



# **The Buddha and the Barcode**

**Understanding Buddhism  
in the twenty-first century**

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## Introduction

The subject of this book - contemporary Buddhism - is one that I've lived with for the last fifteen years: as a meditator, as a member of my local Buddhist sangha, as an academic and as an activist. In writing this book, I've drawn on these experiences to produce a brief introduction for interested newcomers, one that will hopefully give them a greater understanding of what this strange new phenomenon is - religion, philosophy or therapy? - that they come across in the bookshop, the magazine interview or the posters in the health food shop.

In this book I am approaching Buddhism from the point of view of young, educated people who have no particular reason, spiritual or academic, to get excited about the big issues in Buddhist doctrine or the complexities of Buddhist history - things which are far more important for practitioners and scholars. Instead, this book tackles questions like: 'what is Buddhism anyway?', 'what is it doing over here?', 'how is it changing?', 'why do people go for Buddhism?', and 'what's all the media fuss about?'

The answers it gives tend to stress Buddhism as it is, more than as

it should be: as something that ordinary people across the world *do* in an attempt to resolve real challenges in their own lives. This means speaking not as a meditation teacher or a college lecturer but in the way one might answer the question if it came up during the coffee-break at work, on the train, at a family get-together or in the pub: by pointing to what ordinary people find in Buddhism, and what goes on for them. This is an enormous subject, on which Buddhist teachers and Buddhologists would have far more to say. If this little book encourages readers to explore further, or stimulates those with more knowledge to write more in this area, it will have justified its existence.

## Acknowledgements

This book was originally commissioned by Nicola Jeanes of South Street Press. Although South Street subsequently cancelled the series for which the book was originally written, sincere thanks are due to Ms Jeanes for the initial request and for shepherding it through from concept to manuscript in two months flat. Thanks are also due to the staff at Waterford IT's College Street library, for inter-library loans beyond the call of duty, and to Anna Mazzoldi and Wendy Cox for last minute help with computers.

In researching this work I relied heavily on the small academic community researching modern Buddhism, and on the larger community of Buddhists writing about their practice. It is not possible in a work of this kind to provide full academic and canonical referencing, but specialist readers will undoubtedly recognise the sources for many of the ideas in this text. Besides the works listed for further reading, special mention should be made of the excellent *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, the best single source for keeping up with the ever-changing study of Buddhism

<[www.buddhistethics.org](http://www.buddhistethics.org)>, and Martin Baumann's invaluable bibliography on western Buddhism, available through the UK Association of Buddhist Studies homepage <[www.sunderland.ac.uk/~os0dwe/bs10.html](http://www.sunderland.ac.uk/~os0dwe/bs10.html)>. On the Buddhist side, the quarterly *Dharma Life* (now sadly defunct) has been a wonderful resource for keeping in touch with developments in modern Buddhism.

In writing about this subject at all, I have felt at times rather like Tolkien's Bilbo, having the cheek to make up ditties about Eärendil in the house of Elrond. Thanks are all the more due to those friends and strangers who were willing to give the benefit of their experience and understanding by reading and commenting on this text in draft form: Jim Belither, Clodagh Burke, Anna Mazzoldi, Anne Mernagh, Vishvapani, Alex Wilding and Sue Wilding. Special thanks are due to Vishvapani and Stephen Batchelor for contacts. The generosity and insight with which so many busy people have responded are deeply humbling, and this book has benefitted immensely from their help. Any misunderstandings or misrepresentations are my own.

This book is dedicated to my parents.

# 1

## Basic Buddhism

What is 'Buddhism' anyway? One reasonable answer might be that it means whatever you like: the word gets used to describe everything from little books about how to relax to Tibetan sky burials, and from tacky brass statues to Chinese poetry. A better response might be that the word claims that what is being talked about relates to the Buddha, his teaching and his practical legacy - that these different things are all leaves of the same tree, however tangled some of the branches seem to be.

In the winds of the twenty-first century, the different boughs of this Buddhist tree find themselves blown into one another anyway: Japanese and Burmese schools compete for followers in London, religious studies courses in Toronto compare ideas whose living exponents never met, and books about travels in Tibet sit beside histories of American Buddhism in the Dublin bookshops.

The claim to tradition itself is double-edged: on the one hand the claim to be authentic means 'we haven't changed'; on the other hand, if our sense of the past alters, authenticity means changing

to reflect that. So basic Buddhism - what can be recovered of the life, teaching and organisational work of the historical Buddha - is a good place to start. Although it does not describe any branch perfectly, it comes close enough to most as a point from which to look out across the varied and often exotic terrain of Buddhism in the twenty-first century.

### **'There must be some kind of way out of here...'**

A *buddha*, in the ancient Indian languages Pali and Sanskrit, simply means someone who has woken up, who is no longer asleep. In the first decades of his life, the man who was to become the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, would probably have happily denied being in any way asleep.

Born the heir to a leading clan in what is now Nepal, on the fringes of the expanding Ganges civilisation in the fifth century BCE, the young Gautama would have savoured everything his culture valued: comfort verging on luxury by the standards of the day, the sex life of the gilded young, and many chances to stretch his mind and body learning the skills to take over from his father - hunting and fighting, politics and law, traditions and rituals.

This was by no means a sheltered life in the modern sense - Gautama could clearly handle both physical and mental challenges all his life - but it was, perhaps like the lives of the well-off young anywhere who have 'seen everything and done it all', a life marked by a confident serenity, a feeling of invulnerability perhaps, and a lack of real contact with the suffering happening in other people's lives.

And then, maybe quite suddenly, the walls began to crumble. Meeting (for the first time, according to legend) a sick man, an old man, and a corpse, he was hit by the realisation that *this was going to happen to him too*: that sickness, old age and death are all inevitable parts of life, and no amount of wealth and power

can ultimately change this. At the age of 29, Gautama suddenly started to re-evaluate everything in his life: luxury, love and career all started to seem very shallow.

Escaping secretly from his home, he left everything behind, cut off his hair and found some rags to wear, and vanished into the forest to join the small communities of beggars and seekers in pursuit of an answer, a 'way out', and an end to suffering.

According to tradition, Gautama gave himself with great dedication to the new life, starting by forcing himself to eat a begged meal that nearly made him sick, and proceeding to master one after another of the techniques for liberation then being practised. First, it seems, he developed great skill in meditation and achieved states of deep calm and mental purity - only to abandon the practice on seeing that this was not a final end to suffering, but only a temporary result of particular conditions. Then, giving himself over to asceticism, he ate and slept less and less, practising austerities such as restricted breathing, until he reached the brink of death.

Giving up even on this, Gautama - now said to be 35 - was left with nothing: none of his past life remained, his teachers had not had the answer, and his own self-denial had led nowhere. Begging some food to restore his health, he sat down alone under a tree by the banks of the river Nairanjara with the determination not to move until he had found the response he was seeking through his own unaided efforts.

Recalling a past moment of calm and happiness, he brought all aspects of his present experience to mind and examined the nature of each. In a series of visions through that night, he expanded his understanding to grasp intuitively first his own past, then the lives of others in all their fullness. Finally, as the morning star rose above the horizon, he realised the nature of existence and the cause of suffering, saw that by doing so he had reached an end to suffering, and understood the steps involved in doing so. Having sat down as Siddhartha Gautama, he now remained sitting as the

Buddha, finally awake to the way things are, and allowed this wakefulness to permeate his entire being.

Legend suggests that he considered that what he had understood would be too difficult for others to comprehend and follow, and toyed with the idea of remaining self-sufficient and alone. A compassionate impulse, though, prompted the reflection that some people had already done much of the work on themselves and would be able to understand what he had understood and achieve their own awakening, and so he resolved to teach.

For the next forty-five years the Buddha walked the roads of India, speaking with whoever he met - kings and prostitutes, merchants and serial killers, other wanderers and teachers. Some of these, naturally, were unimpressed and unconvinced; others, from all walks of life, were transformed by the encounter, dedicated themselves to the path he outlined, and in many cases achieved their own liberation, leaving poems which are among the earliest written voices of ordinary men and women anywhere.

Despite inspiring this community of seekers, the Buddha himself did not act as a conventional leader, but remained a wandering beggar, walking from place to place, teaching, debating and remaining silent as the occasion demanded. As he lived, so he died: an old man of 80, attended only by his cousin, walking slowly back towards the hill country of his birth, and dying of food poisoning in a small village in the middle of nowhere.

### **Bad habits, good habits and no habits**

A central element of the Buddha's visions on the night of his awakening was the *habitual* nature of so much of life - a routinisation of thoughts, words and deeds that amounts to a lack of awareness that can well be called sleep. These routines, big and small - how we deal with our relationships, what we eat, how we respond to our colleagues at work, our various addictions,

the repetitive commentaries that run through our minds, the sequences of emotions we 'do' - are all, from this point of view, compulsive attempts to achieve happiness and escape suffering.

They are compulsive because they miss the point: we repeat them time after time as though the situation - the way we are, the way people and things around us are - never changed, as though these habits always made us happy, and as though a life of habit could represent our ideal of ourselves. Instead, say Buddhists, suffering is always present in such a life. We encounter what we don't want and are separated from what we do want. When we get what we want we find it is impermanent: people die, situations change, life moves on. Even while we have what we wanted it is subtly unsatisfactory, doesn't quite live up to what we thought it would be.

This isn't a counsel of despair - along with suffering, there is also happiness, beauty and contact with others - but a recognition that habitual, 'sleepwalking' existence is based on a mistaken view of reality: on the emotional belief that things are (or can be made to be) permanent, that having all the right things (or people) and none of the wrong ones would be happiness, and that there is (or can be made to be) an idealised self, with the perfect habits, the perfect possessions and the perfect relationships. Stated like this, these ideas seem simply childish, but they are implied at every step by the sleepwalking approach to life, the idea that by running on autopilot we will sooner or later arrive.

The Buddhist alternative is twofold. Firstly, it involves a careful sorting-through of habits - physical, verbal and mental - to distinguish the destructive and painful ones from those which in our experience tend to diminish our suffering and add to our happiness. Secondly, it involves going beyond habits, even 'good' ones, through a thorough emotional and cognitive transformation which tackles the underlying structure of habit - craving for some things and people, hatred for others, and the illusionary idea of a solid self, in a universe which splits neatly into the desirable and the undesirable.

The first process can be described as ethical, if what we mean by that is applying conscious choice to our actions. The basic criterion is the intention behind the act, the word or the thought. If our behaviour is driven by the emotions of greed, dislike and confusion, according to Buddhist psychology, we will simply tend to become more and more greedy, filled with dislike, and confused - and hence less happy. If the motive forces are those of tranquillity, compassion and wisdom, we will tend to become that much happier. These latter orientations are particularly valued as a basis for meditation: a calm, warm and clear mind is a better foundation for meditation than the opposite.

Meditation, in the sense of the further development of such a mind, covers a wide variety of practices: already in the fifth century CE forty different methods were known, and different approaches were recommended for different personalities. Common to all such practices, as well as to comparable rituals such as prostrations or some kinds of chanting, is systematic practice - usually daily - engaging repeatedly with our changing emotional 'weather' and the basic resistance of a habitual mind to anything that threatens change; the development of awareness (perhaps of the breath, perhaps of physical posture or the sequences in a ritual); and the cultivation of emotional warmth (perhaps through exercises in friendly emotions, perhaps through devotions, or perhaps simply through the happiness that comes with fully engaging with an activity).

Ethics and 'practice' in this sense represent a changeover from 'bad habits' to 'good habits' - good or bad in terms of the specific qualities of mind (a calm awareness, an emotional strength) needed to leave aside such habits altogether and 'wake up'. The methods used to achieve this are extremely varied, from examining moment-to-moment experience to imagining oneself as a being free of all limitations, from the repeated attempt to understand illogical stories to the contemplation of our own impermanence and eventual death. The breakthrough may be seen as something

dramatic and transforming, or simply as a recognition of what is there all the time.

An awakened person is not a god any more than the Buddha was; nor are they necessarily omniscient or noticeably strange, although someone else who has travelled the same path might be expected to recognise the change in someone they knew well. Nor has such a person escaped all pain; they have simply succeeded in breaking the habits that caused them unnecessary suffering. But those who have achieved even some of this transformation clearly find it immensely meaningful, describing it as waking up, finding peace, or breaking free. Such people, expressing and embodying the possibility of awakening, from the Buddha to present-day teachers, continue to inspire new generations to follow this path.

### **The four noble truths**

One formulation of the Buddha's enlightenment consists of the 'four noble truths'. These are not statements of faith to be believed in, but active propositions which have to be engaged with to have any effect. The four truths follow the pattern of a diagnosis in ancient Indian medicine:

1. The symptom: *suffering or unsatisfactoriness*. Conditioned existence can never be fully satisfying - we suffer physical and emotional pain, we are joined to what we do not want and separated from what we want, and even when we have it it is impermanent. To cure the disease, we have to comprehend this truth emotionally as well as intellectually - otherwise we will not bother to make any effort.
2. The underlying cause: *craving*. We try to make ourselves happy by acquiring physical, emotional and intellectual goods - and by separating ourselves from what we do not like. In this pursuit, we develop craving (and aversion) - attachments and preferences that will inevitably fall foul of our own lack of control over the situation, the fact of change, and



the ultimate unsatisfactoriness of whatever we are seeking to gain. To overcome the sickness, this craving has to be abandoned.

3. The possibility of a cure: the *ending of suffering* through the undoing of attachment. As we let go of craving and aversion, we achieve a state of release. Directly experiencing this release is the cure; the belief that it is possible is not in itself a solution.

4. The treatment needed to achieve this healthy state: *the noble eightfold path* of perfect vision, perfect aspiration, perfect speech, perfect action, perfect livelihood, perfect effort, perfect mindfulness and perfect meditation. Through practising this path, we can transform ourselves in all our aspects until craving - and hence suffering - is finally abandoned. This eightfold path is to be developed, as a cure is to be followed through.

## Communities of transformation

Until European colonisation reached its high-water mark in the nineteenth century, Buddhism had the strongest claim to be a world religion, with perhaps 40% of the world's then population living in countries where Buddhism was or had been strong: India and China, Korea and Japan, Indonesia and Malaysia, the populous countries of southeast Asia, the kingdoms of the Great Silk Road stretching from Samarkand and Afghanistan through Turkestan to the tribal lands of northwest China, not forgetting the far-flung territories of Tibetan Buddhism: on the high plateau, in the valleys of Ladakh, across the Mongolian steppes and among the nomadic Buryats and Kalmyks of Siberia.

Even before we turn to its recent blossoming in Europe and America, then, it is clear that Buddhist communities have found a home in an enormous variety of cultures. Although it is not true that Buddhists never go to war, this remarkable missionary enterprise was carried out by small groups of travellers, not by

armies, gunboats and colonial administrations. Buddhism is a very flexible, resilient and fertile plant; and its human institutions are worth attention in their own right. One of them, the community of monks and nuns, is perhaps the oldest surviving formal institution in the world (along with the related Jaina community), following rules laid down some two and a half millennia ago.

Across this enormous expanse of time and space, Buddhism takes three inter-related forms, which combine in different ways in different cultures and epochs. The first, and the most familiar to Western eyes, is the lay community, those who are committed to the Buddhist path, but within ordinary lives, jobs and families. In the long Asian middle ages, it was common for the laity, particularly peasants, to have much the same subordinate relationship to the monastic community as Western peasants had to the Christian clergy. The peasants gave donations intended to benefit the giver in various ways; the specialists controlled magical power and were a source of symbolic order.

In the Buddha's own time, however, lay followers are recorded as devoting themselves to spiritual practice and achieving their own awakenings; and this theme has again become common by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Much of the meditation teaching now common in the West, with its characteristic structure of classes, meetings and periodic retreats, seems to derive from this revival of lay practice in Asia, associated with a more general resurgence of Buddhism as an element of anti-colonial and nationalist movements, community development, non-violence and more recently ecological and feminist activism.

Secondly, the different communities of monks and nuns devote their lives to Buddhism. They take stringent vows, usually but not always including celibacy, and live in formal communities. Ordination is usually straightforward: a taking of vows and a leaving behind of 'the world', which may or may not be for life. Beyond the very basics of doctrine and ritual, study may or may not be an important part of their lives. In most countries serious

meditators - let alone those who are believed to be enlightened - are very much in the minority. Their most common role has been to fulfil the needs of the lay community in various ways; as the latter have changed in recent times, so too do the former, with new roles in education and community leadership.

The dedicated practitioner, thirdly, is symbolised by the meditating hermit, but extends to the broader networks of practitioners within which serious practice tends to arise. They may be lay or monastic, or may take non-monastic vows. They may live and work in a busy city or retire to the hills or the jungle. Such networks, of necessity, are less formal than the monastic and lay communities (often existing within these structures), and also less stable, being typically held together by personal links and oral teaching traditions.

These dedicated practitioners, of course, create much of the life of other communities. As an ideal, they represent what both laity and monastics aspire to - sometimes in this life, sometimes in some other. Practitioners make meditation teaching available and are a frequent source of innovation, from Tantric cults to modern teaching styles. At the same time, the monastic structures preserve the doctrines which underpin the practice and provide a stable context for meditation; while the laity not only provide the next generation of practitioners but also the food and shelter even the humblest hermit needs.

These three orientations between them - lay, monastic and practitioner - combining and recombining in different ways in ancient India, ninth-century China or modern Europe, enable the continuation of Buddhism: not simply commitment and membership, but crucially the continued availability of the possibility to follow the Buddhist path and 'wake up'. Tradition sees even these long-lasting institutions as impermanent, and predicts their decline and eventual extinction, as the possibility of finding awakening through these institutions slowly dries up. At that point, there will be a lengthy period in which only a few

heroic individuals find their own awakening in isolation, until the next Buddha, the next person both to wake up and to leave a teaching and communities that will enable others to find a way to awaken.

# 2

## Buddhism as a best-seller

The little village of Allihies, at the far end of the Beara peninsula in southwest Ireland, might seem an unlikely place to support a large Tibetan religious centre. Survivals of folk Catholicism - holy wells and saints' days - would seem more likely than mantras and initiations.

What makes the centre possible, of course, is modernity: the disconnection and reorganisation of time and space (through the instrumental rationality of modern institutions) that brought the People's Liberation Army into wheel-less Tibet, turned reincarnate lamas into media stars, brought new constellations of Buddhist organisations into being across the west. And it is modernity that shuttles harassed Londoners to and from the centre near Allihies - where Celtic legend says the first monstrous inhabitants of Ireland landed - to practise the timeless wisdom of the mystic east (after first switching off their mobile phones).

A central tenet of Buddhism is conditionality - 'this being, that becomes; this not being, that does not become' in the traditional

formulation, or more generally the teaching that everything is dependent on conditions. This underpins ethical and meditative strategies (setting up good conditions for awakening), but applies equally to Buddhism itself: the truth may be timeless, but the condition of actually coming into contact with it and being able to practise is regarded as extremely fortunate, not to be treated lightly.

The conditions which made Buddhism attractive to the west, the institutions which make it available and the ways in which it flavours the wider culture say as much about the west as about Buddhism: what we hear depends on the kinds of questions we ask.

## Why Buddhism?

Anyone who walks around the British Museum, the Musée de l'Homme or any other major imperial museum can hardly fail to be struck by the extent to which European colonialism was a collector's fantasy: ancient texts, religious statues, photographs of rituals, pieces of temples were gathered by the bucket-load and the boat-load, brought home and displayed. Yet of all these plundered cultures, Buddhism is one of the few that bit back. Europe has Aztec codices but no priests, Aboriginal paintings but no totem groups; but along with Sri Lankan manuscripts and Japanese calligraphy, it also has Buddhists, perhaps as many as a million in western Europe alone. Why?

One major reason for the difference lies in the nature of the encounter. For all its violence, the Asian experience of European colonialism was not as genocidal as that of Native Americans or Australians. The slave trade did not transform the face of Asia as it did Africa and the Americas.

Perhaps most importantly, colonial rule was relatively short and incomplete (Tibet, Thailand and Japan, all Buddhist countries, largely escaped) and redrew fewer boundaries than

elsewhere. Indirect rule was often preferred, as in India or China, allowing more of the local institutional framework to survive (and maintaining power without large-scale settlement) and incidentally pressuring Europeans to try to 'understand the East'. The foundations of modern linguistics, for example, lie in the attempts of a British judge to understand Indian legal systems and hence to learn Sanskrit.

With the exception of small-scale, 'primitive' cultures, eastern cultures from North Africa to Japan were the only non-European voices to survive as something that nineteenth-century Europeans could recognise and respect, meaning that they had written history, theology, literature, logic - and states, clergy, schools and libraries.

Nationalist and anti-colonial movements in Asia could revive 'the national culture' without much difficulty as something rivalling European cultures on their own terms (increasingly assimilated by the local middle class) and unarguably authentic, non-western. When, as with Buddhism, those cultures could also be presented as thoroughly modern because rational and scientific (not requiring belief in gods, transubstantiation or virgin birth), the chance was too good to miss.

Europeans, of course, had their own agenda. As Renaissance, Enlightenment and revolution broke up the certainties of a traditional way of life and threw ordinary people into a rapidly-changing modernity where 'all that is solid melts into air', the question 'how should we live?' became as vivid and immediate as it had been for Gautama - or Socrates.

Although Buddhism is in some senses a simple answer, though, it is not the same simplicity as that which nineteenth-century Europeans started from, and it is hardly surprising that, looking at the vast literature of Buddhism (the smallest Buddhist canon is many times the size of the Bible), the answers they found at first tended to be the ones they were looking for.

One such answer was a rationalist religion, one that did not

demand great leaps of faith or implausible beliefs, but consisted of a simple morality, a simple practice and a simple goal. Very often, the Theravada Buddhism of southeast Asia, with its claim to be the true, original Buddhism, was cast in this role.

Another kind of answer was romantic and irrational, a sudden stepping out of all cultural conditioning and logical thought into a direct encounter with our real nature or the unity of everything. East Asian Zen, with its stress on meditation and enlightenment, was often more than willing to play this particular part.

Lastly, Buddhism could offer the esoteric wisdom of the ancients, revealed only to initiates and offering supernatural power as well as a quick route to the heart of Reality. Here, Central Asian teachers of Tantric Buddhism, with its rituals and initiations, were only too happy to oblige.

Although Buddhism seemed like 'the other', then, it was often an other in the image of the west. It is only with practice and study on the part of westerners, and a more careful ear for possible misunderstandings on the part of eastern Buddhists, that this trap is increasingly avoided and Buddhism in the west can mean a change of heart, not just a change of clothes.

Buddhism, for its part, *did* have several advantages over its Asian competitors in attracting westerners, most notably its portability. Since its inception, a 'great tradition' (the philosophy, the techniques of practice, the rules of the order - and their institutional frameworks of lineages of transmission, sacred languages and histories of ideas) has always coexisted with the 'little traditions' of ritual and magic, folk belief and family structure found locally. Chinese pilgrims, for example, were visiting monasteries in India thousands of miles away - and translating the texts they brought back - centuries before Marco Polo (the *Monkey* story is based on one such pilgrim). Buddhism, in other words, was already international and mobile. Although in settled conditions it rapidly acquired an elaborate ideological and institutional superstructure, its viability did not depend, as did that of mono-ethnic religions,

on the presence of a particular cultural backdrop. A handful of rules, a handful of texts and a handful of meditators was all that was needed; in China and Japan, whole schools were founded around the isolated texts that made the long journey from India. Lastly, Buddhism describes itself as *ehipassiko* - 'come and see'. From the Buddha's own example on, Buddhists have been used to the idea that people might be attracted by the morality but not meditate, or meditate for better mental states but not seek enlightenment. It is rarely an 'all-or-nothing' package, and Buddhists are normally confident that results will speak for themselves.

### **The branches of the Buddhist tradition**

***The Theravada*** (teaching of the Elders) is the form of Buddhism that predominates in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. It stresses in particular the importance of letting go of attachment to the things of this world. The Theravada's *Pali canon* probably comes closest to the teachings of the historical Buddha.

***The Mahayana*** (great vehicle) is the form of Buddhism that predominates in China, Korea and Japan. It stresses in particular the importance of making the possibility of awakening as widely available as possible, and of seeking enlightenment for the benefit of others. The canonical Mahayana *sutras* are very extensive and often philosophically challenging. There are many different schools within the Mahayana, including:

***The Zen schools***, famous for their emphasis on single-minded meditation practice as well as for their sparse aesthetics.

***The Pure Land traditions***, which stress faith in the power of Amitabha Buddha to help achieve a better rebirth in the Pure Lands, from where enlightenment is easier to gain.

***The Nichiren school***, which holds that it is sufficient to chant the title

of the Mahayana Lotus Sutra, as a summation of ultimate truth.

**The Vajrayana** (thunderbolt vehicle) is the form of Buddhism that predominates in Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal and Ladakh. It makes much use of ritual and magic as tools to aid the practitioner, drawing in particular on the esoteric texts known as *tantras* (hence Tantric). The Vajrayana also preserves an in-depth system of canonical commentary and philosophical analysis from mediaeval Indian Buddhism.

Lastly, **syncretistic forms of Buddhism**, whether the product of Asian innovators or Western teachers, combine elements of traditionally separate schools - or Buddhist and non-Buddhist ideas - to produce new syntheses.

All of these forms of Buddhism are now widely present across the world, both in relatively orthodox and / or traditionalist forms and in more innovative and / or modernist ones.

## Building Buddhism in the west

As Buddhism is communicated from one culture to another, it is spoken in one language and heard in another. For the last few years, my local Buddhist centre in Dublin has hosted an ethnic ritual dear to the hearts of those who have brought Buddhism to us from the mysterious east - a Robbie Burns night, complete with vegetarian haggis and Buddhist reflections on the Immortal Memory. Religion is also this: Scottish Buddhists in Dublin bedsits, dual-nationality céilís, and institutions to suit.

The Dharma (teaching), as Buddhists call it, is necessarily transported and transmitted by real people, with their own history, purposes and agendas. Three kinds of people have been particularly important in bringing the Dharma west over the last hundred years or so.

Firstly, immigrants and refugees: Chinese labourers building the California railways, Vietnamese boat people settled in France,

Siberians migrated to work in St Petersburg and Tibetans fleeing Chinese domination have all brought their religion with them and built monasteries or temples as a secure and recognisable community institution. Although little noticed by the media, in most western countries 'ethnic Buddhists' far outnumber new converts.

Secondly, missionaries: often intensely brave individuals facing loneliness, poverty, ridicule and racism in societies where respect for actual Buddhists - as opposed to interest in the idea - has been slow to grow. Most were creative and even outsiders at home, willing to push boundaries to find out what would work in the west; for westerners unused to Asian institutions, though, the effect often remained alien and seemingly rigid.

Thirdly, western seekers, in pursuit of everything mentioned in the previous section: often willing, like the Buddha, to abandon their own careers in pursuit of a difficult and challenging goal, but equally often returning as teachers themselves, or organisers for teachers, or translators and academics; contributing centrally, as practical mediators, to the first institutional forms of Buddhism in the west.

The language of this new Buddhism varies wildly, from a neo-orthodoxy which borders on the incomprehensible to a soothing self-help-speak which is no longer particularly Buddhist. This surface diversity, though, hides a range of themes which are much more widely shared in practical organisation and everyday Buddhism.

Perhaps the most obvious one is the centrality of practice, particularly meditation, but also chanting, prostration, voluntary work and yoga. By comparison, traditional Buddhism focuses more on giving and ethics, with meditation being the preserve of the enthusiastic and revival movements. Few westerners, perhaps, 'see the point' of being Buddhists *unless* they are doing something not already assumed by their liberal, socialist or Christian upbringing. At the same time, this 'addiction to practice', as critics have

described it, does not translate into monastic seclusion as much as the history of Buddhism would suggest. Most new Buddhists are insistent on the relevance of their practice to everyday life, and often add layers of concern - for ecological responsibility, for interpersonal communication, or for personal 'issues' - which were often underplayed in traditional Buddhist institutions.

This 'everyday Buddhism' is also extremely open in most cases. In the 60s and 70s, the situation was particularly fluid, but even now western Buddhism is less prone to set preconditions than traditional religion, west or east. The most obvious indicator of this is that many committed practitioners do not think of themselves as Buddhists; 'conversion' is more likely to be a later result of practice, rather than the initial impetus for seeking out Buddhists.

Consistent with this kind of Buddhism are the structures that have survived and worked. Rarely in the west are monks and nuns as plentiful as in the east, so that the senior 'laity' - where such a distinction exists at all - routinely play an important role in teaching, decision-making and organisation, with many centres surviving without any permanently resident nuns or monks.

The major institutions, then, are not monasteries or temples, but new kinds of institution suitable for this not-quite-lay, not-quite-monastic kind of practitioner. The Dharma centre - running courses, selling books, holding public events and inviting visiting teachers - tends to act as the pole more open to the interested public, with retreats in the countryside, often in dedicated buildings, as an intensification of this but one which often finds relative newcomers alongside old hands. Groups of meditators meeting in each other's houses - of which there are many in Ireland - and formal monasteries form the extremes, though even here the boundaries are more blurred, and the lifetime ordination (common in some Asian countries) finds less all-or-nothing forms. The organisations holding all of this together, finally, are not for the most part the great lineages and orders of traditional Buddhism.

Though virtually all traditional organisations are present in the west, the distance from 'home' leaves far more independence than might be openly admitted to.

The three biggest Buddhist organisations in Britain, for example, are all 'new religious movements' of different kinds. Soka Gakkai International - UK is the British branch of a large new lay Buddhist movement from Japan that has now split publicly from the traditional priesthood. The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order are a new foundation dating back to 1967 and combining elements of different Buddhist traditions. And the New Kadampa Tradition is a newly-founded Tibetan Buddhist organisation based in Britain.

Such organisations 'work' because they have pioneered structures that enable them to make Buddhism more widely available without seeming alien or posing drastic demands on ordinary participants. The American Insight Meditation tradition has gone one step further by making a recognisably Buddhist-derived style of practice and thinking available in an officially non-Buddhist institution - and without even scattering centres of its own across the landscape. Although it has affiliates, including a couple in Britain, it has no 'church' of any kind, and exists in the form of best-selling (and highly regarded) books on meditation along with a large programme of retreats.

### **The first Buddhist meeting – what to expect**

What can a new person expect, as an interested outsider going to their first Buddhist meeting? The easiest answer is to have as few expectations as possible. This isn't because Buddhist groups set out to shock, but because Buddhist groups vary so much on the superficial level of first impressions.

Most Buddhist groups will have events which are designed for the

general public, and hence as non-threatening as possible. A typical meeting might simply consist of a talk with questions and answers, or might include some form of introductory practice - usually meditation, chanting or ritual. If the latter, don't worry about knowing what to do - you will be told, and with beginners nobody is keeping score!

On a practical level, it may be useful to wear relatively loose clothes if meditation or ritual (which can involve sitting or moving in unusual ways) are part of the programme, though people do manage to do both in all kinds of clothing. While a small fee is often charged, most Buddhists will facilitate people who can't afford full rates. Any public group is used to receiving newcomers, and there is very little judgementalism.

The best way to get something out of the event is usually simply to engage with whatever is going on - trying to follow the discussion, 'staying with the breath', or giving yourself to the chanting: without this engagement, it is hard to get any sense of what the practice might be like. Buddhists do not normally take such participation as implying any sort of commitment.

It is worth taking the time after the event to reflect on your own reactions to the event and the group. A certain level of challenge to your assumptions and habits is normal, and is after all implied by the possibility that you might stand to learn something from participation! At the same time, it is rarely wise to force yourself into association with people who make you seriously uncomfortable. Most Buddhists are genuinely friendly and mindful people; while individuals may not meet this description, if a whole group fails to do so, something is wrong somewhere.

Lastly, if one group does not seem particularly attractive (or perhaps especially if it does!), take the time to explore other possibilities nearby. While commitment to a particular path is a necessary part of long-term spiritual development, it is helpful at the start to get a sense of the different ways one can approach Buddhism and to avoid becoming overly sectarian.

## Inside the Buddha boom

This 'virtual Buddhism' is perhaps one of the most creative - from a Buddhist point of view - attempts at building a new boat for the confusing and chaotic waters of western popular culture. At the opposite extreme, some western Buddhists ironically suggest that, given what appears to sell books on the subject, the ideal title would be 'Tantric sex secrets of Zen yoga magic'... .

Certainly the more-or-less-hard core of committed practitioners and Buddhist organisations exists in a soup of free-floating fragments of Buddhism that colour much of western culture. Although there are specialist readerships, for example, a high proportion of the books on sale are general introductions, in some cases reprints of thirty- and forty-year old popularisations. Books *by* Buddhists on general themes crop up in the 'Mind, body, spirit' sections and are very widely read: I have had the Dalai Lama's books recommended both by my grandmother and by an electronic musician involved in eco-protests.

Symbols similarly float freely; the lotus, the sitting Buddha or the eyes from Nepalese stupas can be found on purses and collections of computer icons. Pali manuscripts, ritual thunderbolts and monks' robes are all available on the market - not to mention Tibetan paintings.

Ideas are even more plastic than this. 'Enlightenment', for example, has often drifted completely loose from its Buddhist context to mean any kind of transforming religious experience. Karma, already understood differently by Hindus, Jainas, Theravadins and Tibetans, now has a life of its own in western smalltalk. Zen, most dramatically, has come to mean everything - and nothing - to the point that Terry Pratchett characters crack jokes about it.

Along with the obvious publishing, fashion and music industries a key institution is the range of shops that runs from the serious 'head shop', post-1967 model, to the slightly alternative 'lifestyle' shop, selling T-shirts and teabags, Nepalese calendars and Thai charms, singing-bowls and incense holders.



Although sometimes despised by 'serious Buddhists', many of these shops deserve respect as institutions of an alternative culture which does not treat these fragments simply as commodities, but sees an affinity between them and its own values. In some cases these are fair-trade shops or Buddhist co-ops; in other cases they may act as an unofficial communications centre with alternative magazines beside the crystals display and posters for forthcoming events on the door. For many westerners, these alternative ways in have been the gateway to a deeper interest and commitment.

Beyond this again, Buddhist fragments circulate as elements of new lifestyles in the post-Sixties west. This is most obvious - and apparently most acceptable - in the form of an emphasis on calm, quietness and meditation as antidotes to - or R&R for - the hassle and stress of everyday urban life in the West.

One step beyond this is a move towards simplicity of needs and downshifting - EF Schumacher's *Small is beautiful* described this as 'Buddhist economics'. Here the techniques of meditation - or simple solitude - in effect make more out of less, in an in-the-world-but-not-of-it stance similar to the practitioners we have discussed earlier.

Perhaps more demanding, and more associated with oppositional movements like feminism and radical ecology, is a lifestyle geared towards a self-transformation which does not find its limits in accepting the primacy of work and family, but develops the classically Buddhist theme of 'letting go' gently of whatever blocks real human development.

Even if there were no practising Buddhists in the strong sense, the effects of this 'folk Buddhism' in encouraging ordinary people to question taken-for-granted assumptions and in providing the emotional and psychological tools to do so might justify the effort of bringing Buddhism to the west for many Buddhists. As the Buddha put it, whatever contributes to calm, decrease of wants and solitude can be reckoned part of the Dharma.

# 3

## Twenty-first century religion?

### Religion in the age of the mobile phone

A common perception of religion, particularly in a largely dechristianised country such as Britain, is that religion becomes less and less important as societies develop: to paraphrase Marx, the horse-drawn plough gives you cathedrals, the mobile phone gives you agnostics. An alternative view - pointing to the rise of fundamentalism, new religious movements and the New Age - is to say that there is a 'God-shaped hole' in everyone, no matter how we fill it.

Buddhists, who do not worship a God, are unlikely to be convinced by either position; and yet anyone familiar with the differences between everyday religion in the middle ages and the modern world can hardly fail to notice that as society changes, so too does religion: if not the mobile phone itself, then the way of life it symbolises does make a difference to what people think and do, also in religious matters.

Modernity, it could be said, is permanently upsetting: it shakes us up, brings new and faster pressures, never lets us settle down - like a mobile phone, perhaps. People can use religion to handle this experience in several ways. One kind of response, which can be called fundamentalist, is essentially defensive: never to give our number out, to retreat into the confines of a smaller, more stable, more manageable world and defend its boundaries with rigid rules for ourselves and others, backed up with a ban on discussion of the sacred texts that protect this private haven.

Another, modernist, response is basically affirmative: we never switch the phone off, plunge into the heart of a busy life, never batting an eyelid and always smiling in every encounter. For this we will need a religion for the High Street, without too many rough edges and sharp corners: but the danger is that this either becomes superfluous (because indistinguishable from anything else) or of having one story in the supermarket and quite another one in church.

A third possibility is a response which is critical towards religion itself, dropping what is non-essential but being clear about what really matters, but also critical towards the world: asking what is really valuable in human life, supporting and developing whatever furthers that and challenging whatever crushes, trivialises or commodifies it. Such religion can give us the strength and the openness not to react either with hatred or conformity, but as whole human beings.

This very wholeness, however, becomes difficult to achieve: the communities of ideas, practice and ritual (local, kin-based, work-related, religious) within which people have affirmed one another as whole human beings and found their own place to stand can no longer be taken for granted, as something we are born into and which surrounds us until death. Instead, we have to create or find our own communities within a complex and bewildering world of subcultures, mass media, traditionalism and cyberspace.

Similarly, individual emotional stability and meaning-giving

experiences, once sought for along well-known paths and in familiar contexts, now have to be found for ourselves in a world that constantly rearranges the signs and redevelops the city.

The net result is double: on the one hand a sea of religions and cultures, history and choice, local experience and distant images; on the other an archipelago of unstable islands - coral reefs, volcanoes and sandbanks - needing constant repair work by the inhabitants. The long-term islanders are not alone, though: more and more people take to the waters, perhaps in search of the perfect island, perhaps as permanent tourists, visiting one place after another without ever really leaving home, or perhaps taking to the ocean life itself, living on rafts and drifting with the current.

We don't have to think of this situation as either good or bad - to hope for new landmasses to rise or cheer on the raft-dwellers - to see that both options may have something to offer. The goods traded by the islanders - security, calm, coherence, a stable place to stand - are things the travellers want, but without having to settle for ever to find them. The travellers, for their part, can bring stories, ideas and people that keep the islanders from sinking into provinciality, challenge them to change their ways, and bring them into the flow of creative interaction with the rest of the world.

### **Can Buddhism bridge the gap?**

One way of answering this question is with another: is Buddhism a religion at all? It depends, of course, what you mean by religion. The west has had a peculiar history in this respect: while philosophy for the Greeks and Romans was the art of learning to live wisely - encompassing ethics and meditation along with the more familiar theories designed to help generate the love of wisdom - Christianity brought about a new kind of division, placing practical ethics and emotional work within a devotional

frame and reducing 'mere human thought' to a dry and technical footnote to the mysteries of faith.

To think, as Buddhists do, of ethical behaviour not in terms of following arbitrary rules for fear of punishment but as the insight that 'in taking care of others, we take care of ourselves; in taking care of ourselves we take care of others', cuts right across this division.

Similarly, meditation as a form of self-development which does not require belief in a divine being but simply the developing confidence that we can change how we feel brings us back to the question 'is this religion, therapy or philosophy?'

The ultimate answer, from a Buddhist perspective in which there is no neat equivalent for 'religion' in the western sense, has to be that none of these has a real essence of its own: they are historical constructs, and different ways of combining and separating them can work more or less well in different places and times.

If Buddhism is not the only possible construction, even in its own terms - enlightenment, as a possibility inherent in being human, can be discovered separately from any teaching or institution, and Buddhists have never claimed a monopoly on ordinary positive mental states or ethical living - it is nevertheless quite a strong combination under the conditions sketched earlier in this chapter.

On the one hand, it holds out the possibility of finding a practical coherence to life, a systematic approach to working on ourselves, and a clear goal; and of being able to do all this in independence or as part of small networks and intentional communities. The religion of wandering beggars does not depend on an enormous infrastructure or a stable environment: the smallest of islands will do!

On the other hand, Buddhism is 'at home' - like the wanderer - in the sea of change. A traditional practice for generating insight into the nature of reality is to let go gently of our tendency to see things as permanent, desirable and solid - to search for any

kind of perfect world - by reflecting on the characteristics of conditioned existence.

All our ordinary experience, in the Buddhist view, is the product of conditions. As those conditions change, so too will our experience, whether we like it or not. Seeking our happiness from having those bits of experience we like and avoiding those we dislike is thus ultimately self-defeating, a constant struggle to be comfortable which at best has us forever fidgeting in the attempt to find the ideal place to be, and at worst has us adding to our painful conditions the despair at things not being the way we'd like. In the most powerful reflection of Buddhist thought, all our experience is ultimately 'empty' - there is no solid and stable 'it' within us or outside us, only the play of light and shadows, joy and pain.

The final image, then, is of a person sitting quietly in the middle of change, open to their experience but not caught up in it, at home wherever they are in an interconnected universe.

### **Buddhist practices:**

Buddhism is a path of transformation, and as such involves a whole range of practices designed to aid in this process (which are, paradoxically, practised equally assiduously by those schools that hold that we are already enlightened and need to do nothing more). Some of the more important of these are:

**generosity:** the giving of gifts, including time, energy, money or teaching. In most traditional Buddhist societies this is held to be the starting-point of practice.

**ethics:** working on developing habits that lead to more creative states of mind and abandoning those which lead to more 'stuck' ones. Many Buddhists will take 'precepts' or resolutions of various kinds designed to help them with this.

**everyday action:** whether the everyday consists of an ordinary 9 to 5 job, involvement in an activist project or the routine of an intensive retreat, Buddhists seek to practise a mindful engagement with the task to hand and a compassionate relationship to the other beings they encounter.

**chanting:** most Buddhist schools use some form of chanting or recitation, though the purpose may range from a simple blessing through a recitation of canonical texts to invoking a particular Buddha or Bodhisattva. In some schools chanting is a central spiritual practice.

**meditation:** meditation is a key practice in most schools of Buddhism. The systematic traditions of cultivating the mind developed within particular traditions vary enormously, from developing a feeling of loving-kindness for all beings through the mindful observation of mental events to imaginatively identifying oneself with a particular Buddha or Bodhisattva.

**ritual:** all forms of Buddhism involve some form of ritual. This may be as private as the ritual of meditation itself, or as public as a communal act of devotion. Common to Buddhist intentions for ritual are a constant mindfulness of the activity engaged in and a heartfelt emotional engagement.

**Dharma study:** the study of Buddhist texts, whether alone, with a group or with a teacher. Traditionally wisdom is said to develop through three stages: a thorough knowledge of the texts, a critical reflection on their resonance in one's own life and experience, and a meditative assimilation of their full import.

**spiritual friendship:** association with other practitioners is a central part of most Buddhists' practice. One's own practice of transformation is supported and prodded - sometimes very sharply - by being around other people engaged in the same activity.

## Who are the new Buddhists?

As with any other whole way of life - religions, cultures or political movements - there is an obvious difference among Buddhists between those who have been brought up in it and those who have chosen or converted to it. While at present the former are mostly from Asian backgrounds and the latter from the West, this is changing as once-Buddhist countries become secular, so that Buddhist is no longer an automatic choice; as western converts pass their religion on to their children - though many choose not to - and as new Asian-European hybrid cultures grow up among immigrants in both directions.

The convert is perhaps a less ordinary person, and usually more committed and enthusiastic. Converts have to work hard to internalise what those born to the life take for granted, and may take a long time to come to a stable existence within the new culture. At the same time, if isolated from the main body of the culture or surrounded by other converts, they can easily perpetuate basic misunderstandings as they try to interpret the new world through the categories of the old one. For Buddhists, this may mean a search (conscious or unconscious) for God or spirit, therapy or quasi-scientific explanation.

Those who have grown up in the culture, by contrast, can speak the language without difficulty, giving them often a greater flexibility in using different registers for different contexts and an ability to live the culture on a variety of levels. Emotional patterns which the newcomer may have to struggle to understand can be thoroughly familiar. Yet much more than converts, they will vary: between those for whom it is just a set of family habits and those whose life revolves around it, or between those who have the literature at their fingertips and those who have abandoned most aspects except for a few feeling-laden rituals and ideas.

To draw these distinctions is not to say that one is better than the other, most importantly because their purposes in practising the culture are not necessarily the same. As *Buddhists*, though, there is

shared agreement on certain goals, and from this perspective what is important is simply that people be aware of the 'baggage' they bring to their practice of the religion, and that they sort through which of that baggage is helpful - conducive to skilful ethical behaviour, good meditation practice and ultimately to insight and enlightenment - and which is unhelpful. Over the last hundred years, both born Buddhists and converts have engaged in this kind of self-criticism with some regularity, in reform movements, following institutional crises, or as they change their personal orientations.

How this works depends crucially on where people start from. For some converts, Buddhism is less a whole new religion than a name, a set of tools for and a way of putting shape on changes they have already been making in the rest of their lives. This is particularly so in the west for participants in the new countercultures of the late twentieth century, from the Beat poets to feminists and from ageing hippies to ravers.

Yet for many more converts Buddhism is a dramatic change of orientation, or a way of making the changes they have been wanting but unable to make: a way of calming their lifestyle, opening out to others, a means of personal development or a worthwhile goal in life. In Buddhist centres one meets art students and working-class karate fans, housewives and crusties, care workers and activists. When a specific centre seems more homogenous in its participants, another centre in the same town can have a totally different profile, determined less by the nature of the religion than by the house style of the centre.

The baggage converts bring to Buddhism includes all the usual ugliness of mainstream society, most notably sharp ethnic divisions (links between converts and born Buddhists are thin on the ground) but also patriarchal ways of working (though women make up a majority of Buddhists, the leadership is normally male) and class relations (particularly in the kinds of behaviour and activities which are most valued). Buddhism, on these counts, is little better than the society it inhabits.

At the same time, feminists in particular have been working to change Buddhism, as have other 'engaged Buddhists' with backgrounds in socialism or anti-racist work. The sociological cliché of Buddhism as the religion of choice for the white professional classes is just that - a cliché reflecting a particular way of doing things in high-profile forms of Buddhism - but a less authoritarian, a more lively or a more emotional style of Buddhism can attract quite a different audience.

Beyond these internal conflicts, the most important point is that (in common with new religious movements) the proportion of interested seekers far outweighs that of committed converts, and probably rivals that of those born to Buddhism. In any year, a big centre might teach thousands of people (leaving aside those who teach themselves from books and tapes without coming near a centre); but regular participants are likely to number in their tens or at most their hundreds.

As one would expect, many committed practitioners gravitate towards some organisation at some period in their lives - *sangha*, or community, is an important theme in Buddhist teaching - but informal private groups are not uncommon, and people do practice in isolation, sometimes for many years. Even these are only the tip of the iceberg; many people take basic techniques of meditation, sets of ideas or emotional flavours which remain part of their lives, for years or decades. In this way too, the 'taste of the Dharma' is becoming very widely known indeed.

# 4

## What are the benefits?

Buddhists are not, on the whole, a particularly evangelical bunch. Even as converts, they tend to convert later than others, either to Christianity or to new religious movements, and this is reflected in their religious 'style'. While they certainly hold that anyone can benefit from Buddhism and that enlightenment can be achieved by anyone, most Buddhists recognise that the nature of commitment and practice is such that there is little point in doing more than making the necessary conditions available for those who are attracted.

Nevertheless, to be a Buddhist is not an entirely neutral thing, and non-Buddhists do respond, in different ways, to the discovery that someone is a practising Buddhist. It is as though the fact of an explicit commitment to self-transformation is a kind of challenge, to be met perhaps with an alternative commitment, with a sceptical denial of the value of any commitment, or maybe an attraction to the *idea* of commitment.

There are a range of very real issues at stake here. Firstly, Buddhism, like any other way of life, can be assessed in terms of its ideal of

the good life, which it implicitly recommends to others: is this a worthwhile goal? Secondly, and more subtly, we can ask how far it provides the tools for the job: in other words, if this ideal can really be attained by ordinary human beings under normal circumstances, or if instead it is 'idealistic', or worse, hypocritical? Thirdly, we can ask what kind of contribution Buddhists make to the world they share with others: should non-Buddhists welcome or fear the rising popularity of Buddhism? In this chapter, I will examine each issue in turn.

### **Buddhism as a way of life**

It is often said that orthopraxy (ideal practice) is more important in Buddhism than orthodoxy (ideal beliefs), and despite variation even in this area some general themes are common to most Buddhist practitioners, those implied by the path outlined in chapter one.

First of all, a Buddhist way of life is an ethical one. The most basic Buddhist ethic is generosity, as a practical way of breaking down the boundaries between self and other and of responding to the needs of suffering beings: a giving not only of friendly gifts (an amiable Buddhist institution) and of money, but also of time and energy, of work and effort, of friendship and support, and of courage and ideas.

Many Buddhists will take 'precepts', or ethical guidelines, which they try to develop in daily life. In essence Buddhist ethics are intentional, following the Buddha's line of thought when he observed that particular orientations will lead people to go 'up and down the banks of the Ganges, killing, oppressing and mutilating others', while other orientations will lead people to benefit others.

A starting-point is the area of power; the key Buddhist value of non-violence grounds, for example, many Buddhists' orientation

to pacifism, to vegetarian or vegan lifestyles, and more generally to a way of life that does not depend on domination and violence. The value of generosity, already mentioned, similarly grounds a concern to avoid exploitation of others or of the natural world.

A concern to develop tranquillity encourages Buddhists to explore simpler lifestyles, and in particular to avoid satisfying their desires at the expense of others. Truthfulness underpins a concern to develop clarity and straightforwardness of communication, and avoidance of manipulation. Mindfulness, lastly, enables greater consistency and effectiveness in these other areas and leads some Buddhists to avoid alcohol and a culture of 'getting out of it'.

Beyond these basic guidelines, most contemporary Buddhists engage in some form of systematic practice designed - directly or indirectly - to change their basic orientations to the world. The daily practice of meditation, chanting or ritual can be seen as a way of avoiding a purely formalistic, following-the-rules approach by bringing the practitioner, time and again, up against the limitations of their current way of being. This transformative orientation is expected to work below the conscious, 'official' level and to spill over into the rest of the practitioner's life.

The ultimate goal of transformation can be thought of as the long-term development of a new way of being in the world, one marked by tranquillity rather than neediness, friendliness rather than aversion, and wisdom rather than confusion: a way of being which can be represented by different ideals.

One, stressing tranquillity, is that of the hermit or monk, the person with a 'forest mind', whether living in seclusion or the heart of the city. Having moved from external discipline through 'togetherness' to full integration with themselves and their world, such a being is no longer at war with anyone or anything, happy with whatever life brings next.

A second ideal, stressing compassion, is that of action in the world. Starting from the same kind of freedom, the ideal of a person devoted to helping the development and liberation of



others implies a deep commitment to meeting those others on their own terms and focusing on their needs: from basic literacy work in rural Asia through hospice volunteering to non-violent direct action in ecological and peace movements.

A third ideal, stressing wisdom, is that of the teacher or trickster who helps others break through their own limitations - an ideal which implies considerable work on oneself to be any use to others! The Zen master or the Tantric adept, playing havoc with cultural conventions in the no-holds-barred attempt to help their students wake up to reality, is fast acquiring a place in the imagination of the modern West.

Finally, all of these different elements can come together as ways of life within cultures of transformation: intentional communities, from the virtual network to the rural retreat, within which these ideals are stated explicitly and built into everyday structures and modes of interaction, where people agree in effect to relate to one another not at their lowest common denominator of routine culture but at their highest common factor of the shared potential for liberation and the shared commitment to work in that direction 'by any means necessary'.

### **The noble eightfold path**

According to early Buddhist teachings, liberation is achieved through the progressive transformation of all areas of our life, broken down into eight 'limbs':

**Perfect vision** - engaging with the four noble truths of unsatisfactoriness, its origin in craving, its ending in nirvana, and the path of practice leading to that end.

**Perfect aspiration** - developing a mind free from sense desire, ill-will and harmfulness.

**Perfect speech** - speech which is truthful, harmonious, kind and helpful.

**Perfect action** - developing behaviour which springs from love, generosity and contentment.

**Perfect livelihood** - finding a way of making a living which does not depend on unethical behaviour.

**Perfect effort** - abandoning unskilful mental states and developing skilful ones.

**Perfect mindfulness** - clear awareness of the body, feelings, the mind and the qualities of mind.

**Perfect meditation** - the deepening of concentration in meditative practice.

### **The promise of transformation: myth or reality?**

So far so good, one might say, but does it work? Can all these ideals be translated into reality in any way?

One kind of answer can be given in terms of practice, the basic tool available to contemporary Buddhists in their attempt to change themselves. From my own experience, it is certainly the case that the systematic attempt to change does have effects over time, some dramatic and unexpected, others calmer and more predictable, and which one can register in other people.

There is nothing particularly mysterious about this: it is well-known to scholars of religion that sincerely religious people (as opposed to the pious) often 'glow': there is a sense of happiness, warmth and peace which can be enough to convert the outsider with the basic feeling 'I want to be like that'. It is perhaps less commonly remarked, but similarly impressive human beings can be found among political activists; among academics; or in the caring professions: the effect of living an integrated life, at

one with your ideals, of constantly engaging with a challenging otherness and of repeated reflection on how we do our everyday lives can have this kind of transforming effect.

When I teach meditation, I can see this happening with others: at the moment (perhaps in their first meditation or on retreat) when instead of the usual quiet shuffle of fidgeting with the uncomfortable position, silence deepens across a roomful of people; and when the sit is over, instead of the normal rush back into activity there is a quietness and a slowness to the movements, a loosening of facial tension and a friendly calm rather than a sudden outburst of chatter. This brings it home again that meditation can bring people into contact with an experience of themselves they have no names for and may not have had for many years.

The slow process of transformation rarely works miracles overnight, although that also happens. A good teacher can be confident that interested students will see enough potential within, say, a six-week course to motivate a deeper commitment which can mature in months or years into a more substantial transformation, readily noticeable by others (a useful touchstone!)

The dizzy heights of insight and awakening, for their part, are sometimes spoken of in different contexts as attainable within periods of diligent and committed practice of several years or decades - or even lifetimes! 'Spiritual autobiographies' bear out this sense that full transformation - as one might expect - is a long-term project; but clearly the medium-term results have to make this commitment sustainable.

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of the Buddhists that I know is their creativity. Observing life at a busy meditation centre, it is clear that for many people Buddhism is a lever for change, whether they come with that intention or develop it while practising.

Changes of career - as well as radical downshifting - transformations in relationships, discovery of new goals and interests, moving from one country to another, developing the confidence and ability

to do something new: these strike me as perhaps the strongest common denominator among Buddhists - a willingness to change, and the ability to do so well.

At this level, the only thing one has to take on faith - until it is confirmed in one's own experience - is that change is possible, and that it can be achieved by making a systematic attempt to change. In other words, things really can be different, and not in some future life.

There may of course be limits to this, whether set by human nature or social structure, or by the uncontrollability of the flow of life. Buddhists do not need to quarrel with any of this, and might say that a clear-eyed recognition of limits is helpful in working with change. What they might add, though, is that to say no change is possible is a self-fulfilling prophecy; whereas if we try to change, we will discover practically that what we can do is often greater than we think.

Transformation itself, in fact, is thought of in different ways in Buddhism. In one reading, the transformation is entirely internal: once free of our own craving, aversion and delusion we can fit in anywhere and put up with anything. (It might even be that we will still suffer all the primate emotions - from desire to loneliness to anger - but without the addition of projection, depression or hatred.) Given the history of our species to date, the value of a freedom that can be found even in feudal Japan or as a beggar in ancient India is not to be underrated.

In another reading, however, which uses the full power of modernity's ability to remake the world and its awareness of the many different ways in which humans live and have lived, this transformation is more than a psychological adjustment to a given situation. It can express itself in a radical change of life, in a transformation of everyday cultural routines, and in the vision of a new kind of society. I have already mentioned the enthusiasm contemporary Buddhists have for transforming their own lives: what of the wider challenge?

## A new force for social change?

Since human beings are interconnected, it is entirely reasonable for non-Buddhists to ask themselves whether the rapid growth of Buddhism in their societies is likely to benefit or threaten them. The social record of Buddhism is more ambiguous than either its supporters or its detractors might like. On the one hand, the early sangha refused to import the caste distinctions of the wider society and operated as a kind of consensual democracy that contemporary greens and anarchists might admire, offering women in particular a freedom denied within a broader patriarchal society.

This 'Buddhism from below' found many expressions throughout the middle ages: among meditators in forests and mountains who expressed a popular rejection of official religion; in the underground communities of women and men who practised an alternative, magical route to freedom in the early days of Tantra; or in peasant rebellions inspired by millenarian texts. On the other hand, a 'Buddhism from above', closely linked to royal patronage and owning peasant villages in feudal societies, could approximate in many ways its equivalents in European Christianity.

Perhaps the fairest reading is that Buddhism holds the *potential* for social change, as a repeated normative theme within the religion. Although westerners are keen to separate 'changing yourself' and 'changing the world', the Buddhist theory of awakening is fairly explicit about the importance of achieving the mundane pre-conditions for self-development.

One of these is clearly liberation from basic problems such as hunger, sickness and oppression: food, shelter, water and a minimum of freedom are necessary for the practice of awakening. Another is the availability of forms of culture and education within which people can formulate a vision of self-transformation and a better life. A third, more subtly, is freedom from being so caught up in enjoyment of possessions or so trapped in patterns of hatred and resentment as to be unable to imagine any ideal beyond being on top - or winning the lottery.

In modern times, these orientations have been powerfully drawn on by Asian Buddhists, in movements which leave no doubt about the potential of Buddhism to effect social change. Contemporary examples include the ex-Untouchable challenge to Hindu caste structures by mass conversion to Buddhism, the Burmese pro-democracy movement, Sri Lankan community development, the Tibetan independence movement and the syncretic Falun Gong - the latest demonstration of the power of religious movements to threaten the rulers of the Middle Kingdom.

Like nationalism, however - with which it is often linked - the role of post-colonial religion is double-edged: the Tamil refugees in European exile are victims of a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism which is one of the worst examples of a contemporary Buddhism from above.

'Engaged Buddhism' in the west, by contrast, is as yet more of a potential than a reality. Although Buddhists are active in solidarity campaigns, in environmental or peace activism, as feminists or Marxists, in co-ops and fair trade, hospices and prisons, it is normally on an individual basis, and engaged Buddhist organisation - though present - is relatively weak.

As an activist, I find engaged Buddhism compares rather poorly - both in terms of actual presence and in terms of intellectual contributions - to its dreadlocked cousin, neo-paganism, probably because the latter is more of a contemporary creation for contemporary purposes and so, perhaps, an easier instrument to master than one which comes with over two thousand years of complex and difficult texts and hundreds of millions of practitioners.

For much the same reasons, Buddhism's strengths - an enormously developed theoretical understanding, a powerful organisational tradition, and a range of immensely sophisticated practical psychologies - seem to me in the long run to have more to offer for the kind of activism that might be capable of *transforming* social structure rather than simply building a private alternative.

As one of the most developed non-western systems of thought and action, it is a resource for creativity that western activists ignore at their peril.

For Buddhism as a whole to become 'engaged' in this sense is unlikely, and not necessarily desirable; but an engaged Buddhism which can enable activists to overcome their own fears and limitations, open up a new source of energy and creativity, provide tools for liberation-in-action and communities of liberation, and offer new insight into organisational practice and theoretical imagination might be a valuable zone of interaction.

I mentioned earlier that the Buddhist orders of monks and nuns may be the oldest surviving institutions in the world: in a time when two hundred years is old for a political organisation and social movement projects are doing well to survive two decades, the organisational know-how that can survive two and a half millennia in societies ranging from agricultural feudalism to present-day Japan and from Siberian nomads to Indian shanty-towns is worth listening to and, perhaps, learning from in the creation of social movements after Seattle and Genoa that are genuinely capable of spanning the globe.

# 5

## Media images and real politics

Wherever it has travelled, Buddhism has found other forms of religion and magic already present, which it has usually incorporated or coexisted with. Thus Chinese temples are often syncretic, combining Buddhist, Confucian and folk Taoist elements; in Nepal Buddhists and Hindus celebrate the same festivals together under different names; and in southeast Asia spirit cults are an important part of popular Buddhism.

In the Anglophone world, similarly, Buddhism has found a widespread cult of the image firmly in place. With public rituals in cinemas and private devotions in living-rooms, ordinary British and American people appear to firmly believe in the reality of a bewildering range of celestial beings, in mystical forces such as love and intuition, and in a variety of earthly paradises to be attained through good fortune or appropriate consumption.

One of the most difficult tasks facing Buddhists in the west has been to develop 'skilful means' that turn these various folk beliefs into powerful vehicles for awakening, rather than simply falling into the trap of themselves becoming uncritical devotees of this

cult. The task is not an easy one, since folk religion is a now-you-see-it-now-you-don't phenomenon: on the one hand, people may make fun of these beliefs when challenged; but how they actually feel about them in private is often another matter altogether.

## Celebrity Buddhism and the big screen

For almost two centuries, Buddhism has been known in the west through images of famous Buddhists. Some of these have also been known in Asia: the Buddha himself, subject of a Victorian poem (Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*) that rivalled *Huckleberry Finn* in sales; various Zen masters, familiar from out-of-context stories that circulated widely in the 1960s (much as the medieval stories of the Buddha's previous births made their way into the west as *Aesop's Fables*); and contemporary stars like the Dalai Lama, often misunderstood as some kind of Buddhist Pope.

Others are local saints and heroes, who have combined an interest in or espousal of Buddhism with the kind of cultural creation that westerners tend to revere and remember. Thus in the nineteenth century thinkers like Schopenhauer or Thoreau, poets like Walt Whitman and early new Agers like Madame Blavatsky, founder of Theosophy, all drew on elements of Buddhism in different ways.

In the mid-twentieth century the 'Beat Buddhism' of trickster figures like Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gary Snyder attracted attention to Japanese Zen in particular (and later, with poets Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman, to Chögyam Trungpa's 'crazy wisdom' version of Tibetan Buddhism). Meanwhile, less flamboyant intellectuals - poet Kenneth Rexroth, musician John Cage or artist Roy Lichtenstein - were also discovering the potential of Buddhist ideas and practice.

New literary visions of the Buddhist world were created by sympathetic writers in books like Kipling's *Kim* and James Hilton's *Shangri-la*, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* or Robert Pirsig's *Zen*

*and the art of motorcycle maintenance* and even *Tintin in Tibet*. By the start of the twenty-first century, popular piety is such that new Buddhist saints are discovered weekly. One famous centre of holiness is the town of Hollywood in California, a sort of head temple for cinemas worldwide. Richard Gere, for example, is not only a serious Tibetan Buddhist practitioner and friend of the ubiquitous Dalai Lama (who later scholars will argue could never have known all those people in all those different places!), but a committed activist for Tibetan independence.

Actor-director Steven Seagal has been recognised as the reincarnation of a Nyingma lama. Directors Martin Scorsese and Oliver Stone are also touched by the wind from the east; meanwhile, movies about Buddhism (*Little Buddha*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Kundun*) or on quasi-Buddhist themes (*Truman Show*, *The Matrix*, *Groundhog Day*) are widely popular.

Other fields are not left behind: impelled by Buddhist Adam Yauch, the Beastie Boys have recorded 'The Bodhisattva Vow'. Tina Turner chants with Soka Gakkai. Courtney Love gave occasional Buddhist Kurt Cobain's ashes a Buddhist consecration.

Other indigenous saints include Koo Stark (who discovered her Buddhism in Nepal), Mitchell Kapor of the Lotus corporation, Phil Jackson of the Chicago Bulls, Italian footballer Roberto Baggio, writer bell hooks and therapists Jon Kabat-Zinn and Mark Epstein.

Naturalised foreign saints include the inevitable Dalai Lama and Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, while increasing numbers of westerners are recognised as reincarnate lamas - or claim to be so, starting from the bestselling (and totally spurious) T. Lobsang Rampa, author of *The Third Eye*.

Do these figures have any real existence outside the mind of the believer? If there are historical persons behind the image, are they as presented? And, most crucially, does it matter? While hagiography is interesting in itself, a bigger question is about saints' cults in general. Anthropologists and historians are fond

of asking what they mean for their devotees, and what can be discovered from tracing the rise and fall of different cults.

One kind of question is what role these figures play in their devotee's lives: are they inspired to emulate the saint, or does their devotion simply represent a nod in the right direction? In a period where what tends to be stressed is the sincerity of the saint (raising some doubts, perhaps, about that of the worshipper), and the heroic life or the transforming practice are downplayed or absent in the hagiographies, it is difficult to see much evidence that these cults are primarily about devotees changing their own lives.

This impression is strengthened by looking at the historical trends: Buddhist stardom has shifted from focusing on figures who stepped outside the bounds of everyday conventions and power structures to extolling eminently mainstream figures. In this, of course, the cult of movie *stars*, professionals who play whatever part they are paid to, fits into a more general conservatism and nervousness about any cultural choices that do not appear to lead to fame and fortune.

Buddhists can hardly object to anything that makes Buddhist ideas and practices more widely acceptable and increases public awareness, but if this means a neutralisation of Buddhism they have cause to worry. Students of new religious movements note that where there is too much tension between the new religion and its mainstream environment, no-one will be able to leap the gap; where there is too little difference, no-one will see the point in changing. In some ways, Buddhism in the west has started with one and arrived at the other, while finding it hard to steer a genuinely 'middle way'.

### **The three jewels**

Buddhism is often said to be centred on the 'three jewels' of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Technically, a Buddhist is someone who has 'gone for refuge' to these three jewels. The image here is that one's refuges are where one looks for strength, support and guidance: people might take refuge in a deity or a partner, in magic or self-help books, in food, sex or drugs - or, as Buddhists, in transformation.

Buddhists go for refuge to:

***The Buddha*** - as a vision of one's future self as a transformed being; as the historical enlightened person who has created a teaching and institutions designed to make enlightenment available to anyone; or as a 'meditation Buddha', a symbol of ultimate reality.

***The Dharma*** - as the path of practice leading towards transformation; as the teachings of the historical Buddha; or as any expression from an enlightened mind.

***The Sangha*** - as the community of those working towards transformation; as the "invisible church" of those who have achieved some degree of transformation; or as the host of Bodhisattvas", those who are working towards enlightenment for the benefit of all beings.

***Tantric Buddhists*** also use a variety of other, 'esoteric' refuges which make these concepts more direct and personal.

### **Power, money and scandals**

A second theme which has unearthed the ghosts of the western imagination is that of scandals in the sangha. Beginning in the 70s and running through the 80s, Buddhist organisations old and new went through one scandal after another, covering all the areas of Buddhist ethics - power, money, sex, truth, stimulants - and more. More recently, conflicts within the Tibetan community, polemics

on the Internet and the furore over Chinese Buddhists fundraising for Al Gore have created a distrust of Buddhist organisations en bloc.

At the heart of the problem is the question of authority. Normally, people become interested in Buddhism because of suffering in their lives or a desire for change. The implication is that Buddhism can deliver on its claim to resolve the issue of suffering and enable personal transformation.

In practice, this has two kinds of meaning. One is that the tradition - Buddhist ideas and practices, which are necessarily embodied in and transmitted by institutions, even when they claim to be anti-institutions - is a resource for change. If so, access to that resource is a valuable good, and something which people will often pay well for; and authorised interpreters are likely to find a ready audience.

The other is that teachers who have in some ways transformed themselves can offer insight into the problems of others who are trying to do the same. Zen masters claim to be enlightened, while Tibetan lamas are supposed to be reincarnations of enlightened beings. Asian teachers in general are perennially popular - or failing that, teachers who have studied with Asian masters; and celebrity status (book publishing, media interviews) can greatly increase a teacher's appeal for potential students.

Thus students often bring with them a powerful desire for authority of some kind, even if in some other part of their lives they are concerned with freedom, equality and community. Teachers, for their part, face the unenviable task of defending at least the core teachings and practices of the traditions they are committed to in a sea of sub-Christian folk religion, New Age spiritual supermarkets and pop psychology - and run the risk of becoming isolated from peer contact while having to live up to the expectations of needy students.

Add to this the fragility of the new Buddhist institutions: grappling with a whole range of new problems, painfully established by dint

of enormous volunteer efforts, still often run by the first generation of students who built them - they represent participants' life's work, means of livelihood and personal lifeworld.

Under such circumstances, many people will leap to the defence of their own organisation - and just as strongly attack another, because they offer competing strategies for the pursuit of truth and liberation, often with historical rivalries, as well as competitors for a large and volatile 'market' of unaffiliated Buddhists.

Paradoxically, the desire for non-alignment on the part of many Buddhists pushes the aligned - who provide most of the books, magazines, courses and retreats for the unaffiliated - into more managerial forms of organisation, more instrumental orientations, and a frequent state of intergroup tension. Participatory democracy, in other words, is an ideal which can only be realised by widespread participation; the alternative is not freedom but consumerism.

These problems, then, are western ones, even if they wear eastern clothes. A common (and telling) theme in 'anti-cult movements' is precisely to reassert the power of the family over the individual, and of mainstream religion against the alternatives.

More generally, relatively few westerners are seriously committed to democratic social relations in the first place, such as 'economic democracy' in the workplace, the deconstruction of power relations within the family, an end to capitalism or education as liberation. The ghosts we see in Asian drag, in other words, are our own authoritarian doppelgängers.

Such ghosts can be tamed in two ways. One is by drawing on the resources of democratic experience in the west, from anabaptist and Quaker traditions in Christianity through anarchist and libertarian socialist theory to the practice of the feminist and ecology movements in recent decades - all traditions which have been able to combine egalitarian modes of organisation with a shared commitment to personal or social transformation.

Buddhism also has its own practices for dealing with spirits. Most



if not all schools have traditional resources for distinguishing between the timeless (*akaliko*) truth and institutions which are subject to historical decay, focus on effective communication, and so on. Reformer figures, from the Buddha himself on, are normative within all traditions, though - as in all traditional societies - reform was usually presented as a return to the source.

There is no essential reason, then, why Buddhists in the twenty-first century cannot change their organisational forms as much as they have already done in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and in the wake of the scandals mentioned at the start of the chapter many organisations have tried to do just that. The more Buddhists become aware of the historical nature of their religion, the more clearly they will be able to think about what they are up to.

### Rebirth in Buddhism

The traditional Buddhist view of rebirth fits within its general ethical worldview. Karma - intentional action - can be assessed in terms of the skilful or unskilful states of mind it tends to give rise to and the habitual ways of behaving that it reinforces or undermines. Since for Buddhists we have no fixed 'self', this ethical direction is very important: what we are is to a large extent the result of what we tend to do.

The concept of rebirth extends this flow of habitual tendencies beyond the grave or the cremation ground; once this ethical continuity can be verified in one's own day-to-day experience, it becomes more plausible to think of it continuing indefinitely. This is not a neat rebirth of the same 'soul' in life after life, any more than the same 'self' continues from minute to minute or year to year; in a traditional image, when one candle is lit from another, the flames are neither the same nor different. (Highly developed beings are on occasion held to be able to remain essentially identical from one life to the next, as in the *reincarnated* lineages of Tibetan teachers, but this is a special case.)

As a developmental religion, Buddhism tends to be future-oriented and focus more on acting ethically now so as to improve one's own states of mind now and in the future. In any case, it is held to be extremely difficult to disentangle the workings of past karmatic action, and this is not a common concern among Buddhists. (Things are made more complicated by the fact that ethics are the major determinant of one's future only in some forms of Buddhist philosophy; others recognise many levels of causality, of which ethical behaviour is only one.)

The concept of rebirth is not an 'article of faith' for Buddhists. Its practical importance varies from one form of Buddhism to the next, and with the development of modernity Buddhists of all schools are less likely now to hold to it than in the past, or to interpret it in purely psychological terms rather than the literal cosmological ones of rebirth as an animal, a god, and so on. (Since ethical habits do not in any case define real 'selves', it would also be possible to think of culture as a kind of collective karma that outlasts individual lives.)

It is not, however, true to say (as is sometimes done) that the Buddha simply accepted the concept of rebirth because it was 'in the air' at the time. Certainly the concept is one shared with older Indian religions, but the Buddha criticised views that denied rebirth, and the canonical account of his awakening stresses visions of karma and rebirth as preceding the final breakthrough. Unlike the western attitude which tends to find the concept of rebirth rather attractive, the traditional Buddhist approach is to view the prospect of indefinitely repeated lifetimes of suffering with horror, and see rebirth as a major motivator for spiritual practice - to get 'off the wheel' altogether.

Rebirth becomes particularly important for Buddhists who are seeking a better rebirth to give themselves more fully to spiritual practice, or who have committed themselves to helping others over many lifetimes. The converse is also true, however. If a Buddhist rejects the concept of rebirth, they would need logically to be committed to achieving enlightenment within this life.

## Virtual Tibet: the ghost in the machine

While every age has its images of paradise, where those images are located can tell us something about the politics of the day. Revolutionary movements, in the middle ages or modernity, seek to create utopia (literally 'no place') here and now, or in the near future. The quietist sequel defers this liberation until some indefinitely distant point in the future, avoiding present-day implications. Buddhist tradition too has its stories of pure lands where awakening is easy, of the worlds inhabited by other Buddhas in the future or elsewhere in space, as well as cataclysmic images of the decline of the true teaching.

The modern west is fond of locating its paradise just out of reach - in a bucolic idyll destroyed by the withering touch of modernity, in forbidden lands controlled by repressive states, or in an 'East' imagined as definitively other. While social change, political conflict or cultural diversity are not unreal, they also act as myths which serve convenient purposes, most notably of rationalising a practical acceptance of the way things are here and now by moving any alternative definitively out of reach. Things can be safely *imagined* as different, so long as everyone is reconciled to the fact that in practice they will remain the same.

This dialectic between images and reality plays itself out repeatedly in western images of the Buddhist other: not the meditator who lives down the road, but the odd-looking man with the funny accent and strange clothes who represents a permanently inaccessible wisdom. (Chinese bureaucrats used to write soulful poems on the theme of looking for Taoist hermits in the mountains and failing to find them - upon which they could return to their jobs, having verified that real change was far beyond them.) Paradoxically, one important effect of 'virtual Tibet' is to remove real Buddhism from the sphere of what ordinary westerners think of as possible on their housing estates, in their offices or in their families.

In itself this might only be a problem the west creates for itself, were it not for the global power of this myth and of the people

who believe it. Since the beginnings of imperial adventures, the fantasies of a hidden Asian ideal - in the remote past, in the depths of the jungle or beyond the highest mountains - have gone hand in hand with the conquest and exploitation of actual Asians.

Side by side with virtual Tibet, for example, we have to put the virtual 'war on terror': when Asians appear not as human beings, connected to the west through centuries of interventionist politics and global trading structures, but as images that float across western TV screens, they can as easily be bombed as saved - or one (bad) Asian can be bombed to save another (good) one. Buddhists are not immune to this: during the Gulf War, American practitioners meditated on behalf of the bomber pilots killing Iraqis. In the New World Order, to be an image rather than a real person is not necessarily good news.

Underlying this distancing are rather more real relations between Asia and the west, which have incidentally contributed greatly to the destruction of Buddhism in countries where communist revolution seemed a reasonable response to being on the receiving end of the benefits of nineteenth- and twentieth-century global capitalism. Buddhism has been hit hard in China (where western states, including Britain, fought two wars to force acceptance of the opium trade) and Vietnam (successively occupied by France, Japan, France again and finally the United States). If it is possible today for western tourists to wander round much of Asia without a word of any local language, there are historical reasons for this, which do not help genuine communication.

In the west, too, immigrants and refugees from Asia have met with a decidedly mixed reaction. All citizens of Japanese descent were imprisoned in the United States during the second world war, incidentally giving a boost to the revival of Buddhism in the Japanese-American community. Vietnamese 'boat people', accepted as refugees for reasons of anti-communist propaganda after the fall of Saigon, have remained cut off from the mainstream society in a country like Ireland to such an extent that language still

poses a significant problem thirty years later. Chinese immigrants routinely run into racist prejudice as a visible and highly scattered minority. And yet Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama are also political refugees.

In traditional Buddhism, to gain a reputation for asceticism, meditation and wisdom has often meant that an individual monk or a monastery has become increasingly overloaded with gifts (rendering the asceticism problematic), visitors (making meditation difficult), and invitations to court (causing severe problems for those who wanted to remain both wise and alive).

Similarly, as Asia has come to be seen as a source of holiness of various kinds, its sacred sites have been blessed with a lucrative tourist trade, often controlled by commercial or state interests; all kinds of religious items have been bought up into museums, libraries, private collections and western art and curio markets; and its monasteries have become targets for spiritual seekers from all over the world. As anyone who lives in a tourist town will know, those who are well-placed to profit from this development tend to do so not only at the expense of those who are in the way of this process, but also at the expense of any real understanding.

The Buddha himself, as a dark-skinned immigrant from the provinces to the heartland of the new Ganges civilisation that swallowed up his native state during his own lifetime, was used both to being greeted with prejudice about his origins and with a religious awe focused on his person. The main theme of his responses was to return to the essential: to encourage people to see personal transformation as something they had to engage in for themselves, whoever they were.

To this end he taught people of all castes and all religious backgrounds, and insisted on his teaching being transmitted in whatever language people happened to speak. Awakening, in a traditional formulation, consists of abandoning craving, aversion and delusion: the good other that we desire, the bad other that we seek to destroy and the underlying view of 'self' and 'other', 'we'

and 'they' as real, fixed entities. Or, to put it more positively, our liberation and the liberation of others are not different.

At the edge of the twenty-first century, the central problem of Buddhism remains: as conditioned beings in a universe of conditionality, how can our strategies for liberation help us break loose, and not become just another way we imprison ourselves and others? This is also, of course, a key theme in modernity: its power and speed offer the promise of freedom but often become new forms of constraint. As ordinary people work with Buddhism to develop creative responses to this experience, the possibility of awakening is kept alive.

## Conclusion

Having taken such a rapid and often critical tour through the landscape of contemporary Buddhism, it is only fair to the reader to state my own position. For me, Buddhism is primarily something that I try to *do*. This certainly involves a lot of reading, a lot of talking and a lot of thinking, but those are useful to me insofar as they help me work in Buddhist ways to tackle the basic, everyday problems of living.

Those problems essentially come down to the question of how to live: how to tackle my own confusion and unhappiness, how to help others, how to survive in what Marx called ‘the prehistory of human society’ in social orders based on exploitation, domination and distorted communication, and how to find what the Buddha called ‘the sure heart’s release’, that liberation from unnecessary suffering which is the birthright of all human beings.

While modernity poses these challenges in new ways, they show no signs of disappearing; and a creative engagement with the Buddhist tradition can offer new possibilities of working towards transformation. Buddhism brings its own strengths to this engagement: a critical standpoint on the dissatisfaction inherent in wasted lives, a serious body of skills and ideas developed to enable transformation in many different contexts and cultures, and a constant ability to critically interrogate its own forms and purposes.

This Dharma is said to have one taste, the taste of freedom. The challenge for contemporary Buddhists is to bring out this flavour in their cooking, despite the difference in the ingredients, in the tools at their disposal and in the tastes of the guests. Good Dharma cooking is a practice in itself.

## Glossary

As Buddhism moves west, a range of words from Asian languages (e.g. karma) are becoming naturalised into English and other European languages. Similarly, a range of European words (e.g. enlightenment) are coming to acquire new meanings in Buddhist contexts.

**awakening:** the ending of craving, aversion and delusion; the full flowering of wisdom, compassion and calm.

**buddha:** any *awakened* person. Particularly used for someone who has rediscovered the *dharma* on their own and created a *sangha*; the historical Buddha, Gautama, is seen as just the most recent of these.

**chanting:** reciting or chanting various texts or formulae for purposes ranging from benefitting other beings to self-transformation.

**compassion:** a friendly and open-hearted response to the *suffering* of others.

**conditionality:** the teaching that everything is ultimately dependent on causes and conditions - and hence impermanent, incapable of providing lasting satisfaction, and devoid of a fixed *self*.

**Dalai Lama:** the head of the Tibetan government in exile, and an important teacher within the Gelugpa school of *Vajrayana* Buddhism.

**dharma:** the way things are; the teaching and *practice* that leads to *awakening*. Many other technical uses, particularly to mean 'phenomenon' or 'quality of experience'.

**Dharma centre:** a public centre for teaching *meditation* and/or Buddhism.

**emptiness:** the condition of interconnectedness and transience implied by the teaching that there is no fixed *self*.

**enlightenment:** see *awakening*.

**ethics:** trying to develop *skilful* actions and avoid *unskilful* ones.

**insight:** an emotional and intellectual recognition of the way things are; an important component of *awakening*.

**karma:** intentional action. In western usage normally stands in for **karma-vipaka**, the **results** of action: most importantly developing or counteracting habits and tendencies to act in particular (*skilful* or *unskilful*) ways.

**lama:** a religious teacher in *Vajrayana* Buddhism, also specifically meaning a teacher held to be the reincarnation of a previous teacher.

**liberation:** see *awakening*.

**Mahayana:** the form of Buddhism predominant in China, Korea and Japan.

**meditation:** used in English both for *practices* dedicated towards cultivating the mind and the experiences or states achieved while doing so.

**Nyingma:** one of the schools of the *Vajrayana*.

**practice:** any form of self-development, from trying to break a bad habit to intensive *meditation*.

**prostration:** a form of private *ritual* designed to break down excessive egotism and develop emotional engagement.

**retreat:** a period of time dedicated entirely to spiritual *practice*, usually but not necessarily in a special location.

**ritual:** a fixed sequence of events and actions designed to bring about specific results in the participants or the wider world.

**sangha:** the community of practitioners, sometimes specialised to mean the orders of monks and nuns, or the “invisible church” of those who have achieved some measure of *awakening*.

**self:** Buddhists deny that people have a “self” in the sense of a soul or a fixed essence. This implies that there are no bounds to what human beings can become (see *emptiness*).

**skilful/unskilful action:** Buddhist ethics distinguishes between acts which tend to improved mental states and those which lead to worsened states (see *karma*).

**skilful means:** the doctrine that there are many ways to discover the *Dharma*, and hence many ways to teach, depending on the needs of others.

**stupa:** a religious monument to the *Buddha* or other awakened person.

**suffering:** the various forms of pain or unsatisfactoriness inherent in *conditioned* existence.

**Tantric:** a movement in Indian religions, including the *Vajrayana*, based on extensive use of *ritual*.

**Theravada:** the form of Buddhism that predominates in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

**transformation:** see *awakening*.

**unskilful:** see *skilful*.

**wisdom:** the emotional and intellectual understanding involved in breaking the bonds of craving, aversion and delusion and arriving at *awakening*.

**Vajrayana:** the form of Buddhism that predominates in Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal and Ladakh.

**Zen:** a form of *Mahayana* Buddhism focussing particularly on *meditation*.

**Zen master:** in the *Zen* school, a monk or nun specialised in teaching meditation.

## Further reading

As this book has suggested, the amount of written material on contemporary Buddhism is enormous. Some is of the highest quality; some perpetuates gross misunderstandings; and purposes of course vary greatly, from the sociological to the apologetic and from the inspirational to the philosophical. The suggestions made here are for a variety of excellent and accessible works which will enable interested readers to pursue interests raised by specific chapters.

**Chapter one:** Michael Carrithers' *The Buddha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) is a short and lucid account of the historical Buddha's life and work. Jack Kornfield's *A path with heart* (London: Rider, 1994) is a widely acclaimed introduction to Buddhist practice for contemporary readers. Peter Harvey's *Introduction to Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) is by far the best introduction to the doctrines and institutions of the religion.

**Chapter two:** Stephen Batchelor's *The awakening of the west* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1994) is a very readable account of the encounter between Asian religion and the modern west. Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere's *A time to chant* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) is one of the best studies of a modern Buddhist group in Britain. Kulananda's *Western Buddhism* (London: HarperCollins, 1997) is a clear and committed statement of the possibilities and challenges facing Buddhists in the contemporary world.

**Chapter three:** One of the most interesting recent works on religion and modernity is Paul Heelas' *The New Age movement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). Stephen Batchelor's *Buddhism without beliefs* (New York: Riverhead, 1997) is an eloquent argument for a twenty-first century Buddhism. Charles Prebish and Martin

Baumann's *Westward Dharma* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) is one of the best new books on converts and born Buddhists.

**Chapter four:** Marianne Dresser's *Buddhist woman on the edge* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1997) is one of the best of several collections about the lives of contemporary Buddhists. Sharon Salzberg's *Loving-kindness* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995) is a wonderful introduction to the transformative possibilities of Buddhism. Christopher Queen and Sallie King's *Engaged Buddhism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995) is a good introduction to Buddhist movements for social change.

**Chapter five:** Carole Tomkinson's *Big sky mind* (London: Thorsons, 1996) is an excellent collection on mid-century Beat Buddhism. Rita Gross' *Soaring and settling* (New York: Continuum, 1998) is a challenging reflection on the crises facing contemporary Buddhists. Donald Lopéz' *Prisoners of Shangri-la* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) is a hilarious and intelligent account of the place of Tibetan Buddhism in the western imagination.

## Addresses

For those new to Buddhism, by far the best way to go about finding out more is simply to visit a few accessible Dharma centres, see what kinds of programmes are available, and explore what kind of approach might meet their own needs.

Centres have a habit of moving about, so the most recent sources of addresses are usually the most useful. A good possibility is Internet-based searches, using some of the listings mentioned below or general search engines such as AltaVista ([www.altavista.com](http://www.altavista.com)) or Google ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)).

Another includes listings magazines, the notice boards of New Age shops and Asian food stores, where Buddhist groups can sometimes be found between the yoga courses and the self-help groups. Many Buddhist groups, however, do not go out of their way to advertise themselves and are best found simply by asking around.

As this book has suggested, Dharma centres take a bewildering variety of approaches to Buddhism. Much of this variety is superficial, though, which means that it is worth trying to find an entry-point that you find attractive or inspiring without becoming too sectarian about the differences from other groups - few of which, perhaps, are really fundamental ones.

### General listings and federations:

By far the best resources are available on the Internet, in particular DharmaNet's international listings, which can be found at [www.dharmanet.org/infoweb.html](http://www.dharmanet.org/infoweb.html), and the BuddhaNet directories for Australia, New Zealand, the Americas and Asia, available at [www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net).

Various books include extensive listings, notably John Snelling, **The Buddhist Handbook** (London, Rider, 1998 edition), **The Buddhist Directory** (The Buddhist Society, London, 1997 edition), and Don Morreale's **Buddhist America** (John Muir, Santa Fe, 1988).

Some countries also have national federations; in the nature of things, not all of these are in a position to provide listings of member organisations.

**The Buddhist Society**, 58 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1PH, UK. Tel. 0171 834 5858; fax 0171 976 5238; email [buddsoc@buddsoc.org](mailto:buddsoc@buddsoc.org); Web [www.buddsoc.org](http://www.buddsoc.org)

**Buddhist Federation of Australia**, 365-367 Victoria Street, Wetherill Park NSW 2164, Australia. Tel/Fax: 02 9793 1885

**American Buddhist Congress**, email [email@americanbuddhistcongress.org](mailto:email@americanbuddhistcongress.org), Web [www.americanbuddhistcongress.org](http://www.americanbuddhistcongress.org)

**The European Buddhist Union**, Website [www.sbg.ac.at/budd/ebu.htm](http://www.sbg.ac.at/budd/ebu.htm) has a European Buddhist Directory project, which can be contacted at E.B.U. c/o B.U.N. P.O. Box 17286 NL - 1001 JG Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

### Specific traditions:

In the nature of Buddhism, there are an enormous number of different groups within each tradition. The names suggested here are simply examples of more or less well-connected organisations which could be starting-points for a search, but many more such exist.

#### Theravada traditions:

see <http://www.dharmanet.org/infoweb.html>

Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire HP1 3BZ, UK. Tel: (01442) 842455; fax: (01442) 843721; Web <http://www.abm.ndirect.co.uk/fsn/>

Insight Meditation Tradition, Insight Meditation Society, 1230 Pleasant Street, Barre, MA 01005, USA. Tel. (978) 355 4378; fax (978) 355 6398; Web <http://www.dharma.org/ims.htm>; there is a list of associated centres at <http://www.dharma.org/otherteachers.htm>.

The Access to Insight website, at <http://www.accesstoinight.org/>, has an extensive collection of texts from the Theravadin Pali Canon.



**Zen traditions:**

see <http://www.dharmanet.org/infowebz.html>

Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, Carrshield, Hexham, Northumberland. NE47 8AL, UK. Tel. (01434) 345204; fax (01434) 345216; Web: <http://obcon.org/sathole.html>; there is a list of associated centres at <http://www.obcon.org/temps.html>.

Association Zen Internationale, 175, rue de Tolbiac, F-75013 Paris, France. Tel: +33 - 1 - 53.80.19.19; fax : +33 - 1 - 53.80.14.33; email [zen-azi@worldnet.fr](mailto:zen-azi@worldnet.fr).

The Diamond Sangha network has a Website at <http://www.ciolek.com/WWWVLPages/ZenPages/DiamondSangha.html>

**Pure Land traditions:**

see <http://www.dharmanet.org/infowebp.html>

Buddhist Churches of America, 1710 Octavia Street, San Francisco, CA 94109, USA. Tel. (415) 776 5600; fax (415) 771 6293; Web <http://www.fogbank.com/bca/>

**Nichiren traditions:**

Sokai Gakkai International: 15-3 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160, Japan. Fax 81-3-5360-9885; e-mail [sgipr@sgi.gr.jp](mailto:sgipr@sgi.gr.jp); Web <http://www.sgi.org/index.html>

**Tibetan traditions:**

see <http://www.dharmanet.org/infowebv.html>

Karma Kagyu: Web <http://www.diamondway-buddhism.org/>

**New Kadampa Tradition:**

Manjushri Institute, Conishead Priory, Ulverston, Cumbria, LA12 9QQ, UK. Tel: +44-(0)1229-584029; email: [info@manjushri.org.uk](mailto:info@manjushri.org.uk); Web <http://www.manjushri.org.uk/home.htm>

Rigpa Great Britain, 330 Caledonian Road, London, N1 1BB, UK. Tel: 44(0)171 700 0185; fax: 44(0)171 609 6068; email: 114335.615 @compuserve.com; Web <http://www.rigpa.org/centers.htm>

**Other traditions:**

Friends of the Western Buddhist Order: London Buddhist Centre, 51 Roman Road, London E2 0HU, UK. Tel 020 8981 1225 ; email [info@lbc.org.uk](mailto:info@lbc.org.uk); Web <http://www.fwbo.org/centres/index.html>

**Engaged Buddhism:**

International Network of Engaged Buddhists, P.O. Box 19, Mahadthai Post Office, Bangkok, 10206, Thailand. Tel/Fax: 662-433-7169 e-mail: [ineb@ipied.tu.ac.th](mailto:ineb@ipied.tu.ac.th); Web [www.bpf.org/ineb.html](http://www.bpf.org/ineb.html)

Sakyadita International Association of Buddhist Women, 1143 Piikoi Place, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA. Web <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~tsomo/>

Zen Peacemaker Order, Box 313, La Honda, CA 94020, USA. Email [peacemaker@ibm.net](mailto:peacemaker@ibm.net); WWW [www.peacemakercommunity.org](http://www.peacemakercommunity.org)

**Other resources:**

Naropa University, 2130 Arapahoe Ave. Boulder, CO 80302, USA. Tel. (303) 444-0202; fax 444-0410; email [info@naropa.edu](mailto:info@naropa.edu); Web <http://www.naropa.edu/>.

Sharpham College of Buddhist Studies and Contemporary Enquiry, Sharpham House, Ashprington, Totnes, S. Devon TQ9 7UT, UK. Tel: +44 (0)1803 732 542 or 521; Fax: + 44 (0)1803 732 037; email [college@sharpham-trust.org](mailto:college@sharpham-trust.org); Web [www.sharpham-trust.org/college.htm](http://www.sharpham-trust.org/college.htm)

Journal of Buddhist Ethics: Web <http://jbe.la.psu.edu/>

Dharma Life: Windhorse Publications, 11 Park Road, Moseley,  
Birmingham B13 8AB, UK. Tel/fax +44 121 449 9191; email  
info@dharmalife.com; Web www.dharmalife.com

Tricycle: Web <http://www.tricycle.com/>

