

## Unit 3b: Foundational Beliefs--Buddhism

### Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

### Be aware of the following

- Importance of practice over belief in Buddhism
- Two major Buddhist schools of thought--Theravada and Mahayana
- Foundational concepts of Theravada practice--four Holy Truths, Threefold Training, Three Treasures
  - Three major schools of Mahayana practice--Pure Land, Zen and Tantra

### Identify

- Samsara, karma, Nirvana
- Anatman
- Sangha
- Transmigration
- Theravada, Three Baskets, Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Path
- Threefold Training, Three Treasures (Jewels)
- Mahayana, Bodhisattvas, Bodhicittas
- Pure Land, Amitabha
- "namu amida butsu"
- Shinran
  - Zen (Ch'an), Bodhidharma, Koans

### Realize

- Decentralized, diversified nature of Buddhist practice
- Importance of Bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism
- Amitabha Buddhas importance in Pure Land
- Sudden, speedy nature of enlightenment within Zen thought
- Unique way of ridding self of troubling desire in Tantric thought

## Foundational Beliefs: Buddhism

*"As the great ocean has but one flavor, the taste of salt, so does the Doctrine and the Discipline of the Buddha have but one flavor--the flavor of emancipation."*

-- Anguttara-Nikaya VIII.II.ix (as quoted by Masao Abe, "Buddhism," in Our Religions, p. 72).

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Belief--the acceptance of the truth of a body of facts without having absolute proof, a way of thinking about something--is not the critical emphasis in Buddhism.

Practice, commitment, dedication in achieving is important. The quest for liberation, salvation, the following of the path leading to emancipation, are concerns central to Buddhism.

By design, Buddhism is a diverse practice. Gautama Buddha encouraged decentralization. There is no official Buddhist language. No central hierarchy governs all.



The languages of the people, of whatever culture or nationality, become the languages of Buddhist expression.

The long history of Buddhism (@2,500 years), and the proliferation of its doctrine and scripture from the very start, contribute as well to this diversity.

### I. Introductory Terms

Definitions of the following concepts, central to Buddhism's world and life view, aid understanding.

**1. Samsara** (sahm-SAH-ruh), a Sanskrit term, refers to the cycle of rebirth and redeath--a turning around continually--experienced by all life.

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**2. Karma** (KAHR-muh), "action/intention/deed," forms the basis for the law of karma--every action, every deed, has a result--both in the short term and over the long haul.

**3. Nirvana** (nihr-VAH-nuh), a term difficult to translate, means something akin to unalloyed bliss, pure and simple; fully passed away, fully blown out or fully extinct.

**4. Anatman**, "*devoid of self...[indicates] the Buddhist view that everything is transient and insubstantial, being without underlying reality or...continuing substrate.*" (Robinson and Johnson, The Buddhist Religion, p. 237.)

**5. Sangha** (SHANG huh) The Sangha are specialists in the spiritual life. These monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, follow rules of the codified monastic discipline (Vinaya).

**6. Transmigration** (reincarnation) occurs when one's soul takes on rebirth in successive life forms.

## II. Major Schools of Thought

### 1. Theravada

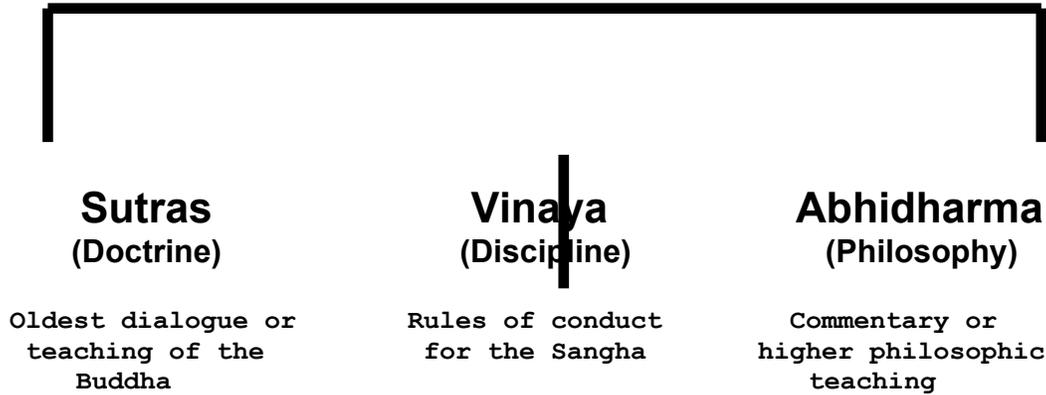
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Theravada practice centers on the original, basic Buddhist teachings. It provides the foundation--the groundwork and basis--for all other movements within Buddhism.

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**a. Theravada Texts** The Pali (pah-lee--an Indo-Aryan language related to the ancient languages of India...used for Theravada Buddhist liturgical and scholarly purposes) canon, arranged into "Three Baskets"--discourse, discipline and commentary--is the source of early Buddhist thought.

## Pali Canon Tripataka “The Three Baskets”



The Tripataka (Three Baskets) is composed of (1) Sutras (SOO-trahs--discourses, scriptures), (2) Vinaya (VI-nuh-yuh, discipline for the Sangha) and (3) Abhidharma (uh-bee-DAHR-muh, commentary or philosophy.) Nikayas (nee-KAH-yuh), texts which begin with 'Thus have I heard...' are early sayings of Ananda, one of Buddha's disciples. They are the earliest forms of Buddhist scripture.

**b. The Four Noble Truths** Four Holy or Noble Truths enable humankind to find peace with themselves and the world:

*"...that there is [suffering], that its origin is [thirst, desire], that men can bring about its cessation...through the attainment of Nirvana, and that the only way to achieve Nirvana is to follow the [Noble Eightfold Path]:*

*Right Views, or acceptance of the Buddha's teaching; Right Thought, or aspirations leading to purity and charity; Right Speech; Right Conduct; Right Livelihood; Right Effort, or avoidance of lapses into frailty; Right Mindfulness, or constant awareness of the truth of the*



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*doctrine; and Right Concentration, or spiritual exercise leading to an awakening.*" (Lucien Stryk, World of the Buddha, p. xxxviii.)

**c. Threefold Training** The Threefold Training classifies practices of the Noble Eightfold Path. Under (1) **Wisdom** (Prajna, 'PRAHJ-nah) come Right Views and Right Thought (intention). The heading (2) **Morality** (Sila), describes moral rules to purify and begin transformation of one's nature, increasing self-insight and mindfulness. Sila groups together Right Speech, Right Conduct and Right Livelihood. (3) **Concentration** (Samadhi, suh-MAH-dee), the cultivation of meditative calm and single-minded focus, categorizes Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

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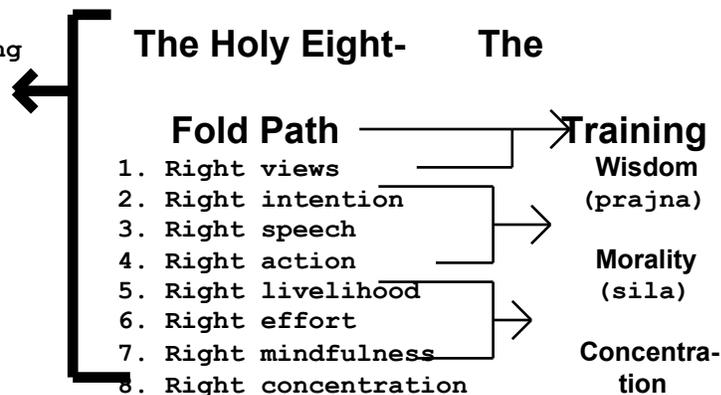
### The Four Holy Truths

1. Of suffering
2. Of the source of suffering
3. Of the cessation of suffering
4. Of the path leading to the cessation of suffering

### Threefold

to the cessation of suffering

(samadhi)



Adapted from Robinson and Johnson, The Buddhist Religion, p. 26.

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**d. Three Treasures** To avoid pain, adherents take refuge in the Three Treasures (Three Jewels), (1) the Buddha, (2) Dharma (the law, truth or doctrine), and (3) the Sangha. *"He who takes refuge with Buddha, the Law, and the Church [Sangha]; he who, with clear understanding, sees the four holy truths: pain, the*

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*origin of pain, the destruction of pain, and the eightfold holy way that leads to the quieting of pain;-*

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*-that is the safe refuge, that is the best refuge; having gone to that refuge, a man is delivered from all pain." (The Dhammapada, in Lucien Stryk, World of the Buddha, p. 59.)*

These foundational concepts--the Four Holy Truths, Threefold Training, and the Three Treasures--identify basic Theravada Buddhist practice.

Buddha prepares the way. He identifies the path. He encourages all to follow, to attain Nirvana. Enlightenment, although difficult to achieve, is open to all.



Monks and nuns, however, as spiritual virtuosos, do have a decided advantage in making progress towards this awakening.

**2. Mahayana** Essential Theravada school teachings are the starting point for Mahayana development.



The power packed notion embodied in Mahayana reinterpretations of **Bodhisattvas** (boh-dee-SAHT-vah) opened attainment of the Buddha path to everyone.

Bodhisattvas are those who have experienced enlightenment (bodhi) but who have taken a special vow to continue being reborn into samsara (rather than entering nirvana) so as to deliver others from suffering by aiding in their attainment of enlightenment. (See Robinson and Johnson, The Buddhist Religion, p. 237.)

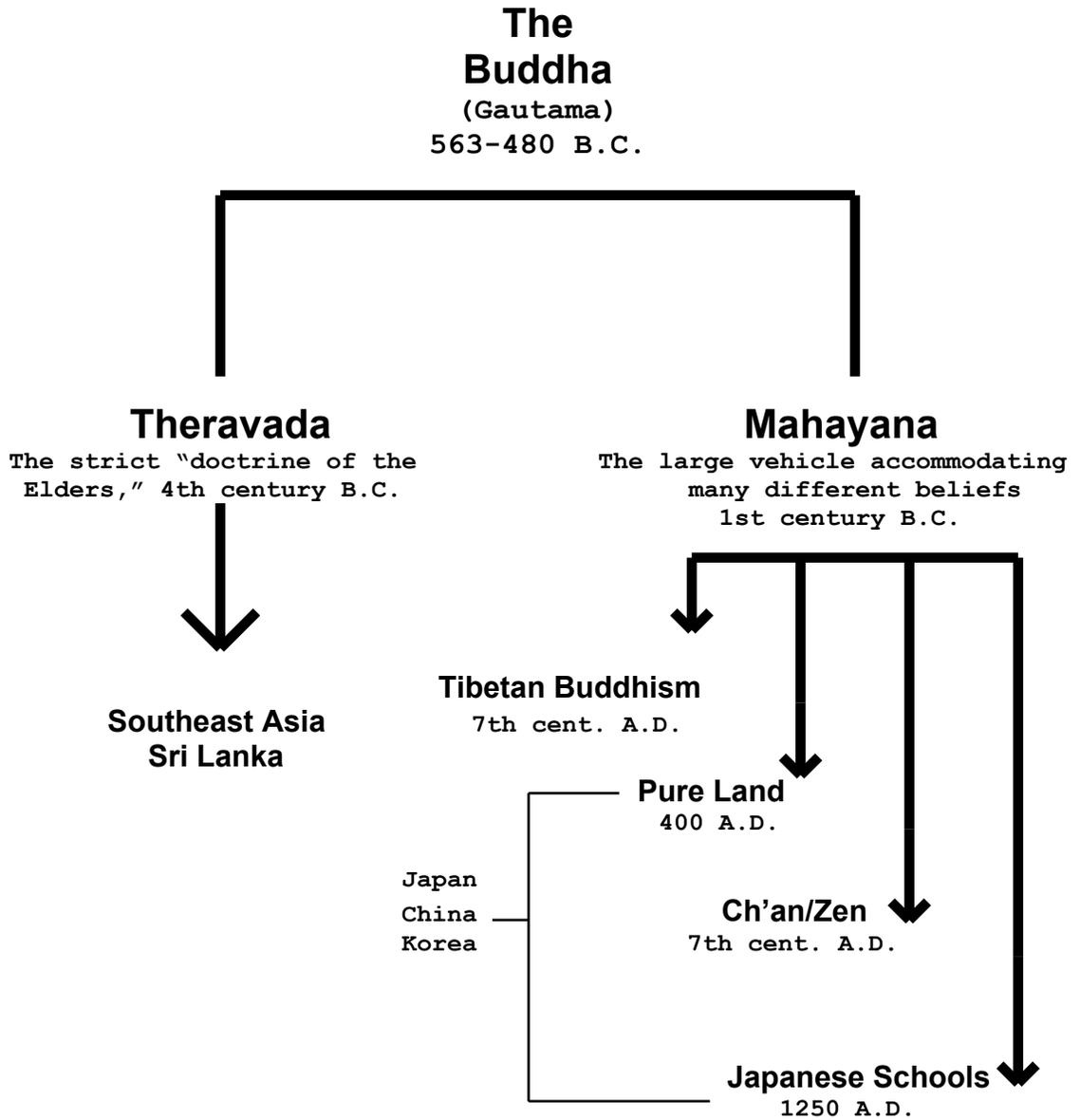
Compassion and acting on behalf of others, exemplified by Bodhisattvas, acquired a renewed emphasis. All could aim for enlightenment, inspired by **Bodhicittas** (thoughts of enlightenment), which may result in a conversion-like experience.

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The following chart assists in understanding the various major schools of thought within Buddhism.



Adapted from Religions on File: Main Streams of Buddhism

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**a. Pure Land** Mahayana thought expresses itself in the broad Pure Land, Ch'an (Zen) and Tantra movements.

Pure Land, the most popular form of Buddhism in the world, identifies a goal for rebirth, the land of bliss (Pure Land or Western Paradise). Amitabha (ah-mee-TAH-bah) Buddha, as a Bodhisattva, created a paradise state. Entrance into this heavenly existence (Pure Land) is by means of Amitabha alone.

As a result of invoking or chanting the namu amida butsu (praise and homage to Amitabha Buddha), practitioners attained rebirth in the land of bliss. As identified in the True Pure Land practice of Shinran (shin-rahn, 1173-1262), the compassionate Amitabha Buddha became a savior figure, carrying awakened ones to the Pure Land. As recipients of Amitabha's grace, devotees express gratitude to him through means of ritualistic practice.

**b. Zen** The Ch'an (chahn, Japanese Zen) school has not attained the popularity of Pure Land trends of thought though its current nominal fame in American/European/Australian culture betrays this fact. Building especially on the family/lineage aspect of traditional Chinese faith, Ch'an traces back to the Bodhidharma (boh-dee-DAHR-muh), a late fifth century patriarch who introduced Buddhism into China. Shen-hui (Shen-hway, 668-760), a monk who became the seventh patriarch, promoted the Ch'an school.

While never overlooking literary tradition, ritual, discipline, regimen, extreme intensity and concentration (more gradual practice), Ch'an nevertheless advocates a sudden, speedy, unmediated enlightenment. The innate Buddha nature within allows all to have the potential to achieve this awakening.



Koans are part of the literary tradition of Ch'an. These public document sayings and dialogues of the masters, are short, pithy, apparently nonsensical verses. Yet, with study, rigorous application of logic, and awareness of both the duality involved and their question/answer format, interpretation--leading to enlightenment--can take place.

The following Koan is illustrative:

*"Someone asked: 'In phenomena what is true? The Master said: 'The very phenomena are themselves truth.' 'Then how should it be revealed?' he asked. The Master lifted the tea tray."*

(The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan, ed. William Theodore De Bary, p. 233.)

### c. Tantra (THUN-truh)



Tantra practice followed a direct route from India to Tibet, bypassing Chinese encumbrances.

This explains, in part, its unique contribution to Buddhist thought. Duality is central to understanding Tantra texts (the word Tantra is taken from "taut thread" or "woof"), which are a network of teachings, incantations and esoteric sayings. The Vajrayana (vuhj-ruh-YAH-nuh) literature, contrasts masculine diamond/sword/thunderbolt images with feminine lotus flower depictions. Physical, philosophical, ironic,

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sexual, meditational and virtuous interpretations all can apply to tantras.

Unique practices of the Tantric movement include the necessity of a personal **guru** (G00-roo) to serve as a mentor, liturgical meditation, **mantras** (MAHN-truh, meditational devices serving as instruments of the mind), and **mahasiddhas** (mah-hah-SI-dah, unconventional, enlightened, wandering about compassionate masters). In addition, Tantrism--rather than ridding self of desire (samudaya) through avoidance--advocates the use of the very troubling desire to eliminate it:

*"Just as water that has entered the ear may be removed by water and just as a thorn may be removed by a thorn, so those who know how, remove passion by means of passion itself."*

--Cittavisuddiprakarana vv 37-38, (as quoted in Buddhist Texts, ed. Edward Conze, p. 221

## Vocabulary List: Foundational Beliefs-- Buddhism

**Abhidharma** (uh-bee-DAHR-muh) Commentary or doctrine. Part of the Three Baskets, an early form of Buddhist texts

**Amitabha** (ah-mee-TAH-bah) A Buddha who, as a Bodhisattva, created a paradise state. Entrance into this heavenly existence (Pure Land) is by means of Amitabha alone.

**Anatman** Devoid of self. The Buddhist view that everything is transient and insubstantial, being without underlying reality or...continuing substrate

**Bodhicittas** Thoughts of enlightenment which may result in a conversion like experience, leading to emancipation

**Bodhidharma** (boh-dee-DAHR-muh) A late fifth century patriarch who introduced Ch'an Buddhism into China

**Bodhisattvas** (boh-dee-SAHT-vah) Those who have experienced enlightenment (bodhi) but who have taken a special vow to continue being reborn into samsara (rather than entering nirvana) so as to deliver others from their suffering by aiding in their attainment of enlightenment opened attainment of the Buddha path to everyone.

**Concentration** (Samadhi, 'suh-MAH-dee') Threefold Training classification grouping together cultivation of meditative calm and single-minded focus, thus categorizing Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration

**Four Noble Truths** Four Holy or Noble Truths enable humankind to find peace with themselves and the world. (1) There is suffering; (2) Desire is the cause of suffering; (3) Humankind can bring an end to suffering; (4) The Noble Eightfold Path is the way to achieve Nirvana and end suffering.

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**Guru** (G00-roo) Personal Tantric guide who serves as a mentor and leader to enlightenment

**Karma** (KAHR-muh) Action/intention/deed. Forms the basis for the law of karma--every action, every deed, has a result--both in the short term and over the long haul.

**Koans** Part of the literary tradition of Ch'an. These public document sayings and dialogues of the masters, are short, pithy, apparently nonsensical verses which can aid enlightenment.

**Mahasiddhas** (mah-hah-SI-dah) Unconventional, enlightened, wandering about, compassionate masters who serve as Tantric gurus

**Mantras** (MAHN-truh) Liturgic meditational devices serving as instruments of the mind

**Morality** (Sila) Classification of the Threefold Training which describes moral rules to purify and begin transformation of one's nature, increasing self-insight and mindfulness.

Sila groups together Right Speech, Right Conduct and Right Livelihood.

**Namu amida butsu** Chant of praise and homage to Amitabha Buddha. Practitioners can attain rebirth in the land of bliss by repeating this phrase near the hour of death.

**Nikayas** (nee-KAH-yuh), texts which begin with "Thus have I heard..." are early sayings of Ananda, one of Buddha's disciples. They are the earliest forms of Buddhist scripture and part of the Pali canon.

**Nirvana** (nihr-VAH-nuh) Term difficult to translate, meaning something akin to unalloyed bliss, pure and simple; fully passed away, fully blown out or fully extinct

**Noble Eightfold Path** Right Views, or acceptance of the Buddha's teaching; Right Thought, or aspirations leading to purity and charity; Right Speech; Right Conduct; Right Livelihood; Right Effort, or avoidance of lapses into frailty; Right Mindfulness, or constant awareness of the truth of the doctrine; and Right Concentration, or spiritual exercise leading to an awakening

**Pali** (pah-lee) An Indo-Aryan language related to the ancient languages of India...used for Theravada Buddhist liturgical and scholarly purposes

**Pali Canon** Oldest collection of Buddhist texts, arranged into "Three Baskets"--discourse, discipline and commentary

**Pure Land** Mahayana Buddhist practice. The most popular form of Buddhism in the world, identifies a goal for rebirth, the land of bliss (Pure Land or Western Paradise)

**Samsara** (sahm-SAH-ruh) Sanskrit term, referring to the cycle of rebirth and redeath--a turning around continually--experienced by all life

**Sangha** (SHANG huh) Specialists in the spiritual life. These monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, follow rules of the codified monastic discipline (Vinaya).

**Shen-hui** (Shen-hway, 668-760) A Buddhist monk who became the seventh patriarch, promoting the Ch'an school

**Shinran** (shin-rahn, 1173-1262) Practitioner of the True Pure Land school who saw the compassionate Amitabha Buddha as a savior figure, carrying awakened ones to the Pure Land

**Sutras** (SOO-trahs) Discourses or scriptures. Part of the Three Baskets an early form of Buddhist scripture

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**Tantra** (THUN-truh) Buddhist Mahayana practice followed by adherent now residing in the area of Tibet. Duality is central to understanding Tantra texts (the word Tantra is taken from "taut thread" or "woof"), which are a network of teachings, incantations and esoteric sayings. Tantrism--rather than ridding self of desire (samudaya) through avoidance--advocates the use of the very troubling desire to eliminate it.

**Theravada** Theravada practice centers on the original, basic Buddhist teachings. It provides the foundation--the groundwork and basis--for all other movements within Buddhism.

**Three Treasures** To avoid pain, Buddhist adherents take refuge in the Three Treasures (Three Jewels), (1) the Buddha, (2) Dharma (the law, truth or doctrine), and (3) the Sangha.

**Threefold Training** Classifies practices of the Eightfold Path under headings of morality, wisdom and concentration

**Transmigration** A more precise term for reincarnation. It occurs when one's soul takes on rebirth in successive life forms.

**Tripataka** (Three Baskets) Buddhist texts composed of (1) Sutras (SOO-trahs--discourses, scriptures), (2) Vinaya (VI-nuh-yuh, discipline for the Sangha) and (3) Abhidharma (uh-bee-DAHR-muh, commentary or doctrine.)

**Vajrayana** (vuhj-ruh-YAH-nuh) Tantric literature, contrasting masculine diamond/sword/thunderbolt images with feminine lotus flower depictions. Physical, philosophical, ironic, sexual, meditational and virtuous interpretations--all can apply to tantras.

**Vinaya** (VI-nuh-yuh) Discipline texts for the Sangha. Part of the Three Baskets, an early form of Buddhist texts

**Wisdom** (Prajna, PRAHJ-nah) Threefold Training classification which groups together Right Views and Right Thought (intention)

**Zen** Ch'an (chahn, Japanese Zen) school of Buddhist thought and practice. Ch'an nevertheless advocates a sudden, speedy, unmediated enlightenment. The innate Buddha nature within allows all to have the potential to achieve this awakening.

## Review Quiz: Foundational Beliefs--Buddhism



**Part 1--Multiple Choice** Place the letter of the most correct response in the blank provided.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ By design, Gautama Buddha encouraged
  - a. one language of Buddhist expression--Sanskrit.
  - b. the language of the people, of whatever culture or nationality, to be the language of Buddhist expression.
  - c. a central hierarchy to determine--as the years progress-- the best language for Buddhist expression.
  
2. \_\_\_\_\_ In Buddhist thought, the term Nirvana equates most closely with
  - a. heaven.
  - b. unalloyed bliss, fully blown out, extinct.
  - c. emancipation.
  
3. \_\_\_\_\_ In Buddhist practice, the Sangha are
  - a. "spiritual virtuosos," the specialists in spiritual life.
  - b. monks alone--no women are allowed.
  - c. singers of the Pali canon.
  
4. \_\_\_\_\_ In Theravada practice, what enables humankind to find peace with themselves and the world?
  - a. Immediate enlightenment
  - b. The Four Noble Truths or Holy Truths
  - c. Following a personal guru
  
5. \_\_\_\_\_ In Mahayana Buddhism, Bodhisattvas experienced enlightenment
  - a. and entered nirvana.

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- b. but continue to be reborn to assist others in attaining enlightenment.
- c. but restricted the Buddha path to a select few.

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6. \_\_\_\_\_ Mahayana Buddhism is divided into at least three main schools--Pure Land, Zen (Ch'an) and
- Koan.
  - Tantra.
  - Shinran.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ In Pure Land Buddhism, Amitabha Buddha as a Bodhisattva, created a paradise state called
- heaven.
  - the land of bliss--Pure Land.
  - Shinran.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ The most popular form of Buddhism in the world is
- Zen.
  - Tantra.
  - Pure Land.
9. Tantrism advocates use of a personal guru, mantras, and
- removal of harmful desire by use of the harmful desire itself.
  - the benefits of life in Tibet.
  - avoiding all troubling desires.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ The Amitabha Buddha, under True Pure Land practice, becomes a
- good example to emulate.
  - savior figure, carrying enlightened ones to the Pure Land.
  - master of the Japanese tea ceremony.

**Part 2--True or False** Place a T or F in the blank provided.



1. \_\_\_\_\_ Within Buddhism, belief takes strong precedent over practice.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Sanskrit is the official language of Buddhism.



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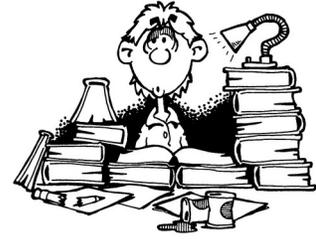
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3. \_\_\_\_\_ A central hierarchy--located in Thailand--governs world-wide Buddhism.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Gautama Buddha encouraged a centralized, consolidated legislative body for conducting world-wide Buddhist affairs.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Theravada Buddhism is the oldest, most foundational school of Buddhist thought and practice.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Theravada Buddhist practice finds adherents taking refuge in the Three Treasures (Jewels)--the Buddha, Dharma (law, doctrine), and Sangha.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The Sangha is made up of monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Mahayana Buddhism forgets all about Theravada thought and practice.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ Zen (Ch'an) Buddhism advocates a sudden, speedy, "unmediated" form of enlightenment.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Koans--short, pithy, seemingly nonsensical verses--are part of the Pure Land Buddhist tradition.



"Take a road trip."

## Sources Used in Foundational Beliefs--Buddhism



Abe, Masao, "Buddhism," in Our Religions by Arvind Sharma (ed.), (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993).

Conze, Edward, Buddhist Texts, (NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1964).

De Bary, Theodore, The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan, (NY: Vantage Books, 1972).

Robinson, Richard and Willard Johnson, The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1982).

Sampson, Kenneth L., World Religions: A Resource for U.S. Army Chaplains and Chaplain Assistants, (Masters of Theology Thesis, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey, submitted to Dr. Charles Ryerson, 6 May 1996).

Stryk, Lucien, World of the Buddha, (NY: Weidenfeld, 1968).

Teiser, Steven, Lecture Notes, REL 225, "The Buddhist World of Thought and Practice," (Princeton University, Fall Semester, 1995).

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## Resources for Further Study

Kristof, Nicholas D., "For Rural Japanese, Death Doesn't Break Family Ties," (New York Times, 29 Sep 1996), p. A1.

One of the most concise and informative portrayals of Japanese practice concerning the afterlife.

O'Brien, Joanne and Martin Palmer, The State of Religion Atlas, (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

Authors state, "More than half the world's population lives in countries where Buddhism is now, or has been, dominant. During this century, Buddhism has been subject to greater suppression and persecution than at any time in its history." (p. 27)

Pollack, Andrew, "Eye on Higher Things And on the Bottom Line," (New York Times, 2 April 1997).

Account of Kazuo Inamori, Japanese Corporate wizard, who uses spiritual themes in his management practice. Mr. Inamori plans to retire soon and become a Zen Buddhist monk in a Kyoto temple.

Reza, "Pilgrimage to China's Buddhist Caves," National Geographic, Vol. 189, No. 4, April 1996, pp. 52-63.

See also listings under Unit 9b: Buddhist Texts--Societal Implications.



"No study is possible on the battlefield; one does there simply what one can in order to apply what one knows. Therefore, in order to do even a little, one has already to know a great deal and know it well."

(Marshal Ferdinand Foch as quoted by General John A. Wickham.)

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