World Religions

A Voyage of Discovery

Jeffrey Brodd

Fifth Edition



saint mary's press

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Printed in the United States of America

1173

ISBN 978-1-64121-255-7

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Preface

As author of this book, which is now in its fifth edition, I obviously have been interested in learning about world religions and sharing what I have learned. But this has by no means always been the case. I wasn't introduced to the academic study of religion until college, when I took three religion courses only because they were required for graduation. The first was an introductory course on the Bible. The second was a course of my choosing on liberation theology taught in Mexico City during the January intersession. I had little idea what this topic might be about, but I did look forward to escaping the Minnesota winter and enjoying the warm sun. And that I did, along with the pickup soccer games that happened almost every afternoon prior to the nightly feasts of delicious Mexican food. I held off until my final semester to take the third course, on ethics—something I figured would be comfortably removed from religion per se, even while fulfilling the requirement.

But then a strange thing happened. While seeking advice about graduate studies in philosophy from my professors, who were aware of my interests in existentialism and Asian philosophies, each of them recommended a particular doctoral program in religious studies. And soon, there I was—and I've never looked back! My newfound enthusiasm did not emerge because I had become more religious; rather, I came to recognize that studying religion and the various traditions of the world provided extraordinarily rich intellectual stimulation. It also fed my heart and soul with deeply provocative ideas and enlightened me about the great variety of ways of being human, both as an individual and as part of society. I do not recall that any of this made me more (or less) religious. It was just a thoroughly worthwhile way to spend my days. It also paved my way to what has proven to be a most fulfilling career as a professor and an author.

Oftentimes, people do not think the study of religion—especially religions that are not their own—is for them. This is unfortunate because religion is a prominent force in human societies and, for most people, important for their individual quest for meaning. Some think the study of religion is the domain of highly religious people studying their own tradition. But beneficial study of a religion does not depend on being either religious or an adherent of the religion studied.

To be confused about this is the equivalent of thinking zoologists must be of this or that animal species or, to be less extreme, that a political scientist with expertise in a particular party or platform must therefore side with the same or be actively political. Neither is true.

To study the world's religions is—just as the term suggests—to explore the world, both geographically and through time. Many of the religions featured in this book date back to the first millennium BCE, and some, such as Hinduism and Judaism, have roots that stretch back even earlier. Each of the world's religions is a window through which one can behold a part of the diverse panoply of humanity's cultural achievements. In the realm of the visual arts, for example, until our modern period, artistic works almost always were religious works, such as the stained glass windows in medieval cathedrals or the sculptures of the Buddha or the arabesque décor in Islamic mosques. And in the realm of ideas, the great thoughts and principles that have indelibly shaped the worldviews of entire societies have emerged mainly within religious traditions. The profound legacies of these traditions continue to form the bedrock of societal perspectives today. A person simply cannot hope to understand our world without serious consideration of its major religions.

Most of my experiences with the study of religion have in some way informed this book, which I now offer to you, dear reader. I make no assumptions about your religious (or nonreligious) perspective. I do not know whether you are being required to study from this book or freely opting to. And I do not assume that this is your first encounter with the study of religion, though I am guessing it may be your first significant foray into the study of the world's major religions. Regardless of your religious or spiritual background, I offer you this book, hoping that you will benefit greatly from the intellectual stimulation, personal enrichment, and worldly wisdom that is yours to be had by exploring the world's religions.

I wish you bountiful explorations!



Jeffrey Brodd



Chapter 1

Studying the World's Religions

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If you scan the news on any given day, you will probably find examples of how religion influences everyday life around the world. Consider these excerpts:

> Gov. Jeff Landry signed legislation on Wednesday requiring the display of the Ten Commandments in every public classroom in Louisiana, making the state the only one with such a mandate and reigniting the debate over how porous the boundary between church and state should be.
>
> Critics, including the American Civil Liberties Union and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, vowed a legal fight against the law they deemed "blatantly unconstitutional." But it is a battle that proponents are prepared, and in many ways, eager, to take on.
>
> ("Louisiana Requires All Public Classrooms to Display Ten Commandments")

> Dozens of people have died amid scorching temperatures during the annual hajj pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, according to reports from official media in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. . . . Muslims travel to Mecca from around the world each year to perform the five-day pilgrimage, which ends Wednesday. The hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam; all Muslims who are financially and physically able must perform the ritual at least once in their lives.

More than 1.8 million people made the pilgrimage this year, according to the Saudi General Authority for Statistics, with 1.6 million coming from abroad.

("Intense Heat Grips Saudi Arabia, Killing Dozens at Hajj")

A high-level U.S. congressional delegation, including the former House speaker Nancy Pelosi, met with the Dalai Lama at his Indian home on Wednesday, a visit that was condemned in advance by China's government, which considers the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader a separatist. The delegation, led by Michael McCaul, the Republican chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, arrived on Tuesday in the Himalayan town of Dharamsala, where the Dalai Lama has lived since the 1960s. The delegation visited the offices of the Tibetan government in exile, which is pushing for autonomy for Tibet within China. ("Nancy Pelosi Meets With Dalai Lama, Despite China's Criticism")

Perhaps no structure so exemplified the rich, interwoven history of Gaza as the Great Omari Mosque, believed by many to be the oldest in the territory. As empires waned, religious buildings on the site—first pagan, then Christian and Muslim—were destroyed or repurposed. The mosque was rebuilt many times, surviving not only as a beloved center for Islamic faith and learning, but also as a symbol of resilience.



No longer exclusive to traditionally Buddhist countries, Buddhist temples, such as this one on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, are becoming more common all over the world.

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In December, the mosque was all but destroyed in an airstrike by the Israeli military, which claimed the site had become a command center for Hamas. . . .

A Christian Byzantine church erected in the fifth century on top of the ruins of an earlier Roman temple was repurposed in the seventh century as a mosque following the Muslim conquest of Gaza. Some researchers suggest the space may have served both Muslims and Christians during this period. But that building was destroyed when Gaza fell to the Crusaders around 1100, and a church was later built at the site. Parts of the church, in particular its central nave, were repurposed as a mosque in the 12th century when Muslims regained control of Gaza.

("Gaza's Historic Heart, Now in Ruins")

One of the first landmarks you'll come across in Shadow of the Erdtree is a tall, brilliantly shining cross. Intersected at its peak by a thin crescent—most likely a representation of the Golden Order, the dark fantasy world's ruling theocracy—it feels bluntly referential to saints and prophets and resurrections. . . .

In Christ-like fashion, Miquella has given up his own living form and ascended to a more heavenly position. The crosses throughout a bizarre realm wreathed in shadow mark sites where he has shed his corporeal flesh. But rather than commune with Marika, his deified mother, Miquella wants to escape the strictures and expectations of her Golden Order.

("Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree Review: Faith, Meet Futility")

The preceding excerpts are drawn from five different articles from the same source on the same day—the June 20, 2024, online edition of *The New York Times*: compelling evidence that the world's religions are part of people's everyday world. We cannot call ourselves informed citizens without having at least a basic knowledge of them.

Today, more than ever before, we live in a global village. Accessing world news as it happens, flying across the ocean, buying clothes and goods created by people far away, and a host of other activities have made us all, in a real sense, neighbors. This unprecedented variety of interactions offers an abundance of opportunities to enrich our lives by connecting us with people who think and live differently than we do. But it also poses challenges. For one thing, it is more difficult than ever to be adequately informed about one's community—now that that "community" includes the entire world. Part of meeting this challenge is gaining a sound understanding of the world's religious traditions.

As the global community grows ever more close-knit, the relevance of religion in our day-to-day lives will continue to increase, not only at the level of international affairs but locally also. Most people already have—or soon will have—friends, classmates, or coworkers who belong to religious traditions quite different from their own.

Recognizing the need to understand the world's religions is one thing; achieving such an understanding is another. This book aims to help. In certain ways, the study of world religions is especially challenging, as the following section explains. But it also offers a great opportunity to discover the many ways of being human.

Search news sources for at least three stories that mention religion. Answer this question: How does religion affect people's daily lives in each example?

The Nature of a Religious Tradition

Religion begins with mystery. Being human inevitably prompts deep questions about our existence: Where did we come from? Where are we going? Why are we here? For that matter, what is "here"? That is, what is the nature of this world? What is the nature of the supreme or ultimate reality? Beset with such questions, we find ourselves confronting mystery on all sides. By responding to the questions, religion provides a way of living and dying meaningfully amid the mystery.

This book explores the various responses to mystery that the world's religions offer. Anything so intimately involved with mystery is bound to be difficult, so the study itself is demystified as much as possible. The process of demystification begins by probing the nature of the questions that most religious traditions address.

Religious Questions

Human beings, presumably unlike any other members of the animal kingdom, have the capacity to question such fundamental things as the source and the meaning of their existence. We are self-conscious beings. Along with being physical, rational, and emotional, we have the capacity for self-reflection; we have a conscience; we can ponder our own nature. We have the capacity to be spiritual (although the term *spiritual* is open to interpretation). And by virtue of our spirituality, we ask—and answer—life's most basic questions. Because these questions are more or less pertinent to each religious tradition, they can be organized into a kind of framework for studying the world's religions.

The terms *spiritual* and *religious* often mean different things to different people. What does each term mean to you?

Not everyone chooses to answer these basic religious questions by following a religious tradition. Some people, even though they regard themselves as spiritual, are not members of a specific religion. But others find that a religion helps them grapple with religious questions. Religions offer responses that have been tested by time, in some cases by thousands of years. They are also fortified by the richness of tradition—for most of the religions considered in this book, many generations of tradition—and by the shared experience of community.

Regardless of how we choose to respond to them, religious questions are inevitable. Studying these questions can help us better understand the nature of each religious tradition. Let us consider the primary ones.

What Is the Human Condition?

The initial religious question, about the human condition, asks what it is, essentially, to be a human being. The term *human condition* might be unfamiliar and seem technical. By being slightly technical, however, it is relatively precise and therefore helpful. A religion's perspective on the human condition encompasses answers to various basic questions: Are we merely what we appear to be—physical bodies somehow equipped with the capacity to think and to feel? Or are we endowed with a deeper spiritual essence, some form of soul? Are we by nature good, evil, or somewhere in between, perhaps originally good but now flawed in some way?

Often a religion's view of the basic nature of the human condition is set forth in its account of human origins. The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, told in the Jewish and Christian Bibles and also in the Qur'an (or Koran, the sacred book of Islam), is one clear example. As

chapter 4 explains, Buddhism's Four Noble Truths assert that human beings, by our very nature, are prone to suffering.

Suffering is indeed an important aspect of the human condition. All religions concur in some ways with Buddhism's Four Noble Truths by recognizing that we suffer. The question is, Why do we suffer? If we are by nature good and in no need of greater perfection, then of course suffering is not our fault. But if we are evil, or somehow flawed, perhaps we deserve to suffer. A religion typically describes a means of overcoming suffering—and of responding to the human condition in general—through the attainment of some higher state of spiritual maturity.

What Is Spiritual Fulfillment?

Almost every religion describes what is needed to fulfill our spiritual potential most perfectly. Some religions teach a form of spiritual fulfillment that can be attained in this life. Others teach that complete fulfillment must await an afterlife. In either case, fulfillment is difficult to attain; in fact, some religions teach that it is impossible to attain on our own, without divine assistance. Therefore, religions tend to acknowledge the goodness of being as spiritually mature and as near to fulfillment as possible. Spiritual transformation, not necessarily leading to complete fulfillment, is a vital objective of most religions.

Later chapters of this book provide specific examples that explore various approaches to spiritual maturity and spiritual fulfillment. This chapter now briefly considers three questions about how a religion addresses spiritual fulfillment and transformation: What is ethical—that is, how are we to act while living in the world? How do we transcend the human condition? How do we attain spiritual fulfillment, or salvation, from the problems that beset the human condition?

What is ethical? Religions typically prescribe an ethical life as a basic requirement for the journey toward spiritual fulfillment. Indeed, teachings regarding right and wrong constitute a significant part of most religious traditions.

How do we transcend the human condition? Some forms of spiritual fulfillment can be attained in this life, either temporarily or eternally. Buddhist enlightenment is one example. These forms all involve a type of **transcendence**, or overcoming, of the normal limitations imposed by the human condition. Of course, we can respond in a variety of ways to the challenges of being human. Some people simply try to ignore them by allowing a certain numbness of the spirit. Others become workaholics to block the challenges out. Some hide behind a veil of drugs or alcohol. Religions normally insist on a different type of response, a form of transcendence that brings one face-to-face with the human condition and then raises one above it or allows one to see through it. (The precise descriptions of this transcendence vary by religion.) The Buddhist who has attained enlightenment, for example, while continuing to inhabit a physical body with the usual discomforts and needs, is said to maintain a state of indescribable spiritual tranquility and bliss.

How do we attain salvation? Most religions teach that spiritual fulfillment is closely related to some form of salvation from the ultimate limitation imposed by the human condition: death. Religions that

Contemplate the human condition by comparing the situation of humans with that of a favorite animal (perhaps a pet). Does the animal have thoughts or feelings, like people do? Does it seem to have a spiritual essence or soul? Does it seem to be, by nature, good, evil, or somewhere in between?

transcendence The overcoming of the normal limitations imposed by the human condition, whether temporarily or abidingly.



In Christianity, the cross is often used as a symbol of salvation. This sixth-century mosaic is in the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe, located near the Adriatic coast in the province of Ravenna, Italy.

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emphasize forms of transcendence typically hold that there is a direct connection between the transcendence attained in this life and final salvation. Some forms of Buddhism teach that the attainment of enlightenment in this life leads to nirvana, the final liberation. *Liberation* for religions such as Buddhism is the equivalent of *salvation*; both terms (as employed in this book) imply an overcoming of the limitations of the human condition. Religions such as Christianity and Islam, which teach that salvation depends on the divine, tend to maintain that final spiritual fulfillment awaits in the afterlife, sometimes after the individual's salvation has already been assured. According to this view, spiritual maturation continues even in a heavenly afterlife.

What Is Our Destiny?

As spiritual beings, we ponder our destiny. We wonder, Where are we going, ultimately? Many religious practitioners seek answers to such questions from the religious traditions to which they belong. And most (though not all) religions provide answers that are closely linked to the issues of spiritual fulfillment or transformation.

According to some religions, human beings face two possible destinies: one leads to reward, typically eternal life in paradise, and the other leads to condemnation. Individual destiny is linked to the question of spiritual fulfillment: the degree to which one has achieved fulfillment naturally corresponds to one's prospects for reward in the afterlife.

The question of destiny is more complex for religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, which teach that human beings live more than one lifetime. In this case, the immediate destiny after this life is generally not the ultimate, final destiny, but just another step toward the final destiny. Nevertheless, the need to seek spiritual transformation (if not complete fulfillment) in this life remains vital, because the degree of one's transformation tends to determine the nature of one's future life.

What Is the Nature of the World?

Along with answering questions about human beings, religions also answer questions about the world. Where did the world come from? Is it real, or is it just some kind of cosmic illusion? Is it sacred, perhaps even living, or is it merely matter? Is it a help or a hindrance to the religious quest?

Such questions belong to the general category **cosmology**—the understanding of the nature of the universe. The answers to cosmological questions tend to reflect the character of a religion's engagement with the natural world. Some religions express such engagement through support of scientific inquiry and theories regarding the natural world, while others tend to be suspicious of science.

What Is Ultimate Reality, and How Is It Revealed?

Finally, there is the religious question of ultimate reality (or for Western traditions especially, God). Theistic religions hold a belief in God or in multiple gods. These religions teach a certain theology, or doctrine, regarding the divine. The theologies of the world include a range of basic perspectives: **monotheism** (belief in only one God), **polytheism** (belief in many gods), and **pantheism** (belief that the divine reality exists in everything), to name but a few.

Some religions do not hold a belief in a god who is essentially relevant for us, although they sometimes do hold a belief in various divine or semidivine beings. Sometimes such religions are termed **nontheistic**, which literally means that there is no belief in a divine being. The term **transtheistic** is helpful, for it allows room for belief in divine or semidivine beings without insisting on a god who is essentially relevant. Some of these religions teach that all reality is essentially one thing, and that human beings are part of the ultimate reality.

A further basic category of religious belief is important for the study of Hinduism, as chapter 3 shows. This is **monism**, the doctrine that all reality is ultimately one. Monism differs starkly from monotheism, despite both being based on the Greek word *monos*, "only one." The only-one-God doctrine of monotheism typically implies that God is prior to and separate from God's creation. Monism insists that there is no such separation; *all* is ultimately one reality. But as Hinduism makes clear, monism is fully compatible with polytheism. Chapter 3 returns to this conceptual challenge when it considers Hinduism's many gods and goddesses along with (for many Hindus, though not most) the monistic belief that all things, including these many deities, are ultimately one divine reality.

Summarize your personal cosmology—your own understanding of the nature of the world. Focus especially on the following questions: Where did the world come from? Is the world somehow a living, organic entity, or is it merely inorganic matter?

cosmology The understanding of the nature of the universe.

monotheism The belief in only one god.

polytheism The belief in many gods.

pantheism The belief that the divine reality exists in everything.

nontheistic Describes a belief system that holds that there is no divine being.

transtheistic Describes a religion that allows for belief in divine or semidivine beings without the belief in an essentially relevant god.

monism The doctrine that reality is ultimately made up of only one essence.

revelation The transmission of the divine will or knowledge to human beings, typically through myths or some form of religious experience.

Most religions also teach that the supreme or ultimate reality, whatever form it takes, is somehow revealed to humans. This **revelation** usually is evident in sacred stories or myths, or through various types of religious experience.

What Is a Religion?

As mentioned, one popular means of facing these religious questions is to adhere to a religious tradition and its (typically) long-established answers. But what counts as a religious tradition? And what makes a person religious as opposed to spiritual, perhaps deeply concerned about these various questions but choosing not to belong to a religion?

The very notion of a religion that can be defined as a distinct entity relative to other aspects of a person's life experience is a recent one. Throughout the ages until the past few centuries, cultures everywhere have typically taken for granted the existence and extreme relevance of what today might be defined as a religion. In the modern age, people tend to take for granted that only some aspects of life are religious, while the rest are secular. The modern impulse to define the institutions that house these religious aspects seems to follow naturally, and therefore it is commonplace among theorists to define what is properly categorized as a religion. In fact, it is so commonplace that well over a hundred definitions have been published in books and articles. And for the past century or so, about a dozen of these institutions—so-called religions—have tended to be categorized more specifically as world religions.

An introductory text that seeks an optimal definition of *religion* or entertains arguments over what should or should not count as a world religion risks getting lost in the weeds. It is better to acknowledge that to read a book with world religions in its title and that contains chapters devoted to prominent examples of such is to accept underlying definitional determinations. Consider, as you proceed through these chapters, what it is that these examples have in common; ultimately, on what basis is each categorized as a religion?

Definitions strive to be universal and all-inclusive, not admitting to exceptions. Insistence on defining what is a religion inevitably also defines what is *not* a religion. And so, for example, defining a religion as somehow revolving around belief in a deity or deities would, as noted again in chapter 9, exclude Zen Buddhism, which is nontheistic. An alternative approach, not insistent on a one-fits-all definition, involves first identifying interrelated features, or dimensions, that together constitute what people commonly consider to be a religion.

Seven Dimensions of Religion

Scholar Ninian Smart (1927–2001) suggests that all the religious traditions manifest seven dimensions: experiential, mythic, doctrinal, ethical, ritual, social, and material. These dimensions are not exclusive of one another: for example, myths often set forth patterns of ritual. Indeed, the seven dimensions are intertwined and complementary, weaving a rich tapestry through which religions respond to humans' basic questions, offering a doctrine here, prescribing a ritual there, and so forth. All religions use the same seven elements to create their own unique tapestry, often emphasizing one dimension more and another less.

Experiential

Religions commonly begin with the religious experiences of individuals. Some of these beginnings are famous and easy to identify. When a young prince named Gautama experienced enlightenment under the bodhi tree, he became the Buddha, and Buddhism was born. When Muhammad began to experience revelations from Allah, Islam began to take form. Other beginnings are not so easily identified. Moreover, religious experiences can be part of anyone's religious life; they do not always result in a new religion.

Faith generally belongs to the category of religious experience, although it also has doctrinal aspects. In the New Testament, for instance, the apostle Paul describes faith as being closely related to experience of the Holy Spirit and involving more than just intellectual belief.

The world's major religions acknowledge numerous types of religious experience, some of them astounding. Generally speaking, in theistic religions, God—or in the case of polytheistic religions, any of the various gods—is experienced as a holy presence who is other (that is, as a

faith Experience of the divine or holy presence, sometimes involving intellectual belief and sometimes emphasizing personal trust.



Private Collection © Look and Learn/Bridgeman Images

The religious experience of Moses is depicted in *Moses and the Burning Bush,* by the Italian painter Raphael (1483–1520).

Like the terms *religious* and *spiritual*, *faith* tends to mean different things to different people. What does *faith* mean to you?

Myth is not as strong an element in the modern, scientific world as it was in earlier ages. Still, as the Creation account in Genesis suggests, some of our basic perspectives about life are derived from mythic sources. What other mythic truths—truths that are based on neither history nor science, but that give life meaning and direction—are prevalent in your society?

being distinct from the individual). This experience of God (or a god) is often characterized by two separate emotions: awe-inspiring fear and fascination. A well-known example of this type of experience is the revelation of God to Moses on Mount Sinai through the burning bush. Moses was fearful of God, yet drawn in fascination toward the divine presence.

Especially in nontheistic or transtheistic religions, religious experience usually takes the form of **mysticism**. In one basic type of mysticism, found in Hinduism and other transtheistic religions, the individual becomes one with the ultimate reality through inward contemplation. Another form of religious experience, known as the vision quest, is found in many indigenous religious traditions, including religions of Indigenous peoples of North America. Mysticism, as later chapters in this book explain, is also notably present in theistic religions, such as Sikhism and, in the form of Sufism, Islam. Mystical experience for these traditions involves being fully in the presence of one's God, even as the duality between the individual and the deity is maintained.

Mythic

The concept of **myth** may not be familiar today because most people no longer hold a predominantly mythic worldview. The matter is further complicated by a tendency to use the term *myth* in various ways. In common usage, *myth* is often taken to mean a falsehood—but in the study of world religions, myths convey important truths.

Westerners today tend to base their perspectives on history and science, acquiring knowledge through empirical observation and rational thinking. Myths are both nonhistorical and nonrational. But they do not necessarily conflict with history and science, nor are they necessarily false or irrational. Myths are sources of sacred truth and are therefore powerful, for they give meaning to life.

Myths take the form of sacred stories that are passed along from one generation to the next. Many are conveyed orally, though some are recorded in scripture. Myths are often set in primordial time, a period in the distant past somehow set apart from the ordinary present. They commonly tell of the origins of humans and the world. Myths set forth fundamental knowledge regarding the nature of things and the proper way to live.

The Genesis account of the world's creation is one such story or myth. It provides knowledge about a number of basic issues: the world was created by God, human beings were created in the image of God and are by nature good, humans are meant to have "dominion" over the other creatures of the world, and so forth. These mythic ideas depend on neither history nor science, but they remain sacred truths for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.

Ninian Smart broadened the mythic dimension to include "sacred narratives," stories that do not necessarily conform to scholarly conceptions of *myth,* as it is described in the previous paragraphs. Ancient accounts of the lives of significant religious people, such as Gautama the

mysticism A category of religious experiences characterized by communing or uniting with the ultimate reality through inward contemplation.

myth A story (often recorded in scripture) that tends to answer questions of origin and serves as a source of sacred truth.

Buddha and Jesus of Nazareth, are examples of sacred narratives.

Doctrinal

For many people, the most obvious and basic aspect of religion is belief. Adherents of a religion believe in something, namely, the creeds, doctrines, or teachings of their religion. Christians believe, for example, in the Apostles' Creed and in the doctrine of the Trinity. The belief aspect of religion is categorized as the doctrinal dimension.

Doctrines, creeds, and other teachings commonly originate in lived religious experience. They also derive from myths. Whereas myth and experience tend in some ways to defy the rational impulses of the mind, doctrines make sense of the content of experience and myth. They are often recorded in sacred texts, or scriptures, along with the myths and the accounts of revelation and other religious experiences that serve as the foundations of religions.

Ethical

Religions tend to devote much attention to **ethics**: How are we to act while living in the world? The ethical dimension includes many sets of teachings that respond to that question, like the Ten Commandments in the Jewish and Christian traditions, which have striking parallels in some other traditions. The ethical dimension also incorporates more general ethical principles, such as the Buddhist ideal of compassion, which is notably similar to the Christian ideal of love for one's neighbor.

Ritual

Worship is a common aspect of religions, taking a variety of forms and occupying much of an individual's religious life. Most forms of worship are carried out through some formal practice, or **ritual**. Like belief, ritual is familiar to most of us. Rituals sometimes reenact a myth or sacred story. For example, and recalling one of the articles cited at the beginning of this chapter, every Muslim ideally will make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca, the most holy city of Islam. Various aspects of the pilgrimage reenact the sacred story of Muhammad's original journey to Mecca, a leading event in the founding of the religion.

Social

Religions naturally involve communities, and most people consider the communal aspect of religion significant and attractive. A sense of community, of belonging to a group such as a people or parish or congregation, is usually empowering for individuals. The shared experience of community also fortifies religions and often results in some form of organization, typically including a hierarchy of leadership. For example, religions usually recognize one level of membership for officials or priests and another level for common adherents. Often particular figures are thought to embody the ideals of spiritual perfection. The Daoist (or Taoist; see "The Art of Translation," on page 155) sage and the Christian saint are two such figures.

Material

The sacred architecture of cathedrals, temples, and other structures of worship, and the art within them, are among humanity's most beautiful cultural achievements. Icons, such as the crucifix and statues of the Buddha, are part of this material dimension of religion. So too are books of scripture. Other types of sacred entities, whether natural (such as mountains) or of human construction (such as cities), are

ethics A dimension of religion that deals with how we are to act while living in the world.

ritual Formal worship practice, often based on the reenactment of a myth.

Identify at least two examples of sacred entities, art, or architecture in your community. Compare the examples in terms of how they express religious ideas and provoke emotions.

also highly significant for some religions. In India, for example, Hindus consider almost every major river sacred.

Some Challenges and Rewards of Studying the World's Religions

Several issues might make studying the world's religions unsettling. For example, it would seem that by definition, ultimate reality must be the same for all humans. Certainly, the monotheistic religions consider God to be the God of all. But if that is the case, can there be more than one true religion? Do the religions say essentially the same thing, even though they use different words filtered through different historical and cultural frameworks? Are they in basic agreement about the truth? If so, does the matter of choosing a religion simply come down to personal preference?

These are difficult questions, and it is unrealistic to hope they will all be answered satisfactorily by the end of this study. It also is quite possible that each reader's worldview will inevitably affect somewhat perspectives on the various traditions studied in this book. Indeed, the book's author, being a person raised and living in the United States with a particular upbringing and personal history, cannot be sure of avoiding, try as he might, effects of preconceptions born of his own heritage, academically and otherwise. Furthermore, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, religion is grounded in mystery, and surely we should not expect to penetrate such mystery entirely. We can, however, make progress toward understanding by clarifying a proper perspective from which to examine the world's religions.



The Kaveri River in Southern India is one of many rivers that Hindus regard as sacred.

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Two Approaches

A study of the world's religions is enriched when it is approached in two ways. First, it should be approached using a comparative methodology. Friedrich Max Müller, one of the founders of the study of comparative religions, insisted that to know just one religion is to know none. As this book moves from chapter to chapter, the dimensions of religion, along with the common questions to which different religions respond, should become clearer. Studying many religions can help a person know each one more precisely.

Second, the study of religions should be approached with **empathy**, which is the capacity for seeing things from another's perspective. A traditional saying cautions to never judge a person until having walked a mile in that person's shoes. This is helpful in avoiding the potential problems born of bringing preconceived perspectives to one's study of religion. Empathy requires the use of the imagination, and it can be quite challenging. It is rewarding too, providing a needed tool for gaining insight into the ways of others. The study of religions would not advance far if it lacked such insight.

empathy The capacity for seeing things from another's perspective, and an important methodological approach for studying religions.

It is important to cultivate empathy—the capacity for seeing things from another's perspective—when studying the religions of others. Try applying the saying about empathy, that we need to walk in another person's shoes, to a family member or close friend. What do you think life looks like from that person's perspective?

Objectives

What can students hope to gain from a broad study of the world's religions? For one, they can strive to become knowledgeable about ways of understanding various responses to the most fundamental religious questions asked by human beings all over the world. All religions are treasure troves of wisdom, and everyone can benefit from exploring them. For another, students can try to become better acquainted with the seven dimensions of religion through the study of abundant examples. Finally, they can expect to emerge from this study with a greatly enhanced understanding of the people who follow a variety of religions. That, in turn, can enrich them in their role as citizens of the global village.

Chapter Review

1. What issues do people usually address when they ask questions about the human condition?
2. How does spiritual transformation or fulfillment relate to the quest for salvation?
3. Briefly explain how religions differ over the question of destiny.
4. Name some ways religions perceive the nature of the world.
5. Describe the difference between theistic and nontheistic or transtheistic religions.

6. What is monism?
7. How do most religions teach that the ultimate reality is usually revealed?
8. Describe in general terms the religious experience of the theistic religions. Then briefly compare it with the religious experience of the nontheistic or transtheistic religions.
9. Briefly explain the concept of myth.
10. Identify at least two dimensions of religion, in addition to the mythic, doctrinal, and experiential.
11. What is one benefit of using a comparative approach to study the world's religions?
12. What is empathy, and how is it applied to the study of world religions?

Discussion Questions

1. The chapter presents five prominent religious questions: What is the human condition? What is spiritual fulfillment? What is our destiny? What is the nature of the world? What is the ultimate reality, and how is it revealed? How do these questions seem to be interrelated?
2. Identify each of Ninian Smart's seven dimensions of religion. Now, thinking about things familiar to you based on your life situation, try to cite at least one example (an item or phenomenon) for each dimension.
3. Based on the content of this chapter and your own background knowledge, consider the possibility of these additional dimensions of religion: political, economic, and technological. How would you describe each dimension? Try to cite at least one example for each.



Chapter 4

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Buddhism

Buddhism, like Hinduism, arose in ancient India. But in stark contrast to Hinduism, with its streams of traditions converging from various sources of India's past, Buddhism began with one man. Gautama was merely a man—not a god or other supernatural being—but he was an exceptional man who underwent an extraordinary experience. To put it briefly, he "woke up"—hence acquiring the name **Buddha** (boo´duh), which is derived from *budh*, "to awaken." He awoke to full awareness of the nature of the human condition and the means of transcending it.

Buddhism teaches the discoveries attained by this man, through this experience of awakening or enlightenment.

Fundamental to Gautama's discoveries is that human beings are by nature prone to suffer. In other words, we are in a state of disease, and we need treatment. In a manner similar to that of a physician, proceeding rationally and empirically, Gautama diagnosed the human condition and prescribed a cure. One way of understanding Buddhism then is as a therapy for living.

Having begun with just one man, Buddhism gradually developed into a religious tradition that includes various interpretations of the Buddha's teachings. This chapter first examines the foundations of Buddhism—Gautama the Buddha and his teachings—which are of central significance for all forms of Buddhism. It then explores the major divisions within Buddhism.

Buddha (boo´duh; Sanskrit and Pali: "awakened one") Siddhartha Gautama and all others who have, by their own insight, attained perfect enlightenment.

The Life of Gautama

Like the lives of most founders of great religious traditions, that of Gautama is known more through legend than through fact. Full accounts of the Buddha's life were not written down until hundreds of years after his death, by which time legendary elements had long been established. Nevertheless, the story of Gautama is meaningful and instructive, reflecting in vivid form the issues and ideals that lie at the heart of Buddhism. The legend that recounts the life of Gautama fits squarely within the mythic dimension of religion, which includes sacred narratives that convey important truths to followers.

From Pampered Prince to Starving Ascetic

Born about 563 BCE, the future Buddha was given the name Siddhartha. His family's name was Gautama, so his full name is Siddhartha Gautama (though he is most commonly referred to simply as Gautama). His family belonged to the warrior (Kshatriya) class, and his father was the ruler of a small region in Northern India.

Gautama was born into a position of worldly power. According to traditional Buddhist belief, he was destined to become either a universal king (that is, a ruler over all peoples) or a Buddha, an awakened one who would offer the world



The birth of Buddha is illustrated in a mural painting on a temple wall in Thailand.

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salvation from suffering. The accounts of his birth tell of miraculous events befitting the arrival of such a great one. Said to have come out of his mother's side, Gautama at once strode seven paces and declared that in this lifetime he would gain enlightenment. A sage, upon seeing the boy's perfect form, affirmed that this child would gain enlightenment and become a savior.

Gautama's father wanted him to become a universal king. He pampered the young prince with all the comforts of the palace. Gautama grew up in luxury, safe from the sufferings of the outside world. He was surrounded by thousands of servants and beautiful dancing girls. Eventually, he married the finest maiden of the kingdom, and the two had a son. It would seem that Prince Siddhartha was enjoying a life of complete satisfaction.

The Four Passing Sights

Gautama soon discovered that such satisfaction would not endure forever. Despite his father's attempts to shield him from the harsh realities of the world, Gautama encountered them firsthand in an episode known as the Four Passing Sights. While he was traveling for pleasure in the countryside, his chariot passed a decrepit old man. Having never before seen old age, Gautama brooded over the implication of this sight—that such a fate was in store for everyone, himself included. On a second ride, the prince saw a diseased man and again was dismayed and deeply disturbed. How could people enjoy life when disease threatened them all? On a third trip, Gautama saw a corpse for the first time. He was now more devastated than before, for with this sight he learned of death. Was it not senseless for people to go on living as if oblivious to the certainty of death?



This Chinese painting from the ninth century depicts the Buddha and the Four Passing Sights. These sights raised religious questions that led to the founding of Buddhism.

National Museum of India, New Delhi, India/Bridgeman Images

How are the facts of old age, disease, and death given meaning within your religious tradition or within the religious tradition you are most familiar with?

Imagine yourself in Gautama's place, a pampered prince or princess with all of life's worldly joys at your disposal. What would it take for you to leave it all, as Gautama did?

These first three sights were penetrating lessons about the reality of suffering and the impermanent nature of life's pleasures. Having seen them, Gautama knew he would never again find contentment in the luxuries of the palace. Nor could he again feel safe, now that he had learned the truths of old age, disease, and death. He mounted his horse and rode out from the palace, grieving as he observed the toil of peasants plowing the fields, and the destruction of living things uprooted by the plows. Eventually, Gautama saw a religious ascetic, a man who had chosen to lead a homeless life of solitude and self-denial. The man explained that he was in search of salvation from this world of suffering, and then he continued on his way.

The ascetic, the fourth of the passing sights, filled Gautama with elation and hope: here was a means of overcoming his despair. Soon, he would leave the palace forever, to embark on the life of a mendicant (a religious person who owned nothing and begged for necessities like food and clothing).



Many images recount the life and teachings of the Buddha.

Musee Guimet, Paris, France/Bridgeman Images

The Great Going Forth

At age twenty-nine, Gautama gave up his life as a prince, secretly leaving his family and palace by horseback in the dark of night. He removed his jewels and dismissed his servant, sending the servant back with a message for the king: Gautama had not left out of resentment or lack of affection; rather, his purpose was to put an end to old age and death. Gautama renounced a life of power and sensual enjoyment for the austere life of a mendicant. Buddhists revere this event in Gautama's life, known as the Great Going Forth, as the triumph of the spiritual over the worldly life.

Gautama came upon other mendicants who taught him their versions of meditation. He learned their methods quickly but was not satisfied with their results. Salvation, he believed, lay beyond the meditative accomplishments of those teachings. He soon joined a group of five mendicants who practiced asceticism to win salvation. Gautama excelled in the practice of fasting, spending the next several years on the brink of starvation. The Buddhist tradition tells of meals consisting of one piece of fruit, one sesame seed, one grain of rice. Believing that reduction of the body would increase his spiritual powers, Gautama diminished himself to skin and bones.

The Middle Way

Starvation did not lead to salvation. And so, six years after leaving the palace, in another famous episode, Gautama accepted a simple meal of rice and milk. He quickly regained enough strength to proceed on his quest. His five companions left him, disgusted that he had abandoned asceticism.

Gautama thus discovered the important Buddhist doctrine of the **Middle Way**. Having earlier rejected a lifestyle of sensual indulgence in the palace, he now rejected the other extreme of asceticism. The Middle Way holds that a healthy spiritual life depends on a healthy physical life. Though it rejects indulgence in bodily pleasure, it does not reject the body itself. In general, the doctrine embraces the idea that contentment is a good thing. Spiritual happiness implies complete contentment, in body, in mind, and in spirit.

The Enlightened One

Now Gautama, contented and fortified in body, was prepared to devote all his effort to attaining salvation. Sitting in the lotus position beneath a fig tree, he resolved not to leave the spot until he found complete and perfect fulfillment.

Traditional accounts of Gautama's enlightenment begin by depicting his encounters with the basic human shortcomings of fear and passionate desire.

Mara, the god of death, noted Gautama's resolution and was alarmed at the prospect that he might succeed. Attempting to defend his realm, Mara desperately tried to frighten Gautama from his spot. But Gautama could not be scared away. Hoping to roust Gautama through an appeal to his passions, Mara then sent forth his three daughters—the goddesses Discontent, Delight, and Desire. Again, Gautama was unmoved, touching the earth to call it to be a witness to his resolve. Defeated, Mara and his daughters departed.

Middle Way A basic Buddhist teaching that rejects both the pleasures of sensual indulgence and the self-denial of asceticism, focusing instead on a practical approach to spiritual attainment.

How might the doctrine of the Middle Way be relevant to the way you live? Reflect on ways you follow (or do not follow) the Middle Way.



Worshippers gather at the Bodhi tree. This is said to be the place where the Buddha attained enlightenment.

© Jeffrey Broad

Enlightenment

Gautama had overcome the distractions of fear and passion, represented in legends by Mara and his daughters. Now he turned his focus inward and entered a meditative trance. He ascended through levels of ever-deepening awareness, until he could perceive with perfect clarity the true nature of the human condition.

During the portion of the night traditionally called the First Watch (evening), Gautama perceived his own previous lifetimes. He observed his long passage from rebirth to death to another rebirth, and so on—a continuous journey of suffering. During the Second Watch (middle of the night), he acquired the "divine eye," the ability to perceive the deaths and rebirths of all living beings. Nowhere in this world was there any safety, nowhere an escape from death. During the Third Watch (late night), Gautama discovered the Four Noble Truths, the perfect summation of the human condition and the means for transcending it.

By discovering the Four Noble Truths, Gautama had attained enlightenment—spiritual fulfillment in this life—and thus had won salvation. Now he had become the Buddha, the Awakened One. This is among the most significant examples of the role of the experiential dimension in the founding of a new religion.

Gautama discovered the truths of Buddhism solely by looking inward, through meditation. Take a few minutes to look inward, to contemplate who you are. What truths regarding your own nature are you able to discover?

Founding of the Sangha

Gautama the Buddha remained in his spot beneath the fig tree (referred to ever since as the bodhi, or "wisdom," tree) for many days. In a state of perfect tranquility and infinite wisdom, he was forever liberated from the sufferings of the human condition. He was tempted to leave his body and pass into **nirvana**, the state of eternal bliss that is ultimate salvation. His depth of compassion, however, compelled him to remain in the world and to share his discoveries with his fellow humans. True, his doctrines would be quite difficult for others to understand. Yet if just one person could comprehend them and thereby gain salvation, his effort would be well spent.

The Buddha wondered, to whom should he offer his teachings? His five former companions would perhaps grasp their meaning, he thought, and so he set off to find them. When the five first saw Gautama, they decided to ignore him, convinced he was no longer worthy of their company because he had abandoned asceticism. But his spiritual presence overcame their intentions. Soon they sat listening as the Buddha, perfectly calm and radiant in his wisdom, preached his First Sermon at the Deer Park near the city of Varanasi (formerly Benares). He taught the doctrines of the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths. Gradually, the five mendicants grasped his teachings and attained enlightenment, thereby becoming arhats, "worthy ones" or saints. The Buddha had gained his first followers; Buddhism as a religious tradition was born.

For the remaining forty-five years of his life, the Buddha continued to teach, attracting an ever-growing following. The first Buddhist monastic community, or **Sangha** (sahn´guh), was formed, consisting of men and women from all walks of

nirvana (Sanskrit: "blowing out") The ultimate goal of all Buddhists, the extinction of desire and any sense of individual selfhood, resulting in liberation from samsara and its limiting conditions.

Sangha (sahn´guh; Sanskrit and Pali: "assemblage") The Buddhist community of monks and nuns; one of the Three Jewels of Buddhism.

life. Gautama's son is said to have been among the earliest Buddhists. The Sangha was carefully organized, with specific roles for monks and nuns, and a clearly defined relationship with laypeople. For the three months of the monsoon season, the entire Sangha remained together in retreat. During the remaining nine months of the year, the Buddha and his followers traveled about the land teaching. Buddhism is focused on the individual and yet, as the Sangha shows, the social dimension plays a major role.

To this day, being a Buddhist means taking refuge in the tradition's Three Jewels, or three focal elements: the Buddha, the Dharma (the Buddha's teachings), and the Sangha (the Buddhist monastic community). The act of taking refuge traditionally involves repeating a ritual formula three times. It amounts to a formal acknowledgment of the authority of the Three Jewels, and indicates a definite commitment to being a Buddhist.

As one of the Three Jewels, the Sangha obviously plays an important role in Buddhism. Describe a community (religious or otherwise) in which you participate. What is the role of community togetherness and organization? What is the relationship between community and learning?

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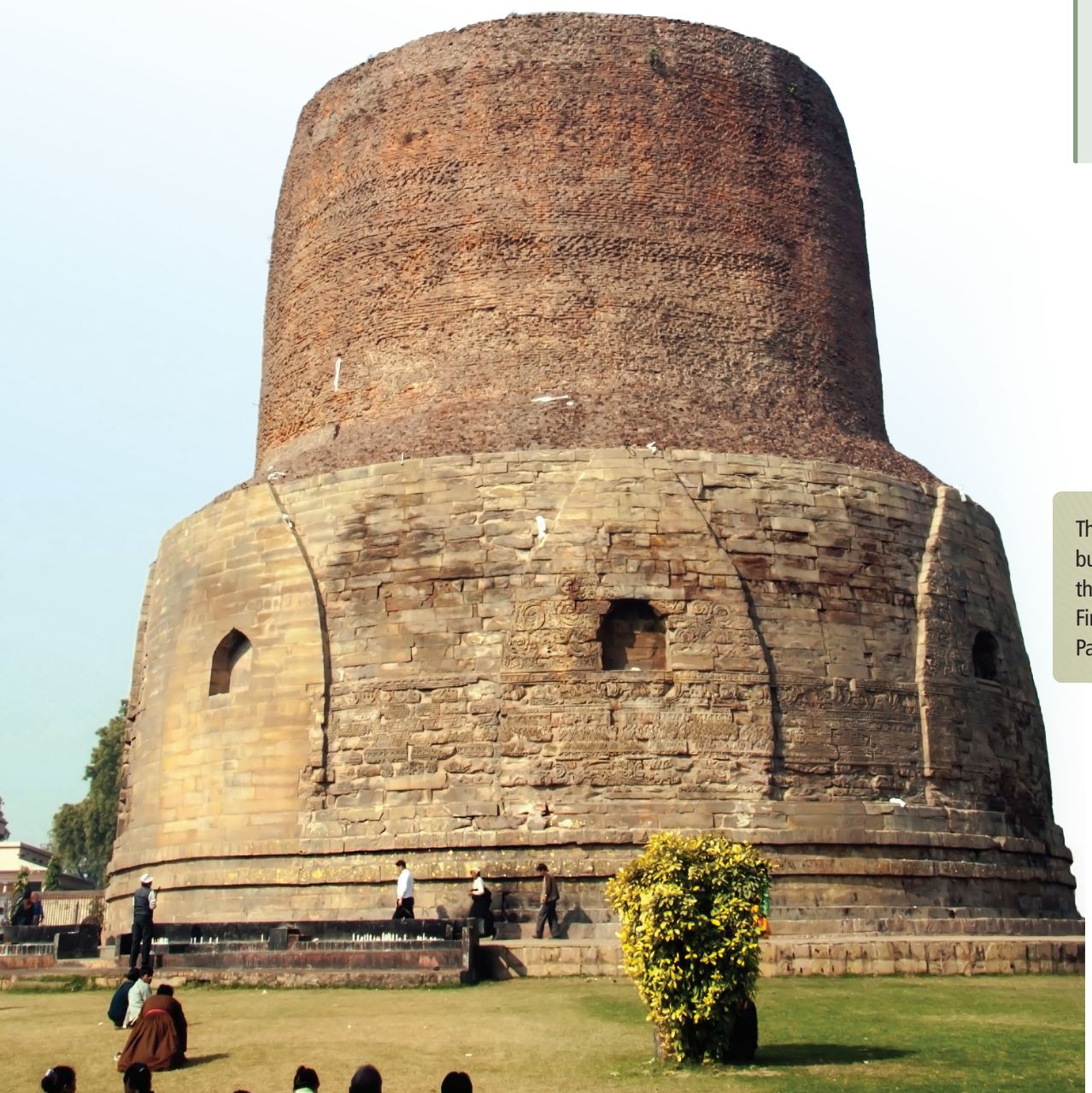


This stupa, or shrine, is built on the place where the Buddha preached his First Sermon at the Deer Park.

Death and Final Nirvana

At the age of eighty, in about 483 BCE, the Buddha became seriously ill after eating a meal of spoiled food. To a gathering of monks and nuns, Gautama spoke his final words: "All the constituents of being are transitory; work out your salvation with diligence" (in *Buddhism in Translations*). In this last message, the Buddha affirmed the hope of salvation for subsequent Buddhists. The physician was leaving his patients, but his prescription was to remain available for all.

After ascending through the stages of meditation to a state of perfect tranquility, Gautama died, passing forever into nirvana.

"Work out your salvation with diligence." Use what you know about the Buddha's religious quest to elaborate on the meaning of his final words.

The Dharma: Buddhist Teachings

Most Buddhists revere Gautama and look to his life and enlightenment as the model for their own religious aspirations. But the Buddha's teachings, rather than the Buddha himself, play the predominant role in defining the religious life of Buddhism.

Buddhist teachings, or **Dharma** (dahr´muh)—not to be confused with the related Hindu doctrine of dharma, or "ethical duty"—are in some respects difficult to understand. They are born not of mental reflection but of insight gained through a profound meditative experience. Thus full understanding of Buddhist teachings requires an equal degree of insight gained directly through meditation. Gautama himself questioned whether anyone would comprehend his teachings, and all along he seems to have advocated Buddhism for only the few who considered themselves fit for the task.

The legendary life story of Gautama is meaningful and instructive, reflecting the issues and ideals that lie at the heart of Buddhism. Within the story, identify examples of at least five of the seven dimensions of religion.

But Buddhist teachings also have a simple aspect: they are the insights of a mere human being. Unlike many religions, Buddhism does not depend on a revelation from the divine for its truths. Buddhist truths were discovered through the inward reflections of a man and are therefore potentially understandable by anyone. Rather than relying heavily on faith, Buddhism emphasizes the development of wisdom, or insight into the human condition, and this is attained primarily through direct experience, rather than being dependent on faith. Buddhism is thus among the most psychologically oriented of all the world's religions.

Buddhism and Hinduism: The Indian Context

Buddhism naturally shares many ideas with Hinduism because it arose in India during the period when the Upanishads were composed. But whereas Hindus have regarded Buddhism as a close relative of their own religion (Hindu tradition counts the Buddha as one of the ten incarnations of the god Vishnu), the Buddha himself in many ways reacted against the Hinduism of his day.

A Shared Cosmology

Buddhism and Hinduism both regard time as cyclical. They maintain that the universe is eternal, with ages of creation and destruction following one after the other. Because of this eternal time scheme, both Buddhism and Hinduism are considered eternal—are believed to have come to be and passed away many times, in cyclical fashion, along with the rest of creation. For Buddhists then, Gautama the Buddha

Dharma (dahr´muh) The teachings of the Buddha, and one of the Three Jewels of Buddhism.

is not the first or only Buddha. In fact, countless Buddhas preceded him, and countless more will follow him.

Many worlds exist in this eternal cyclical time scheme. Gods and goddesses inhabit various heavens, and demons inhabit various hells. Between them are the middle realms, including those of animals and humans. This scheme of multiple worlds has much in common with the Hindu universe.

Basic to this cosmology for both traditions is the doctrine of samsara (sahm-sah´ruh), the "wheel of rebirth," which holds that the inhabitants of all of these realms are generally destined to continue being reborn in one realm or another. People can escape the cycle of rebirth only through liberation from samsara. That liberation is usually called moksha in Hinduism and nirvana in Buddhism. For both traditions, liberation is the final goal, the end result of spiritual fulfillment.

The Buddha's Reaction against Early Hinduism

The Buddha was discontented with many of the religious features of his day, especially the speculative philosophy and the sacrificial rituals that were the domain of the Brahmin class. As the Upanishads illustrate, early Hinduism embraced philosophical speculation regarding the nature of the world, the human self, and the divine. The Buddha dismissed such speculation as useless for the task of winning salvation. He thought sacrificial rituals of devotion to gods were equally useless. He insisted, instead, on direct inward observation of the human condition. Although Buddhism accepts the existence of deities, it holds that only the human mind can win salvation.

Gautama also rejected the institutional structure of Hinduism, in which only males of the Brahmin class controlled the sacrificial rituals and sacred texts. The Buddha, himself born into the powerful warrior class, explicitly rejected the Hindu caste system. And, though apparently with some reluctance, he allowed women to join the Sangha and to become nuns.

Buddhism's tendency to accept all people is also apparent in the language of its earliest texts, which was **Pali** (pah´lee), a local dialect spoken by the common people. At the time, the sacred texts of Hinduism were all written in Sanskrit, which only the Brahmins were expected to know. The teachings of the Buddha, though difficult to understand, were made widely available.

Individuals and Their Destiny

Buddhist teachings focus on the predicament of individuals and their destiny. This makes the teachings simple in the sense that their subject matter is confined to one thing: the individual. Everything the Buddha discovered is discoverable in oneself. The difficult aspect of the teachings lies mainly in this paradox: To examine completely the inner realm of self leads to the discovery that the self *does not exist*. Let us attempt to make some sense of this paradox.

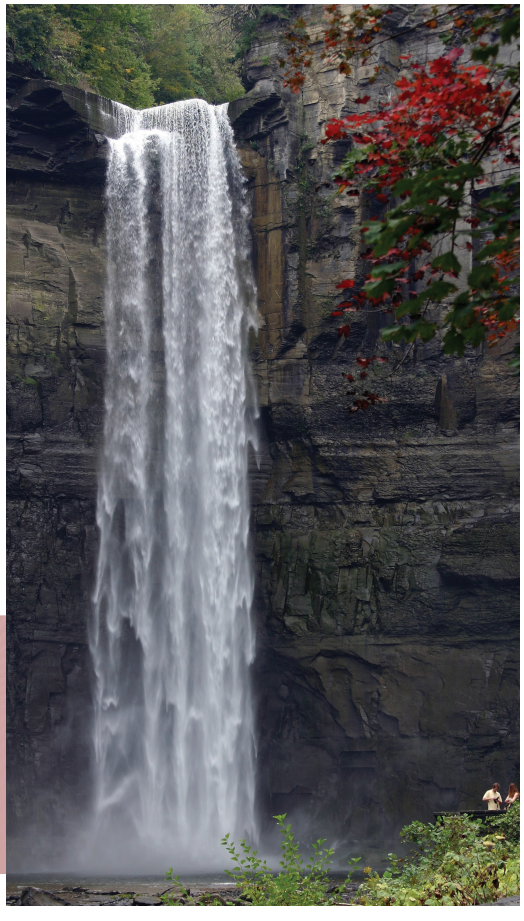
Pali (pah´lee) An ancient language of India, similar to Sanskrit but more commonly understood, and used in the writing of the earliest Buddhist texts; most important for Theravada Buddhism.

The Three Marks of Existence: No-Self, Impermanence, and Suffering

A main teaching of the Hindu Upanishads is that Atman, the eternal Self that resides deep within everyone, is identical to Brahman, the ultimate reality. To find Atman within and to be absorbed in it is the final aim for the Hinduism of the Upanishads.

Gautama looked deeply within, but his discovery led him to a radically different conclusion. In a word, Gautama discovered *change*. Everything, within and without, is changing, in a constant state of flux, impermanent. He summarized this changing nature of reality by noting **Three Marks of Existence**, vital components of the doctrinal dimension of Buddhism.

"The essence of Buddhism is . . . there is no essence." Discuss the meaning of this saying.



The second mark of existence is anicca, or impermanence. We may see the waterfall as an unchanging thing, but it is an ongoing flow.

The first mark of existence is **anatta** (uh-nat´uh), "no-self." Rather than finding Atman (called *atta* in Pali), the Buddha found anatta, meaning there is no ultimate reality within, no essence underlying existence, no eternal substratum that is truly real, enduring beyond the present. This paradox, central to Buddhist teachings, can be summarized thus: The essence of Buddhism is . . . there is no essence.

To gain understanding of the doctrine of anatta, consider your own situation. Where were you ten years ago? It may be tempting to answer, "I was in grade school," or in this or that place. But the Buddha would answer that you simply did not exist ten years ago. The you that exists now is the result of a long sequence of change. And you continue to change, from moment to moment. You hear a new idea from a friend or teacher, and suddenly your outlook changes; you are left with a different self. Of course, practically speaking, individuals do have a personality, a sense of selfhood—but whether they notice it or not, this "self" is constantly changing and is not the sort of enduring self that most are inclined to think they have.

The second mark of existence defined by the Buddha is **anicca** (uh-nee´chuh), which means "impermanence." Anicca is closely related to anatta, but it focuses

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Three Marks of Existence Characteristics that summarize the changing nature of reality: anatta (no-self), anicca (impermanence), and *dukkha* (suffering).

anatta (uh-nat´uh; Pali: "no-self") One of the Three Marks of Existence; the Buddhist doctrine denying a permanent self.

anicca (uh-nee´chuh; Pali: "impermanence") One of the Three Marks of Existence; the Buddhist doctrine that all existent things are constantly changing.

on the idea that existence is constantly changing. Consider this example: If a person spoke of a river flowing, the Buddha, always insistent on the precision of speech, would correct them: the flowing is the river. A river is a dynamic process, not a static entity. A river may seem to be a real and unchanging thing, but it is an ongoing flow, a constant sequence of change. The same understanding applies to the self: it appears to be real and unchanging, but it is an ongoing flow—of thoughts, perceptions, fears, hopes, and so on—that is constantly changing.

The third mark of existence is ***dukkha*** (dook´huh), which is usually translated as "suffering." *Dukkha* is a natural result of anicca and anatta. It is one of the Four Noble Truths, and is considered in detail later in this chapter.

Samsara: Buddhist Rebirth

The paradoxical doctrine of anatta raises a difficult question regarding belief in rebirth, or samsara: If there is no self, what is reborn? In Hinduism this is not a concern, because the eternal Atman resides within everyone. Dying is similar to discarding old clothes, and rebirth is like putting on new ones (Bhagavad-Gita 2:22).

To explain what is reborn, Buddhism turns to analogies also. For example, if a flame is passed from one candle to another, is the second candle burning with the same flame as the first? A flame, like a river, is not a static entity, but a dynamic process. It is an ever-changing bundle of energy, and the passage from one candle to another is, most precisely, a transference of energy. The same can be said of rebirth from one body to the next. It is the transference of a bundle of energy, which is patterned according to one's karma.

Karma: Buddhist Morality and Personal Identity

The Buddhist doctrine of karma generally has the same meaning as the Hindu version: it is the moral law of cause and effect. Karma functions hand in hand with samsara, in that the nature of one's rebirth depends on the status of one's karma. Indeed, because Buddhism denies the transference of any self or soul, personal identity depends entirely on karma. When an individual dies, their karma continues on its trajectory, as it were, eventually bringing about rebirth. At conception, the new person is possessed of this particular status brought on by the karma of the previous life.

Because karma is constantly affected by the moral adequacy of one's actions, morality is of pressing concern for Buddhism, which therefore tends to emphasize the ethical dimension. The moral life requires observance of the **Five Precepts**:

1. Do not take life.
2. Do not take what is not given.
3. Do not engage in sensuous misconduct.
4. Do not use false speech.
5. Do not drink intoxicants.

As you observe the natural world, do you tend to perceive things as permanent or impermanent? Could the things that you perceive as permanent really be impermanent? Give some specific examples.

The analogy of the flame being passed from one candle to another is the most famous one used to describe Buddhist rebirth. Invent a second analogy to help explain this doctrine.

dukkha (dook´huh; Pali: "suffering," "frustration," "dislocation," or "discomfort") The first of the Four Noble Truths, the basic Buddhist insight that suffering is part of the human condition. *See also* Three Marks of Existence.

Five Precepts The basic moral requirements that are binding for all Buddhists.

Four Noble Truths
The central teachings of Buddhism: to live is to experience suffering; suffering is caused by desire; the cessation of suffering can be achieved; the solution is the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Five Precepts apply to all Buddhists. The following precepts are added for monks and nuns:

6. Do not eat after noon.
7. Do not watch dancing or shows.
8. Do not use garlands, perfumes, or ornaments.
9. Do not use a high or soft bed.
10. Do not accept gold or silver.

Buddhist morality emphasizes intention. The degree to which an act is immoral depends on the individual's intention to commit the act, rather than on the actual outcome. For example, for a Buddhist, intentionally shooting at a deer and missing is immoral, whereas accidentally killing a deer with a car is not immoral.

Some systems of morality, such as the Buddhist one, emphasize the intention of an action; other systems emphasize the outcome of an action. Which do you think has greater moral significance—intention or outcome? Explain your answer.

The Four Noble Truths

During the Third Watch of the night of his enlightenment, upon reaching the most profound level of insight, Gautama perceived the **Four Noble Truths**:

1. To live is to experience suffering.
2. Suffering is caused by desire.
3. Suffering can be brought to cessation.
4. The solution to suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path.



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Buddhist precepts emphasize respect for all forms of life.

These truths were the foundational discoveries through which the Buddha, the physician, could attend to humankind: diagnosing the disease, determining its cause, issuing a prognosis, and prescribing a cure. The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths in his momentous First Sermon. They are the central teachings of Buddhism, the heart of the tradition's doctrinal dimension.

Diagnosis of the Disease: *Dukkha*

The name of the first noble truth is *dukkha*, which is translated variously as "suffering," "frustration," "dislocation," or "discomfort," to name only a few possibilities. The word originally referred to disjointedness, as with a wheel not perfectly centered on its axle or a bone slightly ajar in its socket. Generally speaking, to assert that life is *dukkha* is to imply that things are not quite as they should be, but somehow out of joint and in need of repair.

That life is *dukkha* is obvious to anyone who is experiencing pain, be it physical or emotional. When we hurt or are ill, even to a slight degree, it is all too clear that things could be better. But what about the good times, when health and contentment prevail? What about the moments when we feel a deep happiness and yearn for life to continue this way forever? The problem, the Buddha would say, is that such happiness will not continue. Human life is finite, and all our experiences are of limited duration. Life's best times hasten to their end. The ordinary times, even if not hampered by illness or injury, are never quite as good as they could be.

In his First Sermon, the Buddha provided a practical list of specific life experiences during which suffering is most readily apparent. He began by citing stages of the life process: birth, old age, disease, and death. Birth entails suffering simply because it marks the beginning of life in human form, another round of existence in samsara. Recall that among the Four Passing Sights that prompted Gautama to leave his palace life were an old man, a diseased man, and a corpse. Although Gautama's life as a prince may have seemed ideal at the time, those sights prompted him to acknowledge the suffering that was in store even for him. Like the lives of all human beings, his was finite, of limited duration. He too would grow old, experience disease, and die.

The Buddha went on to cite three day-to-day experiences. Despite all their efforts, people continually come into contact with unpleasant things. At the same time, people have to continually endure separation from pleasant things, along with harboring unfulfilled wishes. The problem common to these last two experiences, and one that is highly relevant to understanding Buddhism, is attachment. It is our attachment to pleasant things that sets us up to suffer when we are separated from them. What is a wish other than a mental attachment to some object or event that is not yet ours to enjoy?

The Buddha was severe in his condemnation of attachment, denouncing even such commonly cherished bonds as those between family members. In the following story, retold by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022), a woman grieving the death of a child visits the Buddha in the city of Savatthi:

> The Buddha asked her, "Visakha, where have you been? Why are your clothes and hair so wet?"
>
> Lady Visakha wept. "Lord, my little grandson just died. I wanted to come see you, but in my grief I forgot to take my hat or parasol to protect me from the rain."

"How old was your grandson, Visakha? How did he die?"

"Lord, he was only three years old. He died of typhoid fever."

"The poor little one. Visakha, how many children and grandchildren do you have?"

"Lord, I have sixteen children. Nine are married. I had eight grandchildren. Now there are only seven."

"Visakha, you like having a lot of grandchildren, don't you?"

"Oh yes, Lord. The more the better. Nothing would make me happier than to have as many children and grandchildren as there are people in Savatthi."

"Visakha, do you know how many people die each day in Savatthi?"

"Lord, sometimes nine or ten, but at least one person dies every day in Savatthi. There is no day without a death in Savatthi."

"Visakha, if your children and grandchildren were as numerous as the people of Savatthi, your hair and clothes would be as soaked as they are today every day."

Visakha joined her palms. "I understand! I really don't want as many children and grandchildren as there are people in Savatthi. The more attachments one has, the more one suffers. You have often taught me this, but I always seem to forget."

The Buddha smiled gently.

(Old Path White Clouds)

Reflect on the Buddha's teaching to the woman whose grandson had just died. How do you feel about this teaching? How does it compare with your perspective on family ties?



A Buddha statue at Sukhothai Park, in Thailand.

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Dukkha would seem to be unavoidable. All of life's experiences are of finite duration, and we are constantly bombarded by opportunities to become attached. Indeed, the Buddha concluded in his First Sermon that human life itself, by its very nature, is unavoidably wrapped up in *dukkha*. Bodies, personalities, thoughts—all are finite, all are constantly changing. All are subject to *dukkha*. This is a grave diagnosis.

Determination of the Cause: Tanha

The Buddha did not stop at his grave diagnosis of the diseased human condition, giving in to its hopelessness. Instead, he proceeded to realize its cause. He identified the second noble truth as **tanha**, which is translated variously as "desire," "thirst," or "craving."

It is helpful to think of tanha as implying selfish desire, for it seems impossible not to desire anything—after all, the Buddha himself desired to lead others on the path to enlightenment. The distinguishing characteristic of tanha is its selfish orientation. It is desire for individual attainment, for private fulfillment.

Just as *dukkha* is seemingly unavoidable, so too is its cause, tanha. How can an individual refrain from desiring personal fulfillment? The Buddha would likely answer that they cannot. Individuals are destined to be selfish; tanha is an unavoidable aspect of being an individual. But recall what the Buddha taught about individuality. He taught the doctrine of anatta, "no-self." That which we regard as our self, our individuality, is not part of any ultimate reality. We are, in fact, changing from moment to moment. Yet we imagine that we exist as individuals, each of us unique and endowed with a self that is real and abiding and significant. But this is a falsehood. It is also another form of attachment. Attached to our false idea of being individual selves, we tend to care for ourselves diligently, all the while only adding fuel to the fire of tanha, and tightening the grip of *dukkha*. A British-born Buddhist teacher who went by the pen name Wei Wu Wei puts it like this:

> Why are you unhappy?
> Because 99.9 percent
> Of everything you think,
> And of everything you do,
> Is for yourself—
> And there isn't one.
> *(Ask the Awakened)*

It is a vicious circle! It is precisely this fictitious self that goes on thinking of itself as real. How can such a circle be broken? The great difficulty of this challenge suggests that the Buddha was not an ordinary physician, but an ingenious one who prescribed a radical cure that would forever change the world's religious landscape.

Prognosis

Critics of Buddhism often point out that focusing on suffering is an unnecessarily pessimistic approach to living. Surely, there are alternative perspectives on life. The adage "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die" calls to mind one alternative. But even if blatant indulgence in bodily pleasure is not the focus of other perspectives, philosophies and religions often place more emphasis on the joys of life than on the sorrows.

Despite Buddhism's emphasis on suffering, the accounts of Buddhists give one the overwhelming impression that they gain a deep joy and contentment from practicing their religion. Rather than characterizing Buddhism as pessimistic, it is perhaps more accurate to label it realistic. People *do* suffer. Even happiness is yoked

tanha (Pali: "desire," "thirst," or "craving") The second of the Four Noble Truths, selfish desire, which causes *dukkha*.

Have you ever performed a truly selfless act? Is such an act, completely free from any selfish motivation, even possible? (According to Buddhism, it would be possible only after the actor attained enlightenment.) Explain.

Make a short list of "truths" that summarize the human condition. For each truth, describe why you included it.

Noble Eightfold Path The fourth of the Four Noble Truths; defines the basic practices of Buddhism that lead to nirvana.

to suffering. Life, it would seem, can be better than it is. The Buddha understood the extreme importance of first being aware of the disease and its cause before proceeding. And he believed wholeheartedly that the disease and its cause can be rooted out from each of us. His prognosis can be described only as optimistic.

Prescription for a Cure: The Noble Eightfold Path

In light of the pervasiveness of suffering and its cause, it is appropriate that the cure set out in the **Noble Eightfold Path** encompasses all aspects of life. In keeping with the doctrine of the Middle Way, though, the Noble Eightfold Path sets forth a life of moderation, not of extreme religious practices. Also, the eight steps constitute ongoing practices, not stages to be mastered and then left behind.

1. *Right views.* Learn and adopt the content of the Buddha's teachings, especially the Four Noble Truths.

A Pure Offering, Every Day

Tsechang Gonpo is a Vajrayana Buddhist living in Minneapolis. Although he and his wife, Sonam, are far from their people's native homeland of Tibet, Buddhism continues to be central to their lives. Among other things, Tsechang makes clear the importance of the lama, a figure explained later in this chapter. Tsechang explains what their religion means to him and Sonam, and why:

Buddhism plays a big part in our day-to-day life. It is more important than family. A main reason for this is our belief in life after death and the wheel of rebirth, or samsara. When I die, I have to leave those who are near and dear to me and travel to the next life alone. It would be bad to be too attached to the things of this life, even my family.

The nature of my next life depends on the deeds I have done during this life and previous ones. If I have practiced Buddhism well and accumulated lots of good karma, then maybe I can take on a good life-form, such as a human. If not, maybe I will become a bird, or even worse, I may have to go to hell. My next life is therefore very important to me, as is the ultimate goal of escaping from the pain and suffering of samsara to a state we call nirvana. When we are enlightened, we can become a Buddha. All of us have this chance, depending on our level of practice. One can even get to Buddhahood or nirvana in this life, if one is willing to sacrifice worldly things and follow the tough way of intense meditation and other practices.

The reincarnation of lamas illustrates our beliefs in life after death. Many high lamas who maintain exceptional practice and meditation are reincarnated in their next life as previous lamas. The basic difference between such lamas and ourselves is based on the level of Buddhist practice. They can remember their previous life-form, whereas we do not remember anything because of our relatively low level of practice and our ignorance.

My father was a reincarnation of a previous lama. He was from the eastern part of Tibet but

2. *Right intentions.* Abandon the evil attitudes of greed, hatred, and delusion. Nurture the good attitudes of generosity, friendship, and insight.
3. *Right speech.* Avoid vocal wrong deeds such as gossip, lying, abusive talk, and idle talk.
4. *Right conduct.* Live morally by obeying the Five Precepts for all Buddhists, or ten precepts for monks and nuns.
5. *Right livelihood.* Abstain from occupations that harm living beings, such as selling weapons, selling liquor, butchering, hunting, or being a soldier.
6. *Right effort.* Maintain mental alertness so as to control the effect of the senses and to discriminate between wise and unwise mental activity.

came to central Tibet to master Buddhism and then to return to his people. Unfortunately, he was not able to return home because of the Chinese invasion. He escaped to India, and for his own self-defense he took a weapon. Because of that, he had to give back the vows of lama, and he became an ordinary man.

Another example of a reincarnated lama is His Holiness the Dalai Lama (for more on him, see pages 99 and 101). We believe that he is the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara in human form. The present Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is fourteenth in the succession of reincarnations. He is both the temporal and spiritual leader of Tibet and an important figure for Tibetans. He had to take over the leadership at a young age, during a difficult period. Tibet lost its independence to communist China in 1959. Nearly two million Tibetans died during the occupation, and six thousand monasteries, temples, and other cultural and historic buildings were destroyed and their contents pillaged. Fortunately, the Dalai Lama and about eighty thousand Tibetans escaped to India.

I start each day with prayer. I pray for the well-being of all sentient beings and for the long life of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and that I might accumulate good karma during the day. Our deities are also in my prayers. The majority of us believe in Nechung and Palden Lhamo, deities who give advice to us through oracles. After prayer, I offer seven bowls of water to the gods, and then I burn incense. Water is offered because it is cheap and therefore there is no sense of loss. If I felt loss due to attachment, my offering would not be pure. I then go to work. During the day I always try to think about the most simple Buddhist teaching: "If you cannot help anybody, at least try never to harm anyone." This is good for a common layperson like me as it is simple and easy to follow. Before I go to bed, I think about how I have done during the day. If I have done something bad, then I regret that and ask for forgiveness in my prayers to the Three Jewels: the Buddha, his teachings and the scriptures, and the community of monks and nuns. I meditate sometimes, but being in America it is difficult to find time to meditate every day.

The final three steps of the Eightfold Path tend to be specifically Buddhist, whereas the first five are similar to teachings of other religions. What aspects of these first five steps strike you as being familiar? What aspects are strange to you, and how do you think they relate to Buddhist teachings in general?

7. *Right mindfulness.* Through careful attention to helpful topics, develop the mental focus needed for meditation.
8. *Right meditation.* Ascend through four levels of meditative awareness (some versions describe eight or nine levels), ultimately reaching a point of perfect tranquility, in which the sense of individual existence has passed away. This is the state of nirvana.

Together, the eight steps embrace the primary focal points of Buddhist training: wisdom (steps 1 and 2), morality (steps 3, 4, and 5), and concentration (steps 6, 7, and 8). Though all three focal points are essential, the heart of Buddhist practice lies in concentration, and specifically in the practice of meditation. Meditation affords the opportunity to be made aware, and to learn to let go of attachments to aspects of an ever-changing reality that might otherwise cause suffering. The Buddha's primary teachings derive from his own meditative experience; their truths can be fully understood only when an individual attains the same level of insight through meditation. The centrality of meditation can especially be observed in the unique division of Buddhism called Zen (which is the subject of chapter 9 of this book). The Japanese term *zen* means simply "meditation." Through this centrality of meditation and the heightened states of awareness it nurtures, Buddhism emphasizes the experiential dimension of religion while also engaging through the Noble Eightfold Paths with the doctrinal, the ethical, and the ritual—as meditation itself is often practiced as a type of ritual.



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Young Buddhist monks in Laos engage in study.



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Students at this school in Thailand meditate for 5 minutes on every Buddhist holy day.

Enlightenment and Nirvana

To follow the steps of the Eightfold Path to its end is to reach nirvana. Just as it did for the Buddha, *parinirvana*, the end of samsara and the passing fully into nirvana, awaits the death of the body. But the still-living **arhat** (ahr´huht), the "worthy one" who has become awakened, is forever transformed, having experienced, through the transcendent state of enlightenment, a foretaste of *parinirvana*.

All Buddhists look forward to the same experience of nirvana as that of their model, Gautama the Buddha. Buddhas (recall that there have been many Buddhas in addition to Gautama) are, however, distinct from their followers in that they do not need a model to provide teachings leading to their awakening. Buddhas are able to accomplish their liberation on their own. Gautama the Buddha then, though merely human and not above his followers in terms of the ultimate experience of nirvana, has a special status.

Compassion: The Enlightened Arhat

Having awakened, the arhat or "worthy one" is enlightened, fully aware of the truth of the Buddha's teachings. With this perfect wisdom, the arhat is now free from the imprisonment of tanha, and thus free from *dukkha*. The arhat has fully realized the truth of the doctrine of anatta, or "no-self," and has let go of any sense of individual existence. Spiritual perfection has been achieved. Still engaged in the affairs of this world but no longer

arhat (ahr´huht) One who has become enlightened; the ideal type for Theravada Buddhism.

attached to them, the arhat is perfectly compassionate toward all living things.

With the inward experience of enlightenment, the outward virtues of compassion, friendliness, joy, and even-mindedness are simultaneously perfected. Although the focus of Buddhist teachings is mainly on the perfection of one's inner nature, the development of qualities that benefit society is also essential.

The ideal of compassion, a basic component of Buddhism's ethical dimension, is especially emphasized. It is vividly illustrated in Buddhist stories, many of which depict the Buddha in former lives. One such story, originally told by Gautama, has been restated by storyteller Rafe Martin:

> Once, long, long ago, the Buddha came to life as a noble prince named Mahasattva, in a land where the country of Nepal exists today.
>
> One day, when he was grown, he went walking in a wild forest with his two older brothers. The land was dry and the leaves brittle. The sky seemed alight with flames.
>
> Suddenly they saw a tigress. The brothers turned to flee but the tigress stumbled and fell. She was starving and her cubs were starving too. She eyed her cubs miserably, and in that dark glance, the prince sensed her long months of hunger and pain. He saw, too, that unless she found food soon, she might even be driven to devour her own cubs. He was moved to compassion by the extreme hardness of their lives. "What after all is this life for?" he thought.
>
> Stepping forward, he calmly removed his outer garments and lay down before her. Tearing his skin with a stone, he let the starving tigress smell the blood. His brothers fled. Hungrily, the tigress devoured the prince's body and chewed the bones. She and her cubs lived on, and for many years, the forest was filled with a golden light.



A painting depicting the Buddha's first sermon to his first five disciples in the Deer Park, near the city of Varanasi (formerly Benares). The five become enlightened arhats.

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Centuries later a mighty king
raised a pillar of carved stone on this
spot, and pilgrims still go there to
make offerings even today.
Deeds of compassion live forever.
(The Hungry Tigress)

This extreme example of compassion is fitting for the Buddha, who presents a role model for all Buddhist ideals. This story also illustrates that it takes many lifetimes to nurture the degree of compassion suitable for a Buddha.

Nirvana

When the life of the arhat, characterized by perfect compassion, ends, the arhat enters into the state called nirvana. The word *nirvana* literally means "blowing out." Upon the passage into nirvana, rather than being reborn, the life energy of the arhat is snuffed out, like the flame of a candle. Having extinguished all selfish desire, including desire for continued existence, the arhat has attained complete liberation from samsara.

Buddhists have always found it impossible to describe nirvana precisely. (The higher states of the experiential religious dimension, including the Hindu states of moksha and samadhi, are typically impossible to describe adequately.) Not even the Buddha could come up with sufficient words. Nirvana cannot be understood until it is experienced. It is as difficult for an ordinary human to understand nirvana as it would be for an unborn child to understand life outside the womb. Those still in samsara have never experienced anything that can even approximate nirvana. The most that can be said is that nirvana is the total cessation of suffering, and thus is absolute peace.

If nirvana is total cessation, does the arhat experience "life after death"? Because enlightenment is precisely the abandonment of one's sense of individual existence, who (or what) is left to experience the absolute peace of nirvana? The Buddha specifically refused to say whether a person exists or does not exist in nirvana. He only insisted that nirvana is the cessation of suffering. And this, together with the Buddha's radiant happiness born of his enlightenment, suggests that if anything is experienced in nirvana, it is indescribably joyful.

Contemplate the story of Prince Mahasattva and the tigress. What does it tell you about the nature of Buddhist compassion?

Three Rafts for Crossing the River: Divisions of Buddhism

Buddhists often compare the quest for salvation to the crossing of a river. On this side of the river is the realm of samsara, the ordinary world of suffering. On the far shore lies nirvana, impossible to know until it is experienced, but beckoning all Buddhists as their final destiny of absolute peace. The process of crossing the river is the task of religion. And so Buddhists think of their tradition as a raft, a means for crossing.

In fact, over the centuries, Buddhism has divided into three great rafts, or "vehicles" *(yanas):* Theravada, also referred to by the somewhat derisive name Hinayana (the Lesser Vehicle); Mahayana (the Great Vehicle); and Vajrayana (the Vehicle of the Diamond). Some of the differences among the three vehicles are a result of regional variations, for Buddhism has spread far beyond its original homeland and is now present throughout most of Asia. Interestingly, it disappeared almost entirely from India a millennium ago.

Theravada: "The Way of the Elders"

Theravada (thay-ruh-vah´duh) Buddhism is now the prevalent form in the countries of Cambodia, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Theravada, whose name means "the way of the elders," follows the earliest texts. Theravada regards the Buddha first and foremost as a man who experienced enlightenment and then taught others how to accomplish the same. The Buddha is forever beyond the reach of humans, having passed into the eternal peace of nirvana. The teachings of Buddhism, not the figure of the Buddha, are most important. And so Theravada focuses on the teachings: cultivating wisdom through knowing the Four Noble Truths, and practicing the Noble Eightfold Path, especially meditation. The final aim, of course, is to enter nirvana. Those who succeed are the arhats, which for Theravada are the ideal types whom all strive to imitate.

Theravada's focus on meditation has led naturally to an emphasis on monastic life, because monks and nuns, unlike most laypeople, have sufficient time for meditating. In most regions where Theravada predominates, this emphasis has resulted in a religious hierarchy that differentiates the roles of laity and of religious. Even among the ordained, roles differ. Monks, who outnumber nuns by more than ten to one, have always held the most prominent position within Theravada Buddhism. In some regions, all males reside in a monastery temporarily. Serving as a monk for at least three months is seen as a required step toward becoming an adult.

Mahayana: The Great Vehicle

By naming their tradition the Great Vehicle, **Mahayana** (mah-hah-yah´nah) Buddhists are only in part asserting their superiority over Theravada Buddhism, which they named Hinayana (the Lesser Vehicle). Mahayana is indeed the largest division of Buddhism, claiming well over half the world's Buddhists. Today, Mahayana is the dominant form of Buddhism in China, Japan, and Korea. But its name also indicates something of the nature of Mahayana. Whereas Theravada emphasizes the individual's path of meditation (and hence can suffice with a lesser vehicle, or raft), Mahayana is Buddhism for the masses.

For one thing, relative to Theravada, Mahayana focuses somewhat more on the Buddha himself, tending to celebrate him as a divine savior—although the great variety of Mahayana schools inevitably means there are diverse opinions on this and other aspects. Focus on the Buddha as savior has potent popular appeal because it opens the doors to religious devotion and prayer. Rather than depending on the cultivation of wisdom primarily through meditation on difficult teachings, this form of Buddhism offers salvation through the infinite grace of the compassionate Buddha.

Theravada (thay-ruh-vah´duh; Pali: "the way of the elders") Prevalent form of Buddhism in Cambodia, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Sri Lanka, and Thailand; focuses on the earliest texts and emphasizes monastic lifestyle.

Mahayana (mah-hah-yah´nah; Sanskrit: "the Great Vehicle") The largest of Buddhism's three divisions, prevalent in China, Japan, and Korea; encompasses a variety of forms, including those that emphasize devotion and prayer to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

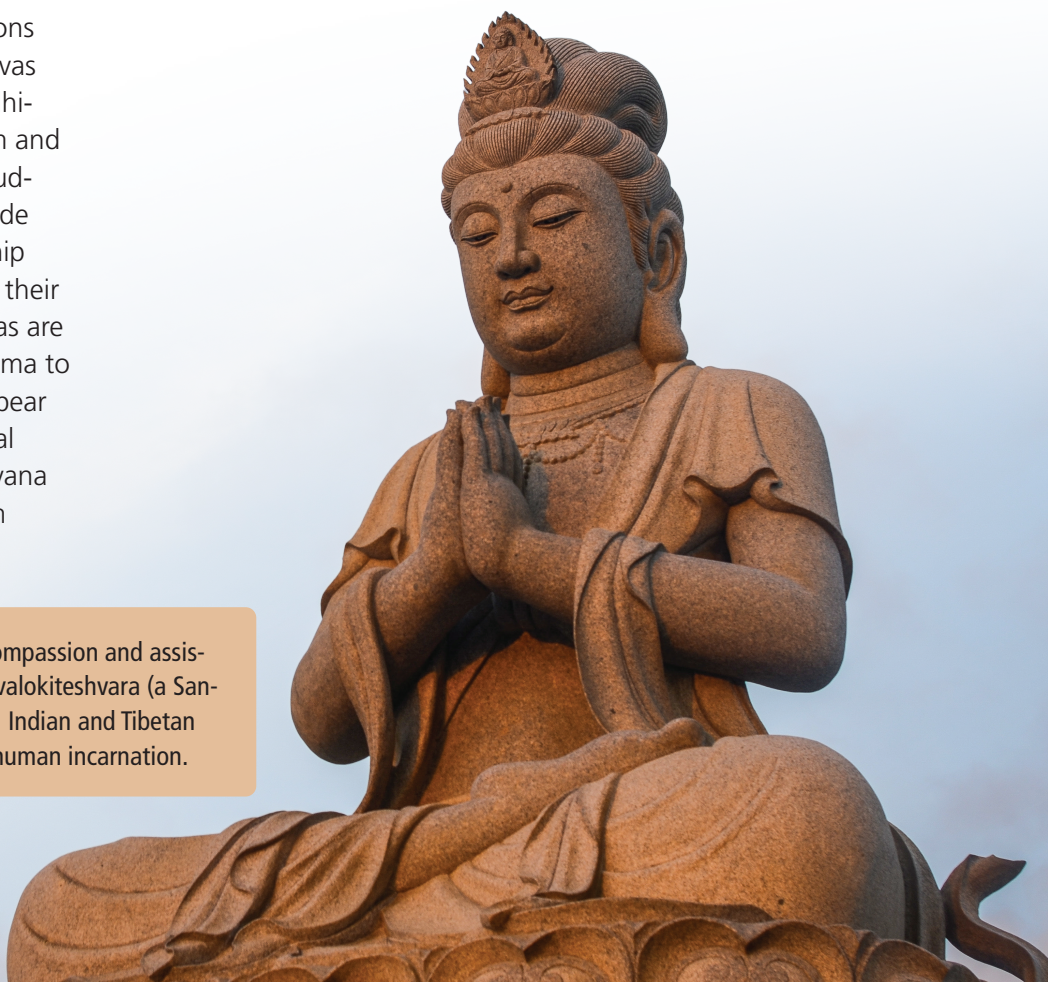
The focus in Mahayana on the Buddha involves the rather complex doctrine of **trikaya** (treh-kai'ya), which understands the Buddha as existing on three different levels. At the first level, the historical Buddha is an embodiment of ultimate reality in the human or earthly realm. At the second level, the Buddha is an eternal being who exists in countless universes and promotes liberation for all beings. At the third and highest level, the Buddha is ultimate reality itself, as experienced in the fully awakened state of nirvana. And Mahayana does not stop with Gautama the Buddha, but recognizes these "three bodies" in all the Buddhas of the past. Importantly, Mahayana reveres **bodhisattvas** (boh-dee-saht´vahs). Bodhisattvas are "Buddhas in the making," dedicated to attaining enlightenment. They are capable of entering into nirvana but, motivated by compassion, stop short of that goal in order to help others achieve it.

Mahayana accepts those definitions and adds another in which bodhisattvas take on mythical qualities. These bodhisattvas exist beyond the earthly realm and are believed to dwell in one of the Buddhist heavens, from which they provide divine assistance to those who worship them. Owing to the infinite depth of their compassion, the mythical bodhisattvas are believed to transfer merit of their karma to their devotees. On occasion, they appear in the world as human beings. Several bodhisattvas are prominent in Mahayana Buddhism, including Maitreya, whom Buddhists expect some day to be reborn into the world as the next Buddha. Along with the biography of Gautama himself, the stories and descriptions of these bodhisattvas make up a large portion of the mythic dimension of Buddhism.

For Mahayana Buddhists, the bodhisattva, rather than the arhat, is the ideal type. And compassion, which is perfectly embodied by the bodhisattvas, is the supreme virtue, regarded more highly even than wisdom. Mahayana Buddhists see Gautama's decision to preach the Dharma rather than passing immediately into *parinirvana* as proof for the primacy of compassion. They look to the bodhisattvas as embodiments of compassion, because the bodhisattvas have vowed to wait to enter nirvana so they may assist others, even until "the last blade of grass" becomes enlightened.

trikaya (treh-kai'ya) Mahayana doctrine of three levels of existence of Buddhas.

bodhisattvas (boh-dee-saht´vahs) Future Buddhas. As the ideal types for Mahayana Buddhism, beings who have experienced enlightenment but, motivated by compassion, stop short of entering nirvana so as to help others achieve it.



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Kwan Yin, a bodhisattva, is revered for compassion and assistance. She is the Chinese equivalent of Avalokiteshvara (a Sanskrit name, and understood to be male in Indian and Tibetan culture), of whom the Dalai Lama is the human incarnation.

Vajrayana (vuhj-ruh-yah´nuh; Sanskrit: "the Vehicle of the Diamond") Named for the *vajra*, the Buddha's diamond scepter; prevalent form of Buddhism in Tibet; emphasizes the harnessing of sensual energies to attain nirvana.

Vajrayana: Tibetan Buddhism

When Mahayana Buddhists elevated the figure of the Buddha to that of divine savior, the Buddha was depicted holding the *vajra*, a diamond scepter. The Vehicle of the Diamond was named for its unique application of Buddhist teachings, resembling in their energetic rigor the strength and clarity of a diamond. This Sanskrit word *vajra* also means "thunderbolt." Taking the two meanings together suggests the power of Vajrayana practices to cut or smash through the ignorance and selfish desire that causes suffering. The relative intensity of **Vajrayana** (vuhj-ruh-yah´nuh) is manifested in the common belief that its adherents can attain nirvana in this lifetime, here and now.

Vajrayana constitutes but a small minority of Buddhists, and yet it is of special interest. This interest is in part because of the situation of Vajrayana's homeland, Tibet. Now claimed as a part of the People's Republic of China, Tibet has endured much religious persecution by China's communist government. Many Vajrayana Buddhists have been killed, and in recent years there have been many incidents of self-immolation: Buddhists setting themselves on fire as a means of protest. A sizeable population of Vajrayana Buddhists now live in exile in India and elsewhere. But for centuries, the high mountain plateaus of Tibet sheltered Vajrayana, to a large extent, from the rest of the world. A full one-sixth of the male population there consisted of monks, and Buddhism pervaded life. This pervasiveness and the relatively pristine state of this form of Buddhism have also attracted special interest.

Exiled Tibetan Buddhists perform a ritual in India.



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Discovering the Dalai Lama

An excerpt from the autobiography of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama provides some fascinating details about the search for the new incarnation of the deceased Thirteenth Dalai Lama.

When I was not quite three years old, a search party that had been sent out by the Government to find the new incarnation of the Dalai Lama arrived at Kumbum monastery. It had been led there by a number of signs. One of these concerned the embalmed body of my predecessor, Thupten Gyatso, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, who had died aged fifty-seven in 1933. During its period of sitting in state, the head was discovered to have turned from facing south to north-east. Shortly after that the Regent, himself a senior lama, had a vision. Looking into the waters of the sacred lake, Lhamoi Lhatso, in southern Tibet, he clearly saw the Tibetan letters *Ah, Ka* and *Ma* float into view. These were followed by the image of a three-storeyed monastery with a turquoise and gold roof and a path running from it to a hill. Finally, he saw a small house with strangely shaped guttering. He was sure that the letter *Ah* referred to Amdo, the north-eastern province, so it was there that the search party was sent.

By the time they reached Kumbum, the members of the search party felt that they were on the right track. It seemed likely that if the letter *Ah* referred to Amdo, then *Ka* must indicate the monastery at Kumbum—which was indeed three storeyed and turquoise roofed. They now only needed to locate a hill and a house with peculiar guttering. So they began to search the neighbouring villages. When they saw the gnarled branches of juniper wood on the roof of my parents' house, they were certain that the new Dalai Lama would not be far away. Nevertheless, rather than reveal the purpose of their visit, the group asked only to stay the night. The leader of the party, Kewtsang Rinpoché, then pretended to be a servant and spent much of the evening observing and playing with the youngest child in the house.

The child recognized him and called out "Sera Lama, Sera Lama." Sera was Kewtsang Rinpoché's monastery. Next day they left—only to return a few days later as a formal deputation. This time they brought with them a number of things that had belonged to my predecessor, together with several similar items that did not. In every case, the infant correctly identified those belonging to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama saying, "It's mine. It's mine." This more or less convinced the search party that they had found the new incarnation. However, there was another candidate to be seen before a final decision could be reached. But it was not long before the boy from Taktser was acknowledged to be the new Dalai Lama. I was that child.

(Gyatso, *Freedom in Exile*)



Tenzin Gyatso while still a young boy, shortly after being identified as the Fourteenth Dalai Lama.

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A Tibetan monk works at creating a sand mandala. After the several days it takes to complete, the mandala will be ceremoniously destroyed, illustrating the impermanence (anicca) of material reality.

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The uniqueness of Vajrayana includes the notion of fighting fire with fire. In general, Buddhist teachings prescribe shutting off the energy of desire to stop suffering. Vajrayana harnesses this energy and turns it against itself. The end goal, nirvana, remains the same, but the means of reaching it are remarkably different.

By harnessing the sensual energies of life, Vajrayana attempts to propel the individual toward enlightenment. Prominent among the practices used to achieve this are **mandalas** (mahn´duh-luhs), patterned icons that visually excite; **mudras** (mood´-rahs), choreographed hand movements that draw on the energies of movement; and **mantras** (mahn´truhs), resonating chants that harness the spiritual potency of sound. Together, these practices invoke sight, movement, and sound, capitalizing on the sensual energies as a way of achieving the goal of spiritual enhancement. Thanks to the willingness of Tibetan monks to share their spiritual practices with the rest of the world, many Westerners have had the opportunity to witness the making of a sand mandala or to hear the provocative intonation of mantras.

Another of Vajrayana's unique practices involves the harnessing of one of life's basic energies, that of sexuality. Whereas most Buddhists target sexual desire as especially problematic and in need of control, Vajrayana Buddhists regard sex as a potent energy for furthering spiritual progress. Through a carefully guarded set of practices known as Tantrism, some Vajrayana Buddhists engage in ritualized sex. Tantrism does not include sex merely for its own sake or sex motivated by a desire for pleasure. It is regulated by masters, and is undertaken solely to enhance spiritual energies. By harnessing sexual energy, practitioners can use it to energize their consciousness, increasing their awareness of the true nature of reality.

mandalas (mahn´duh-luhs; Sanskrit: "circle") Patterned icons that visually excite; used in Vajrayana Buddhism to enhance meditation.

mudras (mood´rahs) Choreographed hand movements used in the rituals of Vajrayana Buddhism.

mantras (mahn´truhs) Phrases or syllables chanted to evoke a deity or to enhance meditation; used in Hinduism and Buddhism, especially in Vajrayana.

Another important feature of Vajrayana is its institution of lamas, a hierarchy of clergy headed by the **Dalai Lama** (dahl´ee lahm´ah). The present Dalai Lama, who won the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts on behalf of regaining Tibetan freedom, is the fourteenth in a direct line of succession. This line is not based on descent by natural birth, but determined through rebirth. Originating with the incarnation of a prominent bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara (ah-wah-loh-ki-tesh´wah-rah), the lineage is believed to continue through the reincarnation of one Dalai Lama into the next. Whenever a Dalai Lama dies, his successor is sought through various means, some supernatural and others more mundane (such as noting a likely child's attraction to the former Dalai Lama's possessions).

The Enduring Wisdom of the Buddha

Each raft of Buddhism charts its own course, but ultimately all the rafts reach the same shore, delivering their followers into nirvana. A famous Buddhist mantra invokes the end of the crossing: "Gone . . . , gone, gone beyond, completely gone beyond, enlightenment hail!" (Robinson and Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion*). Nirvana, the ultimate goal of all Buddhists, is beyond every experience of this life. In typically paradoxical fashion, it is even beyond Buddhism itself. The raft that has ferried the Buddhist across the river to the shore of salvation must be abandoned lest the journey remain unfinished.

Dalai Lama (dahl´ee lahm´ah) The spiritual leader of Vajrayana (Tibetan) Buddhism, believed to be an incarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (ah-wah-loh-ki-tesh'wah-rah).



His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama addresses a gathering at Bodh Gaya, India.

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Buddhism is paradoxical in other ways too. It is indeed unique among the world's religions. Buddhism focuses on the spiritual condition of the human being, not on the supremacy of a divinity. Even more uniquely, it denies the existence of a self, or soul.

Buddhism relies instead on features that are strikingly similar to the ways of the modern, scientific view of life. In fact, modern scientific theory says much that is in close agreement with Gautama the Buddha's observations about the universe and the human psyche.

This is not an accident, for the Buddha, skilled physician that he was, proceeded scientifically—empirically investigating what it is to be human. People suffer. A life of moderation, as exemplified by the doctrine of the Middle Way, helps alleviate suffering. And meditation, the Buddha's favored method of therapy, nurtures the wisdom that leads to transcendence.

Chapter Review

1. What is the name of the man who later became the Buddha and founded the religion of Buddhism?
2. What are the Four Passing Sights? Explain their significance to the origins of Buddhism.
3. Explain the doctrine of the Middle Way.
4. Describe the event of Gautama's attainment of enlightenment.
5. What is the Sangha? Who are its members?
6. What are the Three Jewels of Buddhism?
7. What features of Buddhist cosmology are shared with Hinduism?
8. Describe the Buddha's reaction against early Hinduism.
9. Identify the Three Marks of Existence. How are they interrelated?
10. What is the doctrine of anatta? How does it relate to the Hindu concept Atman?
11. According to the Buddhist doctrine of samsara, what is actually reborn? Explain the role of karma in the Buddhist understanding of samsara.
12. List the Five Precepts, which apply to all Buddhists. Then list the five additional precepts that apply to monks and nuns.
13. What are some possible English translations of the term *dukkha?* Explain its meaning in your own words.
14. What is tanha? How does it relate to *dukkha?*
15. List the steps of the Eightfold Path.
16. What is the difference between the Buddha and other humans who attain enlightenment?

17. Define and briefly describe the character of an arhat.
18. What is the literal meaning of the word *nirvana?* How does this help to explain the concept of nirvana?
19. What are the three divisions of Buddhism?
20. What is the main focus of Theravada Buddhism?
21. What is the literal meaning of the name *Mahayana*, and what are the implications of this meaning?
22. How does Vajrayana Buddhism "fight fire with fire"?
23. Who is the Dalai Lama? How is each Dalai Lama chosen?
24. What are the primary geographical regions of the three divisions of Buddhism?

Discussion Questions

1. Sometimes it is said that Buddhism is a philosophy or a psychology rather than a religion. How might someone support the view that Buddhism is a philosophy or a psychology?
2. Compare Buddhism with Hinduism, focusing your thoughts on how Buddhism compares to these doctrinal and experiential aspects of Hinduism: Brahman, Atman, reincarnation, karma, moksha.
3. On a scale from pessimistic to optimistic, where would you place Buddhism and why?
4. As stated in the chapter, "Buddhists think of their tradition as a raft, a means for crossing." Furthermore, Buddhists insist on the need to abandon the raft once the river is crossed. Why do you suppose this is the case?



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Chapter 11

Ancestors of the West

The region surrounding the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea is commonly referred to as the cradle of the West. Here were born the religious beliefs and practices from which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam eventually emerged. This chapter presents some of the religious aspects of early Western civilization. The presentation is necessarily selective because the religious traditions of the ancient West were numerous and diverse, enduring for ages.

This chapter examines the traditions of Iran, Greece, and Rome for two reasons. First, they include a variety of the beliefs and practices typical in the ancient West, such as polytheism (belief in many gods) and rituals of animal sacrifice. Second, these traditions had a strong influence on the emergence of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The chapter notes many features of these traditions that have been carried to modern times. Still, it is important to remember that these religions are not of value merely because of their influence on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They are significant subjects of study in their own right. In addition, the religion of ancient Iran—Zoroastrianism—is still alive today.

Religion in Ancient Iran: Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest living religions. It arose and flourished in ancient Iran,



Today, Zoroastrianism is practiced mainly by the Parsis of India. Here, people participate in a Zoroastrian initiation ritual.

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which was known as Persia. Its present followers number less than 200,000, the largest population consisting of the Parsis (Persians) of India.

Zoroastrianism has undergone a number of major changes since the time of its founder, Zarathushtra (also spelled "Zarathustra," and called "Zoroaster" by the ancient Greeks). This ongoing transformation has amounted to an incredibly diverse tradition with different features at different times. This chapter begins by looking at Zarathushtra and the Zoroastrianism of ancient times, when the religion exerted great influence on the formation of Judaism and Christianity. A list of the religious innovations of Zarathushtra and the early Zoroastrians is both impressive and familiar: judgment of the soul after death, followed by an afterlife of heaven or hell; a universe pervaded by forces of both good and evil; and monotheism.

The Origins and Early Development of Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism originated in an area now occupied by the nations of Iran and Afghanistan. Although historians do not know for certain when Zarathushtra lived, it was most likely during the sixth or fifth century BCE. According to Persian tradition, he was born in 660 BCE.

Zoroastrianism began to flourish throughout Iran during the Persian Empire, which was at the height of its power and influence in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. The Jews who remained in Babylon after having been forced into exile there (587–538 BCE) lived in direct contact with the Persians who had gained control of the region; Zoroastrian ideas likely affected the ongoing development of Judaism. After Persia was conquered by the Greek general Alexander the Great in 328 BCE, aspects of Persian culture, including Zoroastrianism, spread far and wide.

The Life of Zarathushtra

Zarathushtra's life story is shrouded in mystery. He seems to have been the son of a priest in a rural area. The traditional religion of Iran at this time was polytheistic and a close relative of Hinduism. Zarathushtra eventually initiated a large-scale religious conversion from polytheism to monotheism.

Legend has it that when Zarathushtra was about thirty years old, he had an astonishing religious experience. An angel called Good Thought appeared to him and brought him, as a disembodied soul, before **Ahura Mazda** (ah´hoo-reh maz´dah), the Wise Lord. Zarathushtra recognized Ahura Mazda as the one true God. After this experience, Zarathushtra went around preaching the radical message of monotheism to his polytheistic society. With the help of a king who had converted to Zoroastrianism, Zarathushtra overcame hostile opposition and firmly established his religion. He is said to have died at the age of seventy-seven.

Although Zarathushtra's life story is a legend, his teachings are verifiable. His seventeen hymns, or **Gathas** (gah´thuhs), are the oldest part of the sacred text of Zoroastrianism, the **Avesta** (a-ves´tuh). Altogether, the Avesta is a diverse set of writings spanning a period of perhaps one thousand years. The Gathas show Zarathushtra's innovative religious ideas.

Ahura Mazda, the One God of Zarathushtra

Monotheism is a notion so familiar today that its uniqueness can pass unnoticed. But in the polytheistic society of ancient Iran, Zarathushtra's innovation was truly radical and courageous. The same can be said of the monotheism of the Hebrews (the ancestors of the Jews). Scholars today do not know whether Zarathushtra and the ancient Hebrews influenced each other's thinking on this issue. In any event, the monotheism of both religions was a remarkable departure from the norm of the ancient world. This significant change within the doctrinal dimension of both religions would help shape the development of religions for centuries to come.

For Zarathushtra, the one true God was Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord. Ahura Mazda is eternal and universal goodness, controlling the cosmos and the destiny of human beings. In the following passages from the Gathas, Zarathushtra celebrates Ahura Mazda's role as creator:

> Who is by generation the Father of Right, at the first? Who determined the path of sun and stars? Who is it by whom the moon waxes and wanes again? . . .
>
> Who upheld the earth beneath and the firmament from falling? Who the water and the plants? Who yoked swiftness to winds and clouds? . . .
>
> What artist made light and darkness? What artist made sleep and

Ahura Mazda (ah´hoo-reh maz´dah) The Wise Lord, the one true God worshipped by Zarathushtra and by Zoroastrians.

Gathas (gah´thuhs) Seventeen hymns attributed to Zarathushtra that constitute the oldest and most important portion of the Avesta.

Avesta (a-ves´tuh) The sacred text of Zoroastrianism, which includes the very old hymns known as the Gathas, along with more recent material.



A relief sculpture of Ahura Mazda stands among the ruins of Persepolis in Iran.

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waking? Who made morning, noon, and night, that call the understanding man to his duty? . . .

I strive to recognise by these things thee, O Mazdah, creator of all things through the holy spirit.

(44.3–7)

Review the Gathas passage on Ahura Mazda. To what extent is its description of God like the understandings of God of other religions you are familiar with?

Choosing Between Good and Evil: Ethical Dualism

Ethical dualism, the belief in universal opposing forces of good and evil, is Zoroastrianism's most distinctive feature. In Zarathushtra's theology, Ahura Mazda is the one, eternal God. But twin spirits emanated from Ahura Mazda. One of the spirits, named Spenta Mainyu, is perfectly good. The other, named Angra Mainyu, and in later times sometimes called Ahriman and also Shaitan (which is related to the Hebrew name Satan), is thoroughly evil.

With this theology, Zarathushtra offered a straightforward solution to the problem of evil: evil really exists and manifests itself in the world. But this belief in a cosmic force of evil presents a challenge to monotheism. Ahura Mazda is believed to be perfectly good. Why, then, would the evil spirit emanate from Ahura Mazda, along with the good spirit? Does the presence of an entirely evil supernatural being suggest that there really is not only one god? Similar questions always challenge monotheistic theology, whatever the religion. Zarathushtra's theology of good and evil attempted to answer those questions.

According to Zarathushtra, Ahura Mazda's twin spirit emanations were both free to choose between the forces of good and evil. Spenta Mainyu, the beneficent spirit, chose truth, and Angra Mainyu, the hostile spirit, chose the Lie, the evil force. It was therefore not the intention of the perfectly good Ahura Mazda that this

ethical dualism The belief in universal forces of good and evil; Zoroastrianism's most distinctive feature.

cosmic force of evil should have entered into the world.

For Zarathushtra, the universe was a cosmic battleground of good and evil forces, depicted as angels and demons (the demons were identified as the many gods of Iranian polytheism). This belief had a major influence on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Zarathushtra believed this cosmic battle would eventually be won by Spenta Mainyu and the good, angelic forces. He hinted at the doctrine of a future savior who would come to help restore goodness to the world. This doctrine was richly elaborated by later Zoroastrians, and it also seems to have influenced Judaism and its belief in the coming of a messiah.

This cosmic scheme of good and evil is crucial for human beings, for while the world awaits the ultimate triumph of goodness, humans must choose between truth and the Lie, between the beneficent Spenta Mainyu and the hostile Angra Mainyu. Each person's choice has eternal consequences. In the Gathas, Zarathushtra states the matter this way:

> Hear with your ears the best things. Reflect with clear purpose, each man for himself, on the two choices for decision, being alert indeed to declare yourselves for Him before the great requital. Truly there are two primal Spirits, twins renowned to be in conflict. In thought and word, in act they are two: the better and the bad. And those who act well have chosen rightly between these two, not so the evildoers. And when these two Spirits first came together they created life and not-life, and how at the end Worst Existence shall be for the wicked, but (the House of) Best Purpose for the just man. (30.2–4)

This passage shows how the dualism of Zoroastrianism unites ethics with human destiny—the ethical dimension of religion interconnecting with the doctrinal. At the "great requital," or day of judgment, the wicked will suffer the pains of "Worst Existence" (hell), while the just will enjoy the "House of Best Purpose" (heaven). Humans determine their own destiny by choosing either truth, goodness, and life, or falsehood, evil, and "not-life." This ethical dualism is the basis of Zoroastrianism.

Does the Zoroastrian explanation for the existence of evil account for the evil you have experienced and observed? Why or why not?

Human Destiny

Zoroastrianism's doctrines regarding human destiny—resurrection and judgment of the dead, and vivid portrayals of heaven and hell—are among its most important and influential features. Zarathushtra's own understanding of human destiny seems to have been as follows:

Shortly after death, individuals undergo judgment. This requires crossing the Bridge of the Separator, which goes over an abyss of horrible torment but leads to paradise. The ethical records of individuals are read and judged. The good are allowed to enter paradise, while the evil are cast down to the abyss. In the Gathas, Zarathushtra emphasizes the individual responsibility for failing to pass the judgment:

> Their own soul and their own self shall torment them when they come where the Bridge of the Separator is, to all time dwellers in the House of the Lie. (46.11)

Zoroastrians also believe in a final bodily resurrection of everyone, good and evil alike. Once resurrected, all will undergo a test by fire and molten metal;



Modern Zoroastrians continue to emphasize the fire ritual, in which they worship the perfect purity of Ahura Mazda.

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the evil will burn, while the good will pass through unharmed. It is not clear whether Zarathushtra himself believed in resurrection, or if this belief developed later. Scholars today, therefore, do not know if Zoroastrianism's doctrine of resurrection was adopted by Judaism or vice versa.

In any event, many aspects of the early Zoroastrian perspective on human destiny, such as descriptions of heaven and hell, were adopted by other religions. Heaven, or the House of Best Purpose, is said to be forever in sunshine, and its inhabitants enjoy the company of the saved. Hell, the Worst Existence, is a foul-smelling, dark place where the tormented are forced to remain completely alone.

Fire is often used as a symbol. Recall several ways you have seen fire used as such. Then think about what fire represents for you. How does this relate to what fire represents for the Zoroastrians?

Zoroastrian Life: Ethics and Worship

The traditional life of Zoroastrianism was and remains centered on agriculture. Its ethical demands include such principles as caring for livestock and fields. Generally, one is to lead a simple life, always telling the truth and doing what is right. Great care should be taken to avoid those on the side of evil, the followers of the demons for whom the Lie prevails.

Worship practices include prayer, which is to be done five times a day. (This seems to have influenced Islam, which sets forth a similar requirement.) The most famous form of Zoroastrian worship is the fire ritual. Fire is a symbol of the purity of Ahura Mazda. In the fire ritual, Zoroastrians worship not fire itself, but rather Ahura Mazda's perfect purity. This



Ruins of an ancient Zoroastrian temple.

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ritual has always been central to Zoroastrian worship. According to tradition, Zarathushtra himself was killed while tending the sacred fire.

Modern Zoroastrians continue to emphasize the fire ritual. A fire burns continually within the inner sanctuary of a temple. The priests who tend the fire are extremely careful to maintain ritual purity, covering their mouths with special cloths to avoid contaminating the fire. Worshippers wash themselves before approaching the fire and bring offerings of sandalwood and money. In turn, they receive ashes that they rub on their faces.

Zoroastrianism Today: The Parsis

Once Islam had gained control of Iran in the tenth century, Zoroastrians began leaving. Very few remain in Iran today. Most of the world's Zoroastrians now live in India, where they are known as the Parsis.

The Parsis combine a wide variety of features from the Zoroastrian tradition. They maintain the monotheism of its founder but continue to revere the Avesta as their sacred text.



Zoroastrians walk to a Parsi fire temple in Mumbai, India.

© Reuters

One well-known feature of the Parsis's religious practice is their manner of disposing of the dead. To avoid polluting the sacred elements of soil and fire, the Parsis neither bury nor cremate the body of someone who has died; rather, they place the corpse on a Tower of Silence, which is

Parsis dispose of their dead by leaving them atop a Tower of Silence such as this one in Yazd, Iran.



© Attila JANDI/shutterstock.com

situated on a hilltop, out of view. Within hours, vultures pick the bones clean. After several days, the bones are gathered and thrown into a central well.

The Parsis are a rather closed society. Conversion to Zoroastrianism is generally not allowed, and marriages outside the faith are denounced. The Parsis are highly respected in Indian society because of their economic prosperity and great emphasis on education. They also have a reputation for being philanthropic, devoting a good share of their wealth to societal needs. These features of Zoroastrianism are aspects of the social dimension of religion.

Religion in Ancient Greece

Western culture in general owes an enormous debt to ancient Greece. Democracy, drama, philosophy, and many forms of science and medicine were first developed by the ancient Greeks. In this respect, ancient Greek culture is familiar to Westerners today. The religious sphere, along with more exotic features, also has some familiar aspects. Both Judaism and Christianity developed within a cultural environment heavily influenced by Greek ideas. Christian theology, especially, drew a great deal directly from Greek thought.

The greatest cultural advancements were made during the period that began about 750 BCE with the epic poet Homer and ended with the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE. The era known as the Hellenistic or classical period, 479–323 BCE, is especially noteworthy because of its great flowering of artistic and intellectual achievements. Alexander, who conquered a vast territory stretching from Greece and Egypt eastward to India, imported classical Greek culture to the entire region.

The Religious World of Homer

Sometime around the last half of the eighth century BCE, Homer, or perhaps two poets or even more (for simplicity's sake, the name Homer refers to the collective), composed the the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, epic poems concerning the affairs of gods and humans in the Trojan War and its aftermath. For the next thousand years, Homer's influence was so great that he was known simply as the poet. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are commonly regarded as having been the Bible of the Greeks.

The nature of the religious teachings in the works of Homer, and of most other Greeks of the following several centuries, differs greatly from that of the teachings in the Jewish and Christian Bibles. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* do, nevertheless, contain an abundance of significant religious teachings.

The Olympian Pantheon

The most important of Homer's religious contributions is his portrayal of the Greek **pantheon**, or group of gods. The gods and goddesses inhabit the heavenly realm of Olympus (and so are called the Olympian pantheon) and form a loose-knit family. Zeus, the gatherer of clouds and bringer of storms, reigns as the father of the gods. When angered by the wrongful doings of mortals on earth, he is known to

pantheon A group of deities recognized by a society, such as the Olympian pantheon of the ancient Greeks.



Relief sculpture of Zeus and Hera, his sister and wife.

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strike with thunderbolts. He has a number of consorts, including his sister and wife, Hera (marital relations between family members is common in mythology). Hera is the goddess of marriage and women. Homer often depicts quarrels between Zeus and Hera, but the Greeks came to look upon their marriage as ideal. Zeus and Hera are the parents of Hephaestus, the god of fire, and of Ares, the god of war. Other children of Zeus (but not of Hera) include Athena, Apollo, Hermes, and Dionysus.

One basic feature of Homeric religion is already clear: It is polytheistic (*polytheistic* is a Greek word meaning "of many gods"). Other important deities include Poseidon, god of the ocean, and Hades, god of the underworld. Both are brothers of Zeus. Offspring of Zeus by goddesses other than Hera include Hermes, messenger god; Aphrodite, goddess of love; Apollo, god of the lyre and the bow (among other things); and Athena, goddess of wisdom.

Along with being polytheistic, Homeric religion is notably **anthropomorphic** (*anthropomorphic* is another Greek word, meaning "of human form"). The gods have human attributes. No deity, not even Zeus, is all-powerful or all-knowing; rather, all the gods and goddesses have their own specific talents, functions, and limitations. Also, their moral behavior is much more humanlike than godlike (as many are accustomed to thinking of godlike

anthropomorphic Of human form, characteristic of the deities of ancient Greek and later Roman religion.

Religions of ancient cultures were primarily polytheistic. Think about the gods and goddesses of the Olympian pantheon, and speculate as to why polytheism appealed to people of ancient cultures.

behavior, that is). Examples of this abound. Zeus and Hera quarrel frequently. Ares and Aphrodite commit adultery. In general, the Greek gods fail to maintain consistent principles of justice, both toward one another and toward human beings.

How could gods be plagued by such human shortcomings? Many innovative Greek thinkers of the classical period addressed this problem.

Religious Innovations by the Greek Dramatists

Among the people who contributed new ideas to Homeric religion were the dramatists of fifth-century Athens. Aeschylus (about 525–456 BCE) was especially concerned with the ideal of divine justice. Rather than focusing on the anthropomorphic characteristics of Zeus, Aeschylus celebrated Zeus's great power and wisdom. His works portray Zeus as ruling with order and justice. For example, the play *Agamemnon* explains human suffering as being a necessary part of the divine plan of Zeus:

> Now Zeus is lord; and he
> Who loyally acclaims his victory
> Shall by heart's instinct find the
> universal key:
> Zeus, whose will has marked for man
> The sole way where wisdom lies;
> Ordered one eternal plan:
> *Man must suffer to be wise.*
> (In Vellacott, *The Oresteian Trilogy*)

This direct and lofty theology is not found in Homer. The Olympian pantheon, Zeus especially, takes on a new dignity. Zeus is no longer merely a god of tremendous power; he is now the source and the enforcer of universal moral principles. Sophocles (about 496–406 BCE), another great Athenian dramatist, followed Aeschylus in celebrating the justice of Zeus and also emphasized god's mercy.

This ancient amphitheater at Epidaurus in Greece was the site of dramas that featured the intervention of the gods in human affairs.



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Piety and Worship

The anthropomorphism of the Homeric deities is reflected in the way they are worshipped. As parents demand respect from their children, the gods and goddesses demand piety and proper worship. The mortals in Homer's poems are diligent in their prayers and words of praise, to which the deities respond favorably. On the other hand, the gods are quick and steadfast in punishing the impious. In the *Odyssey*, for example, the soldiers of Odysseus (also known by his Latin name, Ulysses) are all killed by Zeus for butchering and eating the sun god's cattle. Only Odysseus is spared for resisting this impious act in spite of his great hunger.

The Greek deities, much like human beings, relish receiving gifts, especially the gift of sacrifice. Cattle, sheep, and other animals are ritually slaughtered, and the meat is cooked and offered to the gods (and then eaten by the worshippers). Wine is poured out in libations, or acts of sacrifice. Armor and other precious items are placed in temples as gifts. All such forms of sacrificial giving are pleasing to the gods, who in turn are believed to look out for the welfare of the worshippers.

Festivals

Throughout the classical period and beyond, daily worship practices and lavish festivals gave the Greeks opportunities to honor their gods. Most of the celebrations were local events, specific to each city-state. Athens, for example, worshipped its patron goddess, Athena, in an annual celebration of her birthday.

Other festivals were not limited to specific city-states but involved Greeks from across the land. One such festival developed in Olympia (a small village in southwestern Greece, not to be confused with the heavenly realm of Mount Olympus). Founded in 776 BCE, the Olympic Games were held every four years. The games endured for over a thousand years, until the Roman emperor Theodosius I abolished them in 393 CE. They were revived in their modern form in the late nineteenth century.

Like the modern version, the Olympic Games featured athletic contests such as running, wrestling, and boxing, but the festival was primarily religious. Theodosius was a Christian, so he could not tolerate the games because of the religious focus on honoring Zeus. The games attracted the best athletes from the ancient Mediterranean world. The athletic prowess of the participants was a form of sacrificial gift offered to Zeus through the various contests. A victorious performance was

Today's emphasis on sports makes athletes into heroes and awards them with fan adoration and large sums of money. Some scholars of religion have even suggested that sports are a religious phenomenon. Discuss the similarities between sports and religion that might have led to this suggestion.



Greek artists often depicted gods and goddesses along with heroes of the Trojan War and other epic events. Here, the goddess Athena is shown with a sprig of olive, one of her gifts to the city of Athens.

© Gift of Samuel G. Ward, 1875/The Met

oracle A shrine or sanctuary at which the revelations of a god are received, often through a human medium; also, the medium or the revelation itself.

deemed an especially worthy gift. The first and last days of the five-day festival were devoted to sacrifices and ceremony. Olympia, situated in a beautiful valley among wooded hillsides, was the main sanctuary of Zeus. Temples of both Zeus and Hera occupied the area adjacent to the stadium and other sites of athletic contests.

Oracles

The Greeks believed that the gods communicated their desires and intentions to mortals. In Homer's poems, the gods frequently converse directly with heroes such as Achilles and Odysseus. The gods also reveal their will through dreams and ominous signs, such as the clap of thunder or the flight of birds. And, according to ancient Greek belief through the centuries, the gods communicate through oracles.

An **oracle** was a sanctuary favored by a particular god, who communicated in some manner to those who visited the site. (The word *oracle* refers also to the god's message itself, or the medium through which it is communicated.) At one oracle, for example, the will of Zeus could be heard through the whispering leaves of its sacred oak grove. The most famous oracle was at Delphi, where the Greeks sought the wisdom of the god Apollo. Situated on the slopes of Mount Parnassus, high above the Gulf of Corinth, Delphi had been considered a sacred site from very early times and was thought to be the center of the earth.

The temple of Apollo stood in an elaborate complex of structures, including a theater, a stadium, and several treasury buildings owned by the various city-states throughout Greece. The god communicated through the Pythia, a woman who sat on a tripod within the temple. The Pythia breathed in vapors that arose from the earth and brought on an ecstatic state. She may also have ingested bay leaves or



Ruins of the temple of Apollo, where the oracle of Delphi sat and made her prophecies.

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some other intoxicating plant material. In her state of ecstasy, she uttered the will of Apollo in speech that was intelligible only to the oracle's priests. They, in turn, translated her utterances into Greek.

The oracle at Delphi was consulted on issues ranging from private matters to far-reaching public concerns. Major political and military decisions were sometimes based on its revelation of the god's will. Apollo was considered to favor philosophy, and he was credited with pronouncing at Delphi the influential Greek sayings "Know thyself" and "Nothing to excess"; both were engraved on the temple. The oracle also proclaimed the philosopher Socrates to be the wisest of all people.

Like the Olympic Games, the oracle at Delphi endured for centuries. It was abolished by Emperor Theodosius I in about 390 CE, but by then the voice of Apollo had almost been silenced. The oracle had announced its own decline a short time before.

Homer's Perspective on Death and the Afterlife

Homer also set forth a view of death and the afterlife. When a person dies in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the soul departs from the body, entering the dark and dreary underworld ruled by the god Hades and his queen, Persephone (puhr-se´fo-nee). The realm of Hades, through which flows the River Styx, offers little hope for happiness. The souls, or "shades," lack physical substance and strength, and they remember their earthly lives with regret and longing.

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus journeys to the realm of Hades to consult a famous seer, now dead. While there, he encounters the shades of his fallen comrades. His conversation with his friend Achilles, the greatest of all Greek warriors, leaves no doubt as to the gloominess of the afterlife envisioned by Homer:

> "But you, Achilles,
> there's not a man in the world more blest than you—
> there never has been, never will be one.
> Time was, when you were alive, we Argives honored you as a god, and now down here, I see,
> you lord it over the dead in all your power.
> So grieve no more at dying, great Achilles."
> I reassured the ghost, but he broke out, protesting,
> "No winning words about death to *me*, shining Odysseus!
> By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man—
> some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—
> than rule down here over all the breathless dead."
>
> (In Fagles, translator, the *Odyssey*)

The Homeric conception of the afterlife left little room for optimism in the face of death. Homer makes brief mention of a paradise, the Elysian fields, but he identifies only one mortal, King Menelaus, who is destined to go there after death. For the Greeks of Homer's time, the emphasis was clearly on living a good and honorable life, not on the prospects of a happy afterlife.

Suppose you were to travel back through time to ancient Greece and visit the oracle at Delphi. What questions would you ask? Given your modern perspective, what concerns would you have regarding the oracle's accuracy?

The theme of life arising from death, celebrated in classic fashion by the Eleusinian myth of Demeter and Persephone, is universal. It is expressed all around us, sometimes in myth and other literary and artistic forms, sometimes in nature, and sometimes even within our personal and social worlds. Think of three ways you have seen this theme expressed. Briefly describe each.

Alternatives to Homer's Perspective: The Mystery Religions

Homer's influence on Greek religion was great, but he did not tell the entire story. Other forms of religion, some already gaining popularity by Homer's time, also flourished. Deities such as Demeter and Dionysus, who are barely mentioned in Homer's poems, rivaled the other gods in popularity. Such deities were worshipped in a diverse group of beliefs and practices that are now referred to as the **mystery religions**.

The word *mystery* is derived from a Greek term meaning "to cover," and the initiates of these mystery religions did an extraordinary job of keeping their secrets under wraps. As a result, scholars today know very little about the actual rites.



A nineteenth-century illustration of Persephone returning to her mother, Demeter, after having spent four months of the year in the underworld with her husband, Hades.

It is clear, however, that these religions included three basic aspects:

1. Individuals had to choose to become initiates, and they went through some form of initiation ritual.
2. Initiates experienced a personal encounter with the deity.
3. Initiates gained spiritual renewal through participation in the religion and, probably with most mystery religions, hope for a better afterlife.

These aspects of the mystery religions show the interconnectedness of the ritual, experiential, and doctrinal dimensions of religion. The mystery religions offered important alternatives to the Homeric religious perspective, especially its dreary prospects for the afterlife in the dark realm of Hades.

The great and long-lived popularity of the mystery religions, together with the joyous pageantry of the days surrounding their initiation rites, bear witness to their power for enhancing the lives of those who followed them. Various mystery religions would play a central role in the religious life of Rome. Indeed, for people of the ancient Roman world, Christianity must have appeared to be something like a mystery religion, involving a community of initiates, a deeply personal relationship with Christ, and hopes for spiritual renewal and a blessed afterlife.

The Eleusinian Mysteries

The mystery religion par excellence, celebrated at Eleusis (near Athens) honored the grain goddess Demeter and her daughter, Persephone. Along with being very popular for centuries, the Eleusinian

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mystery religions A diverse group of beliefs and practices of ancient Greek and Roman civilization that included initiation into a specific community, a personal encounter with the deity, and hope for spiritual renewal and a better afterlife.

mysteries set forth a basic form that influenced the development of later mystery religions in the Roman world.

Mystery religions were typically based on a myth celebrating the theme of new life arising from death. The myth of Demeter and Persephone goes as follows: One day Persephone was gathering flowers in a meadow. Hades sprang from beneath the earth and took her away to his dark, subterranean realm. Demeter searched everywhere but could not find her beloved daughter. In her grief and anger, Demeter prevented crops from growing. The famine grew so quickly that humanity was threatened. Zeus feared that his worshippers would all perish, so he sent Hermes to the underworld to order Hades to let Persephone go. Hades did as he was told, but as Persephone was leaving, he gave her a taste of pomegranate, a fruit symbolic of marriage. Persephone and her mother were joyfully reunited, and the goddess made the crops grow abundantly. But because Persephone had eaten of the pomegranate, Zeus forced her to spend one-third of every year in the underworld as Hades's wife; the rest of the year she could be with her mother.

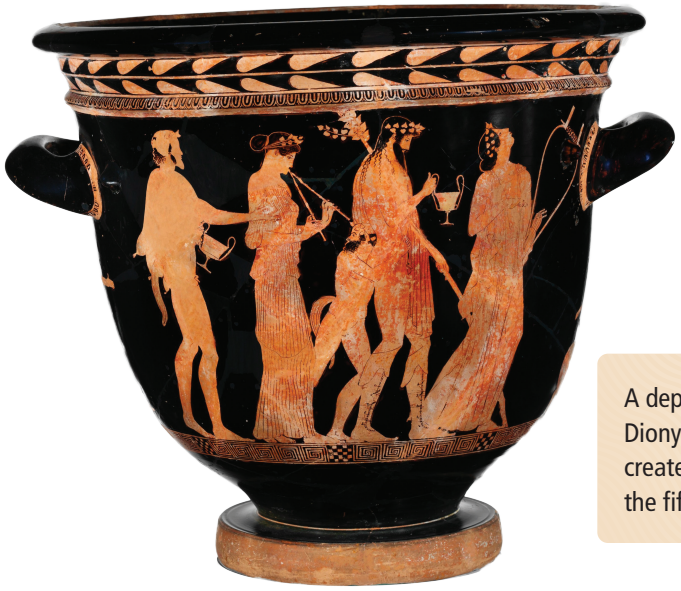
This myth clearly correlates with the agricultural cycle. For the four months that Persephone is in the underworld, the fields lie dormant. When she returns to earth, new life is born and flourishes for the duration of her eight-month stay. The initiates of the Eleusinian mysteries experienced a similar sort of new life. And, connecting the mythic with the ritual and doctrinal dimensions of religion through their initiation rites, the initiates enjoyed spiritual renewal and the hope of a blessed afterlife because they had gained the favor of Persephone, queen of the underworld.

The Cult of Dionysus

Another popular mystery religion, especially among women, was devoted to Dionysus, a god of fertility, vegetation, and specifically the vine (and hence wine). Dionysus is often depicted in Greek art with vines and grapes, and there are accounts of him miraculously turning water into wine.

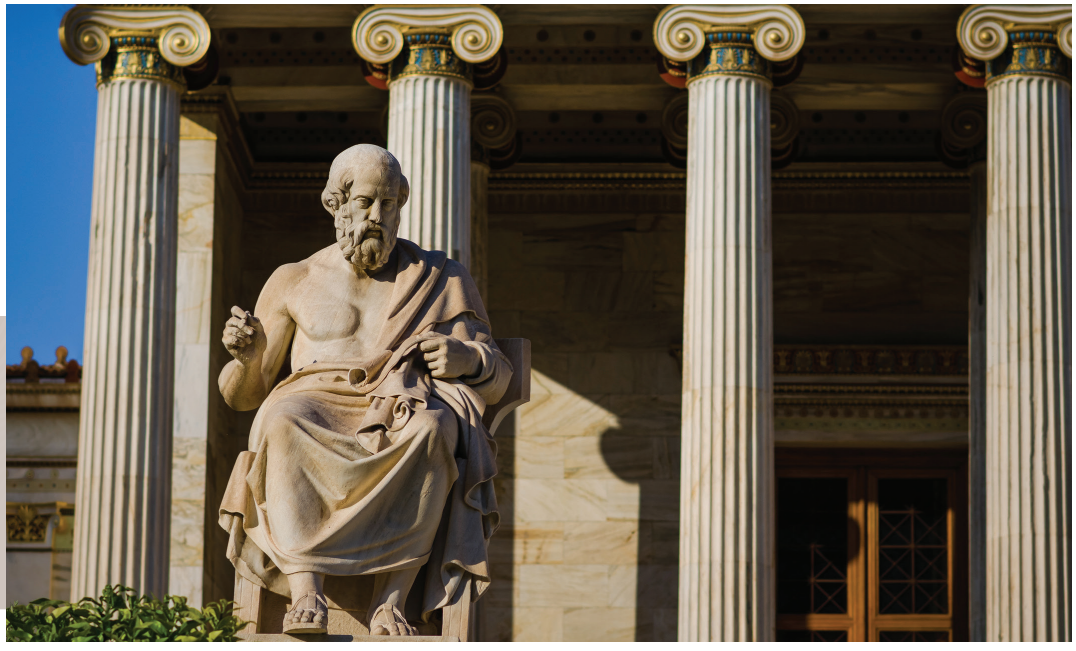
Worship of Dionysus is known to have occurred in the remote countryside, among the wild vegetation of the hills and mountains. As in other mystery religions, it aimed at attaining union with the deity. Its goal was primarily accomplished through rituals that included dancing to music played on the tympanum (resembling a tambourine) and the *aulos* (resembling the oboe).

Worship of Dionysus was often portrayed as untamed, ecstatic, and, at its extreme, frenzied. Devotion to Dionysus also played a role in a religious worldview, with a tamer reputation, Orphism.



A depiction of a Dionysian procession created on pottery in the fifth century BCE.

© Rogers Fund, 1907/The Met



The Greek philosopher Plato (about 428–347 BCE) embraced the Orphic notion of the body and the soul as two distinct realms of human nature.

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Orphism: Freeing the Soul from the Body

Orphism is named for the legendary Orpheus, famous in Greek mythology as a gifted musician and singer. According to the Orphics, Dionysus, the son of Zeus, was eaten by the evil Titans. In anger, Zeus struck the Titans with his thunderbolts, burning them to death. From their ashes, the first human beings were born.

For the Orphics, this myth established that humans possess a dual nature: the evil, bodily, Titanic aspect, and the good, spiritual, Dionysian aspect. The body, the Orphics believed, is the tomb of the soul (expressed in Greek as *soma sema* [soh´mah say´mah], "body [is] tomb"). The religious task of Orphism was to lead a pure life through vegetarianism and other ascetic practices so that the soul might eventually escape the body and fully realize its divine, Dionysian nature. This task was thought to take many lifetimes; the Orphics believed in reincarnation of the soul. (Scholars today do not know whether these ancient Greeks were influenced by the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation.)

Orphic Influence on Plato

Orphism remained an important part of Greek religion for centuries. Its influence on the intellectual history of Western civilization is still being felt, for the great philosopher Plato adopted some of its primary beliefs.

Though reincarnation, or the transmigration of souls, has never become a widely popular belief in the West, it was an important part of Plato's philosophy, closely related to his theory of knowledge. Plato believed that we know things in this life partly because we have experienced them in previous lives. Knowledge, therefore, is *recollection*.

The influence of Plato, especially of his dualism of body and soul (or mind), is deeply ingrained in Christian thought and in Western culture generally. Reflect on Plato's notion of the body as distinct from the mind. Do you tend to look at yourself as Plato would have? Do you think this is the correct perspective? Why or why not?

Orphism An ancient Greek religion named for the legendary musician and singer Orpheus, which incorporated a myth of Dionysus, emphasized an ascetic lifestyle, and included belief in reincarnation, or the transmigration of the soul.

Plato also embraced the Orphic notion of the dual makeup of human nature: body and soul (or mind). According to Plato, truth exists independently of any bodily, or material, evidence, consisting of Forms, or Ideas, which are eternal and perfect. Wisdom lies in identifying oneself with the truth of the Forms, rather than with the changing and imperfect material world. The influence of this **Platonic dualism** can be observed even today. For example, it can be seen in Christianity because important early Christian theologians were well educated in the philosophy of Plato and incorporated his dualism of mind and body into their understanding of Christianity. The great theologian Saint Augustine of Hippo was first attracted to Christianity largely because of its similarities to Platonic philosophy.

The Healing Cult of Asclepius

The ancient Greeks commonly turned to religion for healing from sickness or injury. This was the special domain of Asclepius (a-sklee´pee-uhs). Homer described Asclepius as an able yet mortal physician, but the Greeks came to regard him as a god. He was thought to be the son of the god Apollo, who was also revered for his healing powers. Hygeia, the daughter of Asclepius, was closely associated with him. Her name means "health" and is the root of the word *hygiene*.

The cult of Asclepius was very popular. In fact, for a time Asclepius was one of the most popular of all Greek deities, revered as a savior not only regarding physical health but also for saving people from enemies, storms at sea, and so forth. Unlike the gods of the Olympian pantheon, Asclepius offered the joy of a close relationship between worshipper and god. Like any good doctor, Asclepius cared dearly for every individual who sought his aid.

Asclepius was believed to have tremendous powers of healing, and according to the mythic account of his life, he even had the ability to bring the dead back to life. The great sanctuaries that he was worshipped in were ancient health spas, where strict diets were enforced, and baths, gyms, and theaters were available for physical and recreational activities. Most of the healing occurred while the patient slept in a sacred chamber, when Asclepius was thought to visit in a dream and administer a cure. Patients commonly left offerings to the god, sometimes in the form of replicas of ailing body parts.

When people of the ancient Mediterranean world first heard about Christianity, Jesus seemed to have much in common with the ancient healer Asclepius. Both were called Savior, and the intimacy of the worshippers' relationship with Asclepius bore a strong resemblance to the relationship with Christ celebrated by Christians.

Ancient societies normally viewed the healing of the body as a religious concern. Healings typically were (and sometimes still are) performed by a witch doctor, medicine man or woman, shaman, or other religious figure. Do you think modern Western society treats the healing of the body as a religious concern?

Religion in the Roman World

The word *religion* is derived from the Latin word *religio.* The English term, however, is broader in meaning than the Latin original. Ancient Roman usage emphasized the ritual dimension of religion. *Religio* referred to the ensuring of divine favor through scrupulous observance of ritual.

Platonic dualism Plato's highly influential perspective that true reality consists of eternal and perfect Forms, or Ideas, and that the material world, the realm of the body, is an imperfect reflection of the world of Forms, the realm of the soul.

Dependence on *religio* was based on the notion that life is enhanced through bonding with the divine powers inhabiting the world. All Romans, no matter their social status, strove to improve their lives through *religio.*

The major features of Roman religion as they were known in later centuries seem to have been in place from at least the time of the founding of the Roman Republic in 509 BCE, and some endured even beyond the end of the fourth century CE, by which time a majority of Romans had become Christian. Over time, Roman religion was influenced by Greek religion. Like the Greeks of Homer's time, the early Romans did not have reason to hope for a blessed afterlife.

Songs for the Gods

Aelius Aristides was an accomplished public speaker and writer of Greek literature who lived in the second century CE. He was frequently ill, so he spent many of his days at the Asclepium—the healing sanctuary of the god Asclepius—at Pergamum, a city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). His Sacred Tales *records the events surrounding his many bouts with illness, especially the constant care he received from Asclepius, the god of healing. According to the* Sacred Tales, *Asclepius appeared often to Aristides, usually in dreams. In those revelations, the god would prescribe methods of curing whatever ailed Aristides.*

Along with providing important evidence regarding medical practices in antiquity, the Sacred Tales *offers elaborate and personal accounts of religious experience in ancient Greece and Rome. In this passage, Aristides gives something of an introduction to his* Sacred Tales, *which he wrote as an expression of gratitude to "the God," Asclepius:*

To narrate what came next is not within the power of man. Still I must try, as I have undertaken to recount some of these things in a cursory way. But if someone wishes to know with the utmost precision what has befallen us from the God, it is time for him to seek out the parchment books and the dreams themselves. For he will find cures of all kinds and some discourses and full scale orations and various visions, and all of the prophecies and oracles about every kind of matter, some in prose, some in verse, and all expressive of my gratitude to the God, greater than one might expect. (In Behr, *Aelius Aristides and "The Sacred Tales"*)

Aristides asserts that Asclepius himself approved the project by naming the writings the Sacred Tales, *and then recalls what he refers to as "strange events"—his dream visions of Asclepius and miraculous healings of various types. Aristides also credits Asclepius, along with other gods, for having inspired him to produce hymns. The following passage from* Aelius Aristides and the Sacred Tales *makes clear the polytheistic nature of Aristides's religion, which was typical of the ancient West:*

Tale follows tale, and let us say again that along with other things, Asclepius, the Savior, also commanded us to spend time on songs and lyric verse, and to relax and maintain a chorus of boys. . . . The children sang my songs; and

Their religion was oriented toward achieving things in this world. But the Romans eventually sought more from religion. Such alternatives as the mystery religions became popular throughout the Roman Empire.

Numina: Supernatural Powers

The Roman gods and goddesses eventually took on many characteristics of their Greek counterparts in the Olympian pantheon, as related in various mythic narratives set forth by Homer and others. But relative to the Greeks, and especially in early centuries, Romans were not as prone to envision their gods as anthropomorphic, or in human form. Rather, they tended to think of their gods more ambiguously. For example, the Romans were not of one mind regarding the gender of the spirit of

whenever I happened to choke, if my throat were suddenly constricted, or my stomach became disordered, or whenever I had some other troublesome attack, the doctor Theodotus, being in attendance and remembering my dreams, would order the boys to sing some of my lyric verse. And while they were singing, there arose unnoticed a feeling of comfort, and sometimes everything which pained me went completely away.

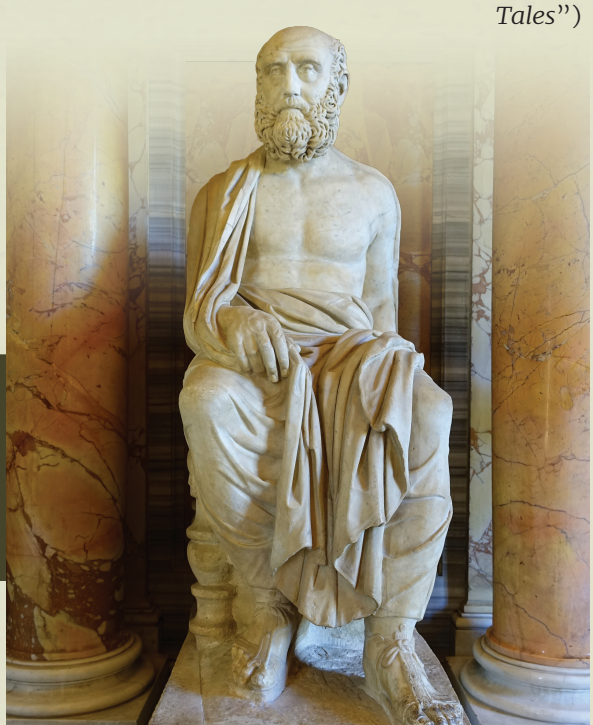
And this was a very great gain, and the honor was still greater than this, for my lyric verse also found favor with the God. He ordered me to compose not only for him, but also indicated others, as Pan, Hecate, Achelous, and whatever else it might be. There also came a dream from Athena, which contained a hymn to the Goddess. . . .

And another dream came from Zeus, but I cannot remember which of these was first or second, and another again from Dionysus, which said to address the God, as"curly haired."

And Hermes was also seen with his dog skin cap, and he was marvellously beautiful and extraordinarily mobile. And while I was singing of him and feeling pleased that I had easily said the proper things, I awoke. . . .

But most things were written for Apollo and Asclepius through the inspiration of my dreams, and many of these nearly from memory, as whenever I was riding in a carriage, or even was walking.

(In Behr, *Aelius Aristides* and "*The Sacred Tales*")



A skilled speaker and author, Aelius Aristides (second century CE) spent much of his time at the Asclepium in Pergamum, seeking cures for his many illnesses from the god Asclepius. This sculpture is in the Vatican Museums, Rome.

Image by Daderot, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



The Gemma Augustea, a cameo carved in an Arabian onyx stone in the early first century CE, portrays the emperor Augustus (seated) surrounded by various Roman deities. Jupiter's eagle sits at the emperor's foot.

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mildew, who was alternately called Rogibus (a male name) or Rogiba (a female name). The name Venus, the Roman equivalent of the Greek Aphrodite, bears a masculine Latin ending; some scholars think the deity originally was regarded as male or as not having a specific gender.

The deities belonged to a larger category known as **numina** (noo´men-uh). The numina were supernatural powers, each in charge of a specific function. These powers were thought to populate Roman homes, towns, and the countryside, and to inhabit a variety of spaces, such as fields, streams, trees, doorways, altars, and shrines. The gods possessed numen (noo´men; the singular form of *numina*), or supernatural power, in abundance. By securing the gods' favor through *religio,* Romans could hope to benefit from this divine power.

The Roman Pantheon

The most powerful of all Roman deities was Jupiter (also known as Jove), the sky god. Jupiter was one of a triad of deities that included Juno, the goddess who looked after women, and Minerva, goddess of handicrafts. Vesta, goddess of the hearth, and Janus, god of doorways, were especially venerated within the home. Because Janus presided over the crossing of the threshold, Janus came to be associated in general with beginnings. That is why the first month of the year is named January.

Once the Romans had come under the influence of Greek culture (especially during Roman conquests of Greek territory in the second century BCE), their pantheon quickly took on the characteristics Homer had conveyed about the

numina (noo´men-uh) Plural of *numen.* The ancient Roman concept of supernatural powers that were the early Roman equivalent of deities.

Olympians. Most of Rome's important deities became identified with Greek counterparts: Jupiter with Zeus, Juno with Hera, Minerva with Athena, Venus with Aphrodite, and so on.

In many ways, the Roman pantheon is more familiar to the modern world than the Greek. For example, the names of six of the eight planets in our solar system are derived from Roman deities. In addition to Jupiter and Venus, we have Mars, god of agriculture and war (identified with the Greek god of war Ares); Neptune, god of the sea (identified with Poseidon); Mercury, god of traders (identified with Hermes, the messenger god); and Saturn, god of sowing (identified with Cronos, father of Zeus).

Greek influence can also be seen in the adoption into the Roman pantheon of some Greek gods, such as Apollo and Asclepius (called Aesculapius in Latin). Another Greek religious figure the Romans worshipped extensively was Heracles, the great hero known to the Romans as Hercules. He was especially popular among merchants because of his success at making long journeys through perilous lands.

Proper worship of the gods was thought to ensure *pax deorum,* "The peace of the gods." *Pax deorum,* in turn, was believed to help ensure the welfare of the Roman state, which thus maintained official worship practices. The state assigned priests for various religious duties. The priests were highly respected and deeply devoted. They were kept busy attending to their tasks, because the gods were worshipped regularly and with utmost precision. By the later centuries of the Roman period, more than one hundred official ceremonies occurred each year, sometimes accompanied by large public festivals, other times carried out in solitude by the assigned priest.

A Multicultural World: Mystery Religions of Rome

By the end of the first century BCE, Rome had conquered most of the regions surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. As a result, it imported many cultures, each with its own religious forms. Most Romans freely adopted foreign ideas and practices. Mystery religions became especially popular. Along with the Greek mysteries, important new religions from Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor gained widespread popularity. By the middle of the first century CE, another new religion, this one from Palestine, had begun to attract followers. For the next three centuries, Christianity would vie with the mystery religions for the religious allegiance of the Roman populace.

The mystery religions had a universal appeal. Though the Eleusinian mysteries were located in a specific place, most mystery religions could be celebrated locally. It was also perfectly common to be an initiate of more than one mystery religion, and most welcomed members of any social class, ethnic background, or gender. One religion that did not embrace this inclusiveness was Mithraism—the favored cult of the Roman army—which allowed only men. Despite that restriction, Mithraism had an enormous following and was one of the two main rivals of Christianity in the later Roman Empire. The other rival was the mystery religion celebrating the goddess Isis.

Goddess of Many Names: The Cult of Isis

The cult of Isis drew from an ancient Egyptian tradition about the goddess Isis and her husband, Osiris. According to the myth, Osiris was killed and hacked into

The initiates of the mystery religions were forbidden to reveal the secrets of their rites. You have read about the Greek and Roman mysteries as well as Apuleius's brief—and intentionally sketchy—account of the rites of the inner sanctuary. Now come up with your own description of the rites. Include the elements described by Apuleius, but add details you think Apuleius may have left out. Use your imagination!

pieces by his evil brother. Isis searched far and wide, finally finding Osiris's body parts. She mummified him, which brought him back to life. Osiris became god of the underworld.

The theme of life overcoming death through the power of Isis was central to the goddess's cult. Osiris's powerful position as god of the underworld likewise contributed. A blessed afterlife seems to have been one of the rewards the worshippers of Isis and Osiris anticipated.

Many aspects of the cult of Isis seem to have been preserved in a delightful novel from the second century CE called *The Metamorphoses* (also known as *The Golden Ass*), by Apuleius, himself apparently an initiate of the cult—although some scholars doubt this. The hero of the story, Lucius, is magically transformed into an ass, only to be changed back into a human through his devotion to Isis. The novel contains a long and detailed description of the ceremony associated with initiation into the religion. Most crucially, its author has Lucius describe the moments within the inner sanctuary of the temple of Isis:

> I approached the confines of death. I trod the threshold of [Persephone]; and borne through the elements I returned. At midnight I saw the Sun shining in all his glory. I approached the gods below and the gods above, and I stood beside them, and I worshiped them. (In *The Ancient Mysteries*)

Whatever readers are to make of Lucius's being "borne through the elements," it is clear that the initiation rite leads to his "rebirth" (as his transformation is described later in the novel) after a ritual death. Life is renewed and enhanced through the symbolic overcoming of death. This theme is common among the mystery religions of ancient Greece and Rome.

The cult of Isis seems to have influenced Christian veneration of the Virgin Mary. The ancient Romans recognized important similarities between the two women. Artistic representations of Isis holding her son Horus are similar to those of Mary with the infant Jesus.



The Egyptian goddess Isis nursing the infant Horus.

Emperor Worship

The mystery religions influenced the development of Christianity because of the characteristics they had in common with it. Emperor worship influenced Christianity, in part because of the violent persecution that sometimes resulted when the Christians refused to participate in it. Judaism fared somewhat better, having the advantage of being an ancient tradition and therefore more or less

© Gift of Mrs. Frederick F. Thompson, 1915/The Met

respected by the Romans, who revered their own ancient traditions. This situation changed dramatically in the fourth century, when Constantine became the first Christian emperor. Judaism then became the religion most threatened by imperial authority.

Like so many facets of Roman religion, emperor worship had its roots in the cultures of Greece and other regions of the ancient Mediterranean world. For instance, when Alexander the Great conquered the lands of Egypt and Persia, he was worshipped as a god by their inhabitants.

Among the Romans, leaders such as Julius Caesar flirted with the idea of being worshipped; some, such as Caligula, Nero, and Domitian, openly declared their divinity. Emperor Augustus (who reigned from 31 BCE to 14 CE), though, established a pattern that most of the later emperors were to follow. For the most part, he encouraged worship not of himself, but of his genius, or guardian spirit. This focused worship on Rome, because the emperor's genius was thought to guard the welfare of the entire state.

This notion of worshipping the Roman state was addressed in a fascinating written correspondence from the early second century CE between Emperor Trajan and Pliny the Younger, who served as a governor under Trajan. To settle a local dispute, Pliny needed to know who among the populace was Christian. Whoever consented to worshipping the emperor in the proper manner, Pliny wrote, could not have been Christian:

> Those who denied they were, or had ever been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the gods, and who finally cursed Christ—none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing—these I thought it proper to discharge. . . . They all worshipped your statue and the images of the gods, and cursed Christ. (In Kee, *The New Testament in Context*)

The Christians had obvious reasons for refusing to worship on behalf of the emperor; to do so would have contradicted their belief in only one God. The Romans, on the other hand, grew suspicious of the Christians, because their refusal to worship on behalf of the emperor implied that they did not support the state. Under such circumstances, it was inevitable that conflicts would arise.

Roman worship of the genius of the emperor was really a means of expressing one's devotion to the state. In other words, it was a form of patriotism. What forms of "emperor worship" do you see today? Would you label such forms of devotion "religious"?

Legacies from Ancient Times

This chapter has provided glimpses into many ideas and beliefs that to the eyes of a modern Westerner may appear strange, and many others that may appear familiar. In the religions of Greece and Rome especially, the strangeness is striking. Belief in numerous gods, many of them of questionable moral fiber; a tendency to regard religion primarily as a means of attaining things in this world; and the likelihood that an individual would embrace more than one religion—all these features probably strike the modern Westerner as being rather odd. Yet the similarities among these traditions, born of influences passed from one to another, are equally striking.

Such is the normal effect of the historical process: Bits and pieces from the past are carried along, sometimes all the way from ancient times to the modern age.

One does not need to be limited to a consideration of Western religions when pondering the extent of influence exercised by the religions of ancient Iran, Greece, and Rome. For instance, Zoroastrian doctrines concerning saviors helped shape the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon of bodhisattvas. One does not need to be limited to a consideration of influence to find meaning in a study of the ancient world. Indeed, one can find as much meaning in the aspects that remain characteristic only to that world as in the aspects it has passed along to the modern world, for those strange ways were the innovations of the minds and hearts of human beings, worthy ancestors of all living today.

Chapter Review

1. When and where did Zoroastrianism begin to flourish?
2. How did Zoroastrianism spread beyond its place of origin?
3. Briefly describe the religious experience Zarathushtra had at about age thirty.
4. Name the sacred text of Zoroastrianism. What is the oldest material in this text, and who wrote it?
5. Summarize the characteristics and actions associated with Ahura Mazda.
6. What is ethical dualism?
7. What is the Lie, and how does it relate to Ahura Mazda?
8. What must humans choose between in the Zoroastrian cosmic scheme?
9. Summarize Zarathushtra's understanding of human destiny.
10. What are the general ethical demands of traditional Zoroastrian life?
11. Who are the Parsis, and where do most of them live today?
12. What are commonly regarded as having been the Bible of the ancient Greeks?
13. Explain the meaning of this sentence: The gods of the Olympian pantheon are anthropomorphic.
14. What was Aeschylus's main contribution to the understanding of the gods of the Olympian pantheon? Give an example.
15. What is an oracle? What is the most famous oracle of ancient Greece, and why was it consulted?
16. Briefly identify the three basic aspects of the mystery religions.
17. What mystery religion honored Demeter and Persephone?
18. What is the god Dionysus associated with, and how is he often depicted in Greek art?
19. Name the goal of the ascetic practices of the Orphics.

20. What is Plato's theory of knowledge?

21. What is Platonic dualism?

22. Why did Jesus seem to have much in common with the ancient Asclepius?

23. What were numina, and what sorts of things were they thought to inhabit?

24. Who was the most powerful Roman deity?

25. Identify the six planets of our solar system that are named after Roman deities.

26. Why did the Roman state consider it essential to maintain official worship practices?

27. Which mystery religions were the main rivals of Christianity in the later Roman Empire?

28. Briefly summarize the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris.

29. Briefly describe the sort of emperor worship encouraged by Augustus.

30. Why did Christians and Roman rulers clash over emperor worship?

Discussion Questions

1. Based on this chapter's study of Zoroastrianism, why are monotheistic religions challenged by the problem of evil? How does Zoroastrianism respond to this challenge?

2. Describe the general evolution of religious ideas in Greece, from Homer down through the classical age, with the development of mystery religions and Plato's philosophy. What factors might account for the evolutionary trends?

3. What role did Roman religion play in Roman governance and care for the welfare of the Roman state and its people?

4. Identify and compare this chapter's presentation of ideas and practices relating to death and the afterlife. Based on your understanding of religions in the modern age, which of these ideas and practices seem to have persisted?