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The Religion of the Dalai Lama—Basic Buddhism

The Buddha

Names of the Historical Buddha (563-483 BCE)

Siddhartha - "He has accomplished his goal," his personal name

Gautama - "Of the lineage of Gotama," his family name

Shakyamuni - "Sage of the Shakya clan," a designation of the historical Buddha

The word Buddha means “the enlightened one”; it is a title given to Prince Siddhartha when he achieved full and complete awakening to the real nature of the world. He is by definition the highest human possibility and so different cultures have portrayed him in different ways.

The earliest Buddhist tradition did not make images of the physical Buddha since he achieved nirvana and was spiritually detached from the physical world. A few centuries later, the first images of the Buddha appear. They were modeled on statues of the Greek god, Apollo which were known to the Indians through contact with Alexander the Great. Apollo was the ideal male figure and the Greeks usually showed him naked and in an athletic pose. The Buddhists took the same ideal form but dressed him modestly and portrayed the Buddha sitting in meditation.

As the Buddha image traveled with Buddhists, each culture portrayed him differently. The Southern Buddhists portrayed the Buddha with gold skin and with narrow human proportions, the physical ideal for that culture. The Chinese and Japanese portrayed the Buddha as grave and dignified as befits a culture that values authority and reserve. The Tibetans give the Buddha a touch of shamanism, so the image of the Buddha is surrounded by lesser deities and waves of power seem to emanate from him.

However, the fat roly-poly guy with a big grin on his face to be found in some Chinese restaurants is not the Buddha. This figure, a Chinese version of the jolly gift giver (like Santa Claus in our culture) is actually based on a 10th century Chinese monk who was a great big fellow with a huge compassionate heart. He went around in north China doing many good deeds. Any rewards he received, he stuck in a sack he carried and promptly gave them to people in need. When he died, the people who knew him, recognizing that he was indeed a special individual, made the statues in his honor and memory and soon he was conjoined with other Chinese figures representing prosperity and good luck. It is for prosperity and good luck that this figure is found in Chinese businesses.

The Four Noble Truths

These four noble truths and the eight-fold path are considered a basic outline of the Dharma, a term that means both “reality” and “the Buddha’s teachings.”

1] Suffering: All life involves suffering.

a] Pain itself, physical and mental.

- b] Impermanence, the world around us is in constant change.
- c] No unchanging "self" (the doctrine of anatman).

The individual is made up of five constituents (skandhas).

- a] The physical body, the environment, the outermost skandha.
- b] Feelings, pleasant, unpleasant and neutral
- c] Perceptions and conceptions.
- d] The will and mental dispositions, the active mind.
- e] Consciousness, divided into five sensory awarenesses.

2] Origin: Suffering caused by obsession (lit. thirsts) ultimately derived from ignorance.

3] Cessation: To end our suffering, we must end our obsessions.

Nirvana - extinction of suffering, snuffing out fires of passion

Nirvana "with remainder" achieved in this lifetime

Nirvana "without remainder," sometimes called parinirvana, the passing of a Buddha.

Bodhi - awakening, complete enlightenment, seeing the world as it is without delusion or obstructions, pure consciousness.

4] Path: to end our obsessions, we must follow the noble eight-fold path.

- 1] Right views
- 2] Right intentions
- 3] Right speech
- 4] Right action - morality
- 5] Right livelihood
- 6] Right effort
- 7] Right mindfulness - the cultivation of awareness
- 8] Right concentration

This set has been compared to a medical analysis: a description of the disease; suffering, its diagnosis; obsessions, its prognosis: that suffering can be ended, and the prescription: the eight-fold path.

Buddhist Morality

Buddhist morality is usually summarized in terms of the ten precepts – five of them applying to all Buddhists, the last five applying only to the monastic Sangha.

For all Buddhists

- 1] No killing – indeed to refrain from violence as much as possible. Buddhists often extend this precept down into the realm of higher animals. Buddhists do not have to be vegetarians but becoming vegetarian is regarded as virtuous.
- 2] No stealing – no taking what is not given.
- 3] No wrong sexual conduct. Wrong sexual conduct for lay people is any sexual activity that is offensive to the community in which one lives. Wrong sexual conduct for monks and nuns is any sexual conduct—they are to be celibate.
- 4] No wrong speech: no lying, no slander, no harsh abusive speech, no chatter.
- 5] No liquor nor consuming anything that would distort one's moral judgment.

For monks and nuns— essentially designed as a moderate disciplining of their lives.

- 6] No eating after noontime.
- 7] No wearing of jewelry or adornment.
- 8] No attending theatrical entertainment.
- 9] No sleeping on a high bed.
- 10] No handling gold or silver.

The Six Perfections (paramitas). These constitute a more “positive” morality, centering on the virtues one should cultivate.

- 1] Charity or generosity.
- 2] Morality i.e. following the above precepts.
- 3] Patience or ability to endure.
- 4] Perseverance or Heroic endeavor.
- 5] Meditation or disciplining the mind.
- 6] Wisdom or cultivation of insight.

These precepts do not constitute “commandments” since there is no God who is dictating this code of behavior. The source of these precepts is said to be the insight of the Buddha. Since the Buddha saw the process of the world as it really is, he knows what constitutes successful or unsuccessful behavior. Following these precepts will gain merit (“good karma”) in this life and the next. Transgressing the precepts will lead to some very unpleasant consequences. Several Buddhist sutras detail these results. Being violent in this life will make one a victim of violence in the next. Habitual lying in this life leads to people not believing you in the next life, even if you are telling the truth.

The Branches of Buddhism

Basic Practices of Mahayana and Vajrayana

The foundation of Tibetan Buddhism is basic Buddhist doctrine and practice in its Mahayana form. Since this doctrine and practice is found in the sutras, the Tibetans call it the **Sutrayana**, the “Vehicle of the Sutras.” Once one is securely grounded in the sutras and the practice of morality, meditation and wisdom, one may move up Tantric practice, the **Vajrayana** or **Tantrayana**. The word *vajra* may mean “thunderbolt,” the irresistible power, and it may mean “diamond,” the adamant substance, pure and unbreakable.

Mahayana – As in most Buddhist schools, the monastic life is important but the spiritual possibilities in lay life recognized as well. Mahayana sutras also give evidence of greater respect given to women’s spiritual potential than earlier Buddhism.

Lay people are encouraged not only to live moral lives but also to meditate and study the scriptures with the help of a spiritual teacher (a **guru**). They are also to take **bodhisattva** vows, resolutions to devote one’s life to achieving spiritual success not only for oneself but also for the sake of helping others to enlightenment out of compassion.

Vajrayana – Once this is done, one goes on to forms of Tantric meditation which can lead one to full enlightenment in this life so as to fulfill one’s bodhisattva vows as rapidly as possible. First one needs to be initiated into Tantric practice and be guided by a guru (in Tibetan: a “lama”).

Deity yoga is a characteristic Vajrayana practice. In this, one visualizes supreme enlightenment in the form of a god or god and goddess pair. Through an elaborate process of worship, using both external objects and inward meditative image-making, one comes to become thoroughly joined to that deity and thus achieving Buddhahood. Typical deity yoga may involve extensive use of “liturgical” meditation and quasi-magical devices of spiritual practice such as special diagrams (**mandalas**) and “spells” (**mantras**) to produce the vajra or diamond body, a spiritual vehicle of transformation.

Metaphysical Outlook

Mahayana – Two schools dominate the metaphysical outlook of Mahayana. The Madhyamika school, associated with the great master Nagarjuna, teaches that world is a network of interdependent forces, events and entities which are empty of any substantial or independent existence. Direct realization of emptiness gives enlightenment.

Thus everything in the world can be seen from two points of view:

- 1] From the highest point of view, everything is empty of own-being and thus can be said not to have “real” (i.e. unchanging) existence;
- 2] From the conventional point of view, everything does indeed exist because things are both the causes and results of change.

The other influential metaphysical school is the Vijnanavada (“School of Mind”) or the Yogacara (“Practice of Yoga”) school associated with the great master Asanga. For this

school, the world is essentially a product of Mind (a collective, not an individual concept). The more we meditate, the more we penetrate the complex nature of mental phenomena and thus the deeper we understand Mind. Once we do that, we understand the nature of our bondage to the world of suffering and hence we are able to free ourselves from it.

Vajrayana – Combines the Mahayana metaphysics with intensive meditation techniques, utilizing the full range of physical and psychological energies to secure enlightenment in this life. What in Mahayana is expressed rationally as philosophic doctrine is expressed in Vajrayana more experientially in dramatic mythic and ritualistic symbolism. Emptiness, for example, is not merely a doctrine about the nature of the world; in Vajrayana, it is experienced as “the Clear Light.” The components of Mind are externalized as divine Buddhas, particularly the five **dhyani-Buddhas**, which represent the five components of the human person – body, feelings, perceptions, will and consciousness - purified and made the five components of a Buddha.

Religious Ideal

Mahayana – The **bodhisattva** aspiration is central to the Mahayana. The bodhisattva, a term meaning essentially a "Buddha to be," vows to devote all their merit and wisdom so as to become fully enlightened both for self and for others. This is accomplished by intense effort, usually over many lifetimes, and ascending through a number of spiritual stages (usually numbered at 10) toward Buddhahood. But if Buddhahood means complete release from the world, the bodhisattva stops short of this in order to still be a force for the benefit of others. He or she (bodhisattvas come in both sexes) find the exit to the forest of pain (samsara) but, unlike the arhat, goes back into it –though fully equipped to deal with its perils—and leads others out of the forest as well.

It is widely believed in India (then and now) that those who practice yoga intensively will gain various paranormal powers. It is a short step to hold that those who have been particularly dedicated to their bodhisattva vows in morality, meditation, and insight, will become more and more powerful until one gains enough power to become, for all practical purposes, a “deity.”

Vajrayana – The successful practitioner of the Vajrayana becomes a **siddha**, a "perfected master," who achieves enlightenment in a single human life. A siddha (male or female) is not simply a spiritual being but is also equipped with many sorts of supernatural powers, making him or her a magic user as well.

Relations with Divine Beings

Early basic Buddhism makes no reference to divine beings or power and nirvana or bodhi are gained only by one's efforts in morality, meditation and wisdom. Buddha is a saint and an example. Buddhism provides the method for liberation from the bonds of samsara while prayers to local spirits and deities provide worldly blessings. These local spirits are not able to provide any help to liberation. The only bodhisattva is the coming Buddha Maitreya.

Mahayana supplemented cultivation of morality, meditation and wisdom, common to all Buddhism, with a rich devotional life. Elements of Buddhist philosophy, such as “the Perfection of Wisdom” come to be personified as a goddess, giving a more vivid form to what would otherwise be an abstract concept. Mahayana evolved the doctrine of the three “bodies” of a Buddha: 1] the transcendent ineffable Dharma body; 2] a radiant “body of enjoyment” which can be experienced in higher spiritual planes of existence, and 3] the transformation body which functions in space and time. Salvation comes to be given a much more concrete representation as a Buddha that presides over a paradise in which it is very easy to gain full enlightenment.

Reverence and prayers are given to “celestial” Buddhas and bodhisattvas who function as divinities. Examples of such beings are:

Amitabha: (Japanese Amida) "Unlimited Light," the Buddha who rules over the Western Paradise, and the object of great devotion in the Pure Land sects.

Avalokitesvara: (Chinese Kuan-yin, the Japanese Kwannon) "Lord Who Observes," one of the most popular bodhisattvas in Mahayana, the bodhisattva of compassion to whom one can pray for favors or help in time of need.

Maitreya: the future Buddha, presently a bodhisattva residing in the Tushita heaven, awaiting his time to be born on earth. This birth will initiate a golden age.

Manjushri: the bodhisattva associated with wisdom, shown with a book and a sword.

Tara: "Star," also "She who carries across (the ocean of samsara)" hence "savioress," a bodhisattva who vowed that she would always appear as a woman to lead living beings to enlightenment.

An important point to observe is that, unlike Western religions where God and human are clean different things, there is clear continuity between the human and divine state. These high celestial beings once were what we are now. What they are now, we can become.

Vajrayana – honor and veneration is given to all the Mahayana divine beings as well as a number of deities connected with and embodying various Tantras. These are known as **vidams** (translatable as “High Patron Deity”).

Interaction between male and female is central to Tantric practice and female Tantric partners on both the human and on the divine levels are called **dakinis**, “sky-walking women”. Honor and veneration are also given to the **guru** or spiritual teacher who not only is guide and instructor but also embodies the path he (or occasionally she) teaches.