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Buddhism depth study

Chapter outcomes

In this chapter, students:

- explain the contribution to and analyse the impact of one significant person or school of thought on the development and expression of Buddhism
- describe and explain Buddhist ethical teachings on one ethical area
- describe one significant practice within Buddhism, demonstrate how this practice expresses
 the beliefs of Buddhism and analyse its significance for both the individual and the Buddhist
 community.

n.

To access resources below, visit www.nelsonnet.com.au

Online Option:

Ashoka

Online Worksheets:

- · Significant practices (Buddhism) (p. xxx)
- Buddhist ethics (p. xxx)



10.1 Significant people and ideas

The Buddha is acknowledged within the Buddhist tradition as the most famous teacher of his own religion and the most exalted role model of someone who has succeeded on the path to nirvana. However, throughout its history the religion has been transmitted through the examples and teachings of a large number of unheralded monks, nuns and prominent laypeople. Other teachers and holy men who are celebrated throughout Buddhist countries have become very famous. Some, such as Ananda, the Buddha's cousin, and the two early disciples Sariputta and Moggallana, lived during the Buddha's own lifetime and were famous as both pupils and teachers. Later philosophers such as Nagarjuna (second century CE) and Candrakirti (seventh century CE) became famous through their teachings. We know next to nothing about their lives, though this has not stopped the rise of Buddhist literature attributing all sorts of supernatural powers to these figures – whose own philosophical treatises are incomprehensible to all but the most learned of scholars.

More is known about the famous Tibetan sages whose writings were partially autobiographical, and also about many of the founders of the various Zen schools in Japan. Most of these figures were monks, but laypeople have also been extremely prominent in the development of the religion.

The founding of new schools within Mahayana Buddhism, especially in China and Japan, can usually be traced back to a particular, often charismatic, individual, or to a monk who had spent many years meditating and undergoing austerities in a remote mountainous or forest area. Lay Buddhists have traditionally been attracted to such people because of the huge merit or good *karma* they have built up, which could be transferred as an act of compassion. This continues even today, especially in Sri Lanka and Thailand. Because of the legitimacy and authority they have by virtue of their expertise in meditation and their performance of austerities, such people are in a position to reinterpret the Buddha's teaching or to introduce new elements into existing ideas. This has become especially important in contemporary Buddhism as many Buddhist countries have had to come to terms with the impact of modern science on their cultures.

This section treats the growth of Mahayana Buddhism as a significant idea, and looks at Ashoka (online option), Sister Dhammadinna (d.1967) and the charismatic Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh (b. 1926) as significant people. Ashoka had a profound impact on the spread of Buddhism in India and internationally after 250 BCE and, although Sister Dhammadinna may not rate as a significant person in world Buddhism, her visits to Australia in the 1950s had a great impact on the development of Buddhism in Australia.

EXTENSION

Update the Buddhism list in your workspace with the key terms, concepts and ideas discussed in this chapter.

10.1.1 Mahayana Buddhism

GLOSSARY

arahant A monk who seeks to attain enlightenment only for himself.

bodhisattva One who is close to enlightenment but forgoes nirvana to help others escape samsara.

stupa A monument containing relics or other sacred objects.

Scholars of Buddhism have traditionally regarded Mahayana Buddhism as developing alongside various groups of monks who were part of what was later known as Theravada Buddhism, possibly by about the first century BCE. Theravada Buddhism is regarded as the backdrop for the rise of Mahayana Buddhism. Other scholars have even used the term 'Primitive Buddhism' to describe the state of Buddhism between the time of the Buddha's death (486/483 BCE) and the ascension of Ashoka (269–232 BCE) to the throne of Magadha.

It is difficult to speak of a single mainstream of Buddhism even during the Buddha's own lifetime. Schismatic activity – where people who disagree on matters of doctrine or behaviour create new groupings within the larger Buddhist sangha - was recorded even during his lifetime, and there were probably 18 such groupings in India by the beginning of the Common Era. Though not much is known about these groups, most of whose literature has been lost, their likely existence testifies both to the vibrancy of Buddhism and its ongoing reinterpretation. The exception here is the Theravadins, whose texts survive to the present day, and the history of the splits within Theravada is still studied from texts such as the Kathavatthu, 'Matters of Controversy', which was composed decades or even centuries following the occurrence of the splits.

Mahayana Buddhism is really an umbrella term covering a whole set of schools and sub-schools, some differing considerably from each other. Its main historical function as a movement has been to act as a set of boundaries distinguishing certain types of Buddhists from others of the Theravada school.

It is not at all easy to trace the origins of Mahayana. To do so rests on the belief that Theravada and Mahayana can be very easily distinguished as different religious entities – that they can be easily allocated doctrinal boundaries and different forms of monkish behaviours. In truth, they cannot. Most of what they have is common

to both: the centrality of the Buddha as an example of a man who attained enlightenment and taught this possibility to others; a sophisticated view of the nature of reality; and a social organisation that resulted in a sharp differentiation between monastic and lay bodies. The two differ in some doctrinal aspects and in how they see themselves and their relation to each other: whereas the Mahayanists distinguish themselves from the Theravadins, the reverse does not seem to have happened.

TABLE 10.2 The main features of Mahayana Buddhism

The Buddha is a transcendent, god-like figure treated as an object of devotion.

The Buddha is worshipped in stupas.

The bodhisattva is more important than the arabant.

The bodhisattva helps lay Buddhists in all aspects of their lives.

Enlightenment exists in everyone. It just has to be found.

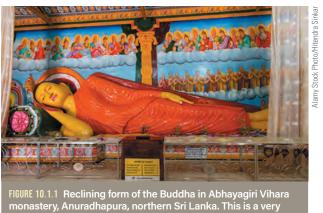
All phenomenal things are empty (shunya) of existence at an absolute level.

Instant enlightenment can be gained through a flash of insight into the true nature of reality.

Despite the common base from which both developed, one would find considerable differences between the two if one were first to read a body of Theravada literature and then some Mahayana texts, or if one were to observe the appearance and behaviour of monks in a Theravadin country such as Sri Lanka and then those of Tibetan or Chinese origin. Beyond this, some of the sub-schools of Mahayana, such as Zen and Vajrayana, do not appear to have any doctrinal equivalents in Theravada Buddhism.

REVIEW

- Explain what 'schismatic activity' is.
- 2 Clarify what it means to say that 'Mahayana Buddhism is an umbrella term'.
- Recall what has been the main historical function of Mahayana Buddhism.
- Identify what Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism have in common.



monastery, Anuradhapura, northern Sri Lanka. This is a very common mode of portraying the Buddha.

Development of Mahayana

Mahayana is thought to have arisen as a reaction against the small-mindedness (*hina*) of the early Hinayana schools. The line of descent goes through the development of the so-called Mahasamghika split – an event that occurred perhaps at the time of the second council held at Vaishali (386 BCE). The Mahasamghika wanted a larger, less exclusive, *sangha* than the Theravadins, one that would somehow include the laity. They developed policies apparently much more conducive to the religious aspirations of the laity, rather than simply concentrating on the higher aspirations of the monks who, at least in principle, sought *nirvana*.

A Japanese scholar, Akira Hirakawa, argued in 1963 that Mahayana Buddhism first arose when groups of laypeople and monks who entered the **bodhisattva** path congregated physically around **stupas** and monasteries. The resulting process led to the development of a new form of Buddhism, one that permitted people other than just monks to aspire towards enlightenment. According to this view, the laity was demanding more inclusion in the elite path to *nirvana* previously reserved in Theravada schools for the **arahants**, and *stupas* were places where lay Buddhists, monks and nuns congregated for the performance of religious festivals. Such places and locations were also excellent venues for teaching the *dhamma*.

A more recent view of the rise and growth of Mahayana suggests that the huge number of Mahayana (and Theravada) texts translated into Chinese from 150 ce onwards, but especially after 380 ce, convey a false impression that Indian Mahayana Buddhism was a much more extensive and divergent cultural phenomenon than Theravada Buddhism. After 500 ce, with the development of Mahayana Buddhism in China, then Korea and Japan, and finally Tibet, the various Mahayanist sects – with their emphasis on the *bodhisattva* path, the existence of the Buddha nature in all sentient beings, and the presence of a transcendent god-like Buddha – convey a much richer understanding of approaches to enlightenment than are found in Theravadin countries.

The Mahayana takes a hard line against other faiths, in theory at any rate, but its attitude to the rest of the Buddhist fold is characterised by ambivalence and defensiveness, and it gives every appearance of being a minority movement ...

P. Harrison, 'Who gets to ride in the Great Vehicle? Self image and identity among the followers of the early Mahayana', Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, 10, 1987, p. 86

This brief quote justifies the idea that Mahayana Buddhism was probably just one small sect among others in India up until about 400 CE, and that most were probably Theravada schools. It is true that the Perfection of Wisdom literature, always regarded as among the earliest of the Mahayana literature, had been composed since the beginning of the Common Era along with some other

texts discussed below. But, because of the difficulty of their content and their composition in Sanskrit, these works were probably passed around in very narrow circles, and so cannot be taken as a sign of the popularity of Mahayana in India.

Mahayana texts and teachings

The Pali Canon is the most complete of the Theravadin Canons, composed in a language derived from Sanskrit. Other canons existed in Sanskrit but are now substantially incomplete. It is likely the Pali Canon existed in some form or other by about 140 BCE. One hundred years later, Buddhist texts in Sanskrit began to appear, and many of these depicted doctrinal tendencies that are closely related to what came to be the Mahayana.

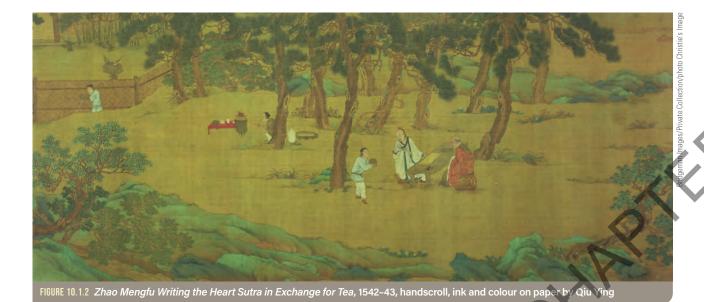
▶ Refer to Chapter 2, pages xx-X, for more on the Lotus Sutra.

Perhaps the oldest is the *Lotus Sutra*, but this is followed by the earliest of what became a complete genre of literature, the Perfection of Wisdom texts (*Prajnaparamita*). There are at least a dozen such texts and they range in size from a few lines (the *Heart Sutra*) to *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* in One Hundred Thousand Lines.

A flood of Mahayana literature associated with Tantric practices, involving visualisation of the Buddha and particular *bodhisattvas*, appeared after the eighth century CE. From about the fourth century CE, many independent (that is, not translations of Sanskrit originals) Mahayanan texts appeared in China and soon after in Tibet, Korea and Japan.

One of the principal areas of difference between the Mahayana and Theravada texts is in the differing images of the Buddha they depict. The Theravadin Pali texts present a much more austere image of the Buddha and of the monks in comparison with what is found in early Mahayana texts. To some extent this matches a perception that the *sangha* in contemporary Theravadin countries are similar, whereas those in the Mahayanan countries are not only marked by their greater variety from the Theravadin sangha but also from each other. Especially in the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha is described in a luxuriant manner through a set of highly pictorial narratives easily comprehensible to an audience who are not well versed in Buddhist teaching. With their sustained teaching of the doctrine of 'skilful means' they depict a Buddha who is much more concerned with the fate of those people who are apparently incapable of enlightenment than the Buddha depicted in Theravadin literature.

The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines teaches about two other fundamental Mahayana teachings – the related themes of the bodhisattva and the doctrine of emptiness – integrating both quite intentionally with the understanding of what it means to be a bodhisattva. Another important theme of this text and other Mahayana texts is the inadequacy of what they called Hinayana. It is taken to mean 'small-minded' (a quite derogatory term in Mahayana texts), as opposed to 'great,



expansive vehicle'. And it is this distinction that helps to convey a perception of the difference between Hinayana and Mahayana. But the authors of these texts directed their critique in a manner more potent than just developing the sharp contrast expressed by the two names.

Those, however, who are certain that they have got safely out of this world (i.e. the Arhats [arahants] who have reached their last birth, and think they have done with it all), are unfit for full enlightenment (because they are not willing to go, from compassion, back into birth-and-death). And why? The flood of birth-and-death hems them in. Incapable of repeated rebirths, they are unable to aspire to full enlightenment.

E. Conze, Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1970, p. 15

The so-called selfishness of the Theravadin arahants (because they were perceived as being concerned only about their own attainment of nirvana) is always contrasted with the generosity of the bodhisattva, who is required as part of his chosen path to help all other beings obtain enlightenment. A concern with the spiritual (and material) good of all beings is a formal difference between Theravada and Mahayana, reflected heavily in inscriptions from the fourth century CE onwards. In inscriptions of the former, donors of gifts present their gift as a ritual act for their deceased parents, whereas the equivalent formula in Mahayana inscriptions specify: 'Let whatever merit is here, with my parents placed in front, be for all beings to obtain supreme knowledge.' Yet, in the final analysis, those who are arahants are always required to exercise compassion towards all sentient beings, even if this is not so formally inscribed within the pathway they follow.

DID YOU KNOW?

In Australia both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism are represented. Both groups are really defined in terms of ethnic background, though Mahayana is more strongly patronised by native-born Australians than Theravada, which is mainly

patronised by immigrants from South-East Asia, and Sri Lanka to a lesser extent, regions where Theravada has been traditionally practised for centuries. Mahayana patronage too has been associated mainly with Australians of Chinese and Vietnamese origin, yet because of the widespread publicity given to Zen and to Tibetan Buddhism, especially in their philosophical dimensions, they have been taken up by nativeborn Australians. Equally, the success of the Dalai Lama in publicising the plight of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism has also heightened the interest in Tibetan Buddhism. People can maintain an interest in Tibetan Buddhism and Zen without engaging in the ritual and devotional aspects of Buddhism, but this is not so for Chinese and Vietnamese practitioners, nor is it so for those who attend Theravadin temples, who support the monks, but do not occupy themselves with the philosophical side of Buddhism.

REVIEW

- 1 In your own words, explain what the sangha is.
- 2 Prepare a mind map to outline the development of Mahayana Buddhism. Note the appearance of the various Mahayanan texts in your mind map.
- 3 Distinguish how the image of the Buddha in Mahayanan literature differs from the Theravadin image.
- 4 In one sentence, summarise the difference between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism.
- 5 Explain the contribution of Mahayana to the development and expression of Buddhism.
- 6 Analyse the impact of Mahayana on Buddhism.

EXTENSION

Use the weblink provided to investigate some of the Mahayana schools. Choose two schools and write a report to summarise what their websites tell you about Mahayana Buddhism.



Weblink Mahayanan

10.1.2 Sister Dhammadinna (1881–1967)

GLOSSARY

refuge The taking of refuge in the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the *sangha* is a brief ritual that can be performed in private or in public by the laity and is extremely popular because of its simplicity.

Vesak The annual ritual celebrating the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death (*parinirvana*).

Sister Dhammadinna was born in the United States and lived in Sri Lanka for 30 years, probably from the early 1920s. She visited Australia twice, first in 1952 (a trip financed by the prominent Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar and diplomat, Dr G.P. Malalasekera) and again in 1957. At the time of those visits she was quite well known in Sri Lanka. She had been given patronage there by a Lady de Silva, who had built a Forest Hermitage – a kind of retreat that may be located in an urban area but retains a strong atmosphere of isolation. There Sister Dhammadinna lived in a hut, leading a life of seclusion.

The paradox of all this is that her life in Sri Lanka, the little we know about it, was that of a forest-dwelling monk more concerned about meditation than the ritualistic functions of a monk who acts like a parish priest in guiding a particular designated area. In this she was following the model of the small number of other Western women who went to Sri Lanka, became ordained as nuns and lived a life of poverty and chastity in an isolated location. This model of the forest-dwelling monk who builds up huge merit is well known in Buddhism. It is believed this merit can be transferred to those not capable of engaging in the meditational lifestyle needed to produce it.

Mr Graeme Lyall, a member of the Buddhist Society of New South Wales since its inception in 1985, knew Sister Dhammadinna and has provided valuable information about her time in Sydney. He paints a picture of a strong-willed, austere woman who tested her students in different ways, held eccentric views about the identity of some of the people she came into contact with, and tried to influence most aspects of the lives of those who became her students.

When she first arrived in Sydney, in 1952, she was 70 years old and virtually penniless. Initially, she stayed with Marie Byles, who housed Sister Dhammadinna in a but in the backyard of her own house. Eventually, she was provided with accommodation by another Sydney Buddhist, Leo Berkeley, until she moved to a granny flat in the home of Eric and Lynne Penrose. As well as conducting weekly classes at Leo Berkeley's house, she also gave lectures at the Centre Club in George Street.

Although she had a solid knowledge of Buddhism, she was somewhat eccentric. It was not unusual for her, during her lectures to cry out saying that she had had a glimpse of enlightenment. She also gave weekly lectures at the Centre Club premises in George Street, Sydney.

A very old man used to attend these lectures. She claimed that she followed him to the stairs one night and he disappeared. She claimed that he was a manifestation of Sakka, king of the gods, who had come to subdue evil whilst she lectured.

Graeme Lyall, 2004

DID YOU KNOW? -

Marie Byles (1900–1979) was the first woman to qualify to practise law in New South Wales and was a founding member of the Buddhist Society of New South Wales, the first society of Western Buddhists in Australia. As well as writing several books on Buddhism, she was an ardent bushwalker and advocate for the conservation of the environment.

It is said in the Pali meditational texts that meditators can receive a glimpse of *nirvana* at a certain point in their meditation, and both Sakka and Brahma were Hindu deities who performed protective roles in relation to the Buddha. In this sense, Sister Dhammadinna's comments are fully understandable within a Buddhist cultural background.

On 29 May 1953, she gave the **refuges** and the Five Precepts (see page **XX**) to a group of eight people, who from then on were considered lay Buddhists. A **Vesak** celebratory ritual was held on the same day. She left Australia shortly after the refuges and lived for a while in Hawaii before returning to Australia in 1957. Once more she gave classes and lectures, though by this time the Buddhist Society of New South Wales had split into two factions. When her visa expired, Sister Dhammadinna went back to Hawaii and lived in a Zen temple there. She died in 1967.

▶ Refer to pages XXX–X for a description of Vesak.



FIGURE 10.1.3 Sister Dhammadinna in Sydney with those who took the refuges and celebrated Vesak with her in May 1953. At front right is Graeme Lyall (1931–2015) one of the central figures of Australian Buddhism in the twentieth century.

What, in conclusion, can be said of Sister Dhammadinna? She obviously had a good knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and was a proficient practitioner of meditation. With her focus on meditation and knowledge of Western culture, Sister Dhammadinna was an ideal person to visit Australia at a time when Buddhism was attracting considerable interest. When she arrived in 1952, she had lived in Sri Lanka for 30 years, and before that had

been brought up in the United States. It is possible that the reasons she became a Buddhist were also reflected in the decisions of the European Australians to take the same step – although spending 30 years in Sri Lanka would have alienated her somewhat from the changes then occurring in Europe and the United States.

It cannot be said that she was the founder of the Buddhist Society of New South Wales, nor that interest in Buddhism would have subsided without her initial year-long visit. A so-called 'Little Circle of Dhamma' had already existed in Melbourne in 1925 and a number of influential personalities were already studying Buddhism prior to her arrival in Sydney. Yet her year in Sydney would have sustained the interest and practices of those early pioneers who helped establish Buddhism in Australia. Sister Dhammadinna was somebody who had long experience in a well-known Theravada country, she had good credentials as a meditator, and she was also able to bring a taste of an actual Buddhist culture to people whose knowledge of Buddhism had been primarily gained through books. In addition, she might have been responsible for focusing the interests of the two main Buddhist societies in Australia on Theravada rather than Mahayana Buddhism (which remained rather peripheral until the early 1970s).

To say she is a significant person in Buddhism as a whole is problematic – that would be to assume her influence in Buddhism extended beyond a group of European Australian Buddhists who were associated with the founding of the Buddhist Society of New South Wales To them, however, she was quite significant.

REVIEW

- Briefly outline the distinguishing features of Theravada Buddhism.
- 2 In your own words, define 'refuge'.
- 3 Explain the contribution of Sister Dhammadinna to the development and expression of Buddhism in Australia.
- 4 Analyse the impact of Sister Dhammadinna on Buddhism in Australia.

EXTENSION

- 1 What do you think is the significance of the name 'Dhammadinna'?
- 2 Use the weblinks provided to find out more about Sister Dhammadinna and Buddhism in New South Wales.



Weblinks Buddhism in NSW

ABC Radio National

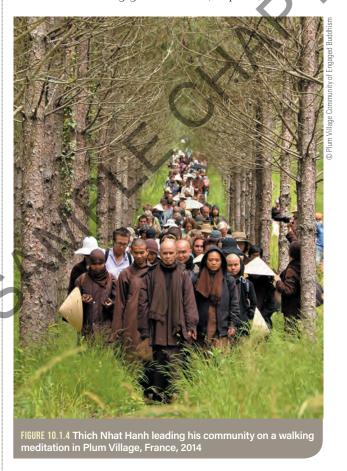
10.1.3 Thich Nhat Hanh (b. 1926)

GLOSSARY

sangha Name for the assembly of monks and nuns

Thich Nhat Hanh is a charismatic Vietnamese monk who became a significant peace campaigner and had a huge

impact on the anti-war movement of the 1960s and 1970s. He continues to speak out against violence in all its forms. Hanh became a Mahayana monk at a young age, received a monastic education, and became active at a time when his country was fighting for its independence during a long civil war (1955–75). He was exiled from Vietnam in 1966 and only allowed to return in 2005. In 1982, he established the Plum Village Monastery in Southern France and other Buddhist centres in Europe, America and Australia. His literary output has been enormous – more than one hundred books – and he has also been heavily involved in establishing and growing the movement called Engaged Buddhism (see p. XX).



Hanh is very much a Buddhist activist, a stance he took during his emergence on the international scene during the beginnings of the Vietnam War. The government of Ngo Dinh Diem (1955–63) had a strong Catholic bias. It persecuted various Buddhist groups, and engaged in forced conversions and destruction of pagodas. Different groups led by monks had come out against this persecution, especially since Vietnam had long been primarily a Buddhist country.

Hanh was involved in 1964 with the Unified Buddhist *Sangha*, an organisation attempting to unify the different Buddhist groups in Vietnam, and was instrumental in establishing the Van Hanh Buddhist University and then the School of Youth for Social Service in September 1965. In 1966 he accepted an invitation from Cornell University to visit the United States for a speaking tour. He left Vietnam for what he thought would be only a few



FIGURE 10.1.5 Thich Nhat Hanh in Canada, speaking against the war in Vietnam, on 22 October 1967, the year Rev. Martin Luther King Jr nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. That year no one was awarded the prize.

weeks. In June 1966, a peace proposal Hanh presented in Washington, DC, urging Americans to stop bombing and offer reconstruction aid, led to an immediate ban on his return to Vietnam – the beginning of his 40-year exile. When peace talks were held in Paris in 1969, he led the Buddhist delegation.

Out of his deep concern for world peace Hanh developed the ideas of Engaged Buddhism and 'walking meditation', which have been very influential in modernising Buddhism and bringing it to the West.

DID YOU KNOW?

Thich Nhat Hanh could not return to Vietnam until he was permitted to visit in 2005. He spent his years of exile in France, where he founded Plum Village Monastery in the Dordogne.



.ife of Hanh

▶ Chapter 15 Religion and peace, pages XXX

Engaged Buddhism

Engaged Buddhism was developed by Thich Nhat Hanh as a means of taking Buddhism out of the monastery and into the social and economic world. It is a form of active social work applying Buddhist principles to social and economic problems.

The idea of Engaged Buddhism was based on the example 'of a living *Bodhisattva* named Bac Sieu, who had been riding a bicycle for fifty years to bring rice and care to thousands of destitute in the city of Hue'. Students associated with the School of Youth for Social Service initially practised it as 'volunteers' – and not necessarily as monks – who had 'rejected a life based on materialism but sought only the happiness that a life of service could bring'.

Hanh lays out the 14 principles of Engaged Buddhism in his 1993 book *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*.

These 14 principles include: not holding any doctrine – even of Buddhist teachings – as absolute truth; confronting

suffering; rejecting fame, profit and wealth; not hating or being angry; maintaining mindfulness at all times; not creating conflict with words; always speaking truthfully; not using the Buddhist community for profit; not engaging in an occupation that is harmful; not killing or letting others kill; not stealing; looking after your own body; and practising sexual integrity.

In these, one can see the five basic precepts (see Chapter 2, pages XX–X) that the Buddha laid down for laypeople. But they go further by applying them to a world of over-consumption, greed, unsustainability, communal hatred and excess individuality.

Collectively, these precepts establish a coherent program that forms the foundation for a world where economic inequality is diminished, where peace reigns instead of warfare, and where, because of the application of mindfulness, individuals are much more sensitive to the thoughts of others and also of the way their own emotions drive their behaviour. Engaged Buddhism is then another social movement perfectly suited to confronting the problems of the twenty-first century, whilst also offering to people a sense of religious depth that is not dogmatic.

Today, there are thousands worldwide who regularly recite the Fourteen Precepts of Engaged Buddhism, which remain uniquely applicable to contemporary moral dilemmas. They are guidelines for anyone wishing to live mindfully. By developing peace and serenity through ethical and conscientious living, we can help our society make the transition from one based on greed and consumerism to one in which thoughtfulness and compassionate action are of the deepest value.

Fred Eppsteiner, Introduction to 'The fourteen precepts of Engaged Buddhism', Lion's Roar website, 2017

Walking mindfulness

Over the last 10 years the form of meditation known as mindfulness has been released from its Buddhist framework and adopted into all sorts of practices associated with psychology and educational training. It is a mode of meditation that involves training the mind to step back and contemplate everything around it without making any judgement. It can be adaptable to all sorts of contexts and has become an almost universal aspect of contemporary Buddhism.

DID YOU KNOW?

Mindfulness, which has become so popular in the Western world, is ultimately derived from one of the two fundamental forms of meditation taught by the Buddha in the fifth century BCE.

Walk with Me is a meditative film about a community of Zen Buddhist monks and nuns who have dedicated their lives to mastering the art of mindfulness with their world-famous teacher Thich Nhat Hanh.



Weblink Walk with Me Hanh's special contribution has been to make its application much easier by developing the idea of 'walking meditation'. This enables the development of meditational activity in the mind, slowing down one's mental and physical activity, and providing a new focus for appreciating the earth.

To walk in this way, we have to notice each step. Each step made in mindfulness can bring us back to the here and the now. Go slowly. Mindfulness lights our way. We don't rush. With each breath we may take just one step. We may have run all our life, but now we don't have to run anymore. This is the time to stop running. To be grounded in the earth is to feel its solidity with each step and know that we are right where we are supposed to be.

..

Walking meditation unites our body and our mind. We combine our breathing with our steps. When we breathe in, we may take two or three steps. When we breathe out, we may take three, four, or five steps. We pay attention to what is comfortable for our body.

...

In Buddhism, we speak of meditation as an act of awakening. To awaken is to be awake to something. We need to be awake to the fact that the earth is in danger and living species on earth are also in danger. When we walk mindfully, each step reminds us of our responsibility. We have to protect the earth with the same commitment we have to protect our family and ourselves. The earth can nourish and heal us but it suffers as well. With each step the earth heals us, and with each step we heal the earth.

Thich Nhat Hanh on walking meditation

Climate change

It is clear from his teachings on walking meditation and Engaged Buddhism that Hanh is very concerned about the earth and its welfare, and this has led him into a further deep concern about the problem of climate change. Much that he writes now is directed at making people – all people – aware that the earth is precious, that humans are part of it, and that they must begin to appreciate the true relationship they have with it. Using analogies such as 'The earth is our mother ...' reaches deep into the beliefs of various religions, though not into the teachings of the Buddha himself.

We need to change our way of thinking and seeing things. We need to realise that the Earth is not just our environment. The Earth is not something outside of us. Breathing with mindfulness and contemplating your body, you realise that you are the Earth. You realise that your consciousness is also the consciousness of the Earth. Look around you – what you see is not your environment, it is you.

Thich Nhat Hanh, statement to the UN on climate change, September 2015

In 2014, Hahn suffered a severe stroke, and in 2018 he returned to Vietnam to live at Tu Hieu Temple for 'his remaining days'. This is the temple where he was given *dhamma* transmission – which made him a teacher as a 16-year-old.

Hanh has become famous in the West as a monk who has taken Buddhism into the secular world. He uses language that comes from Christianity, Hinduism and other religions, and this makes his teachings very accessible to a wide audience. But the Buddhist flavour is strongly retained. He remains a typical monk with shaved head and saffron robes.



FIGURE 10.1.6 Buddhist monks and nuns greeting Thich Nhat Hanh (centre) at a ceremony marking the first day of Lunar New Year at Tu Hieu temple on 25 January 2020

REVIEW

- 1 Outline the major events in the life of Thich Nhat Hanh
- What is the relationship between Engaged Buddhism and mindfulness?
- Explain the contribution of Thich Nhat Hanh to Buddhism.
- 4 'There is no doubt that Thich Nhat Hanh has had a huge influence on the acceptance of Buddhist teachings by Westerners. It is difficult, however, to assess how influential he is in contemporary South-East Asian Buddhism.' Analyse some implications of this statement.

EXTENSION

- 1 Using the weblinks provided, construct a storyboard for a documentary on the life of Thich Nhat Hanh. What would be your priorities in telling his story?
- 2 Try mindfulness by downloading one of the free apps available from reputable sites. For example, see the Mindful Check-in meditation app from Nan Tien Temple or a mindfulness app from Plum Village. Write three sentences to describe your experience.



Weblinks Memories of Thich Nhat Hanh

Thich Nhat Hanh prepares to die

Life of Thich Nhat Hanh

Life of Thich Nhat Hanh podcast

Thich Nhat Hanh's peerless influence

Mindfulness apps

Mindful check-in

10.2 Ethics

GLOSSARY

ethics Ethics is the explicit, philosophical and/or religious reflection on moral beliefs and practices. Its purpose is to clarify what is right and wrong and what human beings should freely do or refrain from doing.

The Buddha stressed the cultivation of particular **ethics**, and Buddhist ethical behaviour was grounded within the realm of individual intentionality, not of group cohesion. Intentionality was emphasised



Weblink

because the accrual of *karma* was a consequence of the intention to act in a particular way, not just of the physical act itself. Ethics in Buddhism are directed at a person's present situation such that, if followed, ethical behaviour will always produce positive outcomes. Ethical behaviour is also directed towards the ultimate attainment of *nirvana*, at least as far as monks and nuns are concerned.

At the most elementary (yet still difficult) level, Buddhist practice requires that negative emotions are translated into positive emotions, until the negative emotions finally disappear. Three negative emotions – greed, hatred and delusion – lie deep within the mind and, being so basic, are extremely difficult to eradicate. It is primarily through meditational practices that these will be eradicated as emotional tendencies, whereas the transformation of negative emotions to positive emotions will be achieved more easily by following the Buddha's precepts about behaviour. The Buddha's teachings on ethics could be described as having both therapeutic and spiritual implications.

➤ Refer to Chapter 2, pages xx, for the core ethical teachings of Buddhism.

All of this is laid down with considerable emphasis in Buddhist literature, and the specific forms of ethical attitudes are defined with great precision. This means it is easier to trace changes in ethical attitudes nowadays back to what is found in the classical texts or, more pointedly, to locate precedents in canonical texts for shifts in contemporary ethical behaviour.

10.2.1 Bioethics

GLOSSARY

bioethics A branch of applied ethics relating to moral decisions and behaviour in the life sciences and incorporating, but not limited to, medical ethics, which is commonly considered to be a subspecialty of bioethics. It is usually referred to as being interdisciplinary – many disciplines feed in the data to be considered in order to make appropriate judgments for human conduct.

Vinaya The name given to the collections of books detailing the conduct of monks, and a word denoting correct conduct – the monastic code.

DID YOU KNOW?

The term 'bioethics' was coined in 1970 by US biochemist Dr Van Rensselaer Potter as a bridge between science and humanity.

In the last decade there has been a great deal of writing on bioethics from scholars of Buddhism and Buddhist practitioners. Although this can be considered a response to advances in both medical technology and modernist thinking, it is possible to find passages in Buddhist canonical and post-canonical literature that have a direct bearing on what have come to be framed as bioethical questions. Abortion and euthanasia are both important subjects of bioethical discourse. Both share the characteristic of being processes that require acts of violence (admittedly, qualified violence) for their proper execution. Violence is, however, strongly condemned in Buddhism, both for laypeople and for monks and nuns. Laypeople are requested to abstain from killing any living beings, although exceptions are made for people in certain occupations, such as farmers who may unintentionally have to engage in the killing of animals. In the case of monks, the intentional taking of a human's life is one of the four **Vinaya** offences that lead to immediate expulsion from the sangha.

The classical texts go further than simply opposing acts of violence, as understood in the broadest possible sense. Passages in these texts against abortion and euthanasia would then seem to function as definitive precedents. The famous and still influential fifth-century CE commentator Buddhaghosha expressed this view:

'Taking life,' means to murder anything that lives. It refers to the striking and killing of living beings ... 'Taking life' is then the will to kill anything that one perceives as having life, to act so as to terminate the life-force in it, in so far as the will finds expression in bodily action or in speech.

Cited in E. Conze, Buddhist Scriptures, 1959, pp. 70-1

The *Vinaya* goes even further than this, specifically making proscriptions against acts of abortion by the monk:

An ordained monk should not intentionally deprive a living thing of life even if it is only an ant. A monk who deliberately deprives a human being of life, even to the extent of causing an abortion, is no longer a follower of the Buddha.

Vinaya I, 97, translation by D. Keown, Buddhism and Bioethics, 1995, p. 93

This may seem obvious when applied to living beings that can be seen to be such. What about a foetus, which cannot be seen and may not be obviously a living thing?

Abortion

Buddhist literature is clear that the criterion of life is determined by the presence of consciousness (*vijnana*) in an entity, as this makes such an entity a 'sentient being'.

If anything, whether god, human, animal or plant, is capable of reflective thought, it is regarded as having the capacity to know self-consciously and is therefore regarded as a sentient being. A foetus is considered to have sufficient qualities to meet the above definition, leading to the conclusion that the act of abortion is an act of violence against a living being who possesses an individuality that is distinct from that of the woman carrying it.

The correct analysis of pregnancy from a Buddhist perspective is not that the fetus is a 'part' of the mother but that one individual is temporarily housed within the body of another. Abortion is therefore neither simply the loss of part of the mother nor a temporary redirection of the life flow. In the simplest terms it is the intentional destruction of a karmic being.

D. Keown, Buddhism and Bioethics, 1995, p. 106

Abortion was certainly known in early Buddhist literature, and a number of texts in the *Vinaya* literature make reference to it. Because monks were known to possess medical knowledge, there are recorded cases where they were approached to provide drug-related remedies that would lead to abortion. The provision of these remedies was forbidden by the Buddha and any monk who provided them would have been liable for formal punishment. It is not known how common this would have been in the period when the early texts were composed, but the prohibitions are illustrated by actual examples.

In contemporary Buddhist societies of South-East Asia, the image of monks is that they are too far removed from the 'secular' world to even engage in debates about abortion and other bioethical matters. Their traditional status as people who leave the social world to pursue a spiritual life is such that they are regarded as incapable of dealing with bioethical problems. However, while members of the monastic orders in these countries are viewed in this light, this is not so for the rest of the population who have been raised as lay Buddhists. As Buddhists, the lay members of the population should not conduct abortions because of the prohibition against killing living beings, the first of the five actions not recommended for laypeople. Nonetheless, abortions are performed and are quite widespread in Thailand, and especially Japan, even though the statistics can never be fully accurate.

The performance of an abortion has karmic implications for the aborted foetus, the person who conducts the procedure, and the woman who undergoes the abortion. Each will experience karmic consequences that must be lived out in the future. The least of these will be experienced by the aborted foetus – birth as a human is always regarded as being superior to birth in the other five life worlds, as it is only humans who are in the privileged position to attain *nirvana*. This is why the karmic consequences of abortion for those who perform it are greater than the act of violence perpetrated.

The *sangha* does not want to be involved in the abortion debate – in fact, its attitude towards it is already clear – yet abortion is widespread in many Buddhist countries. What is to be done from a Buddhist perspective? A positive response to it can scarcely be expected, for the reasons already given. One resolution is the performance of rituals that are in some vague sense associated with Buddhism, and that are perhaps modelled on the transfer of merit from the living to the dead. This enables the appropriate ceremony to be placed within an existing Buddhist framework.

[In Thailand] the very common ceremonies of making money, flowers, or incense offerings to Buddhist images, and releasing birds, fish, or turtles at temples are frequently resorted to by women to assuage their feelings of guilt and to lessen the harm done to the aborted fetus. This would be achieved by transferring the merit of the ritual to the fetus.

R. Florida, 'Buddhism and abortion', in D. Keown (ed.), Contemporary Buddhist Ethics, 2000, p. 154

A similar resolution to the problem is found in the veneration among Japanese of the *bodhisattva* Jizo Bosatsu, whose images are made in honour of aborted foetuses. He is a *bodhisattva* who is long reputed to have assisted the dead and was especially connected with children dying in childbirth and at a very young age. Commissioning the construction of an image of him and having it formally established in a temple has become an important religious means of expressing compassion for the aborted foetus.

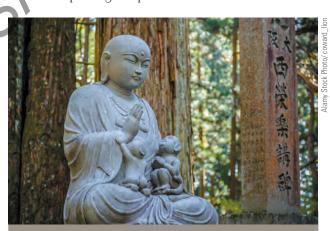


FIGURE 10.2.1 Statue of the bodhisattva Jizo Bosatsu holding two children, Koyasan, Japan

RESPOND

Explain how veneration of Jizo Bosatsu and other ceremonies can lessen the guilt of 'the intentional destruction of a karmic being'.

Euthanasia

It is not difficult to see that the same arguments that apply to abortion will also apply to euthanasia, even if the latter differs from the former in that it applies to a demonstrable living being. Both acts are instances of violence conducted against a sentient being.

Bioethical problems pertaining to elderly people have two dimensions in contemporary Buddhist countries, either in shortening or lengthening a person's natural life. Both are regarded in a similar light and both have assumed a different dimension in the last 20 years because of the substantial improvement in medical technology. But decisions on the use of this technology, especially in countries where a strong pressure on resources exists, often clash with existing belief systems.

We have here, then a conflict of values and moral perceptions between, on the one hand, the doctors who have faith in the healing powers of modern technological medicine and who have the obligation to save lives as part of their professional ethics; and on the other hand, the monk's [Venerable Buddhadasa] and his disciples' belief in the limitations of modern medicine ... this famous monk who accepted natural death had wanted to set an example of facing it without fear or anxiety, in keeping with the tenets of Buddhism. These teachings emphasise non-clinging to life, and the non-craving for the prolongation of life, that is, the acceptance of death as part of the human condition.

Pinit Ratanakul, 'To save or let go: Thai Buddhist perspectives on euthanasia', in D. Keown (ed.), *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics*, 2000, p. 172

This is a brilliant summary of the dilemma. Medical technology can 'artificially' lengthen or shorten a person's life, but to do so violates fundamental beliefs about *karma* for a Buddhist. Buddhists do not reject the use of medical treatment. If a person is sick, they should make use of available remedies, and medicine was developed to a very high level among monks in the monastic context. The two dimensions of extending or bringing an end to life apply mainly to the old.

Early Buddhist texts forbid suicide. Both taking your own life and having somebody else take it for you with your own informed consent stand directly at odds with the traditional teachings of karma. According to Buddhist (and Hindu) views of karma, many details of a person's life are determined by past actions, even to the point where the time and circumstances of one's death may be determined. Though it could be argued that suicide concludes a person's life at a particular time as determined by past karma, there is also the possibility that it cuts short a life that would have lasted longer if a natural death had been allowed. Cutting short one's life can lead to the consequence that the past karmic impulses that should have been lived out in that life will now have to be lived out in a ater life. Hence, suicide could be understood as a cause for further rebirth. Euthanasia may well fall into this category even if it is agreed upon by the patient.

Similarly, if life is extended artificially (the opposite of euthanasia) the same problem may arise. Karmic impulses dictate a particular life span and this is violated if technology is used to prolong that life span.

There is also the question of the karmic implications for those who undertake the process of euthanasia. Ultimately, all violent acts are opposed according to Buddhist doctrine, even violent acts towards oneself, because they will be productive of (usually) bad *karma*. In the case of the famous Thai monk Venerable Buddhadasa (1906–1993), the doctors found it necessary to use artificial means to save his life after a severe stroke. They were reluctant, however, to keep him in hospital against his own wishes because they were concerned that his inevitable death might have been attributable to them, with the accompanying karmic consequences.

While it is likely that debate about euthanasia will continue to emerge in Buddhist countries, the parameters of this debate will not be markedly different from what has been suggested here.

REVIEW

- In your own words, define the Buddhist concept of karma.
- 2 Describe the principal ethical teachings of Buddhism as covered in this section.
- **3 Explain** how these teachings are used to determine Buddhist positions on bioethical issues.
- 4 In pairs, discuss whether cultural factors have any influence in a Buddhist response to bioethical issues.
- 5 Analyse the application of Buddhist ethical teachings to one bioethical issue.

EXTENSION

Use the weblink provided to find out more about Buddhist ethics in relation to stem-cell research. Summarise in point form the Buddhist attitude to stem-cell research.



Weblink Buddhism and stem-cell research

10.2.2 Environmental ethics

In contemporary Buddhist countries, the current situation that is applied to the treatment of the natural environment in an ethical sense is the same as that found in relation to bioethics. To even consider the idea of environmental ethics in Buddhism requires an understanding of Buddhist perspectives on the environment.

Buddhist teachings certainly take a negative attitude towards the sociocultural world of the city and the village, but deal with it in a realistic way. Monks and nuns can be *in* the world while they are not *of* it (that is, not consumed by worldly things). As for nature, there is no definitive view in the early texts. In the early *Theragatha* poems composed by monks, the natural world of forest and mountain is seen as a place of isolation and danger from animals and demons, and the courage of the monk who resides there is lauded. The theme of the heroic forest-dwelling monk is frequently found in such poems. So, if the natural environment was appreciated, it was in a very broad sense without any real attempt to define precisely why it should be so appreciated. Isolation was important for the meditator, not the precise nature of the environment governing this isolation.

With its focus on liberation from *samsara*, Buddhist doctrine aims towards creating the conditions where a person

can free themselves of the conditions that produce further rebirths. At a very basic level, then, Buddhist doctrine would result in an attitude of indifference towards the condition of the environment which, like all other phenomenal things, is conditioned by the three marks of existence.

Refer to Chapter 2, pages XXX, for coverage of the three marks of existence.

Liberation, then, comes through escape from the bonds that tie us to samsara, not through some fundamental restructuring of existence. In this light the environmentalist agenda of restoration, though well intentioned, misses the fundamental point.

lan Harris, 'Buddhism and ecology', in D. Keown (ed.), *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics*, 2000, p. 123

This is the dilemma faced by contemporary Buddhists who want to be activists for the preservation of the environment, while wanting to anchor their activism in their tradition's understanding of the Buddha's own teachings. To put this succinctly: if a person's sole aim is to put an end to rebirth, why waste time improving the conditions from which one is attempting to escape? A qualification to this is that plants and animals are both regarded as sentient beings. The case for regarding plants as sentient beings is a difficult one, yet there is some evidence in the texts that this is how plants were regarded. If so, this would justify active intervention to preserve the environment on the basis of the monk's need to exercise compassion.



A new element in the Buddhist response to environmental concerns relates to developing Buddhist activism in regard to human-induced climate change. This has long been foreshadowed by very prominent Buddhist figures such as Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama, who have for 20 years expressed a deep concern about the environment and climate change, basing their concerns on what they have observed around them and a strong belief in the interdependence of all things. They have connected this directly with their teachings on world peace (see Chapter 15, pages XXX—X) and the bodhisattva impulse of helping all beings in both a material and a religious sense. Both men have been very influential in internationalising Buddhism in the West, and with this they have brought a strong recommendation about the need for action about climate change.

DID YOU KNOW?

A recent book, *Our Only Home!* A Climate Appeal to the World (2020), has the Dalai Lama speculating that if the Buddha returned to this world he would 'certainly be connected to the campaign to protect the environment ... Buddha would be green' (*The Guardian*, 12 November 2020).

In practical terms a number of initiatives have taken place. The widely publicised statement "The time to act is now: A Buddhist declaration on climate change' of 2015 was developed from contributions by Buddhist scholars and monks of all traditions. The first signatory was the Dalai Lama, and he was followed by many thousands of others. The website Ecological Buddhism, associated with this declaration, provides a Buddhist justification for action to confront the environmental and social effects of climate change. Much of the short declaration is taken up with summarising the present scientific position on climate change, but there are very clear signs of an attempt to frame this within the context of fundamental Buddhist teachings. Consider this extract from the declaration:

From a Buddhist perspective, a sane and sustainable economy would be governed by the principle of sufficiency: the key to happiness is contentment rather than an ever-increasing abundance of goods. The compulsion to consume more and more is an expression of craving, the very thing the Buddha pinpointed as the root cause of suffering.

'The time to act is now: A Buddhist declaration on climate change', 14 May 2015

A more practical application of concern for the environment can be found in Thailand, where Buddhist monks are involved with sustainability, placing solar panels at Buddhist temples and helping villagers build houses out of mud and other sustainable material. Another expression of this environmental concern is found in the temples.



Weblink Buddhism and climate change

this environmental concern is found in the tree ordination movement, in which trees are ordained in a ceremony and this prevents them from being logged. This is in response to

the widespread logging that has been so damaging to forests in several South-East Asian countries.

REVIEW

- Describe the principal ethical teachings of Buddhism as covered in this section.
- **2** Explain how these teachings are used to determine the development of environmental ethics in Buddhism
- 3 Analyse the application of Buddhist ethical teachings to a specific environmental issue by using the material provided at the weblinks.



Weblink Dharmanet

Buddhist

Follow the weblink to read David Lov's essay 'What would the Buddha do?' on the Ecological Buddhism website. To what extent are his perspectives consistent with your knowledge of basic Buddhist teachings?



Weblink What would the

Significant practices 10.3

GLOSSARY

buddhahood The view that all beings have within them the potential to become a Buddha and possess enlightening knowledge.

public devotion The communal sharing of prayer and other religious actions, beyond the home, that binds the religious group as a faith community.

rite A formal or ceremonial act or procedure that is prescribed or is customary in a religious or other solemn use. Within the rite there are certain rituals; these are established or prescribed procedures and actions for the ceremony.

Most Buddhist countries today have a rich ritual calendar, something that was not present within early Buddhist culture, in which most rituals were practised in respect of Hindu and non-Hindu fertility deities. Many



Weblink

contemporary rituals are in fact fertility rituals and, with the exception of funerary rituals, Buddhist countries do not show much interest in performing the more typical Western 'rites of passage'.

Some of the specifically Buddhist rituals centre on the commemoration of the Buddha himself. Others are designed to reaffirm particular relations between the sangha and the laity. Still others are directed towards the veneration of Buddhist deities, each having their own place within a hierarchy of functions of power and authority, with the Buddha placed at the top.

This may seem odd given the popularly held belief that Buddhism does not accommodate a belief in gods. Yet, in most countries where Buddhism enjoys a strong presence, pre-Buddhist beliefs have been incorporated into Buddhist practices. This means that, in studying Buddhist ritual, there are very few 'pure' Buddhist rituals that are not in some way intermixed with what were originally non-Buddhist elements.

10.3.1 Vesak

NOTE

anglicised to Wesak) derives from the Vesak (somet Sanskrit Visakha, but in modern South-East Asian languages esak, which is now the most commonly used

One of the most commonly performed rituals of public **devotion** in Buddhist countries, including Australia in recent years, is the celebration of Vesak or Visakha. This annual ritual celebrates the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death (or parinirvana), all of which are believed by the celebrants to have occurred on the same day. By bringing together these fundamental events the ritual not only mirrors the temporal boundaries of the Buddha's life, but also focuses on the religious high points of his life. In South-East Asian countries, it is performed on the full-moon day of the month of Visakha (April-May), hence the name Vesak. It may not be coincidental that this is just before the beginning of the rainy season in these countries.

DID YOU KNOW?

The decision to agree to celebrate Vesak as the Buddha's birthday was formalised at the first Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, held in Sri Lanka in 1950.

The earliest occurrence of the practice of Vesak seems very old, though obviously it must come after the death of the Buddha since it celebrates his life and spiritual achievements. In the Sinhalese (literally 'from Sri Lanka') chronicle of kingship, the Mahavamsha, composed in the fifth century CE, most of the early Sinhalese kings are credited with performing many Vesaks. Of these kings, the earliest was the famous Dutthagamini (101-77 BCE), who erected many religious edifices and held 24 Vesak pujas. Later kings are also recorded as having performed large

numbers of these. Considering early Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon) was a Buddhist state, and the kings were active supporters of the religion, it is likely the Vesak ritual was a pre-eminent expression of the close connection between religion and state. Today the political implications are not so apparent, but it is inconceivable that a country where Buddhism is a prominent religion would not perform Vesak in some form or other. Today most South-East Asian Buddhist groups in Australia celebrate Vesak.

DID YOU KNOW?

It is likely the earliest Vesak to be held in Australia was the one performed in Sydney by Marie Byles and eight other people on 20 May 1951. Another was held in Sydney in May 1953 in the presence of Sister Dhammadinna (see pages XXX–X).

Vesak in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, where Vesak day is a national holiday, lamps are specially lit and, although flowers and coconut oil are used in the ritual, it is the parading of the lights that is most important. This reaffirms the importance of the symbolism associated with the Buddha as the remover of the darkness of ignorance. It is important to note that the royal family are present at the performance of the ritual, directly connecting the religion with the state.



FIGURE 10.3.1 Sri Lankan Buddhist devotees in Colombo light coconut oil lamps for Vesck 2020 during an island-wide curfew.

Vesak in Thailand

In Thailand, Vesak is the year's greatest religious holiday, and it comes during seeding and ploughing season. During the day, Buddhists will do merit and attend sermons at the temples (wat). In the evening, Buddhist monks throughout the country lead the laity in a magnificent candlelight procession three times around Buddhist shrines. In the villages, elders attend temple celebrations and sermons during the day. Those who have been working all day in the fields return at dusk to join the lovely candle- or torch-lit processions. These processions are enacted in every village, town and city wat. Each person carries flowers, three glowing incense sticks and a lighted candle in silent homage to the Buddha, his teaching and his disciples.

The procedures followed here occur in most other South-East Asian countries where Vesak is performed. Both the laity and the monks participate, indicating the great importance of the Buddha as a behavioural exemplar for both groups. Lights of various kinds are also common in many countries.

In South-East Asia, Vesak coincides with the spring festivals, and so brings rituals associated with Buddhism directly into conjunction with the agrarian calendar, reflecting a correspondence that has probably been associated with Buddhism since near its beginning.

Vesak in Burma (Myanmar)

Vesak in Burma is described thus:

The full moon of May ... is marked by watering the bo tree, the tree under which Enlightenment came to the Buddha. As at the New Year, merit is also acquired by capturing fish in the dwindling ponds and lakes, for this is the very end of the dry season, in which many lakes and riverbeds dry up, and releasing them in fresh water.

Strangely enough, Buddha Day, despite its important mythological associations, is not one of the popular festivals in Burma. In the villages it comes at the beginning of the agricultural season, and few villagers find time to take part in its various observances.

M.E. Spiro, Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes, 2nd edn, 1987, pp. 221–2

In Burma, the most important component is a celebration of the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment. This celebration is usually made easy as most Buddhist temples contain replicas of bo or Bodhi trees and the ritual watering of one of these is not expensive in either time or money. The act of releasing fish into fresh water is an act of compassion. It is an expression of the compassionate aspect of the Buddha's own practices of generosity that were described in popular tales such as the Jataka tales, which tell of the Buddha's previous lives before he attained **buddhahood**.

Even though the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment is highlighted in Vesak, most lay Buddhists would recognise this as being an unattainable goal for them, at least in this life. Yet in the use of lights and the release of fish we observe an intermingling of intellectual Buddhism with behavioural expressions of compassion, both understood well by the laity. Both expressions are essential in folk Buddhism and Vesak is a clear elaboration of the need for both levels of Buddhism to coexist, as well as a measure of the success with which they do exist. Note that it is the monks who recite the texts – this and their central role in such rituals reaffirms the difference between the *sangha* and the laity.

Vesak in India

Although Buddhism no longer has the following in India that it has in South-East Asia, the celebration of Vesak continues in those areas where there is a strong Tibetan and Nepalese influence. Here, on the full-moon day in *Vaishakh* (the second month in the traditional Hindu



calendar followed in North India), all the important occasions related to the Buddha are combined in one.

Buddhist rituals for celebrating the three-in-one occasion are naturally elaborate. On this day, after bathing, Buddhists wear only white clothes. They gather in their viharas (monasteries) for worship and give alm to monks. Prayers, sermons and nonstop recitation of Buddhist scriptures resound in *viharas*, religious halls, and homes. There are day-long readings of the scriptures, before statues of the Buddha, by monks in the viharas. Laypeople listen to these readings and also offer gifts such as incense, flowers and candles to the statues.

The replica of the Bodhi Vrksa – the tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment - is hung with garlands and coloured flags. Its roots are sprinkled with milk and scented water, and lamps are lit around it.

Many Buddhists spend their entire day at the vihara listening to discourses on the life and teachings of the Buddha or invite monks to their homes. They also reaffirm their faith in the Five Precepts – not to take life, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to lie and not to take alcohol or drugs that confuse the mind.

On Vesak, Buddhists refrain from eating meat. They eat kheer (rice cooked in milk and sugar), which they share with the poor. They set up stalls in public places to offer others clean drinking water and also show kindness to animals.

Aims of Vesak

Descriptions of Vesak vary slightly from country to country, but all have in common the apparent fact that, despite

the importance of this ritual, it does not make complex demands on its performers. The aims of Vesak are to:

- commemorate, and therefore explore, three extremely important events in the life of the Buddha
- celebrate the achievements of the Buddha and recognise his importance as a model for all Buddhists, monastic and lay, to emulate.

This explains the reading of tales about the Buddha at these events and the observance of behavioural attitudes directly associated with the life of the Buddha.

It is also important that Vesak occurs on a very significant full-moon day, when planting is about to begin in anticipation of the coming rains. Somehow a connection is drawn between the Buddha himself and fertility associated with the rains.

REVIEW

- Define the term 'ritual' in the context of Buddhism.
- Clarify how a Buddhist would define 'public devotion'.
- Re-read each of the descriptions of Vesak and outline their similarities and differences.
- Describe in one paragraph the extent to which Vesak is a celebration of the Buddha's life.
- Construct a flow chart to illustrate and explain the key elements of Vesak.
- Demonstrate how the ritual of Vesak expresses the teachings of Buddhism.
- Analyse the significance of Vesak for both the individual and the Buddhist community.

EXTENSION

Use the weblinks provided to investigate the significance of Vesak. Write a 300-word report to summarise your findings.



WeblinksDay of Vesak

Day of Vesak 2020

Vesak Sri Lanka

Vesak Day (documentary)

10.3.2 Pilgrimage

Ananda, a man of good family who has confidence in the Buddha's teachings should visit these four awe-inspiring places. 'Which are these four?'

Here where the Tathagata was born ... Here where he attained the unsurpassed enlightenment and perfect awakening ... Here where the Tathagata set rolling the unsurpassed wheel of *dhamma* ... Here where the Tathagata attained his final *nirvana* consisting of that nirvana where nothing whatever remains ...

Ananda, monks, nuns, male and female lay followers – all having confidence in the Buddha's teachings – will come to where the Tathagata was born ... And any of these who, believing in their heart, might die whilst undertaking a tour of a pilgrimage spot (cetiyacakram), will be reborn after death in the happy world of heaven.

Summary of Mahaparinibbanasutta, Digha Nikaya 2, pp. 140-1

Four places are mentioned by the Buddha as appropriate places for what would later become famous pilgrimage spots. These places correspond to Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar, respectively. As early as 250 BCE, Ashoka announced in his inscriptions that he had visited the birthplace of the Buddha in Lumbini and helped refurbish the Bodhi temple at Bodh Gaya, the spot that marks the place where the Buddha became enlightened. He also established roadside centres to provide refreshments and temporary accommodation for pilgrims going to these spots. Ashoka's is the first publicised account of pilgrimage sites, and it is very likely pilgrimages were made to these sites well before his time. Later, in the fourth and sixth centuries CE, Chinese pilgrims also visited these sites and left accurate descriptions of them as they saw them at that time.

➤ Refer to Chapter 2, page xx, for a map of significant places in the life of the Buddha.

Today in India, these four places remain the most important on the map of pilgrimage for Buddhists, although there are other pilgrimage sites in India and in other countries as well. Another four places that are also accorded a very high status are all associated with miraculous events in the life of the Buddha. In order, these are Rajgir, Shravasti (now just a set of ruins), Vaishali and Samkasya. The Buddha spent many years of residence during the rainy season in both Rajgir and Shravasti. Buddhists from all over the world visit the first four locations and perform rituals, in particular, at the Bodhi temple. The other four sites are to some extent off the tourist track, although a special hotel has been built to accommodate Japanese tourists who visit Rajgir. Once

there, pilgrims are also able to visit Nalanda. This 14-hectare site contains the ruins of a huge Buddhist university that flourished from the fourth to the seventh centuries CE.

Buddhists also visit other sites, such as famous *stupas* and locations where celebrated monks, or occasionally nuns, have lived for many years leading an austere life of meditation. Such places are considered to be strong sources of merit, but they differ from those sites sacred to the life of the Buddha. These latter sites help focus the mind on the Buddha's achievements, and are important as memorials and places where good merit can be accessed and where the example of the Buddha as one man who attained enlightenment can be celebrated. In contrast, the forest hermitages of prominent monks and places where Buddhist deities are famous are attractive to pilgrims because of the availability of good merit there, associated with the good *karma* built up over many lives by these monks.

When is a site sacred?

Buddhist texts themselves have provided three criteria by which a particular site is to be judged as sacred. First, there are those believed to contain a relic of the Buddha's body. This refers to the ritualised cremation of the Buddha's body after his death. All his bones remained after everything else was burnt and fragments of these were taken by the seven kings present at the cremation, to be distributed at various locations. A famous example of such a relic is represented by the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Sri Lanka. It is believed to contain one of the Buddha's teeth, which was brought there in the early centuries of the Common Era.

The second category relates to the kinds of things the Buddha used and that he subsequently left behind. The third concerns simple reminders of the Buddha's presence; that is, stories that tell that he had visited a particular place. For the latter, the Sinhalese chronicles, such as the *Mahavamsha* and the *Culavamsha*, provide many examples. Another category of sacred sites involves those of Buddhist deities who usually perform a protective or helping function within a designated local area.

Many of these sacred sites had probably been considered sacred before the Buddhists defined their sacredness in particular Buddhist terms. They may have been the residence of a prominent fertility deity, such as a snake god, or a place where a holy man dwelt for many years. This demonstrates the capacity of Buddhism to integrate within itself beliefs and practices that were originally non-Buddhist. It also enhances in the eyes of believers the amount of sacred power inherent in these sites.

The sacred tooth relic

In August each year there is a huge seven-day festival, called *Esala Perahera*, held in Kandy with long processions of elephants and thousands of spectators, virtually bringing the city to a halt. It is extravagant in

its display and attracts people from all over Sri Lanka, combining a traditional concern with fertility with the veneration of the Buddha's tooth.



GURE 10.3.3 Highly decorated elephants feature rominently in the processions of Fsala Perahera.

RESPOND

Alamy Stock Photo/Emmanuel Lattes

Investigate some sites for the Esala Perahera festival and write a brief summary of the history of the festival. Some helpful weblinks are provided.



Weblinks Temple of the Sacred Tooth

Kandy Esala Perahera

REVIEW

- Recall the names of the four most important sites for Buddhist pilgrimage and explain their significance to Buddhism.
- 2 How would a Buddhist define 'sacred site'?
- 3 Recall the four categories of sacred sites for Buddhists.

Bodh Gaya

Bodh Gaya is the most important pilgrimage site for all Buddhists. The Bodhi temple is located on three acres in the eastern part of the small town of Bodh Gaya in the Indian state of Bihar. The Mahabodhi Temple ('Great Awakening Temple') is built slightly to the north of the famous Bodhi tree where the Buddha achieved his enlightenment. Cuttings of this tree have been transported to many other prominent Buddhist temples around the world so that they too can have their own Bodhi tree.

The existing temple was in ruins when the prominent Sri Lankan reformer monk Dharmapala Angarika visited it in the last years of the nineteenth century and began the process of its renovation. During the 1980s, Japanese Buddhists poured millions of dollars into the construction of a two-metre-high protective marble wall around the site. The wall creates a huge contrast between the site and the surrounding area. Outside it is noisy, traffic is constantly moving, and little street-side stalls remind us how close religion and business are. Inside it is quiet. The temple is surrounded by lush lawns, large ponds of lotus-covered water and raised daises where people can just sit and, at the



southern end of the temple, many *caityas* (small funeral monuments) can be found.

Despite the groups of people who are visiting the temple itself and the surrounding shrines, it is possible to find quiet places to meditate or simply reflect. There is no compulsion to perform particular rituals, and an extended stay at the temple will enable you to see people expressing their commitment in a variety of ways. For example, a party of Japanese Buddhists may be standing before the huge Buddha image in the main hall of the temple, being instructed in the symbolism of the objects – flowers, lamps and wall hangings – surrounding the Buddha. The high point of their time there will most likely be a brief recitation of the vow of taking refuge in the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the *sangha*.

Or you may see a group of Sri Lankan laypeople being led by a monk. He will be explaining the significance of the temple and simultaneously giving a teaching in Sinhalese on the main points of the Buddha's teachings in a way that the lay audience can easily understand. Next to them may be a group of Indian Buddhists being read a story in Hindi by a monk. At the raised dais at the southern end of the temple, young Westerners may be seated on meditational rugs, engaged in elementary forms of meditation, having perhaps been taught in one of the many meditation schools located in Bodh Gaya. Consistent with the inclination of most Westerners, they are probably more interested in

the meditational and intellectual aspects of Buddhism than they are in its ritual and devotional processes. This reflects the different approaches of those brought up in Buddhist countries compared with those who were raised in predominantly Christian countries and subsequently developed an interest in Buddhism as an alternative to Christianity or secular liberalism.



Dotted around within a kilometre of the Bodhi temple are at least a dozen other temples, representing all of the Buddhist countries. The monks in them are constantly engaged in the performance of Buddhist rituals and they are often visited by prominent Buddhists such as the Dalai Lama. Each of the temples contains an area set aside for accommodating pilgrims at cheap prices, which means pilgrims can actually stay in a working monastery instead of a secular hotel. This temporarily places them in a heightened religious environment and allows them to give offerings, often financial, to the monks and/or the temple, and, in turn, to receive teachings from the monks. From this perspective the visit to Bodh Caya should be seen as having a kind of transactional purpose: the receipt of good karma or merit is cultivated by the monastic order and is expected by the laity. This kind of transaction reaches back to the earliest years of Buddhism.

Finally, there are a whole range of Buddhist institutions that run meditational courses and elementary introductions to Buddhist philosophy, as well as advanced courses in *Vinaya* for monks and nuns. Bodh Gaya is both an important pilgrimage spot and a central location for the propagation of Buddhist teachings and values.

There is also an interesting new development there – some huge images of the Buddha are being constructed, particularly by Japanese and Tibetans, that are capable of being seen from a great distance. While a protective function can be found in the presence of these images, this kind of activity also betrays a competitiveness about the final size of the Buddha being constructed. Similar huge Buddhas are also being built in Thailand and Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

Virtual Buddhism

While Buddhist festivals were not allowed during the COVID-19 pandemic, chanting in temples and meditation classes continued online – especially in Buddhist centres in the United States – but with different practices.

East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC) in Oakland, California, before it took all its classes online, promoted mindful handwashing at the centre, saying it is 'a great 20-second practice all of the time.' The Portland Insight Meditation Center in Portland, Oregon, shared the following 20-second handwashing loving-kindness (metta) meditation on its Facebook page:

'May all beings be safe.

May all beings be content.

May all beings be healthy.

May all beings live with ease.

That's about 20 seconds, right?



ay _w

The delayed United Nations Vesak Day was also virtual.

A final aspect of pilgrimage that should not be overlooked is its tourism component. Since Bodh Gaya is a Buddhist pilgrimage site in India, and Buddhism currently has only a few million adherents in India, most of the pilgrims travel there from overseas. This means there is a considerable investment in time and money for those who make this pilgrimage, and this will only serve to heighten the good merit they expect to receive as a consequence of attending these sites.

REVIEW

- 1 Define the term 'ritual' in the Buddhist context.
- 2 Clarify how a Buddhist would define 'public devotion'.
- 3 Identify two aspects of pilgrimage for Buddhists.
- 4 Describe a pilgrimage to one of the major pilgrimage sites.
- 5 Demonstrate how pilgrimage expresses the teachings of Buddhism.
- **6** Analyse the significance of pilgrimage for both the individual and the Buddhist community.

EXTENSION

Use the weblinks provided to find out more about Bodh Gaya.



Weblinks Bodh Gaya

Pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya

Buddhist Society of WA pilgrimage to India

Conclusion

In the contemporary world, Buddhism remains a vibrant, growing religion, expanding in virtually every country where it is found. Australia, with its rapidly changing number of adherents, is an excellent example of this. In the 1947 Australian census, 411 people (0.01 per cent of the population) identified themselves as Buddhists. This increased to 139 795 (0.8 per cent) in 1991 and 563 700 (2.4 per cent) in 2016, the majority of whom were born overseas. This growth in numbers can be accounted for by the immigration of South-East Asian Buddhists to Australia, and by the charismatic presence of the Dalai Lama in teaching a particular brand of Tibetan Buddhism to Westerners.

Throughout its long history, Buddhism has adapted to broad social and cultural change. This adaptability is demonstrated in the development of Mahayana Buddhism, a movement that showed a self-conscious awareness of its difference from other forms of Buddhism that were contemporary to its period of development between 100 BCE and 400 ce. It emerged out of a broadening of religious beliefs and practices, especially deriving from new views about the nature of god that were associated with the doctrine and practice of bhakti flooding through Hinduism at the same time.

Under this influence, the images of the Buddha presented in literature and art expanded considerably from what they were in the Pali literature. In this literature, the Buddha is presented as a somewhat austere figure, which contrasts with his much more expansive persona in the Mahayana literature found throughout much of Asia. In addition, bodhisattvas were created and became the centre of cult followings all over Asia. This expansiveness has made it possible for Buddhism to respond to ethical and philosophical questions that have arisen, especially under the influence of Western scientific thought, and contributed to its success in most Asian countries over the last century and a half.

It is especially in the area of ethics that Buddhism has continually shown itself to be capable of adapting in a manner that meets the requirements of highly differing cultures, but which enables identification with Buddhism - seen as a religion of great antiquity – to be maintained. Tradition is therefore continued in such a way as to allow whatever is new to be made to seem part of the past. One example of the maintenance of traditional values is found in the emphasis that Buddhists continue to place on the application of compassion. A fundamental requirement that compassion should be exercised towards all sentient beings means all Buddhists, ideally at least, should have an active concern in maintaining the world around them in a way that benefits everybody and causes the least possible harm. In this area, intentions and actions intersect in a positive way that can be applied by Buddhists of all persuasions. Revised ethical attitudes very easily fit within this framework of thinking.

Like all other world religions, Buddhism must provide its adherents with a sense of certainty and solidity in a world that is fragile and shifting. Since the Second World War,

no Asian country has been able to escape the modernising process that has been so visible as a cultural force for change. Buddhist teaching stresses the overwhelming importance of coming to terms with change. Change is unavoidable, and resistance to it will usually result in dukkha for oneself and others. Buddhism responds to this in the ethical sense by its pragmatic willingness to take up, albeit slowly, questions of bioethics and environmental ethics, including responses to climate change, that have been at the forefront of Western ethical thinking for at least the last 20 years.

Buddhism also responds to change by offering a continual reinforcement of the Buddha's message and its relevance for daily life. This is how the annual performance of Vesak and other important rituals need to be understood. They reconfirm the importance of a Buddhist community in those countries where they are performed, they bring the laity directly into contact with the sangha of monks (and nuns), and finally, they function as an important reminder of the centrality of the figure of the Buddha in the life of Buddhists. Each of these rituals, even if their performance changes slightly over time, is a constant (and is seen as such) within the religious life of Buddhists and stands almost outside of time, giving people the opportunity to see again the timeless values represented in the teachings of the Buddha and the examples set by living monks.



FIGURE 10.3.6 Decorations for Year of the Rat celebrations at the Nan Tien Temple, Wollongong, January 2020

EXTENSION

- 1 'Buddhist teaching stresses the overwhelming importance of coming to terms with change.' To what extent does the material in this chapter support this statement? Identify at least three key examples to support your assessment.
- 2 Check your list of key terms, concepts and ideas from this chapter and ensure that it is clear and complete.
- Synthesise the main features related to Buddhist people, ideas, ethics and practices in this chapter in the form of a flow chart or mind map, then place the completed detailed mind map into your HSC revision notes to reflect on when preparing for your exam.



10 HSC-style exam questions

Section II

Studies of Religion I: answer **one** question from this section.

Studies of Religion II: answer **two** questions from **two** different religious traditions in this section.

Question 1 - Buddhism (15 marks)

- a i Briefly outline one significant practice from Buddhism within each of the following:
 - pilgrimage
 - temple puja
 - Vesak.

3 MARKS

ii Explain the significance of the practice selected in **(a) (i)** for the individual.

4 MARKS

Follow the path of virtue. The virtuous rest in bliss in this world and the next.

Dhammapada 13:168

- **b** How do the ethical teachings of Buddhism guide adherents to live virtuous lives? In your response, refer to **one** of the following ethical areas:
 - Bioethics
 - Environmental ethics.

8 MARKS

Section III

Studies of Religion I and Studies of Religion II: answer **one** question from this section that is from a different religious tradition to the question(s) answered in Section II.

Question 3 - Buddhism (20 marks)

One must understand the nature of the suffering from which we wish to free others (this is wisdom) and one must experience deep intimacy and empathy with other sentient beings (this is loving kindness).

In Essence of the Heart Sutra (14th Dalai Lama)

How does Buddhism guide adherents to strive for wisdom and loving kindness?

Additional Section III Question

One must understand the nature of the suffering from which we wish to free others (this is wisdom) and one must experience deep intimacy and empathy with other sentient beings (this is loving kindness).

In Essence of the Heart Sutra (14th Dalai Lama)

To what extent does **one** significant person **or** school of thought, other than the Buddha, encourage adherents to demonstrate wisdom and loving kindness in their lives?