

Buddhism

by Steven Cory

Buddhism arose out of authentic strands of Hinduism current in India in the sixth century B.C. Gautama, called the Buddha ('The Enlightened One'), is said to have discovered that both the life of luxury and the life of extreme asceticism were of no use in gaining spiritual freedom; thus he postulated that 'Middle Way'. His teaching, however, was to undergo many transformations.

Buddhism became a great missionary religion and eventually all but died in its native India. The *Mahayana* school, which developed a grandiose cosmology and a pantheon of semi-deities, is to be found in China, Korea, and Japan; the *Therevada* school, which is more austere, flourishes in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Burma, and southeast Asia. *Zen* is technically a Mahayana sect but has closer affinities with Therevada. All have proponents in the west.

God

There is no absolute God in Buddhism, although many have interpreted Buddhism as a search for God. The Buddha did not deny the existence of God outright but said that the question of His existence 'tends not to edification'. That is, those seeking enlightenment need to concentrate on their own spiritual paths themselves rather than relying on an outside support.

The Buddha did not claim divinity or even a divine source for his teachings. He saw himself as only an example to fellow monks and compared his teachings to a raft that should be left behind once the other side of the river has been reached.

Many Buddhists believe the existence of suffering and evil in the world is evidence against belief in God.

Although belief in an ultimate God is opposed by nearly all Buddhists, the Mahayana school developed the notions of the Buddha as still existing for the sake of men and propounded the existence of many semi-divine beings, who can be represented in art and have been revered in ways very similar to worship of Hindu gods.

Man And the Universe

Both the beginning and the ultimate nature of the world are left unexplained by the Buddha – once again, those questions are not helpful to consider. The Mahayana school speculates un-systematically about a vast series of heavens, sort of half-way houses on the road to nirvana. But in the end even those heavens are illusory. Mahayanists teaching at the least implies that the powers of the universe will see to it that all creatures will eventually find salvation.

Buddhism does begin with an analysis of the world of appearances and especially of man. As with Hinduism Buddhism sees the cycle of reincarnation as shot through with pain, largely because life is characterized by impermanence.

The Buddha added the notion that all creatures, including man, are fictions: **there is really no 'self'**, only

a series of occurrences that appear to be individual persons and things. Once the so-called person is broken down into his component parts and his different actions and attitudes analyzed during the course of time, it is seen that there is really nothing holding all together. (the question of how there can be both reincarnation and striving for salvation without a self has occupied Buddhist philosophy from the start). The notion of no self is difficult, and much effort spent trying to grasp it fully.

Salvation And The Afterlife

Buddhism sees ignorance rather than sin as the roadblock to salvation. That is, the belief that the world and self truly exist keeps the illusory wheel of existence rolling; only destruction of that belief will stop the mad course of the world.

Its doctrine is summed up in the four noble truths:

- 1) life is basically suffering, or dissatisfaction;
- 2) the origin of that suffering is craving or grasping;
- 3) the cessation of suffering is possible through the cessation of craving; and
- 4) the way to cease craving and so attain escape from continual rebirth is by following Buddhist practice, known as the **‘Noble Eightfold Path.’**

Original Buddhist teaching and the Theravada place emphasis on the individual monk working through self-control and a series of meditative practices that progressively lead him to lose a sense of grasping self.

The Mahayana school began with the insight that the ideal of the monk striving only for his own salvation was selfish and did little for the majority of men. Mahayanists eventually came to posit a vast number of Buddhas and **bodhisattvas**, ‘heroes of the faith’ who reached the point of nirvana but refused to enter it until the rest of mankind was brought along with them. To varying degrees they can graciously grant aids to salvation to those who petition them.

Nirvana literally mean ‘blowing out’, as with flame of a candle. That is, nothing can be said about it except that it is a transcendent, permanent state.

Morals

Buddhists laity are urged to follow the Five Precepts, which prohibit killing (including animals), stealing, illicit sexual relations, wrong speech (including gossiping), and drug or alcohol. In addition they are expected to support the community of monks.

Monks and nuns follow a path of moderate asceticism, including strict celibacy and the repudiation of all personal property, Buddhist religious leaders often are involved in education and charity and even take part in politics; other leaders separate themselves in monasteries, contacting the public only to gain funds.

Original and Theravada teaching indicate that a Buddhist can for the most part help his fellow man only by showing him an example of dedication to meditation and self-denial, Mahayana teaching emphasizes ‘compassion’ which involves aiding people in all areas of their lives, even though such aid does not lead directly to nirvana.

Worship

In most cases what looks like worship before a statue or image is really a sort of paying respects. The Buddha is revered as an example of a saintly life and as the one who brought the teachings of Buddhism; Buddhists are taught that they must themselves overcome the obstacle of ignorance.

Meditation in Buddhism can focus on one's breathing (important because it is halfway between voluntary and involuntary action), one's own attitudes (as in Mindfulness meditation, in which one tries to be clear at all times as to one's true motives for every action), a neutral object, or a **bodhisattva**. In each case the purpose is to divest oneself of craving and sense of self.

In some sects it is believed that a bodhisattva can transfer his merit to a supplicant and to aid him to nirvana. In those cases the Buddhist becomes very much like a worshipper petitioning God for peace and mercy.