist religious values to bear on secular affairs. In July 1988, the Burmese ruler General Ne Win, head of the Myanmar Socialist Programme Party, held a national referendum on Myanmar's political future. Popular opposition to the authoritarian military rule crystallized around the figure of Aung San Suu Kyi. Her father, Aung San, was a colleague of U Nu (see main text) and had led the movement for national independence until his assassination in 1947.

Aung San Suu Kyi's political writings, gathered in a collection called *Freedom From Fear*, speak eloquently of a modern quest for democracy and human rights and of the traditional Buddhist values of truth, fearlessness, righteousness, and loving kindness. In recognition of her campaign for peaceful democratic reforms, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.

Aung San Suu Kyi and supporters at a press conference at the gate of her home in Yangon (Rangoon), from where—under a state of effective house arrest— she headed the movement for democratic reform in Myanmar.