Chapter 10: Buddhist Traditions

Chapter Overview

In “Buddhist Traditions,” Roy C. Amore discusses the life of the Buddha, key Buddhist teachings, and the historical development of Buddhism. In doing so, he explains the general structure of Buddhist traditions in terms of the “Three Gems,” which are the Buddha, the Dharma (teachings), and the Sangha (congregation). In elucidating the First Gem, The Buddha, Amore draws our attention to the significance of the previous lives and vows of the bodhisattva that lead to the life and eventual enlightenment of Shakyamuni. Amore describes the Four Sights that begins the Buddha’s quest for enlightenment, the process of the Buddha’s enlightenment, and the teachings that the Buddha expounds as a result, including the “Instruction on the Middle Path.”

The discussion then turns to the Second Gem, the Dharma. Amore asserts that the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, which were part of the Buddha’s first teachings, became the foundational teachings of the Buddhist traditions. He explains how these teachings were then further developed through the ideas of the three characteristics of existence (suffering, impermanence, and no-self), dependent origination and causality, and through the *Tripitaka*, the Three Baskets of Sacred Texts.

In his explanation of the Third Gem, the Sangha, Amore describes the structure of Buddhist communities, including the roles of the *bhikshus*, the *bhikshunis*, and the lay sangha, while also introducing us to the three major forms of Buddhism, which are Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. Amore expands his discussion of the three major forms by looking at their developments in terms of geography, schools, and rituals. Thus, we see that Theravada developed predominately in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, practices the Buddha-puja, the *dana* ritual and *vipassana*. Mahayana developed across Central Asia to northern China, focuses on bodhisattvas, merit transfer rituals and koan training, and created the schools of Pure Land, Chan-Zen, Madhyamaka, and Yogacara. Vajrayana developed in Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal, and Bhutan, and emphasizes mantras and tantras. Amore continues his discussion of Buddhist traditions by looking at the topics of interaction and adaptation of Buddhist traditions, cultural expressions, including stupas, pagodas, temples and art, and explains the developments of Buddhist traditions in the twentieth century.

Learning Objectives are met when the student:

1. Outlines the origins of Buddhism along with the life and teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha.
2. Paraphrases Buddhist teachings including the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, the three major vehicles.
3. Compares and contrasts the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions and the various roles and contributions of Buddhist monasticism (the sangha).
4. Summarizes the conservative Theravada school, the Mahayana school, and the Vajrayana school of Buddhism, and its current status in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China.
5. Evaluates the nature, impact and various iterations of Buddhism in the West.

Study Questions

1. What are the four sights of Siddhartha? Why are they significant in Buddhism?
2. What are the Four Noble Truths and what is their rank of importance in Buddhism?
3. What are the *Tripitaka* and how were they composed?
4. Identify Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara and explain the significance of this bodhisattva in regards to popularity, roles and attributes, in Mahayana Buddhism?.
5. What is Engaged Buddhism and in what are two ways by which Ajarn Sulak (also known as Sulak Sivaraksa) participates in advancing the aims of this organization?

Study Questions: Answers

1. The four sights of Siddhartha are a sick man, a suffering old man, a dead man, and an ascetic. These sights are significant because they led Siddhartha to begin his quest for knowledge and enlightenment. That is, after he these sights, he meditates on them, exchanges his princely clothes for those of a poor hunter, obtains an alms bowl, leaves his life in the palace at night and begins a new life as a wandering student seeking spiritual truth along the banks of the Ganges. (p. 439)
2. The importance of the Four Noble Truths is denoted by the fact that they were at the core of the Buddha’s first sermon. The Four Noble Truths are as follows: (1) Noble Truth of Suffering: no one can escape suffering (*dukkha*), birth, sickness, senility, and death are all occasions for suffering, whether physical or psychological; (2) Noble Truth of Origin: suffering arises from excessive desire; (3) Noble Truth of Cessation: suffering will cease when desire ceases; (4) The Noble Truth of the Eightfold Path: it is possible to put an end to desire, and hence suffering, by following eight principles of self-improvement. (p. 444)
3. The *Tripitaka* are the “Three Baskets” of sacred texts. The first type, known as the *Sutra Pitaka* (“discourse basket”), contains discourse on dharma. The second type, known as the *Vinaya Pitaka* (“discipline”), contains rules of the monastic discipline. The third type, known as the *Abhidharma Pitaka* (“further discourses”), contains discourses on reality according to Buddhist principles. These texts were originally a part of oral traditions until famine reduced the number of monks who knew the teachings, and thus, they were written down for the sake of preservation. (p. 446)
4. Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (“the Lord who looks down”) is a popular bodhisattva in all Mahayana countries. Avalokiteshvara is known as the bodhisattva of compassion. Originally, Avalokiteshvara was masculine, but in China he came to be venerated in female form under the name Guanyin, who is known for her care of children and infants. (p.458)
5. Engaged Buddhism aims to make Buddhism more relevant in the contemporary world. One way Ajarn Sulak strives to make Buddhism more relevant is by working with people from other religious traditions. Sulak rethinks the essential ethical precepts (*sila*) in order to make sense of life in the contemporary world. For example, the first precept teaches to refrain from killing, which in the contemporary world may lead one to ask if we allow our tax dollars to go towards armaments, or should we breed animals for consumption? The second precept, which teaches us to refrain from taking what is not ours should be extended to the issue of rich countries exploiting poor countries through the international banking system and the international economic order. (pp. 480–482)

Research Questions

1. The life of the Buddha provides the foundation for Buddhist teachings. What are the most significant teachings of the Buddha?
2. Analyze one of the merit-making rituals and explain how it helps produce good karma; additionally, why may someone need to participate in this ritual?
3. How does the Theravada Buddhist practice known as *vipassana*, which is a form of meditation, relate to the teachings of Theravada Buddhism?
4. Compare and contrast the various forms of Pure Land Buddhism within China and Japan therein detailing the major points of difference and similarity.
5. Compare the ordination ceremonies of the *bhikshus* and *bhikshunis*. What are the significant similarities or differences within the ceremonies that illuminate the place of the *bhikshus* and *bhikshunis* in the Buddhist traditions?
6. What are the principles within the Eightfold Path in Buddhism? Describe the teachings of the Eightfold Path and explain how these principles eliminate desire and suffering.
7. Outline and analyze the main components and the structure of the Sangh, also known as the Third Gem of Buddhism.
8. Koans are a fundamental part of Mahayana practice. Analyze one or more koans and explain the connection with the quest for enlightenment.
9. The Dalai Lama’s teachings have garnered world-wide attention. What teachings gain the most attention and what are some possible explanations for their popularity?
10. Analyze the vows of one of the Bodhisattvas and discuss how these vows help us to understand key Buddhist teachings.

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think that the concept of non-violence is central to Buddhist teachings?
2. Why do you think the roles of women are often ambiguous in Buddhist history?
3. How can we frame, interpret and gain a greater understanding of the populist forms of Buddhism that have arisen in North America?
4. How does the Buddhist concept of *anatman* help us to understand the Four Noble Truths?
5. What is the role of scripture in Buddhist traditions?

Additional Resources

1. BuddhaNet: Buddha Dharma Education Associations Inc. <http://www.buddhanet.net/>

BuddhaNet is a not-for-profit organization affiliated with the Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc., which was first established as a Vipassana Meditation Center in 1992 in Sydney by an Australian meditation monk Ven. Pannyavro. Amongst the many resources on this site, one section contains many useful Flash-powered multimedia presentations on Buddhist topics, particularly helpful is the timeline of Buddhist history: <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/b_chron.htm>

1. Sacred Texts in the Buddhist Traditions. <https://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/>

The Internet Sacred Text Archive has made a wide range of Buddhist sacred writings accessible spanning Southern Buddhism, Northern Buddhism, Jataka, and select modern works.

1. DharmaNet: Worldwide Net of Study, Practice and Action. <https://dharmanet.org/>

This website provides a significant amount of learning resources on the Buddhist traditions in the form of videos, courses material for individual study, and additional links, spanning a broad range of topics, teachings and movements. The breadth of resources makes this a valuable website despite the lack of internal organization.

1. *The Buddha* (PBS 2010). <http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/>

A documentary by David Grubin and narrated by Richard Gere. It tells the story of the Buddha’s life. Currently, PBS has made this documentary available online only to those with the PBS SoCal | KCET Passport membership. Alternatively, the documentary may be accessed for free via YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vc7_VyVXDLs>.

1. Sakyadhita: International Association of Buddhist Women. <http://www.sakyadhita.org/>

Sakyadhita is a grassroots organization that provides a platform and resources for an international network of Buddhist women. Sakyadhita “promotes research and publications on Buddhist women’s history and other topics of interest.”

1. Vipassana Meditation. <http://www.dhamma.org/en-US/index>

This website is devoted to the promotion of Vipassana meditation through providing information, resources, courses, locations to practice and connect, and additional links to various institutes and other useful sites.

1. Free Tibet. <https://www.freetibet.org/>

Free Tibet advocates for an **end to China's occupation of Tibet** and for international recognition of **Tibetans' right to freedom** by mobilizing “active support for the Tibetan cause, champion human rights and challenge those whose actions sustain the occupation.”

1. Rama Meditation Society. <https://www.ramameditationsociety.org>

Rama Meditation Society (RMS) describes itself as “an electronic tribe of seekers who live for spiritual experience and illumination. Within these pages, you will find the teachings of an enlightened American Buddhist teacher, Rama - Dr. Frederick Lenz. The site also offers numerous ways of exploring, experiencing, learning and sharing higher spiritual awareness.” This site identifies with and promotes “American Buddhism,” which “doesn’t reject modern living in western culture, but rather integrates the premises of meditation and mindfulness with living a full, rich life of excitement and fun.”

1. Dalai Lama. 2005. *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality.* New York: Morgan Road Books.
2. Thich Nhat Hanh. 1992. *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life.* Edited by Arnold Kotler. New York: Bantam Books.

Field Work Guidelines

If you are interested in doing fieldwork, you need to plan and organize your fieldwork experience as thoroughly as you can. Generally, you can divide your fieldwork experience into three stages: Planning, during, and after your fieldwork.

Planning Your Fieldwork

*Research:* Begin by researching the individual, group, or place you would like to do work on or with. Visit websites if available, and read any available scholarship.

*Make Contact:* Contact the person, group, or administrators of the place you would like to research. Give as much information as possible about your project so that your contact can guide. Often your contact will be able to help you understand the rules for conduct that will be needed during your fieldwork. Remember to be polite and courteous.

*Questions:* Based on your research and interests, create a set of questions you would like to answer during the course of your fieldwork.

*Ethics Approval:* Some projects need to have ethics approval, especially if your research involves people. The guidelines for applications for ethics approval may differ depending on the organization or university you work with; thus, please contact your organization or university to find out more about this process.

During Your Fieldwork

Often, there are specific rules for conduct when you visit sacred spaces and/or interview people, and usually, these rules can be seen before you enter a site, or spoken about before you interview people. It is best to find out about these rules before you begin your fieldwork. There are some general rules that should be followed at all times: Always be polite and courteous, dress modestly, and participate where appropriate.

*Be polite and courteous:*

1. Introduce yourself. If you are visiting a sacred site or a worship centre, you will be able to find people who are either there to meet you specifically, or would like to help you during your visit.
2. Leave your camera, phone, notebook, or laptop in a bag or even at home unless you have received prior permission to use these items.
3. Be aware of signs. Signs have important information about the place you are in, thus, look for the signs and the information they give.
4. Be respectful of the people and your surroundings. Do not disturb the rites or the privacy of the people. While there are times when you may be invited to participate, please remember that if you are not invited, you should keep a respectful silence and distance from the rite. Also, people may be curious about why you are visiting or conducting your research. Try to answer their questions as best you can. They may be able to provide you with additional information and further help.

*Dress modestly:*

1. Rules for appropriate dress are often important when visiting a place or a group. Please follow these rules if you have been given them.
2. For Buddhist sacred sites, these rules usually mean shoes will need to be removed. Often, if you are not dressed appropriately, you may be given appropriate attire, or you may not be allowed into a site.

*Participate Where Appropriate:*

1. If you have been invited to participate, please do so!
2. Generally, follow the guidelines that have been given to you, or the people around you. The best tip: Stand when people stand, and sit when people sit.
3. Ask questions. If you are not sure what to do, ask the people around you. Most people will be happy to help you out.
4. If you are interviewing a particular person or people, make notes on the questions that you ask, and answer any questions that you are asked as well.

After Your Fieldwork

1. Make a comprehensive set of notes on your experience as soon as you are able. The better your notes are, the more you will be able to draw on later.
2. Thank anyone who has helped you with your experience, and acknowledge their help in the written version of your work.
3. Follow up with the people or the place that you have visited. If you have used information from any interviews, offer to send a copy your work to the place or the people you have met.