



UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

a monthly forum on the third *Saturday* of each month from 6:30 to 7:30 P.M. following Evening Prayer at 6
Most Forums are led by Canon Richard T. Nolan.

Retired Priest-in-Residence, St. Andrew's Church; Editor of www.philosophy-religion.org
Saturday, March 17, 2007

Tonight's Topic

"AN INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM: A Venerable Atheistic Religion"

(including a brief video presentation)

[Are there any themes/beliefs/practices common to Buddhism and Christianity?]

A Prayer To Be Said In Unison

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who has committed to your Church the care and nurture of all the faithful; Enlighten with wisdom those who teach and those who learn, that, rejoicing in the knowledge of your truth, they may worship and serve you from generation to generation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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BUDDHISM

The Buddhist Quest for Enlightenment

THE BUDDHA

Buddhist philosophy has much in common with Hindu philosophy, but it also departs radically from it at certain points and hence was known among adherents of Hinduism as the “Great Heresy.” Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism (see biography and excerpt, pp. 414–415), lived in Northern India in the fifth century B.C.E. Gautama, although reared in luxury and under sheltered conditions, became greatly concerned about the widespread misery under which people lived. He left his home and family and wandered

into the forest in search of the truth about the meaning of existence. Finally, after six years, and lengthy experimentation with asceticism, he returned to the Middle Way (see excerpt, pp. 415). One night shortly thereafter, under the Bo Tree, the truth, it is said, flashed into his mind and he became the “Enlightened One”—the Buddha. Contrary to the spirit of his teaching, Gautama was later idolized and deified, and temples, ceremonies, and a priesthood arose. As a result of Buddha’s teaching and influence, Buddhist thought flourished in India for more than a thousand years. Today it is found mainly in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. In the course of its expansion it has changed considerably.

Buddhism makes a fundamental break with Hinduism in its rejection not only of the Vedic scriptures but also of the concepts of Brahman and atman—the metaphysical absolute and the changeless self. Experience, it is said, gives no clear indication of such an all-inclusive World Soul. Gautama rejected the authority ascribed to the ancient gods and urged believers to rely mainly on the resources within themselves. He also rejected the caste system; wisdom and not birth or caste is of importance. He was impressed by ceaseless change, which he observed as pervading everything, and by finiteness and suffering. Gautama was not only a man of great human sympathy and goodwill; he was a thinker of great philosophic power who decided to spend his life in teaching others to gain understanding.

THE THREE MARKS OF EXISTENCE AND THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The central core of Buddhist philosophy is found in the Three Marks of Existence. By carefully observing our everyday experience, unimpeded by normal belief systems and opinions, we notice that the world of our senses is marked by transitoriness or impermanence. We then notice *anatta*, an inability to determine through experiential channels of knowledge whether or not there is a Self; this “no doctrine of a Self” quickly became in early Buddhism the “doctrine of no Self,” whereby we can find no independent essence in existing things. Finally, we discover *dukkha*, suffering, that is experienced because of our attachment to things which change.

The doctrine of the Four Noble Truths then focuses on the relationship between suffering and attachment or desire. There is, first, the fact of the existence of suffering. Unhappiness or pain accompanies the experiences of birth, illness, failure to satisfy desires, separation from friends and loved ones, old age, and death. The problem of suffering is the universal problem of life in a world that is finite and changing. Even the more fortunate are unable to ward off old age and death.

The second noble truth discloses the cause of suffering. Suffering is caused by desires, or *tanha*, which in its original and literal meaning is “thirst.” These desires or cravings are many, and they tend to grow or increase as we attempt to satisfy them. The greatest attachment, however, is to existence itself, for what we want most is to continue indefinitely, to have life as we now know it. The world, however, is marked by change and it is our attachment to these changing things (and especially to our own selves) that causes us the greatest suffering.

The third noble truth is that release is possible. Because we cannot alter the transitory nature of the experiential world, we have to focus our attention on something else: our attachment to this world. By getting rid of our attachment and desire we automatically get rid of our suffering. By eradicating our desire, we also reduce our ignorance and see for the first time the true nature of the self as a conditioned entity interdependent with all other things in a “chain of causation.” Real happiness comes with this freedom from attachment and if we can gain such enlightenment, the wheel of existence can be ended and *nirvana* experienced.

The fourth noble truth is that there is a way out through the *Noble Eightfold Path*. Right knowledge about the nature of one’s self is a means of removing attachment and suffering.

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH AND NIRVANA

The Noble Eightfold Path consists of the following steps: (1) Right understanding. We need to realize that the cessation of suffering comes through the elimination of ignorance and of craving, desire, and thirst for a world and a self marked by transitoriness. Without understanding, we do not know the direction from which

release is to come. (2) Right aspiration or purpose. Without the goal of enlightenment we are not likely to make a start or to put forth vigorous effort. (3) Right speech. We should be truthful, kind, and humble, and never gossip, slander, or boast. (4) Right conduct. We must not harm other living creatures and must avoid killing, stealing, eating meat, intoxication, and other evils. (5) Right mode of livelihood. Our mode of living and our vocation should be in harmony with the goals toward which we aspire and should be especially consistent with the ethics of nonviolence. (6) Right striving or effort. Discipline is necessary in the attainment of knowledge. (7) Right mindfulness. Our thoughts are important, and must not be permitted to wander or dwell on desires that need to be suppressed. (8) Right concentration. When we are able through meditation and concentration to identify ourselves with truth, the goal of mystic illumination is reached. At this point we are no longer subject to rebirth, and we may achieve the experience of *nirvana*.

What is *nirvana*? Literally, the term means “blowing out, extinction, ceasing to be.” Does this mean that Buddhist thinkers have set forth a religion or philosophy of escape? Such, however, would be a superficial interpretation, which in no way explains the sense of joyous fulfillment and the appeal of Buddhism to large numbers of people. What is extinguished is attachment to any belief in an eternal, permanent self and to all notions of individuality. The elimination of the bonds of rebirth, of suffering, of ignorance, of desire, is the liberation that is *nirvana*. Cessation of striving, being bound by rebirth, is said to bring a sense of liberation or freedom, peace and contentment, joy, insight, and love or compassion for all living beings.

In order to achieve this freedom, compassion, and wisdom, certain ethical behaviors must be followed. In the earliest Buddhist dialogues five prohibitions are given:

1. Avoid taking life (animal or human).
2. Avoid stealing (taking what is not offered).
3. Avoid illicit sexual relations.
4. Avoid lying.
5. Avoid intoxicants.

The law of *karma* and the doctrine of rebirth were retained by Buddhists when they rejected Hinduism. The law of *karma* is a strong incentive to choose the good and avoid its opposite. If we realize that we are our own saviors, our sense of responsibility is likely to be keen. One should give aid to others, however, whenever this is possible, physically through almsgiving and the like, and spiritually through knowledge and enlightenment.

Excerpts from *RELIGIONS EAST AND WEST*

by the late Professor Robert C. Zaehner, University of Oxford

The religions of the world may be roughly divided into two types - the prophetic and the mystical. Each type derives ultimately from one nation, the prophetic from the Jews, the mystical from India. In addition, China must count as an independent religious phenomenon which, however, belongs to the Indian 'type' by which it was profoundly influenced.

To the prophetic type of religion belong Judaism itself and its daughter religions, Christianity and Islam. These religions all originated in the Near East, Christianity spreading mainly throughout Europe. Islam replaced it in Asia Minor and North Africa, but its greatest expansion was towards the East when it displaced Zoroastrianism in Persia and made deep inroads into India and beyond. If we speak of 'prophetic' religion as 'Western,' we must remember that Islam constituted an integral part of this 'Western, block, not of the 'Eastern.' The great religious divide is not the Bosphorus which, separates Europe from Asia, but the Hindu Kush which separates the lands of the Muslim Iranian nation from India on the one hand, and the Gobi Desert which separates them from China on the other. Thus, if we persist in using the words 'Eastern' and 'Western' we must understand that in the religious context we mean Europe and the Middle East by 'Western'; India and the Far East by 'Eastern.'

GOD AS HE OR IT

In prophetic religion the first assumption is that of a personal God who rules the universe and who communicates his will to man through Prophets and Lawgivers. This God is directly and personally concerned with the right ordering of this world and with the right and 'righteous' relationships he wishes to

exist between man and man: hence he is the Law giver *par excellence*, operating in time and space in a concrete situation the center of which is man. ...he manifests himself in act. As Pascal said, 'he is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the learned.' He is a personal and 'living' God who manifests his will in history.

The God of 'Eastern' religion is the God of the philosophers a - so much so indeed that to call him God at all can only mislead, for he is not a person, it is a principle: it is the principle of unchanging Being which is yet the source of all becoming, the stillness that is yet the source of all activity, the One from which all multiplicity proceeds. In Chinese it is called the Tao, the 'Way,' in the Indian languages it is Brahman, unchanging, One, dependent on nothing, free.

All religions aim at 'salvation' of some sort, and this implies that there is both something or someone which can be 'saved' and also something *from* which it can be saved. For prophetic religion this 'something' is usually sin or evil, for the mystical religions it is the human condition as we know it, subject to birth and death, old age and decay - the tyranny of time and of this world in which we live. This longing to have done with life as lived and experienced on earth are typically and admirably expressed in an ancient Hindu prayer:

From the unreal lead me to the real!

From darkness lead me to the light!

From death lead me to immortality!

Immortality and the 'real' are one and the same thing: they are not of this world, for they are what does not and cannot change. 'Immortality' does not mean 'life everlasting,' for it does not last at all: it just *is*. It is the real as contrasted with the unreal, the eternal as contrasted with the transient. The essential experience is that of the 'salvation,' or rather 'liberation' of the soul from the bondage of time, space and matter.

What then is the nature of the soul if by this word we understand that thing in man which can be so liberated? It is emphatically not what Christians understand by that word: it is not the responsible element in man which can be 'saved' or 'damned' because salvation and damnation are the reward and punishment allotted to the doers of good or evil deeds. The 'soul' or, as the Hindus prefer to call it, the 'self,' cannot be saved or damned because it has nothing to do with 'doing,' only with 'being.' 'Doing' in Sanskrit is *karma*, and it is karma which binds you to the never-ending round of impermanent existence. 'Liberation' means to have done with 'doing' and having in order that you may simply 'be.'

THIS SPACE WITHIN THE HEART

Brahman is Being: Brahman is consciousness: Brahman is joy. So too, you and I, in our inmost selves, are Being, consciousness, and joy. We do not know this because we are ignorant of the true nature of things: we identify ourselves with body, senses, mind, the 'ego,' or even with what we in the West call 'soul,' of which consciousness is an essential part. This is to fail to see things as they really are; and as liberation means also to free oneself from a false view of things.

Brahman is the same changeless principle which both pervades the universe and dwells in the consciousness of every man. To 'become Brahman' is to realize that one's true being is independent of this world, of mind and emotion and feeling just as much as of the body and its desires. To 'become Brahman' means to realize that the point without magnitude within the human heart is the same as the ground of the cosmos:

As wide as is this space around us, so wide is this space within the heart. In it both sky and earth are concentrated, both fire and wind, both sun and moon, lightning and the stars, what a man possesses here on earth and what he does not possess: everything is concentrated in this (tiny space within the heart).

This is what is usually called pantheism; but it does not mean that everything is indiscriminately and indifferently divine, but that all things are divine in the sense that the sum eternal spirit, Brahman, is fully present in them all.

'Liberation' means to *experience* the presence of this unchanging being both in yourself and in all Nature - hence it is possible to say that one's inmost self and the highest Brahman are one: 'This finest essence -- the whole universe has it as its Self: That is the Real: That is the Self: That *you* are.'

This 'Highest Self' is usually regarded as far transcending anything that can be called personality; and the experience of identity with this impersonal absolute means the loss of anything you can call 'I,' the dissolving of the hard contours of personal existence into the wide expanse of unqualified being, just as a river loses its identity once it flows into the featureless ocean. And yet in the ancient Hindu texts Brahman is not

always conceived of as being simply the changeless One behind the ever-changing many, for it sometimes appears as the creative ground of the universe, the "Lord" of the universe.

This is indeed the great unborn Self which consists of understanding... In the space within the heart lies the Ruler of all, the Lord of all, the King of all. He neither increases by good works nor does he diminish by evil ones...For it is he who makes him whom he would raise up from these worlds perform good works, and it is he again who makes him whom he would drag down perform evil works. He is the guardian of the worlds, the sovereign of the worlds, universal Lord. Let a man know: He is my Self.

Here the identification of the essence of man and the Absolute which is at the same time God is complete. This is not the Judaeo-Christian God who stands over against you as a judge, it is not even the 'Kingdom of God' that 'is within you;' it is a God who transcends all personal gods and yet is identical with you as you exist in eternity. Moreover, this is not something that must be accepted on faith alone, it is something that all can experience if their dispositions are right and if they are suitably trained. It may sound absurd, but it is an experience that is attested all over the globe and at all stages of human development. Once experienced, this vision of the one undying reality behind all that comes to be and passes away cannot be doubted, for to have glimpsed it, if only for a moment, brings the conviction that death itself is an impossibility. The danger is that it introduces you into a world where all action is transcended and in which there can therefore be neither good nor evil. This too is the experience which the Buddhists call 'Enlightenment.'

The Hindus were and are incurable metaphysicians. Though all admit that this experience is not explicable in words, this did not prevent them from trying to explain it philosophically. Some said it proved that all things are inseparably one and that all multiplicity is an illusion: others went to the other extreme and claimed that there are two orders of being - the eternal and the transient - and that liberation means no more than the final separation of the eternal element from all that is not eternal. All this the Buddha rejected as being irrelevant to the saving experience itself which for him meant the 'snuffing out' (Nirvana) of all worldly existence and the actual experience of 'what is unborn, does not become, is not made or compounded.' This Nirvana, the blowing out of the flame of life and of anything we are pleased to call a 'self' (for the Buddha will have nothing to do with a 'self' of any kind whether individual or universal), is the realization of the Changeless. This again is an experience that may be had here in this life: it is something that is present in all of us. For most of us it is hidden away so that we do not even suspect its existence.

The Buddha, however, is there to show us the way, the Noble Eightfold Path which is the only sure way to the cherished goal and which is based on a strict morality of selflessness and self-abnegation.

THE PRISON OF THE WORLD

Both Hinduism and Buddhism see salvation as a release from *this* world into an unconditioned form of existence in which all change and all action are transcended. That is because they believe in the transmigration of souls, the endless repetition of lives more or less miserable to which, but for the possibility of 'liberation,' there would be no foreseeable end. Their tendency is to see this world as a prison from which the spirit of man must escape. The Chinese did not believe in transmigration, and their attitude to this world is therefore very different. The Supreme principle is the Tao - the 'Way' - the 'way' things work, that is; and man's salvation consists in his attuning himself to and uniting himself with this Tao. Since the Tao is the principle that makes things what they are, man must not resist it. Like Brahman the Tao is the single reality that operates in all things, though remaining still and unperturbed itself all the time. Hence to be at one with all things is to be at one with the Tao, and through the Tao to share in its immortality. For these Taoists Nature and Spirit are one; you do not have to renounce Nature, only your individual 'self.' Once that is done you will see Nature itself miraculously transformed in the eternal light of the Tao; you will see all things still as separate, but yet in a far deeper sense as one.

When Buddhism came to China it too was transformed: the original rigid separation of eternity from this world of space and time, was abolished. The result was Zen in which 'enlightenment' is seen much as the Taoists and early Hindus saw it - as the realization of the interconnectedness of all things in the one absolute 'ground.' Enlightenment may come after long practice either gradually or quite suddenly. The experience, as with the Hindus, is one of Being, heightened consciousness, and joy. In it there is nothing that a Christian would recognize as God; it is simply the discovery of a changeless principle within yourself, it is your own true being which no one, not even God, can take away from you. 'Salvation' lies squarely in your own hands: and in this surely lies the attraction of Zen and the whole 'Eastern' tradition to post-Christian man. In China this mystical trend, the keynote of which is always unity, left its mark on what until 1905 was the official religion of China - Confucianism - which had previously been concerned very much with this world and with ethics.

Despite the mystical influx, however, Confucianism never ceased to mainly interested be in the right ordering of society in this world rather than in individual escape from it. That, it thought, was the higher selfishness; but among the 'Eastern' religions Confucianism was the odd man out.

from Owen C. Thomas and Ellen K. Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*. 3rd ed. (2002)

(Both Thomas and Wondra are contemporary Episcopal theologians.)

GOD AS PERSONAL

An immediate implication of the foregoing is that God is personal, since personhood or selfhood is involved in spiritual life, or is identical with spiritual life, looked at from one point of view. Nothing comes through more clearly in the Bible than that God approaches humanity in a personal way in the divine words and acts. In revelation, God confronts us as an "I." Brunner has pointed out that more than one thousand sentences of the Bible begin with the divine "I." The personal character of God is underlined by the ideas of the name and face of God. God's personal approach to humanity culminates in the divine approach through the man Jesus. But, in this analogy, elements of finiteness in human personhood, such as birth and death, cannot be applied to God. This raises the difficult problem of conceiving of nonfinite or infinite personal reality. The only personal reality we know directly is finite. Because of this difficulty, some theologians have asserted that God is suprapersonal (beyond personhood). But others have responded that all concepts claimed as suprapersonal are in fact subpersonal or impersonal. Gollwitzer states, "The personal way of speaking is unsurpassable for Christian talk of God ... There exists alongside the personal way of speaking only the impersonal and subpersonal way, but not a supra-personal one."⁵

The theological issue here is that God is self-revealed as personal, and yet God is not a finite object, limited by space and time, but rather non-finite or infinite. Thus any attempt to state the infinite personhood of God must not stress the infiniteness in such a way as to fall into subpersonal categories.

The concern to transcend the personal often derives from the presupposition that the more abstract a concept is, the more spiritual it is, and the more concrete or personal, the less spiritual. From the point of view of the Bible, the opposite is true, as we have seen above. The concrete, anthropomorphic, personal way of speaking about God is sometimes said to be primitive and naive, but it is the only way personal reality can be spoken about, and it is therefore a necessity in our language about God.

If it is objected that analogical application of the term personal to God is too anthropomorphic, one can reply that application of the term personal to humanity is too theomorphic. Only God is truly personal, truly free and responsible, whereas human beings are personal only by way of analogy to God's personhood. Our personhood is only a reflection or image of the divine personhood, and we come to realize our true personhood only through our relation to God.⁶

5. Gollwitzer, *Existence of God*, 188f.

6. *Ibid.*, 196f.; Barth, *C.D.*. II/1: 248ff.

Excerpted from **Buddhism** contributed by James Paul McDermott (Encarta, 2007)

I INTRODUCTION

Buddhism, a major world religion, founded in northeastern India and based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who is known as the Buddha, or Enlightened One.

Originating as a monastic movement within the dominant Brahman tradition of the day, Buddhism quickly developed in a distinctive direction. The Buddha not only rejected significant aspects of Hindu philosophy, but also challenged the authority of the priesthood, denied the validity of the Vedic scriptures, and rejected the sacrificial cult based on them. Moreover, he opened his movement to members of all castes, denying that a person's spiritual worth is a matter of birth.

Buddhism today is divided into two major branches known to their respective followers as Theravada, the Way of the Elders, and Mahayana, the Great Vehicle. Followers of Mahayana refer to Theravada using the derogatory term Hinayana, the Lesser Vehicle.

Buddhism has been significant not only in India but also in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), and Laos, where Theravada has been dominant; Mahayana has had its greatest impact in China, Japan, Taiwan, Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, Korea, and Vietnam, as well as in India. The number of Buddhists worldwide has been estimated at between 150 and 300 million. The reasons for such a range are twofold: Throughout much of Asia religious affiliation has tended to be nonexclusive; and it is especially difficult to estimate the continuing influence of Buddhism in Communist countries such as China.

II ORIGINS

As did most major faiths, Buddhism developed over many years.

A Buddha's Life

No complete biography of the Buddha was compiled until centuries after his death; only fragmentary accounts of his life are found in the earliest sources. Western scholars, however, generally agree on 563 BC as the year of his birth.

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was born in Lumbinī, Nepal, near the present Nepal-India border, the son of the ruler of a petty kingdom. According to legend, at his birth sages recognized in him the marks of a great man with the potential to become either a sage or the ruler of an empire. The young prince was raised in sheltered luxury, until at the age of 29 he realized how empty his life to this point had been. Renouncing earthly attachments, he embarked on a quest for peace and enlightenment, seeking release from the cycle of rebirths. For the next few years he practiced Yoga and adopted a life of radical asceticism.

Eventually he gave up this approach as fruitless and instead adopted a middle path between the life of indulgence and that of self-denial. Sitting under a bo tree, he meditated, rising through a series of higher states of consciousness until he attained the enlightenment for which he had been searching. Once having known this ultimate religious truth, the Buddha underwent a period of intense inner struggle. He began to preach, wandering from place to place, gathering a body of disciples, and organizing them into a monastic community known as the *sangha*. In this way he spent the rest of his life.

B Buddha's Teachings

The Buddha was an oral teacher; he left no written body of thought. His beliefs were codified by later followers.

B1 The Four Noble Truths

At the core of the Buddha's enlightenment was the realization of the Four Noble Truths: (1) Life is suffering. This is more than a mere recognition of the presence of suffering in existence. It is a statement that, in its very nature, human existence is essentially painful from the moment of birth to the moment of death. Even death brings no relief, for the Buddha accepted the Hindu idea of life as cyclical, with death leading to further rebirth. (2) All suffering is caused by ignorance of the nature of reality and the craving, attachment, and grasping that result from such ignorance. (3) Suffering can be ended by overcoming ignorance and attachment. (4) The path to the suppression of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path, which consists of right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right-mindedness, and right contemplation. These eight are usually divided into three categories that form the cornerstone of Buddhist faith: morality, wisdom, and *samadhi*, or concentration.

B2 Anatman

Buddhism analyzes human existence as made up of five aggregates or "bundles" (*skandhas*): the material body, feelings, perceptions, predispositions or karmic tendencies, and consciousness. A person is only a temporary combination of these aggregates, which are subject to continual change. No one remains the same for any two consecutive moments. Buddhists deny that the aggregates individually or in combination may be considered a permanent, independently existing self or soul (*atman*). Indeed, they regard it as a mistake to conceive of any lasting unity behind the elements that constitute an individual. The Buddha held that belief in such a self results in egoism, craving, and hence in suffering. Thus he taught the doctrine of *anatman*, or the denial of a permanent soul. He felt that all existence is characterized by the three marks of *anatman* (no soul), *anitya* (impermanence), and *dukkha* (suffering). The doctrine of *anatman* made it necessary for the Buddha to reinterpret the Indian idea of repeated rebirth in the cycle of phenomenal existence known as *samsara*. To this end he taught the doctrine of

pratityasamutpada, or dependent origination. This 12-linked chain of causation shows how ignorance in a previous life creates the tendency for a combination of aggregates to develop. These in turn cause the mind and senses to operate. Sensations result, which lead to craving and a clinging to existence. This condition triggers the process of becoming once again, producing a renewed cycle of birth, old age, and death. Through this causal chain a connection is made between one life and the next. What is posited is a stream of renewed existences, rather than a permanent being that moves from life to life—in effect a belief in rebirth without transmigration.

B3 Karma

Closely related to this belief is the doctrine of karma. Karma consists of a person's acts and their ethical consequences. Human actions lead to rebirth, wherein good deeds are inevitably rewarded and evil deeds punished. Thus, neither undeserved pleasure nor unwarranted suffering exists in the world, but rather a universal justice. The karmic process operates through a kind of natural moral law rather than through a system of divine judgment. One's karma determines such matters as one's species, beauty, intelligence, longevity, wealth, and social status. According to the Buddha, karma of varying types can lead to rebirth as a human, an animal, a hungry ghost, a denizen of hell, or even one of the Hindu gods.

Although never actually denying the existence of the gods, Buddhism denies them any special role. Their lives in heaven are long and pleasurable, but they are in the same predicament as other creatures, being subject eventually to death and further rebirth in lower states of existence. They are not creators of the universe or in control of human destiny, and Buddhism denies the value of prayer and sacrifice to them. Of the possible modes of rebirth, human existence is preferable, because the deities are so engrossed in their own pleasures that they lose sight of the need for salvation. Enlightenment is possible only for humans.

B4 Nirvana

The ultimate goal of the Buddhist path is release from the round of phenomenal existence with its inherent suffering. To achieve this goal is to attain nirvana, an enlightened state in which the fires of greed, hatred, and ignorance have been quenched. Not to be confused with total annihilation, nirvana is a state of consciousness beyond definition. After attaining nirvana, the enlightened individual may continue to live, burning off any remaining karma until a state of final nirvana (*parinirvana*) is attained at the moment of death.

In theory, the goal of nirvana is attainable by anyone, although it is a realistic goal only for members of the monastic community. In Theravada Buddhism an individual who has achieved enlightenment by following the Eightfold Path is known as an *arhat*, or worthy one, a type of solitary saint.

For those unable to pursue the ultimate goal, the proximate goal of better rebirth through improved karma is an option. This lesser goal is generally pursued by lay Buddhists in the hope that it will eventually lead to a life in which they are capable of pursuing final enlightenment as members of the *sangha*.

The ethic that leads to nirvana is detached and inner-oriented. It involves cultivating four virtuous attitudes, known as the Palaces of Brahma: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. The ethic that leads to better rebirth, however, is centered on fulfilling one's duties to society. It involves acts of charity, especially support of the *sangha*, as well as observance of the five precepts that constitute the basic moral code of Buddhism. The precepts prohibit killing, stealing, harmful language, sexual misbehavior, and the use of intoxicants. By observing these precepts, the three roots of evil—lust, hatred, and delusion—may be overcome.

Shortly before his death, the Buddha refused his disciples' request to appoint a successor, telling his followers to work out their own salvation with diligence. At that time Buddhist teachings existed only in oral traditions, and it soon became apparent that a new basis for maintaining the community's unity and purity was needed. Thus, the monastic order met periodically to reach agreement on matters of doctrine and practice. Four such meetings have been focused on in the traditions as major councils.

B Formation of Buddhist Literature

For several centuries after the death of the Buddha, the scriptural traditions recited at the councils were transmitted orally. These were finally committed to writing about the 1st century BC. Some early schools used Sanskrit for their scriptural language. Although individual texts are extant, no complete canon has survived in Sanskrit. In contrast, the full canon of the Theravadins survives in Pali, which was apparently a popular dialect derived from Sanskrit.

The Buddhist canon is known in Pali as the Tipitaka (Tripitaka in Sanskrit), meaning “Three Baskets,” because it consists of three collections of writings: the Sutta Pitaka (Sutra Pitaka in Sanskrit), a collection of discourses; the Vinaya Pitaka, the code of monastic discipline; and the Abhidharma Pitaka, which contains philosophical, psychological, and doctrinal discussions and classifications.

The Sutta Pitaka is primarily composed of dialogues between the Buddha and other people. It consists of five groups of texts: Digha Nikaya (Collection of Long Discourses), Majjhima Nikaya (Collection of Medium-Length Discourses), Samyutta Nikaya (Collection of Grouped Discourses), Anguttara Nikaya (Collection of Discourses on Numbered Topics), and Khuddaka Nikaya (Collection of Miscellaneous Texts). In the fifth group, the Jatakas, comprising stories of former lives of the Buddha, and the Dhammapada (Religious Sentences), a summary of the Buddha’s teachings on mental discipline and morality, are especially popular.

The Vinaya Pitaka consists of more than 225 rules governing the conduct of Buddhist monks and nuns. Each is accompanied by a story explaining the original reason for the rule. The rules are arranged according to the seriousness of the offense resulting from their violation.

The Abhidharma Pitaka consists of seven separate works. They include detailed classifications of psychological phenomena, metaphysical analysis, and a thesaurus of technical vocabulary. Although technically authoritative, the texts in this collection have little influence on the lay Buddhist. The complete canon, much expanded, also exists in Tibetan and Chinese versions.

Two noncanonical texts that have great authority within Theravada Buddhism are the Milindapanha (Questions of King Milinda) and the Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification). The Milindapanha dates from about the 2nd century AD. It is in the form of a dialogue dealing with a series of fundamental problems in Buddhist thought. The Visuddhimagga is the masterpiece of the most famous of Buddhist commentators, Buddhaghosa (flourished early 5th century AD). It is a large compendium summarizing Buddhist thought and meditative practice.

Theravada Buddhists have traditionally considered the Tipitaka to be the remembered words of Siddhartha Gautama. Mahayana Buddhists have not limited their scriptures to the teachings of this historical figure, however, nor has Mahayana ever bound itself to a closed canon of sacred writings. Various scriptures have thus been authoritative for different branches of Mahayana at various periods of history. Among the more important Mahayana scriptures are the following: the Saddharmapundarika Sutra (Lotus of the Good Law Sutra, popularly known as the Lotus Sutra), the Vimalakirti Sutra, the Avatamsaka Sutra (Garland Sutra), and the Lankavatara Sutra (The Buddha’s Descent to Sri Lanka Sutra), as well as a group of writings known as the Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom).

C Conflict and New Groupings

As Buddhism developed in its early years, conflicting interpretations of the master’s teachings appeared, resulting in the traditional 18 schools of Buddhist thought. As a group, these schools eventually came to be considered too conservative and literal minded in their attachment to the master’s message. Among them, Theravada was charged with being too individualistic and insufficiently concerned with the needs of the laity. Such dissatisfaction led a liberal wing of the *sangha* to begin to break away from the rest of the monks at the second council in 383 BC.

While the more conservative monks continued to honor the Buddha as a perfectly enlightened human teacher, the liberal Mahasanghikas developed a new concept. They considered the Buddha an eternal, omnipresent, transcendental being. They speculated that the human Buddha was but an apparition of the transcendental Buddha that was created for the benefit of humankind. In this understanding of the Buddha nature, Mahasanghika thought is something of a prototype of Mahayana.

C1 Mahayana

The origins of Mahayana are particularly obscure. Even the names of its founders are unknown, and scholars disagree about whether it originated in southern or in northwestern India. Its formative years were between the 2nd century BC and the 1st century AD.

Speculation about the eternal Buddha continued well after the beginning of the Christian era and culminated in the Mahayana doctrine of his threefold nature, or triple “body” (*trikaya*). These aspects are the body of essence, the body of communal bliss, and the body of transformation. The body of essence represents the ultimate nature of the Buddha. Beyond form, it is the unchanging absolute and is spoken of as consciousness or the void. This essential Buddha nature manifests itself, taking on heavenly form as the body of communal bliss. In this form the Buddha sits in godlike splendor, preaching in the heavens. Lastly, the Buddha nature appears on earth in human form to convert humankind. Such an appearance is known as a body of transformation. The Buddha has taken on such an appearance

countless times. Mahayana considers the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, only one example of the body of transformation.

The new Mahayana concept of the Buddha made possible concepts of divine grace and ongoing revelation that are lacking in Theravada. Belief in the Buddha's heavenly manifestations led to the development of a significant devotional strand in Mahayana. Some scholars have therefore described the early development of Mahayana in terms of the "Hinduization" of Buddhism.

Another important new concept in Mahayana is that of the *bodhisattva*, or enlightenment being, as the ideal toward which the good Buddhist should aspire. A bodhisattva is an individual who has attained perfect enlightenment but delays entry into final nirvana in order to make possible the salvation of all other sentient beings. The *bodhisattva* transfers merit built up over many lifetimes to less fortunate creatures. The key attributes of this social saint are compassion and loving-kindness. For this reason Mahayana considers the *bodhisattva* superior to the *arhats* who represent the ideal of Theravada. Certain bodhisattvas, such as Maitreya, who represents the Buddha's loving-kindness, and Avalokitesvara or Guanyin, who represents his compassion, have become the focus of popular devotional worship in Mahayana.

C2 Tantrism

By the 7th century AD a new form of Buddhism known as Tantrism (*see* Tantra) had developed through the blend of Mahayana with popular folk belief and magic in northern India. Similar to Hindu Tantrism, which arose about the same time, Buddhist Tantrism differs from Mahayana in its strong emphasis on sacramental action. Also known as Vajrayana, the Diamond Vehicle, Tantrism is an esoteric tradition. Its initiation ceremonies involve entry into a mandala, a mystic circle or symbolic map of the spiritual universe. Also important in Tantrism is the use of mudras, or ritual gestures, and mantras, or sacred syllables, which are repeatedly chanted and used as a focus for meditation. Vajrayana became the dominant form of Buddhism in Tibet and was also transmitted through China to Japan, where it continues to be practiced by the Shingon sect.

B New Sects

Several important new sects of Buddhism developed in China and flourished there and in Japan, as well as elsewhere in East Asia. Among these, Ch'an, or Zen, and Pure Land, or Amidism, were most important.

Zen advocated the practice of meditation as the way to a sudden, intuitive realization of one's inner Buddha nature. Founded by the Indian monk Bodhidharma, who arrived in China in 520, Zen emphasizes practice and personal enlightenment rather than doctrine or the study of scripture. *See* Zen.

Instead of meditation, Pure Land stresses faith and devotion to the Buddha Amitabha, or Buddha of Infinite Light, as a means to rebirth in an eternal paradise known as the Pure Land. Rebirth in this Western Paradise is thought to depend on the power and grace of Amitabha, rather than to be a reward for human piety. Devotees show their devotion to Amitabha with countless repetitions of the phrase "Homage to the Buddha Amitabha." Nonetheless, a single sincere recitation of these words may be sufficient to guarantee entry into the Pure Land.

A distinctively Japanese sect of Mahayana is Nichiren Buddhism, which is named after its 13th-century founder. Nichiren believed that the Lotus Sutra contains the essence of Buddhist teaching. Its contents can be epitomized by the formula "Homage to the Lotus Sutra," and simply by repeating this formula the devotee may gain enlightenment.

V INSTITUTIONS AND PRACTICES

Differences occur in the religious obligations and observances both within and between the *sangha* and the laity.

A Monastic Life

From the first, the most devoted followers of the Buddha were organized into the monastic *sangha*. Its members were identified by their shaved heads and robes made of unsewn orange cloth. The early Buddhist monks, or *bhikkus*, wandered from place to place, settling down in communities only during the rainy season when travel was difficult. Each of the settled communities that developed later was independent and democratically organized. Monastic life was governed by the rules of the Vinaya Sutra, one of the three canonical collections of scripture. Fortnightly, a formal assembly of monks, the *uposatha*, was held in each community. Central to this observance was the formal recitation of the Vinaya rules and the public confession of all violations. The *sangha* included an order for nuns as well as for monks, a unique feature among Indian monastic orders. Theravadan monks and nuns were celibate and obtained their food in the form of alms on a daily round of the homes of lay devotees. The Zen school came to disregard the rule that members of the *sangha* should live on alms. Part of the discipline of this sect required its

members to work in the fields to earn their own food. In Japan the popular Shin school, a branch of Pure Land, allows its priests to marry and raise families. Among the traditional functions of the Buddhist monks are the performance of funerals and memorial services in honor of the dead. Major elements of such services include the chanting of scripture and transfer of merit for the benefit of the deceased.

B Lay Worship

Lay worship in Buddhism is primarily individual rather than congregational. Since earliest times a common expression of faith for laity and members of the *sangha* alike has been taking the Three Refuges, that is, reciting the formula “I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the dharma. I take refuge in the *sangha*.” Although technically the Buddha is not worshiped in Theravada, veneration is shown through the stupa cult. A stupa is a domelike sacred structure containing a relic. Devotees walk around the dome in a clockwise direction, carrying flowers and incense as a sign of reverence. The relic of the Buddha’s tooth in Kandy, Sri Lanka, is the focus of an especially popular festival on the Buddha’s birthday. The Buddha’s birthday is celebrated in every Buddhist country. In Theravada this celebration is known as Vaisakha, after the month in which the Buddha was born. Popular in Theravada lands is a ceremony known as *pirit*, or protection, in which readings from a collection of protective charms from the Pali canon are conducted to exorcise evil spirits, cure illness, bless new buildings, and achieve other benefits.

In Mahayana countries ritual is more important than in Theravada. Images of the buddhas and bodhisattvas on temple altars and in the homes of devotees serve as a focus for worship. Prayer and chanting are common acts of devotion, as are offerings of fruit, flowers, and incense. One of the most popular festivals in China and Japan is the Ullambana Festival, in which offerings are made to the spirits of the dead and to hungry ghosts. It is held that during this celebration the gates to the other world are open so that departed spirits can return to earth for a brief time.

CORE ESSENTIALS OF PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY

[sometimes labeled “classical mysticism” or “mystical religion”]
Outline prepared by Dr. Richard T. Nolan

Many philosophers, theologians, and clergy/religious leaders believe that all religions are to be understood within the context of some version of the “Perennial Philosophy,” that all religions are poetic expressions of the “Perennial Philosophy” and are therefore essentially identical. For a different viewpoint, see the subsites on biblical thought and the subsites containing the writings of Drs. Cherbonnier and Kirkpatrick.

References:

A. Huxley, “Introduction” in *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita* ; A. Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*; L. Loemker, “Perennial Philosophy” in the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*; N. Smart, “Perennial Philosophy” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*; H. Titus, M. Smith, and R. Nolan, “One Asian View of God” in *Living Issues In Philosophy* [9th ed.]; *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* is at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/DicHist/dict.html> .

See also <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/perennial/mysticisim.htm> ; and <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/perennial/contents.htm>

1. GOD OR ULTIMATE REALITY

- a. Ultimate Reality, which may be called “God,” is pure non-physical spirituality; God is supra-personal, Wholly Other, Oneness, Being or Non-Being, eternal, absolute, infinite, and transcendent. This concept of ultimate reality may be labeled *Brahman*, sometimes *Nirvana*, sometimes the *Tao*, sometimes the “God beyond God,” sometimes “The One,” sometimes “The Divine Ground.”
- b. All named Gods (whether *Brahma*, *Krishna*, *Allah*, *Yahweh*, the Holy Trinity, etc.) are equivalent symbolic “pointers” to Ultimate Reality.
- c. Some named Gods (e.g., gods of nature, gods of popular mythology) may be less sophisticated, personalized “pointers,” but pointers nonetheless.
- d. The belief that any personalized God [such as in “b” or “c” above] is ultimately real falls short of approaching an understanding of Ultimate Reality as It truly is.

2. THE UNIVERSE

- a. The Universe, the visible and the invisible (including time/history), is either:

- i. an illusion, appearing-to-be-reality [*maya*], or
 - ii. less real than ultimate reality, separate from It, or
 - iii. less real than ultimate reality, flowing from It, or
 - iv. a “fallen” reality, separated from true Ultimate Reality.
- b. The Universe is either neutral (neither good nor bad) or evil/sinful, to some extent.

3. HUMAN NATURE

- a. Persons consist of a perishable ego and body plus an eternal soul (or non-soul), which is of the same nature as the Divine Ground.
- b. The body/ego is either neutral or evil/sinful/shackled to some extent.
- c. One’s true reality is trapped, imprisoned within an alienated existence, separated from Oneness.
- d. Death is liberation for eventual reunion/union with God.
 - i. eternal unconsciousness, or
 - ii. eternal beatific vision

4. RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

- a. Human reflection and language are limited to the finite world, the Universe.
- b. Human beings can “know” the Divine Ground by direct unitive experience that transcends rationality.
- c. The “mystical experience” may be
 - i. suprarational absorption into or “touching” the Divine Ground [the “dreamless sleep”], or
 - ii. being in the presence of Ultimate Reality.
- d. “Descriptions” of the mystical experience may be expressed by
 - i. total silence [profound enlightenment], or
 - ii. poetic symbols in speech, art, & literature (scriptures), or
 - iii. “negative” language.

5. CONSEQUENCES FOR LIVING

- a. The purpose of life is the uniting of one’s true, eternal “self” (soul or non-soul) with the Divine Ground.
- b. Life may be regarded as inauthentic, a shadow, purposeless, and inconsequential.
- c. Some possible values:
 - passivity
 - detachment from material things
 - detachment from relationships with others
 - flow with *maya*
 - all experiences oriented toward the Divine Ground, which alone is real
 - isolation
 - beyond good and evil
 - Love the “soul” in everyone.
 - Be active as long as the Divine Ground is believed to be the only true Reality.
 - Accept what is.
 - It doesn’t matter.
 - Longing for the Infinite

CORE ESSENTIALS OF HEBRAIC/BIBLICAL/PROPHETIC/ABRAHAMIC RELIGION

(outline prepared by Richard T. Nolan)

For elaborations on these themes, see the subsites containing the writings of Drs. Cherbonnier and Kirkpatrick at www.philosophy-religion.org. When compared carefully with versions of “perennial philosophy,” the contrasts are evident.

1. GOD OR ULTIMATE REALITY

- a. God is "Someone" characterized by purposeful acts; God is a caring intelligence whose actions include creating, self-disclosing, and empowering.

- b. Though personal, God is not confined to mortal limitations.
- c. God, whose names include Yahweh and Allah, is the only God.
- d. In the Bible and Qur'an, God is involved in history, yet sovereign.
- e. Certain Greek-like philosophical reflections on God add a transcendent dimension; the biblical motif focuses upon God's acts, not "location."

2. THE UNIVERSE

- a. The universe, the visible and the invisible (including time/history) is real.
- b. The universe is created good.
- c. Certain Greek philosophical reflections on the Bible interpret the very fabric of the universe as having become inherently corrupted.

3. HUMAN NATURE

- a. Human nature, endowed with the capacity for intelligent, purposeful and caring acts, is fundamentally good.
- b. Certain Greek philosophical reflections view human nature as having become inherently sinful.
- c. Human beings, whether sinful inherently or by choice are in need of radical or realigning salvation.
- d. Human nature is social or corporate, not individualistic.
- e. Persons have been/are interpreted in various ways, including as
 - i. an animated, organic unity which dies (ancient biblical).
 - ii. a being with a body and a transfigurible ego.
 - iii. a resurrectable being.
 - iv. a body and an immortal soul. [under Greek philosophical influence]
- f. Life-after-death is interpreted in various ways, including as
 - i. not expected.
 - ii. not automatic; it must be deserved.
 - iii. automatic with possibilities of:
 - a. heaven, purgatory, hell.
 - b. continued growth toward greater communion with God.
 - iv. particular (individually when death occurs) and general (corporately at the end of the world).

4. RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

- a. Human beings can grow in their understanding of God's purposes for humanity by comprehending the meaning of the:
 - i. Hebrew Scriptures (Judaism).
 - ii. Old and New Testaments (Christianity)
 - iii. Qur'an (Islam)
- b. Continuing sources or religious knowledge vary [as revelation, not introspective enlightenment]

5. CONSEQUENCES FOR LIVING

- a. The purpose of life for humanity is covenant living as God's accountable guests, as "children of God." [understandings vary]

References: "Fundamental Considerations" by Vinjamuri E. Devadutt at <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/thought/baptist.htm>
<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/thought/contents.htm> ;

Recommended Web Links

Buddhist Studies

<http://www.ciolek.com/WWWVL-Buddhism.html>

Tibetan Buddhism

<http://www.tbrc.org/>

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University <http://www.pluralism.org/>