

Discussion Questions
Western Heritage-Global Context
Buddhism

1. What are the sights the Prince saw that caused him to question his life? Have *you* ever thought about these things? What do they make you think of?

2. The Four Noble Truths seem to be about sorrow, and that might make it seem Buddhist thought is very pessimistic about life! But a better translation of the word "dukkha" (that is translated as "sorrow" in your text) might be "unsatisfactoriness"; and *in* that would be included ideas such as "imperfection", "impermanence", and "insubstantiality". So one might say, for example, that even all happiness is ultimately dukkha [unsatisfactory], and make a statement that makes sense, for someone can agree that all happiness is impermanent and does not last (and so we have the unsatisfactoriness arising from change, or impermanence). But to say happiness is sorrow might not seem to make sense!

So, go back through the Four Truths again with this in mind, and ask yourself: Is there any truth in these things for me? Do I find that life always changes? That no pleasure is ultimately satisfying because it is impermanent? That craving for impermanent, changeable things then leads to unsatisfactoriness? Or not? What do *you* think?

3. Examine footnote nine on p. 88 of your syllabus, and consider it in conjunction with this quote:

Asked by a young student to explain the idea of maintaining or protecting truth, the Buddha said: 'A man has faith. If he says "This is my faith", so far he maintains truth. But by that he cannot proceed to the absolute conclusion: "This alone is Truth, and everything else is false." In other words, a man may believe what he likes, and he may say 'I believe this.' So far he respects truth. But because of his belief or faith, he should not say that what he believes is alone the Truth, and everything else is false. . . To be attached to a certain view and to look down upon other views as inferior--this the wise man call a fetter. . . Do not be led by reports, or traditions, or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances. . . nor by the idea: 'this is our teacher.' But when *you* know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome and bad and wrong, then give them up . . . and when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome and good, then accept

them and follow them' [Walpole Rahula, What the Buddha Taught (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 3; 10]

What do you think of this attitude? Should truth be a matter for your own discovery, or should we depend on religious texts and authorities to guide us?

4. What is the simile of the chariot? What is it supposed to teach?

5. What is the view of change and identity in Buddhist thought?

6. What state of mind did the Buddha ask his followers to cultivate?

7. What is a Bodhisattva? Can you think of any Western figures a Buddhist might characterize as a Bodhisattva?

8. By "emptiness" the Mahayanists meant (among other things, many which are far beyond me) that since there are no permanent things with an enduring identity which can be thought of as independent of everything else, then reality is "empty" of substantial forms. [By "substantial forms" are meant things that can exist independently of everything else; that have their identity in themselves in isolation.] Instead, reality is like a great river of change, in which each reality that appears must be thought of in connection with every other reality – that there is no-thing thought of as an independent reality!

With that in mind, consider the writings on emptiness, and ask yourself: Have you ever come across anything that could exist just by itself, and needed nothing else to define or understand it? Could you exist without your parents, the air you breath, or generally, in modern terms, without the ecosystem? In general isn't any one thing always ultimately dependent on other things for its reality? Isn't the world full of no-things, no independent entities?

9. Read aloud the words of the Buddha on pp. 107-113, everyone reading one of the verses, and stop and discuss whichever one strikes a chord in anyone!

10. Recite the Metta Sutta, just as countless Buddhists will have done this day. How do the words make you feel? What do they make you think of?

11. How should a Bodhisattva look at living beings?

12. Consider the passage on p. 121 that begins with Shariputra asking “Why do you not change your female bodily form?” What are the views on gender that develop out of this exchange? How are they based in a fundamental view of the nature of reality? What do you think of this?

13. The autobiography of Hui-neng gives us a look at the actual lives and teachings of Zen masters. What do you find to be the most fascinating thing in this story? Why?

14. Underline a passage in each reading, and be prepared to share that passage with your section, and explain why you chose that passage and what you think it means.