

## Unit 9b: Buddhist Texts--Societal Implications

### Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

### Be aware of the following

- Motivational impact of Buddhist ethics upon society and individuals
- Importance of compassion, concentration and meditation within Buddhist thought
- Motivation to achieve good merit within Buddhism
  - Foundational themes of Buddhist ethical thought and practice

### Identify

- Anatman
- Middle Path
- Five Precepts
- Merit
  - Nirvana

### Realize

- "This world" impact of Buddhist meditation practice
  - Impact of Buddhist thought and practice on urban pressures

## Buddhist Texts--Societal Implications

*"...to summarize the main doctrines of normative Buddhism in one brief chapter is not only presumptuous, but since Buddhism is a luxuriant forest, it is almost impossible to identify all the main paths by which it might be traversed."*

-- Buddhism and Society, by Melford Spiro, p. 31.

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Though Buddhism possesses nothing similar to a Bible or Qur'an, it does have authoritative sacred texts. The Pali (pah-lee) canon, the oldest grouping, forms the basis of Theravada and subsequent movements. Chinese teachings, which preserve translations of texts originally composed in the Sanskrit language, elaborate further Mahayana practice. The Tibetan canon is foundational for the Tantric trend.

**1. Foundational Themes** The motivational impact of Buddhism--its ability to provide an inner urge to move or prompt people to action--derives from a variety of factors.

**a. Nirvana** Most obviously, the desire for Nirvana and positive rebirth stimulates moral behavior, giving, and meditation, all "instruments of salvation." Seen negatively, fear of hell inspires good action.

**b. Contentment** Contentment arises from Buddhist influence. Meditation brings serenity. Worship, through offerings given, and mental state achieved, encourages tranquillity.



Acceptance of one's position, especially for the poor, whereby karma justifies one's poverty, brings social stability. Cultivation of an open-hearted and

sensitive attitude to others enriches one's own sense of peace in return.

### c. No Self

A difficult, but nonetheless important, motivating ethical force is the concept of "no self" (anatman). The radical Buddhist view of the self sees it as a false, imaginary belief. There is no independent, autonomous soul, self or identity.

Anatman ties individuals with all living beings. Emphasis on ones own ego produces nothing but selfishness, harmful desire, this-world attachments, conceit and pride.

Realizing anatman, one has compassion for others, identifies and sympathizes with them, and possesses genuine humility because all are one, "in the same boat" together.

### d. Future Orientation

Buddhist practice--due to karma and its effects--sustains coping skills in difficulties. An irrepressible optimism, that the future is full of positive possibilities, helps in adversity. Even a sense of resignation assists to see one through great difficulty.



**2. Ethical Practice** Key ethical practices relate to the following:

**a. Merit** Related to the concept of Karma, merit making is a basic Buddhist practice. Good deeds (meritorious ones) effect positive results in either this life or a future one. Bad deeds bring negative results.

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Though the Buddhist tradition developed different systematized ways to achieve merit (respecting elders, meditating, listening to sermons, observing moral precepts,) giving is the most commonly understood form of achieving positive merit (good karma), especially in Theravada schools of thought.

Giving refers primarily to the material support offered by laymen and laywomen to the monastic community of monks and nuns.



Motivation in merit making involves (1) interest in future lifetime awards; (2) obtaining enlightenment and escaping rebirth cycles; (3) seeking to alleviate the suffering of others. In Mahayana Buddhism, bodhisattvas (those who have experienced enlightenment but continue to be reborn to deliver others from suffering) possess large reservoirs of merit.

**b. Middle Path** The Middle Path accentuates the humanity of the Buddhist ethic. Avoiding extremes--either an overt pursuit of passionate world desire, or an austere discipline practiced by ascetics--enables individuals throughout the culture to exhibit moderation and grace.

**c. The Five Precepts and Ethical Conduct Factors** The Five Precepts and standards of ethical conduct encompass the minimum moral obligations of a lay Buddhist.

The Five Precepts ([1] not to destroy life, [2] not to steal, [3] not to commit adultery, [4] not to tell lies, [5] not to take intoxicating drinks) are not commandments as such, but rules of training, and ideals to live up to.

In time, these traits become the positive, expected norms by which people live.

**d. Compassion** To demonstrate compassion--love, charity, kindness, tolerance and other such noble qualities--follows the Bodhisattva example of someone who renounces entry into Nirvana in order to help the living obtain release from suffering, rebirth and death.



Anatman provides the impetus. Rid of the notion of an ego, through meditation we expand our identity, coming more and more to be united with all living beings. This linkage puts one in the other's shoes, not because of a desire to love the unique individuality within the other, but to recognize a oneness with all.

Compassion follows the Dhammapada teaching: "Let one conquer wrath by meekness. Let one conquer wrong by goodness. Let one conquer the mean man by a gift and a liar by the truth."

**e. Meditation** Meditation falls indirectly within the ethical realm. As Buddhist scholar Walpola Rahula states,



*"It is unfortunate that...[t]he moment the word 'meditation' is mentioned, one thinks of an escape from the daily activities of life; assuming a particular posture, like a statue in some cave or cell in a monastery, in some remote place cut off from society; and musing on, or being absorbed in, some kind of mystic or mysterious thought or trance. True Buddhist 'meditation' does not mean this kind of escape at all." (What the Buddha Taught, p. 67.)*

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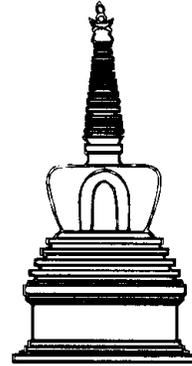
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Meditation discipline is especially needed in urban, tension-ridden patterns of life. A calm and tranquil spirit enables a person to more efficiently do one's work. Meditation assists in developing this frame of mind.

**f. Socio-economics** Anthropologist Melford Spiro studied Theravadan Burmese village life. Though conducted over thirty years ago, his insights still apply.

Dr. Spiro found prosperity to be judged not by personal possessions or acquisitions. Rather, the condition and number of Buddhist temples and monasteries were deciding factors. (See *Buddhism and Society*, p. 396)



Economic development is not an end in itself. Rather, it reaches for a nobler purpose. Society must achieve certain minimal material standards so its population can achieve spiritual success. Wealth--expressed in donations to monks and nuns, upkeep of pagodas and shrines, and purchasing animals from slaughter--is necessary. Merit (the good deeds of giving) is thus made.

Buddhism can provide business acumen. In addition to developing patience, perseverance, and endurance, it serves to hone a competitive edge. Business people may use Buddhist thought and practice, especially aspects of Zen, to enhance aggressive ambitions.

# Vocabulary List: Buddhist Texts--Societal Implications

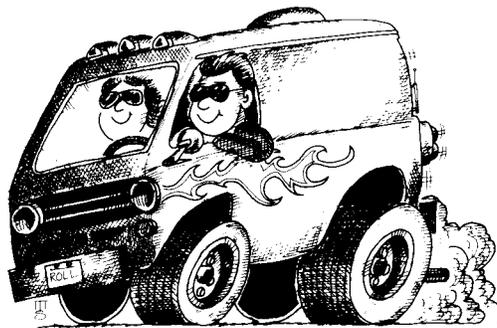
**Anatman** The radical, difficult Buddhist view of the self which sees it as a false, imaginary belief. There is no independent, autonomous soul, self or identity.

**Bodhisattva** (boh-dee-SAHT-vah) Those who have experienced enlightenment but who choose to remain in the world of rebirth. By this compassionate act, they deliver others from suffering.

**Compassion** To demonstrate compassion--love, charity, kindness, tolerance and other such noble qualities--follows the Bodhisattva example of someone who renounces entry into Nirvana in order to help the living obtain release from suffering, rebirth and death

**Five Precepts** Standards of ethical conduct which encompass the minimum moral obligations of a lay Buddhist. The Five Precepts ([1] not to destroy life, [2] not to steal, [3] not to commit adultery, [4] not to tell lies, [5] not to take intoxicating drinks) are not commandments as such, but rules of training, and ideals to live up to.

**Merit** Related to the concept of karma, merit making is a basic Buddhist practice. Good deeds (meritorious ones) effect positive results in either this life or a future one. Bad deeds bring negative results.



"Start your engines."

## Review Quiz: Buddhist Texts--Societal Implications



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

1. \_\_\_\_\_ The concept of anatman (no self) is
  - a. a difficult, but important, Buddhist notion.
  - b. similar to the ego.
  - c. of minor importance to Buddhist ethics.
  
2. \_\_\_\_\_ In Theravada Buddhism, the most commonly understood purpose for giving is
  - a. appeasing the gods.
  - b. achieving positive merit.
  - c. helping bodhisattvas enter Nirvana.
  
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Considering the future, Buddhist practice is often
  - a. pessimistic--nothing can be done to improve one's position in life.
  - b. optimistic as the future is full of positive possibilities.
  - c. unconcerned to make any impact at all on the future.
  
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Buddhist societies must maintain certain minimal material standards so
  - a. other nations will seek to emulate them.
  - b. their populations can achieve spiritual success.
  - c. more citizens have leisure to hunt deer and antelope.
  
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Theravadan Buddhism judges prosperity by
  - a. personal possessions.
  - b. urban business growth.
  - c. the condition and number of temples and monasteries.



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6. \_\_\_\_\_ Merit making is best equated with
- demeritorious karma.
  - good karma.
  - meditation.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ According to scholar Walpola Rahula, true Buddhist meditation results in
- escapist, cut-off-from-society schemes.
  - self-absorbed, remote rites in the isolation of a cave.
  - betterment of society and daily activities of life.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ The Middle Path enables Buddhist practitioners to avoid extremes while
- exhibiting moderation and grace.
  - following a political agenda for society's transformation.
  - ascending Mt. Everest in a dignified fashion.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ The Five Precepts are
- commandments every Buddhist must follow.
  - rules of training, ideals to live up to, the minimum moral obligations of a lay Buddhist.
  - followed only by Buddhist monks and nuns.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ The bodhisattva pattern of renouncing Nirvana in order to help the living is an example of
- the middle way.
  - the effects of bad karma.
  - compassion.

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



1. \_\_\_\_\_ Though Buddhism is not a "religion of the book," it does possess authoritative texts.

2. \_\_\_\_\_ One of the goals of meditation is calmness and serenity.

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3. \_\_\_\_\_ The concept of anatman sees an underlying soul, self and \_\_\_\_\_ identity within each living thing.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Merit making stimulates positive Buddhist ethical practice.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Buddhist meditation expands one's identity, in the process uniting one with all living things.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Meditation has little application to the tensions and strains of present day urban life.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Buddhism, when applied to business practice, can help hone a competitive edge.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ The Pali canon forms the basis for Theravada Buddhist practice.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ Desire for Nirvana and positive rebirth serve as motivation for Buddhist ethics.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Bodhisattvas have nothing to do with merit in Mahayana Buddhist thought and practice.



"Thank your favorite teacher."



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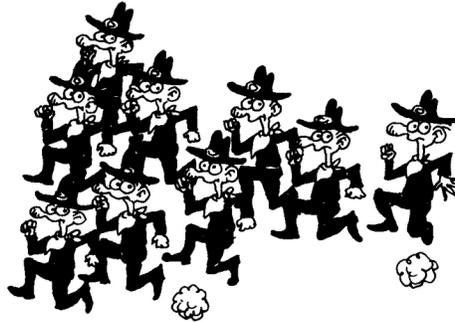
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"Every member of the Army [Air Force, Marines, Navy] is a potential leader--civilian or military."  
(General Carl Vuono)

