

Buddhism
(Fernandez and Meyer)

The Buddha (The Enlightened One, or Illuminated One, or the Awakened one): c.563-483BCE

- b. Kapilavastu (--or Lumini), India (Himalayan foothills, area now in Nepal.)
- Given name: Siddhartha Gautama (or Gotama)
- Other names: Sakyamuni (prophet or sage of the Sakyas, his clan); Tathagata (the Perfect One; one who has attained spiritual perfection).
- Is only founder of a major religion not claiming divinity or an encounter with a divinity -or even needing a divinity.
- Born into cast system. Belonged to Kshatriya cast (warrior cast).
- Born in the same century as Confucius and Lao-Tsu. When he died Pericles was 47 years old and Socrates was 6 years old.

Social Context:

- India then in a state of social transformation: Wars by petty warlords; smaller states and republics taken over by imperialistic states; established Vedic (Hindu?) traditions had become stale, dogmatic, ritualistic, mired in tradition, meaningless or obstructive to real people; rigid caste system exploited lower castes; many minds looking for new ways to live life meaningfully in a turbulent age.
- *Upanishads*: A philosophical movement of this time, was important point of departure for the Buddha. Upanishads saw ultimate reality in/as Brahman, or transcendent, pure consciousness; also saw essence of the human being as pure consciousness (atman). Brahman and atman are one. One's right or wrong acts form *karma*. The goal of living is to escape reincarnation (*samsara*) and achieve final freedom (*moksha*).

The Buddha's life:

- Siddhartha Gautama was born into luxury; his father “protects” him from knowledge of the trials/pain of everyday life. Siddhartha gets curious, and one day gets a glimpse of the real world of its pain (age, sickness, death).
- Like St. Francis, he leaves his family (father's house as well as wife and son) and goes off to the forest; becomes a wandering ascetic. He pursues the path of Yogic meditation with two Brahmin hermits. He achieves high meditative consciousness, but severe fasting and radical punishing of the body bring him to near death. He realizes such asceticism brings exhaustion, torpor, and impotence of mind, not spiritual enlightenment.
- He goes to meditate for a long period (one week to two months) under the Bodhi Tree (now a pilgrimage place) and finally achieves Enlightenment (at age of 35). This event (Enlightenment) is crucial for Buddhism, like say crucifixion for Christians. After some self debate, he decides to go and teach others.

The Buddha's Teachings:

- The Buddha saw the path that leads to the end of all suffering and to liberation, or to Nirvana. This path is rooted in reason, not faith. The main ingredients are:
 1. The Middle Way: avoid extremes of pleasure or hardship to achieve clear vision.
 2. The Four Noble Truths (given by the Buddha in his first seminal sermon):
 - Pain/suffering: Life is full of pain, sorrow, suffering (*dukkha*)
 - The cause of pain is craving, or suffering due to attachment (*tanha*)
 - To cease pain. cease craving; attachment can be overcome
 - To cease craving/attachment, or to achieve non-attachment, follow the Noble Eight- fold Path (*dharma*) to *Nirvana* (which literally means “blowing out”)
 3. The Noble Eight-Fold Path:
 - Right views
 - Right intention } constitute wisdom (*prajna*)
 - Right speech
 - Right action } constitute morality (*shila*)
 - Right livelihood

- Right effort
 - Right mindfulness
 - Right concentration
- } constitute concentration/meditation (samadhi)
4. How it works: The aspirant gets a glimmer of wisdom, leading to a motivation to morality, leading to the beginning level of concentration, leading to a deepening of wisdom, leading to a strengthening of morality, leading to higher levels of concentration, and so on in an upward spiral until one reaches *Nirvana*.
 5. The Four Virtues of Buddhism:
 - Amity/friendliness
 - Compassion
 - Joy/gladness
 - Equanimity
 6. Buddhist morality consists in (among other things):
 - Right action: abstaining from: taking life, taking what is not given; misconduct in pleasures; false speech; intoxicating drink. Formally, the Pancha Sila “commandments” are: 1) do not kill 2) do not steal 3) do not give way to adultery 4) do not lie 5) do not take intoxicants
 - Right speech: abstaining from telling lies, from backbiting, slander, and talk that may bring hatred, enmity, and disharmony; abstaining from harsh, rude, malicious language and from idle gossip
 - Right livelihood: abstain from making one's living through a profession that brings harm to others.
 - This moral conduct aims at promoting a happy and harmonious life, both for the individual and for society (Cbampawat, 1995: 164).
 7. BUT: it's through meditation that one contemplates the truths about nature and one's own being, and achieves detached consciousness/non-attachment. It is divided into two categories: *samatha* and *vipassana*. The former means “tranquility” and involves paying attention to a single object, concept. The latter means “insight” and having passed the samatha stage allows the mind to focus on what it chooses.
 8. Enlightenment is non-attachment and equanimity: no craving, therefore no suffering (or no *dukkha* -no sorrow, no “unsatisfactoriness”).
 9. Most Buddhists believe in reincarnation: your good and bad actions are passed along (*karma*) to the next life. There is no such thing as “heaven,” rather the attainment of *nirvana* and thus the escape of continual cycle.
 10. Spiritual Agency: Each individual is responsible for his or her happiness; everyone can achieve enlightenment like the Buddha and realize Truth. No need for “faith” in a “God” or in some higher power external to yourself, only meditation/concentration (“reason?”). Trust yourself to know what's right and wrong by following the Eight-fold Path.

Impact of Buddhism:

- Influential king (King Ashoka, 269-232BCE) became model emperor following Buddhist precepts (Buddhism's Constantine?)
- Buddhism spread through large areas of India, Ceylon, and further East and to the Northwest. After a millennium, it declined from the Indian subcontinent, and 500 years later it had practically disappeared from India.
- Eventually two schools emerge, between 200BCE and 200CE: Theravada (“the way of the elders”, the survivor of the early 18 schools known as Hinayana), now mainly in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Burma, and Mahayana (“the greater vehicle of salvation”), which came later, now mainly in Tibet (est. 7th century),

China, Korea (est. 4th century) and Japan (est. 6th century). In 8th century Muslim armies go into India and Buddhism mostly disappears from country where it originated!

- Theravada Buddhism focuses on monastic life. It has little to say to the lay man. The emphasis is on discipline. Theravada monks can only own 8 things: a three part robe, a loin cloth, a begging bowl, water strainer, razor, and needle. They have 227 strict rules: among those is not being able to cook their own food, not being able to work, have money, live under the same roof with a woman. The spiritual quest is self-centered: one obtains salvation by detaching one's self from the world (there is no motivation in helping society). However, there is a link with society: they must beg for their food!
- Mahayana Buddhism adds the dimension of "helping others" lacking in Theravada Buddhism. The ideal is represented by a "Bodhisattva" (vs. "Arhat" in Theravada) who decides to stay in the rebirth cycle and help others. Compassion or karuna is an important virtue (while wisdom was stressed in the other school).
- Zen Buddhism is the branch of Buddhism established in Japan. It derives from the Mahayana Buddhism. Zen literally means meditation, and for Zen monks there is no distinction between religious and secular activities (total commitment to meditation). Zen monks do work however (unlike Theravada monks), and many become monks because their fathers tell them too (marriage is allowed). The main purpose of Zen Buddhism is the awakening of illumination or satori (the actual teachings of Buddha are not as crucial as the fact that the "Enlightenment" was achieved). It is anti-intellectual in the sense that concepts and language are useless as compared to meditation. Finally, there are many branches of Zen in Japan: Soto, Rinzai, Jodo, Tendai, Nichiren...
- Tibetan Buddhism derives from the Mahayana Buddhism like the Zen Buddhism. It has suffered enormously under the Chinese since 1959. The Dalai Lama (their spiritual leader) lives in Dharamsala, India.

Some points from the Dalai Lama:

- a) Goal in life is the pursuit of happiness
 - b) Suffering (the first noble truth) is what unites us with our fellow human beings. Why suffering? We lack meaning in our lives.
 - c) While we suffer, the nature of humans is gentleness and goodness (compare to Mencius).
 - d) While gentle seed is in us we must cultivate using wisdom and compassion (again compare to allegory of the mountain by Mencius). One must train the mind. Note there is no need of a God, it's all within ourselves
 - e) Compassion is key in achieving happiness, while hatred is the great evil in the world. Compassion according to the Dalai Lama is not based on personal attachment, but rather based on a universal bond (suffering in fact).
 - f) Importance of inner contentment (not have what we want but want what we have)
 - g) Watch out for the comparing mind (compare with less fortunate rather than the other way around)
 - h) Importance of the "enemy". We must cherish the enemy since they give us an opportunity to practice patience, tolerance and compassion
 - i) Strength is in restraint, not in retaliation against the enemy
 - j) Find meaning in pain and suffering (leprosy as a physical example).
- Buddhism is a VERY tolerant religion: "So tolerant and gentle was the Buddha's teaching that there is not a single example of persecution or the shedding of a drop of blood in converting people to Buddhism" (Champawat, 1995: 161).
 - Buddhism has attracted many adherents in the West in recent decades. Possible reasons (**for discussion**):
 1. Western sense of emptiness rigidity/sectarianism of mainstream Western religions?
 2. Western materialism leaves some with a sense of emptiness and desire for a more simple life of non-attachment?
 3. Buddhism's tolerance and non-violence to ALL other beings (not just "our neighbor") are attractive to some?
 4. Environmentalist consciousness has common points with Buddhism?
 5. Spiritual agency, through meditation, looking inward; self-centering?

Some Comparisons for Discussion:

- Compare Buddhist teachings with the Tao. Is dharma (“the way one should follow to fulfill one's true nature and carry out one's moral and social responsibilities” (Burt, 1955: 19) like Te? Is Nirvana like Tao?
- Compare Buddhist teachings with Mencius.
- Compare Buddhist enlightenment with Plato's allegory of the cave.
- Compare the Buddha's teachings with Plato in general.
- Compare Buddhist meditation and Western prayer.

Activities for Class:

- If it's a nice day, take class outside!!!
- Deep breathing/meditation exercise (requires some knowledge of yoga)
- Have the class recite the Metta Sutta, like countless Buddhists today (or read it to your students during the meditation exercise). Ask the class, How does it make you feel? What does it make you think of? How will/would your day/life be different if you recited this each day?
- Discuss the four Noble Truths: How do pain, Sorrow, craving, attachment divert us from peace, enlightenment, happiness?
- Discuss the Noble Eight-fold Path; discuss the four Buddhist virtues.
- How can non-attachment/detachment alleviate pain/sorrow?
- Does non-attachment/detachment mean passivity or non-action?
- Can Buddhism thrive in a materialistic, violent culture like that of the US?
- Can Buddhist principles of tolerance, non-violence to ALL life (including the Earth), the Eightfold Path, the four virtues, etc., provide us with a viable alternative to a world of hatred, religious sectarianism and intolerance, ecocide, etc? Is it a religion that we should all adopt?
- Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy.?
- Does Buddhism have a notion of “the sacred”?