Buddhism

Buddhists represent about seven percent of the world’s population today, with approximately half a billion adherents. Buddhism is predominantly a religion of Asia and the Pacific, with nearly ninety-nine percent of all Buddhists living in those regions. Most Buddhists are a part of the Mahayana sect (more on Mahayana Buddhism below), which is prevalent in many countries with large Buddhist populations, including China (about half of the world’s Buddhist population live in China), Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia. The Theravada sect (more on Theravada Buddhism below) is prevalent in South and Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), Sri Lanka, Laos, and Cambodia. There are also over six million Buddhists living outside of Asia, mostly in North America and Europe.

All of these Buddhists are a part of a dynamic tradition that perpetually transforms from time to time and place to place. One way to think about the vastly diverse Buddhist world as somewhat united is to consider the shared goal of acquiring wisdom with regard to the ultimate reality underlying the human condition and all of life. In fact, the term Buddhist is derived from the Sanskrit term buddha or “awakened one.” Buddha, then, is a title ascribed to any being believed to have attained the state of awakening to ultimate reality.

Buddhists are also historically united by their ascription of spiritual authority to Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, the historical founder of Buddhism. But the historical Buddha did not appoint a successor, which resulted in the absence of a centralized authority following his death. Although different Buddhist sects often feature their own bureaucratic systems, the absence of a unifying bureaucracy has meant that fissures readily arise when there are doctrinal or practical disagreements or when Buddhists encounter new cultures and traditions. Buddhism tends to adapt easily to the traditions of the indigenous cultures with which it comes into contact. Accordingly, its various local forms are largely based on the specific regional contexts. It is important, therefore, to avoid erroneous generalizations about Buddhism that ignore this broad and deep internal diversity. In other words, Buddhism must be defined very broadly, recognizing that Buddhists are united by a cluster of variables, each of which is often, but not always, present in a specific Buddhist context.
Historically, the Buddhist tradition can be traced back to about twenty-five hundred years ago in an ascetic culture of world-renouncers that arose in the central Gangetic region of what is present-day northern India beginning around the seventh century BCE. This was the same general place and time that produced the Jain tradition. Renouncers, recall, are ascetics and so deem ordinary (as opposed to spiritual) life and its activities to be ultimately unsatisfactory. For such ascetics, ordinary worldly values and pursuits reflect conventional, impermanent truths that shift according to time and place and so are relative and unworthy of our ultimate attention. In short, they maintain that there is no lasting truth or meaning to be found in ordinary life. Thus they “renounce” that life and embark upon an exclusively spiritual path believed to lead to ultimate truth, that is, the way things really are, and salvation from samsara, the cycle of birth and death or “continuous flow” into which beings are perpetually reborn. Renouncers vary with regard to their specific ideas about ultimate truth (hence the different religious systems), but they generally agree that the spiritual path requires ascetic rituals, which are, again, formal techniques for freeing oneself from worldly desires, needs, and the social conditionings that shape a malleable infant into a particular member of a specific culture and community.

The Buddhist tradition was instigated by the philosopher and world-renouncer, Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (died circa 410 BCE), who became famous for his profound awakening and consequent insights into the true nature of things. Siddhartha means “one who has achieved his aim,” and Gautama is a clan name. Siddhartha was born in present-day Nepal to a clan called the Shakyas, hence the common title ascribed to Siddhartha, Shakyamuni or “the sage of the Shakyas.” Siddhartha would later acquire the honorific title Buddha or “Awakened One” following his enlightenment event.

It is believed that Siddhartha was born into a wealthy, powerful family belonging to the kshaitrya caste of society, which included warriors and the aristocracy. The Buddha’s birth narrative, like those of many important founding figures, includes miracles. He is believed to have been conceived on an evening when his mother, Maya, dreamed that a white elephant, considered a highly auspicious sign, entered her side. Having consulted an oracle to interpret the dream, she and her husband were told that she would give birth to a son who would be either a
great emperor or a great spiritual teacher. Siddhartha was born during a journey to his mother’s relatives’ home and, immediately upon birth, is believed to have stood up, taken seven steps, and declared that this would be his last rebirth.

Siddhartha grew up in his father’s luxurious palaces and married a woman named Yashodhara, who bore him a son named Rahula, or “Fetter.” When Siddhartha was twenty-nine years old, everything changed when he undertook a series of journeys beyond the palace walls and witnessed four sights: an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a renouncer. He was struck by what these sights represented, which was something he had never considered before, namely, the inevitable suffering of human life and the renouncer’s quest to resolve this problem. He soon renounced all “fetters,” including his wife, son, and luxurious palace life, and began an extensive spiritual quest.

For six years, Siddhartha experimented with an austere life of self-denial, studying under various mendicant teachers, engaging in rigorous yogic techniques, and eventually fasting nearly unto death. Having failed to attain his goal, he gave up the extreme ascetic paths offered by his ascetic teachers, many of whom were early authorities for what would later come to be known as classical Hinduism. Instead, Siddhartha accepted a Middle Way between his luxurious life in the palace and the severe austerity of his ascetic teachers. Having accepted a path of moderation in which his appetites where neither indulged nor denied, he accepted a small meal offered by a young girl, sat comfortably underneath a tree, which would famously come to be known as the “bodhi” or “enlightenment” tree, and entered a state of firm meditation.

It is in that state that Siddhartha attained enlightenment. He became omniscient, that is, he directly and simultaneously knew all things in existence. He had a vision of his own previous lives and those of all living beings. He saw the bhavachakra or “wheel of life,” which contained the many realms of existence, including those of the heavens, the world of humans and animals, and the hells, into which rebirth was possible. And he realized that salvation from the cycle of rebirth was nowhere on the wheel. He purged all ignorance and achieved the state necessary to guarantee nirvana, that is, the end to the cycle of rebirth. He was thirty-five years old when he thus became the Awakened One, the Buddha.

He now decided to share his profound realization with others and so embarked upon a life of preaching. He began his preaching career in a park, where he gave his first sermon to five fellow mendicants or ascetics, who quickly realized that this man had indeed achieved
enlightenment. This sermon is believed to have set in motion the wheel of the dharma or the “teaching.” With that first sermon, the five mendicants became his disciples and were ordained as monks. They soon achieved enlightenment and so earned for themselves the title of arhat or “worthy one,” a name reserved for those who attain enlightenment with the help of a teacher. This was the beginning of the Buddhist sangha or “community.”

The Buddha attracted many more lay and monastic disciples during his long preaching career. He established a community of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. The community is believed to have been united by their “taking refuge” in what the Buddhist traditions call the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha, that is, the Buddha himself, his teaching, and his community of monastic disciples. Additionally, a code of rules called the vinaya was established, which served to guide and regulate monastic life. Initially, nuns were not a part of the monastic community, but when female members of the Buddha’s community pleaded for the Buddha to establish an order for nuns, he conceded after having initially shown much resistance. He is said to have taught that this development would certainly shorten the life of his movement. Today, feminist-oriented Buddhists point to such claimed events and ancient teachings in Buddhist history as indicative of traditional patriarchy, which has led to the institutional oppression of women, and call on contemporary Buddhists to redress all incidents of oppression.

The Buddha ended his teaching career with his death at the age of eighty, upon which he left his disciples with only the dharma for guidance and attained full and complete nirvana. According to his followers, he would never be reborn again.

Key Ideas and Soteriology: the Four Noble Truths

So what saving knowledge did the Buddha attain in his state of enlightenment and proclaim in his first sermon? This saving knowledge is summarized in what are called the Four Noble Truths, a concise set of doctrines outlining the nature of reality and the path to salvation from rebirth. The first noble truth is that all aspects of life are characterized by duhkha or “suffering,” in the sense that they are impermanent and so ultimately unsatisfactory. We are all subject to aging, sickness, and death. Though there are real pleasures in life—in things like romantic love, sensual enjoyments, and the companionship of friends—those things are ultimately impermanent
and, therefore, finally unsatisfactory. In other words, life is not always painful, but it is always unsatisfactory, since every pleasure, like everything else, will eventually come to an end. Even what we often identify as our “selves,” composed of our bodies, personalities, desires, and dispositions, are impermanent, since they vary within a single lifetime and from one rebirth to another. There is no permanent, unchanging identity, or what some of the Buddha’s early Hindu contemporaries famously called the atman or immortal “Self.” The Hindu doctrine of the immortal and eternal Self is mistaken for Buddhism. Rather, there is only anatman or “no self.”

The second noble truth is that the origin of suffering is desire. In other words, desire is the cause of rebirth. We desire unending physical and emotional pleasures. But more than anything else, we desire a permanent self. We want to believe, in other words, that there is something permanent and unchanging about ourselves, yet we can never pinpoint what that unchanging something is. For Buddhism, we cannot locate for a simple but profound reason: it does not exist.

The third noble truth is that there is an end to suffering. This is nirvana. Nirvana carries the sense of “blowing out,” as in the blowing out of a candle. In this metaphorical register, then, the end of suffering entails the idea of an individual personality or ego being “blown out” or ceasing to exist. This awakening to no-self in turn results in the end of the cycle of rebirth and the end of the individual. Although outsiders often consider this aspect of Buddhism morbidly pessimistic, Buddhists suggest it is anything but that. After all, the teaching of no-self and the promise of nirvana offer an especially optimistic promise, namely, that all sentient beings are capable of becoming awakened to ultimate reality and so freed from suffering existence.

The fourth noble truth is that there is a particular path leading to the end of suffering existence. The Noble Eightfold Path includes eight factors divided into the categories of wisdom, morality, and meditation. More specifically, it consists of the cultivation of prajna or “wisdom” (adopting the “right view” and “right purpose”), disciplined and moral action based on the cultivation of shila or “virtue” (adopting “right speech,” “right conduct,” and “right livelihood”), and culminating in a life of samadhi or “meditation” (adopting “right effort,” “right mindfulness,” and “right concentration”). It is believed that the Noble Eightfold Path represents the life of the historical Buddha. By following that path, one might also become a buddha.

One might say that the Noble Eightfold Path maximizes the quality of the aspirant’s karmic futures. Karma is a doctrine held in different ways and to different degrees by many
Asian religious systems, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. Buddhists believe that **karma** is a force that results from moral actions—underlying intentions and consequences are important parts of the equation—that accumulates over many lifetimes and perpetuates the cycle of rebirth. What are called **samskaras** or “mental formations,” which include personality characteristics and emotional dispositions, arise as a result of moral actions or karma. It is in this way that living beings literally create themselves through their moral actions. And yet living beings also have free will and so can resist previous karmic conditioning, thus establishing new moral patterns. Put a bit differently, living beings are in control of their own karmic futures.

Buddhists believe there is good karma and bad karma. **Punya** is good karma, otherwise known as “merit.” **Papa** is bad or harmful karma (although there is no external deity here “judging” or “punishing” such bad actions). Good karma or merit results from previous ethical actions and serves to bring about worldly benefits, such as wealth or health, or a fortunate rebirth in the heavenly or human realms. Lay people are often encouraged to earn merit by offering alms (for example, in the form of food offerings) and financial support to the monastic community. Many Buddhists believe that merit can be transferred from one being to another and can benefit the recipient as well as the donor, since the donor accumulates even more merit as a result of this generous action. Merit is beneficial, but it is not the final goal for most Buddhists. The final goal is **nirvana**. Such a final goal resolves the problem of suffering when a living being abandons all attachments to the concept of the individual and therefore to all good or bad karma attached to that individual.

Technically speaking, Buddhist karma, whether bad or good, does not accumulate to the soul or the “self”—as it does, for example, in Jainism—because there is no permanent self or soul, according to Buddhism. Rather, the individual is a combination of five factors that arise as a result of karma: the physical body, sensations and feelings, cognitions, personality traits and dispositions, and consciousness. All of these are constantly in flux and so cannot serve as a core or permanent essence of the individual. By rejecting the idea that there is a permanent self, the Buddha distanced himself from the competing positions set forth by the authorities of what would come to be known later as Hinduism and Jainism. Rather, he suggested that it is not the soul or the self that is “blown out” upon enlightenment, since that soul or self never existed in the first place. What ceases to exist, what is blown out, are the five factors that arise as a result of karma.
Most living beings are perpetually entrapped in a state of *avidya* or “ignorance” because bad karma obscures their perception. Only the awakened ones who have achieved enlightenment perceive ultimate truth. Rebirth as a human is highly desirable because it serves as an escape from the complacency characteristic of rebirth into the heavens and the overwhelmingly distracting aspects of rebirth into lower levels of existence, such as in animal form or in one of the hells. Only the human can wipe out all ignorance, strive for *nirvana*, burn any remaining karma obstructing one’s path, and become awakened.

Ethics

For Buddhists, morality is central to the *dharma* and the first step, in fact, toward cultivating a spiritual life. It is a prerequisite for the other components of the Noble Eightfold Path: meditation and wisdom. There are three core virtues a Buddhist must cultivate as a first step along the spiritual path: non-attachment (toward those things that stir destructive and selfish desires), benevolence (toward all living beings), and understanding (the Four Noble Truths). Buddhists have many codes or sets of precepts for the regulation of the moral life. The most commonly observed of these among lay Buddhists is the Five Precepts, which forbid killing, stealing, sexual offenses, lying, and ingesting intoxicants. Additional precepts apply on special occasions, such as holy days. Furthermore, the *sangha* is regulated by a strict monastic code called the *vinaya*, which includes over two hundred rules for monastic life.

For many Buddhists, correct ethical actions in their everyday lives are determined based on their conformity to the virtue of *ahimsa* or “non-violence.” Ultimately, every living being suffers, so all living beings should in turn experience compassion for other living beings and strive to limit their suffering. Consequently, most Buddhists express some degree of respect for all living beings, and the intentional destruction of life on any level is generally thought of as wrong. Many Buddhists even actively advocate for vegetarianism and pacifism, although not every Buddhist is a vegetarian or a pacificist.

Sectarian Divisions and Conflicting Ideals
About one hundred years after the Buddha’s death, divisions arose primarily due to different opinions with regard to monastic practice. One group of “Elders” broke from another called the Mahasanghika or “Universal Assembly,” probably because the Elders wanted to introduce additional rules to the monastic code of conduct. The split is popularly referred to as the “Great Schism.” Both sects eventually fragmented into many sub-sects, most of which died out over time. One sub-sect of the Elders, the Theravada or “Teaching of the Elders,” survived, and many others contributed to a movement that emerged some time between one hundred BCE and one hundred CE, which would come to be known as the Mahayana or “Great Vehicle.”

Although there are countless sects of Buddhism today, the main division remains that between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. Very generally speaking, Theravada Buddhism represents a more conservative school. It considers itself to proclaim the authentic original teachings of the historical Buddha. It is found primarily in South and Southeast Asia. Mahayana Buddhism, on the other hand, is generally considered be more open to innovation and is prevalent in countries in Central and East Asia.

Advocates of Mahayana Buddhism believe that it provides a universal path to salvation. Hence the self-described name of the tradition, the “Great Vehicle.” In the self-understanding of Mahayana Buddhists, theirs is a path far more accessible than what they consider to be the rigid, narrow path of Theravada Buddhism. This is not, of course, the self-understanding of Theravada Buddhists. Again, the ideal of Theravada Buddhism is the arhat, a title of honor meaning the “worthy one” ascribed to all enlightened beings, since every being is believed to be responsible for her or his own salvation. The Theravada considers the Pali Canon, collected not long after the death of the Buddha, to be the most sacred of Buddhist texts and the source of the Buddha’s teachings. On the other hand, the different schools of Mahayana Buddhism inevitably possess sacred texts, often composed some time in the early centuries of the common era, which contain teachings they believe were intentionally kept secret by the historical Buddha during his lifetime because his disciples were not yet ready for them. (We saw one Tibetan version of these hidden “treasure” texts in chapter 9.)

According to Mahayana Buddhists, the Buddha first revealed only a limited version of his teachings, which were accessible to the early disciples who needed a simplified version of the dharma. The full truth of the dharma, however, was much more profound and can now be found in the Mahayana Sutras. The Mahayana Sutras suggest the Buddhist ideal is the bodhisattva,
the “enlightened being” who devotes her- or himself to helping others attain salvation. Since, according to Mahayana doctrine, all living beings have the potential to become awakened, there must be countless awakened beings. And since enlightenment requires not only wisdom but also compassion, those beings must be eager to help others with regard to everything from meeting worldly needs to helping them advance along their own paths to enlightenment.

Mahayana Buddhists offer devotion to a large and diverse pantheon of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, all of whom are believed to respond to placations with acts of assistance. They also suggest that, some time in the future, a buddha named Maitreya will be born and will initiate a utopian era on earth during which many will attain enlightenment. Some Theravada Buddhists believe in this future buddha as well.

The Mahayana even developed a new conception of the historical Buddha. Reasoning that the Buddha was too compassionate to have made himself absent and inaccessible to others in need, they speculated that he must still be present in the world. They believe in the doctrine of trikaya or “three bodies.” According to this doctrine, the Buddha exists in three forms. His earthly body was the one that existed on earth and represents the historical Buddha. His second heavenly body exists in the heavenly realm and can intervene on behalf of devotees. Third, he has a transcendent body, which is identical to ultimate truth itself. It is not unreasonable then to worship the Buddha, since his heavenly body is capable of reciprocity or exchange of benefits.

In addition to these cosmologies and buddhologies (doctrines about the nature of the Buddha, akin to the christologies of Christianity), Mahayana Buddhism also developed new philosophical positions. Nagarjuna (circa 150-250 CE) is the most famous of Mahayana philosophers. Whereas Theravada Buddhists speculated that the world is made up of components that are impermanent but nevertheless exist, Nagarjuna suggested that the components of the world neither exist nor are non-existent. He founded the Madhyamaka or “Middle School,” based on the shunyavada or “doctrine of emptiness.” Very simply, according to Nagarjuna, the components of the world are not only impermanent but also not real. They are empty, that is, empty of independent reality. Put a bit differently, they only exist insofar as they are in relation to, and therefore dependent on, other entities. Reality is somewhere in the “middle,” then, between existence and non-existence. There is an important implication of this idea: since everything is empty, everything is the same. And this means that nirvana is no different than samsara. The ultimate goal of Buddhism, in other words, is fundamentally no different than the
cycle of birth and death. The difference lies only in perception. One should therefore strive to
attain correct perception, to remove ignorance in order to attain salvation rather than work
toward escaping one reality (samsara) for the sake of another (nirvana). It is all “empty.”

Ritual Culture

From its beginnings, the Buddhist tradition reflected popular trends with regard to worship styles
and rituals. This was even the case during the Buddha’s lifetime. He lived in a devotional culture
in which lay people worshiped the living renouncers whom they encountered. The Buddha and
his disciples would have been attractive objects of devotion because of their claims to being
awakened and to offering the solution to suffering existence. By participating in the popular
devotional culture, the Buddha and his disciples attracted many disciples to their new religious
movement.

Today, Buddhists around the world participate in countless rituals, many of which vary
according to local traditions and are related to local deities or customs rather than Buddhist
concerns per se. There are, however, also Buddhist public and private rituals, primarily of four
types: meditation, usually in isolated or monastic contexts; study of sacred texts; offerings of
alms to monks or nuns; and acts of devotion to buddhas or bodhisattvas, often at home or in
public shrines or temples.

Buddhists concern themselves with self-transformation through rituals, especially
meditative ones, which are believed to cultivate knowledge and compassion and therefore to
bring about new states of consciousness that propel one along the path to enlightenment. We can
think of the Buddha’s meditation under the bodhi tree, which culminated in his awakening, as the
first Buddhist meditative ritual and the model for all meditative rituals to come. That being said,
not all Buddhists meditate in the same way. In fact, there are vastly different interpretations of
how the Buddha meditated and how Buddhists can best emulate him.

Many Buddhist rituals are focused on monastic life. It is primarily and traditionally the
responsibility of the monastic community, for example, to study and interpret Buddhist doctrines
as discussed in sacred texts. Monks and less often nuns copy, memorize, translate, and recite
texts. These are considered religious activities because each Buddhist text is believed to serve as
a container and expression of the dharma.
Interdependence between lay Buddhists and the *sangha* or community is important. This becomes readily apparent when we look at Buddhist ritual culture. Making offerings of alms to living monks and nuns is believed to result in the transmission of merit from the monastic to the lay disciple. Thus when the lay disciple offers the monk or nun an abundance of worldly gifts, such as food, she receives merit, which then results in worldly benefits, such as health or wealth. Although the *sangha* serves as the social center of many Buddhist communities, monks and nuns perform few rituals on behalf of the laity. Yet another benefit of the laity for giving alms comes in the form of spiritual instruction that monastic beneficiaries often offer their lay benefactors.

Theravada Buddhists reject the worship of the historical Buddha or any other buddha, since, theoretically, these enlightened beings are considered freed from the world for eternity and thus are no longer capable of mutually beneficial interpersonal engagement with devotees. Instead of worshipping the buddhas, Theravada Buddhists reflect on the historical Buddha as the model of the ideal necessary to attain *nirvana*. The majority of Buddhists, however, mostly in Mahayana sects, worship a pantheon of buddhas and bodhisattvas. In a way similar to the reciprocal relationship between lay disciples and monastics, in which offerings are exchanged for merit, buddhas and bodhisattvas are believed to deliver merit in the form of worldly blessings to their devotees.

For both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhists, various sites from the Buddha’s life serve as important centers of pilgrimage, such as the place of his birth, enlightenment, and the park where he is believed to have delivered his first sermon. Buddhists travel from all over the world to visit these sites. There are also many sites throughout Asia that serve as devotional and sometimes pilgrimage centers. These often feature *stupas*, that is, dome-shaped monuments believed to contain Buddhist relics, usually the remains of Buddhist monks.

Global Buddhism

Buddhism is a proselytizing religion. This means that Buddhists have historically sought converts by disseminating Buddhist ideas and practices among previously unexposed populations. Buddhism, furthermore, has always been influenced by its surrounding culture. Consequently, Buddhism is found in many different regions of the world but varies widely in its regional forms. As it enters new regions, Buddhists tend to incorporate local beliefs, gods, and
spirits into its cosmology. Local beliefs and customs often serve to fulfill everyday needs with regard to health and society, whereas Buddhism often serves to answer questions regarding the otherworldly need for salvation.

Since the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, widespread immigration as well as strategies to expand the Buddhist community across the world by linking Buddhist ideas and practices to popular movements in the global religious market have become increasingly common. Some Buddhist monks have even taken the lead in the global spread of Buddhist ideas and practices by engaging with modern science and participating in contemporary ethical debates.

For example, in recent decades, the fourteenth and current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, has played a major role in bringing Buddhism into the global spotlight. The Tibetan Dalai Lamas—dalai means “ocean (of wisdom),” and lama is a term designating a spiritual teacher—traditionally serve as both religious and political leaders in Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism is a sub-sect of Mahayana called Vajrayana or “Vehicle of the Thunderbolt.” Vajrayana Buddhism, which is a form of tantric Buddhism, emerged in India in the latter half of the first millennium CE before missionaries brought it to Tibet. It features the use of a number of ritual tools and techniques, including meditative diagrams called mandalas and magic formulas called mantras, that serve to help the practitioner awaken to the underlying non-duality of existence. Here reality is “non-dual,” that is, “not two,” because everything is the same, that is, empty. Following in the philosophical path of Nagarjuna, tantric forms of Buddhism teach that nirvana and samsara are not different but identical insofar as they are both empty. Hence anything, even desire, can “skillfully” serve as the “means” to salvation. In some contexts, even sexual desire has been seen as a means that could be harnessed and channeled toward increased wisdom of ultimate reality. This idea is most often expressed symbolically, in the iconography of buddhas sexually united with female counterparts, representing the union of wisdom (symbolized by the female partner) and upaya or “skillful means” (symbolized by the male partner). We briefly discussed this iconography in chapter 6.

After the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, Tibetan Buddhists have largely maintained a policy of peaceful resistance to the Chinese occupation, and this despite the serious violations of human rights on the part of Chinese rule. An estimated one million Tibetans have died, and thousands of monasteries have been destroyed. In the process, the Dalai Lama has become a high
profile international public figure who advocates for peaceful resistance to the Chinese occupation of Tibet, peaceful resolutions to conflicts in all areas of foreign policy, as well as what he considers the mutually beneficial and respectful dialogue that is possible between traditional religion and modern science.

Glossary

*ahimsa*  
“non-violence”

*anatman*  
“no-self”

*arhat*  
“worthy one,” a fully enlightened being who became awakened with the help of a teacher

*avidya*  
“ignorance”

*bhavachakra*  
“wheel of life” into which all living beings are reborn

*bodhisattva*  
“enlightened being”; devotes her- or himself to helping others attain salvation from rebirth

*buddha*  
“awakened one”; epithet ascribed to any being who has attained enlightenment without the help of a teacher; also the most common honorary title of the historical Siddhartha Gauthama

Dalai Lama  
“ocean (of wisdom) teacher”; a term designating the religio-political leaders of Tibet

*dharma*  
teachings of the historical Buddha

*duhkha*  
“suffering”

*karma*  
a force that arises from moral actions—underlying intentions and consequences are important parts of the equation—accumulates over many lifetimes, and perpetuates the cycle of rebirth

*Madhyamaka*  
“Middle School”; a philosophical system stating the components of the world are not only impermanent but also not real

*Mahayana*  
“Great Vehicle”; the Buddhist sect most prevalent in Central and East Asia
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mahayana sutras</strong></td>
<td>Mahayana sacred texts composed some time in the early centuries of the common era and introducing key Mahayana ideas, including the notion of the <em>bodhisattva</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>mandala</strong></td>
<td>meditative diagrams prevalent in tantric Buddhism</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>mantra</strong></td>
<td>magic formulas prevalent in tantric Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle Way</strong></td>
<td>the spiritual path prescribed by the Buddha between the extremes of luxury and austerity</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>nirvana</strong></td>
<td>“to blow out”; salvation from rebirth into suffering existence by putting an end to all components of the individual</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Noble Eightfold Path</strong></td>
<td>the path toward enlightenment as prescribed by the Buddha; involves the cultivation of virtue, wisdom, and meditation</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pali canon</strong></td>
<td>a set of texts collected not long after the death of the Buddha and considered sacred by all Buddhists and the sole literary source of the Buddha’s teachings by Theravada Buddhists</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>papa</strong></td>
<td>harmful karma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>prajna</strong></td>
<td>“wisdom”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>punya</strong></td>
<td>beneficial karma; merit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>samadhi</strong></td>
<td>“meditation”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>samsara</strong></td>
<td>“continuous flow”; cycle of rebirth</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>samskara</strong></td>
<td>“mental formations,” which include personality characteristics and dispositions; arise as a result of moral actions</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>sangha</strong></td>
<td>term designating the entire Buddhist community but most often referring to the community of monks and nuns</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Shakyamuni</strong></td>
<td>“Sage of the Shakyas”; a epithet ascribed to the historical Buddha</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>shila</strong></td>
<td>“virtue”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>shunyavada</strong></td>
<td>“doctrine of emptiness”; doctrine suggesting the components of the world are empty of independent reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>stupa</strong></td>
<td>dome-shaped monuments believed to contain Buddhist relics, usually the remains of Buddhist monks</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theravada</strong></td>
<td>“Teaching of the Elders”; the Buddhist sect most prevalent in South and Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Three Jewels: the Buddhist proclamation to “take refuge” in the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha.

trikaya: “three bodies”; Mahayana doctrine stating that the Buddha exists in three forms: his earthly body, his heavenly body; and his transcendent body.

upaya: “skillful means”; the means by which a Buddha or bodhisattva convey a spiritual message or help an aspirant toward enlightenment.


vinaya: Buddhist code of monastic discipline.

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