



A Journalist's Guide To  
**Buddhism**

## Introduction

*Five centuries before the Common Era, tradition says that a group of villagers invited the Buddha to come into town and help sort out what had become a big problem. It seemed that this village, Kesaputta, was constantly being invaded by preachers who would come in and tell the folk that everything they'd heard from other preachers was wrong. "Which of these venerable priests are speaking the truth, and which ones are lying?" they asked the Buddha. They expected him to do criticise all the others, which would prove he was just an ordinary evangelist. What he said has become a hallmark of the Buddhist knack for confounding all expectations. "Ehi-passiko," he said, in the Indian language of the day. "See for yourself."*

*The Buddha taught that capital "T" Truth can be discovered by anyone who was willing to courageously explore the nature of reality. Don't rely on "reports, legends, traditions, scripture...or even teachers," he said. "Ehi-passiko. See for yourself."*

*In this guide we've taken his advice to heart and have structured it as a series of questions – an approach we think he would have approved of.*

### Is Buddhism News?

There are two reasons for taking an interest in Buddhism, from a news perspective. One comes from reading the latest data from Statistics Canada, which reveals that arrivals of Buddhists immigrants are rapidly growing. For cities like Toronto and Vancouver, evidence of this can be seen in the number of new, large and expensive temples being constructed.

Another is that Buddhism is also growing rapidly from within, aided by Hollywood celebrities like Richard Gere and Goldie Hawn, and visits to the West by spiritual celebrities like the Dalai Lama. Buddhism is both "hot" (from a media perspective), and "cool":

"Because Buddhism is a way of understanding the self and the cosmos it is particularly attractive to young people who are not strong in believing in organised religion. The way Buddhism is practised in the West makes it viable for people who want to be spiritual without being religious..."

This is a phenomenon happening all over the western world. The quote above actually describes the situation in the UK by sociologist Brenda Brasher, but it is equally true for Canada.

Universities are also tracking this phenomenon – for example, the University of British Columbia opened a Contemporary Tibetan Studies Program in 2004. The opening was attended by the Dalai Lama himself. McGill, Concordia, and the universities of Alberta

and Toronto all have well-developed Buddhist studies programs, many in place for over half a century.

Buddhism also is making itself felt in the international peace movement. The Dalai Lama, considered to be the one of the world's most influential religious leaders has established himself as a significant peace-builder (and was awarded a Nobel Prize for this in 1989).

## What's Buddhism About?

Most people know that Buddhism has something to do with "**enlightenment**" (*nirvana*), a gradual or sudden transformation that is salvational in character. Whatever enlightenment is, getting there involves a handful of its foundational beliefs. First, everything in life is **impermanent**, subject to change, decay, and death. Second, all forms of violence are anathema to the spiritual life. **Harmlessness** (*ahimsa*) must be the foundation of human society. Third, **compassion** has to become second nature. Fourth, if this is to happen, we must come to see our **delusions** – notably, that the "self" is a delusion, and as such creates strife, and prevents us from seeing our true nature and the nature of existence (they're both the same, in fact). In Buddhism this essence is often called "Buddha-nature." Finally, through **meditation** this nature is revealed as deathless, perfect and essentially empty. Everything is impermanent except impermanence.

## But Is It a Religion?

This is a very good question. A nineteenth century Protestant minister said Buddhism fails the test of religion: "There is no great glowing future to which faith can lift its eye, no eternal progress to inspire aspiration. No God, no soul, no Saviour from sin, no love, no heaven!"

It is true, Buddhism says little that is positive about God; it is fairly described as non-theistic. As for a life after death, Buddhism accepts the Indian notion of rebirth. However, the best outcome, Buddhists believe, is to conclude the seemingly endless cycle of birth and death through enlightenment. And while some Buddhists do see its founder as a kind of "saviour", most see him as just a man, although a pretty impressive one. Others do ascribe more divine attributes to him but nowhere is he considered to be God or God's son or God's proxy. The Buddha taught a program of salvation - but not of the divine sort. In fact, he often sounded more like a psychologist than a religious leader.

And yet three-quarters of a billion people worldwide are described as having Buddhism as their religion.

No wonder it has often been said that Buddhism is either the most psychological of religions, or the most religious of psychologies.

At its heart, it is something of a mystery, just like its teachings. Try cutting your teeth on these *koans* (a Zen meditation):

*One day as Manjusri stood outside the gate, the Buddha called to him, "Manjusri, Manjusri, why do you not enter?" Manjusri replied, "I do not see myself as outside. Why enter?"*

*The Monk Mayo asked this question of the Sixth patriarch: "What is Zen?" The Patriarch replied, "When your mind is not dwelling on the dualism of good and evil, what is your original face before you were born?"*

If your reaction is a sort of puzzled indifference, join the club. If suddenly you find yourself...enlightened...you might want to read on before giving up your day job.

## What Do the Numbers Say?

1. There are between 500 and 760 million Buddhists worldwide. The range is so large because no one knows precisely how to count Buddhists in Communist China, where they have been systematically suppressed since 1949. (One credible report put the Chinese Buddhist population of China at 200 million in 1949.)
2. According to Statistics Canada, the 2001 census counted 300,050 Buddhists in this country, just over 1 per cent of the total population.
3. Ontario has the largest Buddhist population with 128,000; BC is second with 85,540.
4. India – the birthplace of Buddhism – now has only 6.6 million, not even 1 per cent of the total.
5. In recent surveys, 84% of Japan's population of 125 million practice both Buddhism and Shinto.
6. According to Buddhist cosmology, the universe lasts for one *kalpa* or about 4.3 billion years.
7. Some Buddhists argue that when you die you have a chance of being reincarnated in one of 31 "realms" ranging from Number 1, Hell ("realms of unimaginable suffering and anguish"), through to Number 5, the Human Realm, all the way up to Number 31, Pure Mind Realm ("neither-perception-nor-non-perception").
8. About 60 Chinese Buddhists were the first to arrive in Canada in 1788. They were aboard Capt. John Meares' ship that landed in Nootka Sound on the west coast of British Columbia.

## Who Was He?

There's little doubt among academics these days that there was an historical Buddha, but that does not mean there are no problems in reconstructing a timeline for his life or authenticating even the most credible documents.

Accounts of his life and his teachings were not recorded in writing until two to three hundred years after his death. Before that, his disciples memorized everything he said (and probably added a lot that he didn't) which inevitably meant that errors and fabrications were incorporated in the canon (more about that later).

As the popularity of Buddhism grew, so did the stories of his life and his spiritual powers. From the jaundiced, rational perspective of a western journalist, it's very difficult to put any credence into some of the more fantastical stories and miracles that were told about him. And genuine, biographical details – the sort that help us understand what sort of man he might have been – were ignored by those who prepared the early manuscripts. His “life-details” were not seen as important.

Modern scholarship now puts his death at 483 BCE (although some claim it could have been as late as 368 BCE). He was 85 when he died, so his birth was somewhere between 568 and 453 BCE). He was a contemporary of Socrates, Lao Tzu, and Confucius. Like them, his ministry (which lasted for 45 years) had a profound impact on the world and continues to do so.

He was born Siddhartha Gautama, son of a nobleman in northern India in a region known as Sakya. Legend has it that upon his birth, diviners were brought in to forecast his life. They looked, and consulted, and reported to his parents that they had some good news and some bad news. The good news? Siddhartha could become a great king. The bad news? If in his childhood, the young boy experienced any suffering, well, the kid would become a great spiritual leader...but not a king. Despite their best efforts to prevent him from seeing anyone with disease, or hunger, or experiencing anyone dying, they failed. At 29, Siddhartha had seen fleeting glimpses of old age, sickness and death, and his eyes were opened. He left home to join the bands of ragged ascetics who roamed northern India searching for the meaning of life.

## What Did He Find?

Siddhartha found a number of wise teachers among a variety of Hindu traditions. A common element of all was the growing interest in exploring “inner space” through meditation, discipline and renunciation. Some of these forms of practice involved incredibly painful forms of privation. One of the great teachings of Hinduism (and later incorporated into Buddhism) was the notion that one’s ego was a barrier to wisdom. The ego was responsible for keeping people in the dark; the ego was responsible for violence; the ego handcuffed ordinary people and kept them enslaved.

But the more Siddhartha attempted to destroy his ego, the stronger it got. Clearly, starving his body by eating only one bean a day was not getting him closer to his ultimate goal, complete liberation from suffering. In desperation, at the age of 35, he found a spot under a big old tree outside the present Indian city of Patna and vowed that he would not get up from that spot until his meditations removed the blindfolds and fetters of ignorance, and he could actually see, or, become enlightened.

Tradition has it that all through the night he was tormented by passions and doubt; engaged in a cosmic battle with the Lucifer of the Buddhist pantheon, Mara, the Evil One; but in the end, of course, Siddhartha prevailed, and thus gave birth to one of the world’s great religions. This religion would be named after what he became after his vigil under the tree: the Buddha, The Awakened One.

Buddhism is all about awakening.

## What Were The Buddha’s Main Teachings?

After the Buddha got up from his spot under the tree, he had a difficult choice. Since he had penetrated to the source of suffering and reached *nirvana* (from a Sanskrit word meaning to extinguish) he could have lived a life of pure bliss, if he chose to. Instead he decided to share his discovery with others. He found a group of ascetics he had travelled with and taught them the basics of his new system, which he called the Four Noble Truths. A word of warning: with such a ‘noble’ title, you might anticipate his four truths to be inspiring, like “God is the source of all goodness” or “If at first you don’t succeed...” No, the Buddha’s truths have the quality of a bucket of cold water – but that’s exactly what he intended: to “chill” us out.

## Four Noble Truths?

1. Most of life is painful ('dukkha: to be hollow'): get used to it. The Buddha realized that just as his parents had tried to protect him from seeing old age, sickness and death, we spend much of our lives in futile efforts to avoid pain. We wrap ourselves with luxury, avoid difficult decisions, try to become "important" and pretend we are happy when we aren't.
2. Painfulness has many causes, including the way we perceive and interpret the world, the inability to accept change, ignorance, disease and old age. A key factor is often identified with craving (tanha).. Somehow we have become convinced that if we can get the things we want, all will be okay. And we then become attached to the things we have collected, fearful of losing even a scrap of our hoardings. Basically, he argued that humankind will always experience pain if craving leads to excess, envy, narcissism, taking advantage of others, etc.
3. There is a way to deal with this problem, a total solution - if you can begin to realize the meaning of Noble Truths Number One and Two. Selfish craving can be wrestled to the ground
4. Although the Buddha never claimed to have the only path to equilibrium and a wholesome life, he did offer the Eightfold path as a possible appropriate means to gain these gifts.

## Eightfold Path?

Without a doubt, the Buddha would have loved the modern penchant for putting a number on things, like "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" or "The Five Rules for Successful Stock Investing". These guys did not invent the genre. The Buddha did and his religion created numbers of numbered lists. But his most important, besides the Four Noble Truths, is the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha created a formula that would attack suffering in a coherent way, so that if one were to strive to follow his rules, the end result would be a life that is harmonious with the nature of reality, the ultimate truth – what he called **dukkha**, from the Sanskrit noun 'duty'.

1. **Right View:** If you understand the insatiable appetites of the ego and its impact on your personal suffering and those around you, you will not remain deluded about the nature of reality.\*
2. **Right Thought:** It is possible to refrain from thoughts that injure and to encourage a healthier mental environment.

3. **Right Speech:** ditto.
4. **Right Action:** ditto, but with a significant distinction. The Buddha believed in *karma*, a difficult concept that roughly means a form of universal justice meted out according to your actions. Everything you do, for good or ill, follows you around from life to life, and influences your current circumstances. More about this later.
5. **Right Livelihood:** As you sow, so shall you reap. Make sure your job does not attract any more bad karma than necessary.
6. **Right Effort:** If you strive too much to follow the Buddha's teaching, it will only cause problems. You have to learn a balance, and you have to strive in a non-egoic way.
7. **Right Mindfulness:** Watch what is in your mind because it is the source of both understanding and delusion. (Mindfulness, you'll soon see, is one of the principle techniques the Buddha taught.)
8. **Right Concentration:** Meditation is at the heart of the Buddhist practice. But there are right ways to meditate and wrong ways. Don't overdo it.

### \*What was that asterisk after the word "reality"?

The Buddha taught that there were three essential things about reality that might have escaped the world's attention. The first, as we have seen, was that life was generally "unsatisfactory". He called this unsatisfactoriness *dukha* (which is often translated as "suffering" and sometimes spelled *dukkha* in the Pali language).

One of the chief sources of this unsatisfactoriness is that we fail to come to terms with the impermanence of life. We get sick, we age, and we die. Things change. If you could take a time-lapse movie of a mountain over millions of years, and speed it up, even Mt. Everest would follow the same course as ice cream left out in the sun.

And finally, there is no permanent "self". That identity you are so proud (or ashamed) of is a delusion. We think of ourselves as very real, but the Buddha taught all things living are subject to a strict rule of causality, implying that everything physical and mental is always changing - thus denying any sense of permanency.

Putting these three concepts together is the practice at the heart of Buddhism.

## What is Meditation?

The Buddha argued that the very essence of existence was 'knowable' not from an examination of the physical universe but from the direct experience of awareness itself. But there is a problem in attaining that direct experience: our thoughts are constantly skipping about in an incessant search for pleasure and security. We are afflicted with emotions such as anger and fear. We replay the past and fantasize about the future. And we are hooded by our ideas and beliefs, prejudices and preferences.

In these ways we preoccupy ourselves and cloud our ability to stay present in the moment. As long as we are thus distracted, the true nature of reality, the *dharma*, is hidden from our view.

Meditation in all forms of Buddhism is the attempt to directly experience reality.

Usually one adopts a sitting posture on a cushion, but in fact the Buddha taught standing, walking, and even prone meditation. In all these postures, however, the same basic principles apply. The mind is directed to an object of concentration, which can be the breath, an internal image, mantra or prayer, or an external object such as a candle, or an activity such as the feet while walking.

Gradually, as one trains the mind to stay on the object of concentration, the "brain chatter" begins to calm. Buddha's theory was that through this calmness, the true nature of reality begins to emerge, and with it the prospect for liberation.

There are meditation classes being taught in every city in Canada

## What's the History?

The Buddha's teachings spread quickly. Hindu society, with its oppressive caste system, was ripe for someone to come along and let in some fresh air. The Buddha, who renounced the Kshatria (nobility) caste he came from, despised the system and allowed all to join his movement – even the Untouchables.

The Buddha quickly attracted many people based on his growing reputation for having created a new path. His followers, both monks and laypersons, were encouraged to travel and spread the word. But it is clear the Buddha did not believe he had created a new religion, and his "missionaries" were not instructed to tear people away from their beliefs.

When he died though, disagreements arose among his followers. Some of these had been brewing during the 45 years of his active life as a teacher. One of the main sources for these divisions was, oddly, the Buddha himself. On his deathbed, he is

reported to have instructed his faithful attendant, Ananda, on some of the things that should happen when he died.

“Ananda,” he said, “when I die please eliminate all the little fussy rules for the monks. Just make sure the major rules are followed.” Ananda, who was known for his prodigious memory, did not seem to possess much of a curiosity. He did not ask, “Can you be more specific?”

So when the Buddha died, Ananda reported to the throng of monks and nuns what the Buddha had said, and immediately there were questions that he could not answer, and, of course, a certain amount of strife resulted.

Thirty years later, the First Buddhist Council was convened, and a list of rules for the monks was agreed upon, but the disagreements did not end there.

There were disagreements on what should happen in the absence of the Awakened One on all sorts of issues. Clearly the Buddha had considered what would happen to his flock in his absence. In the quaint words of one of his most important discourses (*sutra* in Sanskrit), the conversation went like this:

*“The Blessed One spoke to the Venerable Ananda, saying: ‘It may be, Ananda, that to some among you the thought will come: ‘Ended is the word of the Master; we have a Master no longer.’ But it should not, Ananda, be so considered. For that which I have proclaimed and made known as the Dharma and the Discipline, that shall be your Master when I am gone.’”*

Following his death, monks continued to memorize his words, and in that sense, the Master still had a voice. But no longer could they question him, and he in his Socratic manner, tease out of them the truths that they could discover for themselves.

## **What Was the Big Split?**

The Buddha taught entirely from personal experience, and the path he took to enlightenment he believed others could follow. But it was admittedly a difficult path. In his own case, it meant leaving a wife and child to trod the dusty roads of a spiritual seeker. And for the most part, the people who joined his movement had done the same. It was not a path for the faint of heart.

But what about those who could not leave home but who deserved to hear the Buddha’s *dharma*? Out of this question would grow a new powerful tradition in Buddhism.

On one side of the debate were spiritual conservatives, who believed that strenuous personal effort was required for personal liberation. Anyone could do it, but frankly, it required tremendous dedication. It (what does “it” refer to – personal liberation?) had the support of the aging monks who had achieved nirvana during the life of the Buddha.

Later on the one faction (do you mean one faction of the debate or one faction of spiritual conservatives or ....?) to survive (right up to the present ) became known as **Theravada**, the Way of the Elders.

But another group began to make its views known – that all of humankind benefited from the Buddha’s *dharma* collectively. Somewhere around 200 BCE this faction began calling itself “The Greater Vehicle” (**Mahayana** in Sanskrit) because it was big enough for all humanity to climb onboard. In this tradition, personal effort was subsumed into a more global search for liberation. It saw “The Way of the Elders” as far too narrow, and began to call that approach “The Narrow Way”, or in Sanskrit, **Hiniyana**. (Most Theravadins today see that word as somewhat dismissive, naturally. As a journalist it is highly unlikely you will ever meet anyone who describes herself as a “Hiniyana Buddhist”. )

The difference between philosophies was significant enough to create a true schism, even to the point of viewing the Buddha through different lenses. In Theravada, the Buddha was held to be a mortal, albeit an extraordinary one. On the Mahayana side, the Buddha increasingly was viewed as a saviour (I’ve never heard this before!), imbued with divine characteristics. But there are other distinctions which you might be interested in.

### What is Theravada Buddhism?

In Theravada, the “Way of the Elders” takes its spiritual guidance from the original monks who gathered around the Buddha and reached enlightenment through his direct teachings. These were called the “*arhats*” (sometimes *arahants*). They followed the Buddha’s very precise instructions on how to meditate, how to think about the nature of reality, even how and what to think about. It started out as a largely monastic endeavour before it became the state religion of India.

Theravada Buddhism emphasized the development of wisdom through meditation and renunciation. Morality (*sila*) becomes fundamental to the religious life, which improves your chances of someday achieving *nirvana* (enlightenment). It may take several lifetimes – but if you accumulate enough merit you’re guaranteed to get “time off for good behaviour”. Of course the fastest way to accumulate merit is to become a monk or nun. (See more below on **karma**).

### What is Mahayana Buddhism?

Convinced that Buddhism was growing stale under the discipline of the Elders, a number of Buddhists began to break out into a more “universalist” form. For them, the historical Buddha paled in comparison to the supreme Buddha, who existed for eons and eons through an infinite number of Buddha-manifestations. The teachings of these cosmological Buddhas were being revealed via a process of secret transmissions to other spiritual divinities called *Bodhisattvas*. In his classic [A Short History of Buddhism](#),

Oxford historian Edward Conze wrote that these revelations became “one of the most magnificent outbursts of creative energy known to human history.” Mahayana Buddhism introduced some important concepts. One of them was to slightly change the emphasis from the struggle to achieve personal enlightenment to an active compassion for all other beings and their struggles for enlightenment. The other was a heightened interest in ontological (what’s that?) concerns and the notion that existence was essentially “empty”.

### **Isn’t There One More Branch of Buddhism?**

Somewhere in the fourth to the seventh centuries of the Common Era, a new form of Mahayana Buddhism emerged. Called *Tantra* or *Vajrayana* Buddhism, it emerged in India and promised a more rapid path to enlightenment. Emphasizing the role of the guru, who, imbued with prodigious spiritual powers transmittable through special teachings to students, it grew incredibly quickly, spreading throughout India before moving into China, and especially, Tibet. This esoteric form of Buddhism has become popular among non-Asian westerners. (It’s popular with some Asian westerners as well. Theravada is equally popular with non-Asian westerners.)

### **How Did Buddhism Develop?**

Buddhism might have been relegated to the dustbin of history, given its radical prescriptions. But two hundred years after the Buddha’s death something extraordinary would happen that would soon make it the largest religion in India – the conversion of King Ashoka to Buddhism.

Ashoka (272 – 236 BCE) was a powerful ruler who consolidated the growing Mauryan empire. At the conclusion of a particularly bloody but victorious battle, he was stunned by the carnage around him. According to Indian histories, Ashoka was confronted by a beggar who carried a dead child. “Great King Ashoka, you have the power to take thousands of lives, but can you please give this one back?” Ashoka was stunned by the audacity of the questioner and discovered the beggar was a Buddhist monk. He was converted on the spot.

And he changed Indian history by doing so. He opened hospitals and schools, built Buddhist temples far and wide and sent emissaries to all parts of Asia spreading the word of this new practice of compassion. The emissaries went as far afield as Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, Egypt and Macedonia, and wherever they went, new converts were found.

Buddhism became wildly popular because it eroded the stultifying rigidity of the caste system and promised everybody the opportunity to seek freedom. For almost a thousand years Buddhism flourished on the Indian subcontinent, only to be brought

down by Muslim invasions beginning in the eleventh century, and through a resurgence of Hinduism.

But although it virtually died out in the land of its birth, everywhere else in Asia Buddhism grew, thanks in large part to the ambassadors King Ashoka had dispatched.

## **Where Did Buddhism Spread?**

### **Sri Lanka**

Theravada Buddhism arrived here about 250 BCE, carried by King Ashoka's son Mahinda, and daughter Sanghamitta; it quickly became the state religion. Although an oral tradition of all that Gautama Buddha said and did was carefully preserved for several centuries after he died in 483 BCE, by the time the dharma arrived in Lanka it was set down in written form. Sri Lanka is still largely Buddhist, and there are Theravadin Sri Lankans across Canada.

### **China**

Somewhere around 70 BCE a Mahayana form of Buddhism entered into southern China, where it quickly spread, muscling aside or blending with Confucianism and Taoism. By 500 CE, it existed in all parts of the Middle Kingdom. In 845 CE, it suffered tremendous persecution at the hands of the state and never fully recovered its stature. However many important schools of Buddhism survived, some of which are found practiced in Canada. Ch'an, a school that involves meditation (later exported to Japan as Zen) and Ching T'u (Pure Land) are both represented in Canada.

### **Korea**

Arriving here in about 370 CE, Buddhism has clearly helped form Korean identity and culture over hundreds of years, though Christianity later made major inroads into the religious landscape (at least in South Korea; in Communist North Korea all religious practice is suppressed). However, for centuries it was the state religion, and its evidence is everywhere.

### **Japan**

Buddhism was introduced here in the sixth century by way of Korea, and here it underwent a remarkable transformation. Adapting(adopting?) a variety of schools of thought, especially from China, a number of Japanese monks created home-grown versions of tremendous vitality. Jodo Shinshu, Nichiren, and Zen are all represented in Canada.

### **Burma**

Tradition claims that the faith was introduced here by Ashoka the Great, but the historical evidence associates it with the rise of the southern Mon kingdom in the

early part of the first millennium. Buddhism came to Burma by way of Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Buddhism did not become a major force until the 12<sup>th</sup> century when a Burmese king converted and decreed that Buddhism become the state religion. Currently almost 90% of Burmese describe themselves as Buddhist, including the Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, who is currently still under house arrest. There are Theravadin Burmese communities in BC, Alberta and Ontario.

### **Thailand**

Thailand is massively a Buddhist country. It did not become the state religion until it was declared so by a Burmese king in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Buddhism remains the state religion of Thailand and is protected in part by its association with the highly revered monarchy.

### **Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos**

All largely Theravadin Buddhist, except Vietnam where only in the south does Theravada persist. In the north, Mahayana holds sway. Vietnam has a long history of Pure Land and Zen traditions (two traditions is repetitive), which continue in Canadian practice. Cambodian Buddhists are almost exclusively Theravadin (see more below).

### **Tibet**

Buddhism arrived in this mountainous kingdom in the early sixth century and by the seventh century Tibet had its first monastery. Merging with an indigenous shamanism, Tibetan Buddhism elaborated an esoteric form of Mahayana called Vajrayana. In 1949 the communist government of China began a series of repressive incursions into Tibet, gaining full military control in 1951. Hundreds of monasteries were destroyed; monks were beaten, tortured, jailed and murdered in what has been termed the “Tibetan Holocaust” by reputable historians. In 1959 the Dalai Lama fled to India where he established a government in exile.

## **What About Asian-Canadian Buddhists?**

### **Chinese Immigration**

The first Buddhists to arrive in Canada probably came from Macao. They were Chinese artisans, part of the expedition of Captain John Meares, who landed on Vancouver Island in 1788. What happened to them nobody knows. No one bothered to record this event.

In some ways, this foreshadowed the treatment later Buddhist immigrants would receive. In 1858, exactly seventy years later, the first Chinese arrived in substantial numbers, not directly from China but from the goldfields of California. They came north along with a horde of American miners who were following rumours of a great gold find

along the banks of the Fraser River. When the gold ran out and most of the Americans headed back south, the Chinese workers stayed behind finding work in the forests and in the towns as day-labourers.

According to Prof. David Lai of the University of Victoria, the first Buddhist house of worship in Canada was the Tam Kung Temple, housed in a rented wooden hut in 1876 at 1713 Government Street in Victoria. Undoubtedly there were many Buddhist shrines that had been erected previously in private homes and in some of the secret societies throughout BC. Historical records reveal a “shrine” on the top floor of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Victoria, built in 1844, with an “ornately carved altar, altar table, screens and images.” One can assume that Buddhist and Confucian images were included.

At first the Chinese were welcomed for their industriousness. As an article in the *Victoria British Colonist* in 1861 stated: “We have plenty of room for many thousands of Chinamen... there can be no shadow of a doubt but their industry enables them to add very largely to our own revenues...” But this welcoming attitude would not last. When BC became a province in 1871, one of its very first measures was to pass an act disenfranchising the Chinese.

In 1878 the provincial government unanimously passed a law preventing the hiring of any Asian on public works.

Not welcome as citizens, they were, however, indispensable to the construction of the railways. Between 1881 and 1884, 17,000 Chinese arrived in Canada to build the Canadian Pacific Railway. They were recruited at half the wages paid to white workers.

Anti-Asian organizations began to spring up all over BC demanding the Chinese be deported. Instead of combating racist attitudes, Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald fed it but argued in the House of Commons that the Chinese had become indispensable: “It will be all very well to exclude Chinese labour when we can replace it with white labour, but until that is done, it is better to have Chinese labour than no labour at all,” he said in 1883. And as soon as the railway was complete, Ottawa moved quickly.

In 1885 the railroad was complete and the first of several new anti-Asian immigration laws were enacted. The infamous “head tax” was swiftly passed, and the \$50 (soon to be raised to \$500) landing fee had an immediate effect: Chinese immigration had been slowed, at least for awhile.

## **Japanese Immigration**

The first Japanese immigrant to Canada was a 19 year-old stowaway, Manzo Nagano. He landed in New Westminster, BC, in 1877.

In the next ten years another 200 Japanese adventurers would join him to work aboard fishing boats and in garden farms in the Lower Mainland. Their Buddhist beliefs and practices were transplanted to the new world, and they built their first temple inside the Ishikawa Hotel in east Vancouver in 1905. A substantial community of Japanese migrated to southern Alberta in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, largely as beet-root farmers, identified with Jodo Shinshu (Pure Land) Buddhism. This form of Buddhism adapted to Western-style temples (like Christian churches, with Sunday worship, Sunday schools, use of pews, organ music, etc.)

In 1907, an angry mob of white settlers rampaged through Chinatown in east Vancouver and broke all the windows in every Chinese establishment before moving on to the Japanese community. There the rioters met a determined resistance and withdrew. Across Canada, people were shocked, but the political response was cautious – and ultimately sided with the populist, racist forces that called for exclusion. Restrictive immigration quotas persisted until after World War II, which was the beginning of a new ordeal for the Japanese community.

### Becoming the enemy

When war broke out in 1941, there were a total 23,000 people of Japanese origin living in Canada, of whom 13,687 (about 60 percent) were Japanese-Canadians by birth. But even before the onset of hostilities with Japan, Ottawa began to impose a series of measures designed to isolate the community.

On January 7, 1941, Japanese Canadians were informed they would not be allowed to volunteer for the armed services. In March, compulsory registration by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police of all Japanese Canadians over 16 years began. And immediately following the attack on Pearl Harbor, a provision of the *War Measures Act* required all Japanese nationals to register as Enemy Aliens. From a peaceful, industrious community, the Japanese were now transformed into a dangerous fifth column.

They were restricted from certain geographical locales in British Columbia (see poster), but what was to come was much worse.

In 1942, Ottawa decided on a policy of absolute containment and the relocation of the entire Japanese community. Unlike similar measures in the United States where families were generally kept together, Canada broke up families, sending male evacuees to work camps in BC, Saskatchewan and Ontario while women and children were moved to six inland B.C. internment camps.



Buddhist priests were thus separated from their congregations at the beginning of the war at a time they were needed most.

In 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney agreed to redress the grievances of those who had been interred, with a formal apology and a cash settlement of \$21,000 for each survivor of the camps.

## **Recent Immigration Issues**

According to Prof. Janet McLellan in her excellent book, Many Petals of the Lotus: Five Asian Buddhist Communities in Toronto (1999), the first Vietnamese to arrive in Canada in recent times landed in Quebec in the 1950s as students, but it was the Viet Nam war that would eventually drive thousands from their homes in Southeast Asia and into every Canadian province.

In the aftermath of the French colonial period, which ended in 1954, Vietnam was divided between the communist North and theoretically democratic South. Neither was particularly hospitable to Buddhism, but in the South, monks involved in the Buddhist peace movement were actively suppressed by the government, with the compliance of Washington.

Between 1975 and 1978, almost 15,000 Vietnamese landed in Canada, most of them from Buddhist backgrounds. This was, however, just the first wave. By 1986, the Vietnamese population in Toronto alone had grown to 30,000. In 1991, studies revealed a total of 131,000 across Canada.

They built their first temples soon after arriving, and most large Canadian cities are home to several Buddhist congregations. For example, an informal survey finds 12 Vietnamese-speaking congregations in the Toronto area and 8 in Vancouver.

## **Why Are Non-Asians So Interested?**

While the numbers of Canadian non-Asian converts and those deeply interested in Buddhism are small, they are an influential group with access to local and national media. As discussed in the introduction, the willingness of celebrity Buddhists to discuss their faith and support the cause of a free Tibet has added to the profile of Buddhism in the west. There are now hundreds of Buddhist organizations in Canada with more being added every year. Why?

Clearly the rise of secularism in the west, especially since the two world wars, has created an appetite for another foundation for a spiritual life not based on belief in God or in the creation myths of Judaism and Christianity. In the 1950's, "beat" poets like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg began an exploration of Buddhism, especially Zen, and

with the emergence of the 60's anti-authoritarian counter-culture, Buddhism found a new receptive audience.

Since then, the tide of secularism has continued to rise, and with it an armada of "spiritual-but-not-religious" seekers have launched themselves on voyages of self-discovery. Buddhism has proven itself to be a robust, popular choice with its emphases on personal investigation, non-theism, anti-consumerism, and a politics of social engagement and pacifism.

Another associated allied reason for its growth may be the fact that in Europe and in the Americas, westerners have had the ability to pick and choose what aspects of Buddhism they want to adopt, allowing new adherents to "assemble" a religion of their choosing. Westerners have largely discarded the more devotional, ritualistic aspects of Buddhism in favour of the contemplative ones. Because all forms of Buddhism are "ripe for the picking" in the west unlike in Asia where one form would dominate a country, the result has been the creation of what some scholars see as the growth of a new form of Buddhism called "Western Buddhism".

"For the first time in history, all Buddhist traditions and sectarian divisions may be present in one country at the same time," writes Charles Prebish in his book Luminous Passage (1999). Here he writes about the United States, but the same is equally true for Canada.

But it is clear that the key lure of Buddhism for westerners is its emphasis on meditation.

## **Is The Dalai Lama the Buddhist "Pope"?**

In one word, no. The current Dalai Lama is the secular head of the Tibetan government in exile, and the supreme spiritual leader of most Tibetan Buddhists.

But through a curious convergence of history and modern culture, the Dalai Lama has become the de facto spokesperson for Buddhism today. On one hand, the tragic spectacle of the invasion of Tibet by the Chinese Army and its continuing religious persecution has made it an international cause célèbre. The Dalai Lama has been tireless in circling the globe in pursuit of diplomatic and popular support for his cause.

As a reporter, if you have ever been stationed in a city on the Dalai Lama's itinerary, you will have experienced the crush of media interest. Very few figures are in his league when it comes to news profile. Winning the Nobel Prize for peace in 1989 only cemented his stature.

Secondly, the Dalai Lama has captured the hearts of millions of people worldwide. From Taiwan to South Africa, he is seen as one of the most credible of world leaders. And he has a wry sense of humour, which is also endearing.

And finally, there is the growing popularity of Buddhism in the west. Together these factors have created an unprecedented regard for the man and the office. But that's where it stops. Among non-Tibetan Buddhists, he is not the arbiter of Buddhist practice or beliefs. He doesn't have the power to issue writs or bulls (?), or excommunicate heretics. And unlike the pope, he is not universally accorded the status of a head of state.

As he puts it himself, "I am only a simple monk."

## **What are the Main Festivals?**

Not to be difficult, but the answer depends completely on the cultural background of the particular community you may be reporting on. After 2500 years and a complex pattern in the way Buddhism spread from one country to the next, local factors dominate the nature, dates, and content of the festivals. All Buddhist countries created unique observances – and even where the same festivals are celebrated, the dates can vary widely.

For example, in Tibet the celebration of Losar doesn't even happen at the beginning of the Tibetan calendar year but in the tenth month of its lunar calendar, just to make things really confusing.

Here is a list, modified from one provided by the excellent web resource, BuddhaNet ([www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net)):

### **Buddhist New Year**

While not particularly a spiritual holiday, the New Year is celebrated in all Buddhist countries, though at remarkably different times. From January to April, the day marks a time when people visit their local temples and monasteries to offer gifts to monks, to pay homage to the Buddha, and for some, to rededicate themselves to deeper practice.

In Japan, the new year is celebrated by ringing bells 108 times in order to rid all beings of the "108 troublesome desires", according to their Buddhist beliefs.

### **Bodhi Day**

Mostly observed in Mahayana countries, the day celebrates the awakening (bodhi) of the historical Buddha at the age of 29. A time for reflection.

### **Vesak or Visakah Puja ("Buddha Day")**

This is the most important spiritual celebration, commemorating the birth of Buddha. In some countries, Vesak covers all the major milestones of Buddha's life: his birth, enlightenment, and death. Usually occurs in May or June.

In Japan it's called Hanamatsuri

### **Dharma Day (also known as Asalha Puja Day)**

Some congregations commemorate the day when Buddha was reunited with some former fellow spiritual seekers after he attained enlightenment. It was, in a sense, the beginning of his teaching career and thus marks the beginning of Buddhism, the religion.

**Magha Puja Day** (also called Sangha Day)

In Theravadin countries, the day celebrates a legendary gathering of 1250 of Buddha's best students, who assembled spontaneously and received teachings from their master. It has come to mean an opportunity for the entire congregation to meet and offer gifts to monks, pay homage to the Buddha, and perform a variety of meritorious deeds.

**Uposatha** (Observance Day)

The four monthly holy days which continue to be observed in Theravadin countries - the new moon, full moon, and quarter moon days. Known in Sri Lanka as Poya Day.

**Pavarana Day**

This day marks the conclusion of the Rains retreat (*vassa*). In the following month, the *kathina* ceremony is held, during which the laity gather to make formal offerings of robe cloth and other requisites to the Sangha.

**Kathina Ceremony** (Robe offering ceremony)

Is held on any convenient date within one month of the conclusion of the Vassa Retreat, which is the three-month rains retreat season (*Vassa*) for the monastic order. It is the time of the year when the laity may offer new robes and other requisites to the monks.

**Anapanasati Day**

At the end of one rains retreat (*vassa*), the Buddha was so pleased with the progress of the assembled monks that he encouraged them to extend their retreat for yet another month. On the full-moon day marking the end of that fourth month of retreat, he presented his now-famous instructions on mindfulness of breathing (*anapanasati*), which may be found in the *Anapanasati Sutta* (MN 118) - The Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing.

**Abhidharma Day**

In the Burmese tradition, this day celebrates the occasion when the Buddha is said to have gone to the Tushita Heaven to teach his mother the Abhidharma. It is held on the full moon of the seventh month of the Burmese lunar year starting in April, which corresponds to the full moon day in October.

**Ulambana (Oban in Japan; "Ancestor Day")**

Although typically a Mahayana celebration of the dead, it has spread to Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, which are Theravadin countries. Offerings to the ancestors are proffered and cemeteries are visited.

**Avalokitesvara's (Kuan Yin) Birthday**

This is a festival which celebrates the Bodhisattva ideal represented by Avalokitesvara, who represents the perfection of compassion in the Mahayana traditions of Tibet and China. It occurs on the full moon day in March.

## Buddhist Resources

**Buddhanet** – [www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net) - This website has a slight Theravadin slant, due to the fact that a Theravadin monastery in Australia is responsible for it. However its content is quite developed and has a very useful guide to worldwide Buddhist organizations.

**Buddhism in Canada** – [www.buddhismcanada.com](http://www.buddhismcanada.com) - This is the best guide to organizations in Canada. Produced by a hand of volunteers under the direction of George Klima, it is frequently updated and is the most authoritative guide available.

**Buddhist Studies Virtual Library** - [www.ciolek.com/WWWVL-Buddhism.html](http://www.ciolek.com/WWWVL-Buddhism.html) - an extensive guide for those looking for academic information about Buddhism.

**DharmaNet's InfoWeb** - [www.dharmanet.org/infoweb.html](http://www.dharmanet.org/infoweb.html) - A very useful source of online resources to the major Buddhist "schools" and organizations.

**Shambhala International** – [www.shambhala.org](http://www.shambhala.org) - This is a large organization founded by a spiritual "genius" by the name of Chogyam Trungpa. A Tibetan lama, he arrived in Great Britain in the 50's and set about creating a form of Buddhism he thought would appeal to Westerners. Today his legacy can be seen in the glossy magazine, "Shambhala Sun" (produced in Halifax, NS), a flourishing publishing house (Shambhala Publications), and an accredited US college (Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado).

**Tibet Government in Exile** - [www.tibet.com](http://www.tibet.com) - Everything you'll need to stay in touch with the organization behind the Dalai Lama.

**Journal of Global Buddhism** - [www.globalbuddhism.org](http://www.globalbuddhism.org) - A scholarly online journal headed by one of the most prominent "buddhologists". Charles Prebish.

**Women Active in Buddhism** - <http://members.tripod.com/~Lhamo/> - An inspiring look at many of the most prominent women teachers and nuns around the world.

**Buddhist Peace Fellowship** - [www.bpf.org](http://www.bpf.org) - An organization promoting Buddhist social action

**Access to Insight** – [www.accesstoinsight.org](http://www.accesstoinsight.org) - a huge online collection of basic writings from the early collected teachings of the Buddha, the so-called "Pali" canon.

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