Rethinking Religion: Buddhism

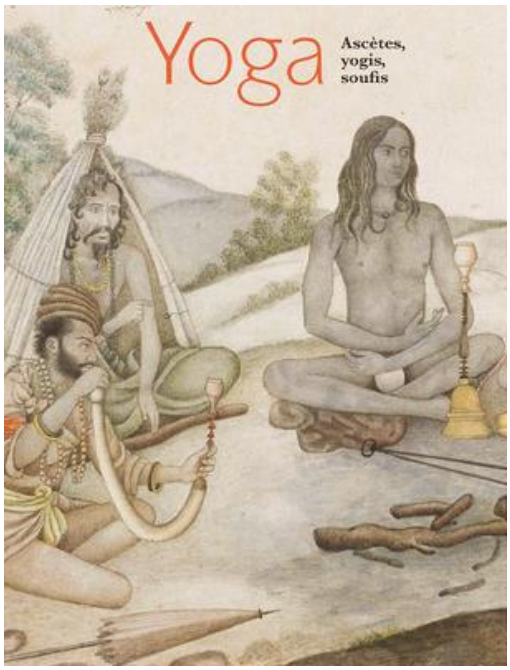
"Kind intentions toward others"

(Venerable Master Hsing Yun https://hsingyun.org/)

1. Buddhism

1.1 Life of the Buddha

The Buddha, whose name was Siddharta Gautama, lived from about 563 to 483 BC (the exact dates are uncertain). According to Buddhist tradition, he was born in the Lumbini Province in today's Nepal in the foothills of the Himalayas, in a district that at the time was part of India.[1] According to the story of Siddharta's life, his father was a chief or king in the small district or State where they lived. Thus, the young Prince Siddharta was raised in some sort of royal palace or compound with all its comforts. He married and had a son and was expected to succeed his father in due course. However, during one or more excursions from his home he came face to face with the harsh realities of people's daily existence from which he had been shielded, in particular their suffering from disease, old age and death. Supposedly, Siddharta also saw a "spiritual aspirant", which made him aware of the possibility of freeing oneself from the cycle of suffering (Dalai Lama, 2000; p52).



Later, evidently still deeply affected by what he had seen outside the royal compound, Siddharta decided to leave his family to become a wandering ascetic (*muni*) seeking spiritual illumination.[2] Ascetics were not uncommon in India at the time and philosophic doctrines abounded. According to Alexandra David-Néel (1939), Siddharta became *sannyâsin*, which means not just an ascetic, but someone who has liberated himself from all social norms and bonds – "*he walks on a path which is known to him alone, and is responsible only to himself. He is, par excellence, 'an outsider'*" (David-Néel, 1939;p.17).

Exactly when Siddhartha's spiritual awakening occurred is uncertain, but not before he had spent a number of years travelling and learning from other ascetics, yogis and teachers. Supposedly, he had his revelatory moment while meditating in solitude under a tree, the so-called Bo Tree. That pivotal event marked the beginning of the religion we know as Buddhism, so named because Siddharta acquired the title 'Enlightened One' or Buddha.[3] At the age of about 80 he died of old age, falling to the ground alongside the road he was walking, on the way to bring his teaching to new listeners. His body was cremated, and his ashes then divided amongst various followers and stored in special funereal/memorial structures that have come to be known as stupas.[4]

[1] https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/666

[2] Curiously, the fact that the Buddha began his spiritual quest by effectively abandoning his family (surely causing them suffering) is not generally commented on, except to say he had to do it.

[3] A buddha is literally someone who is awakened (from Sanskrit *bodhi*, awake) so Buddhahood is the awakened state.

[4] For a far more detailed account of the Buddha's life, with extensive references, see Wikipedia.

As the canonical texts on Buddhism were written several centuries after the death of the Buddha (he left no writings of his own), it is mere speculation what the Buddha looked like, the clothes he wore etc. In fact, the earliest artistic depictions of him were symbolic, e.g. empty throne, riderless horse, footprints or a tree (Leidy, 2008). Interestingly, the toes on the feet shown in Figure 1 are decorated with swastikas...

Figure 1. Footprints of the Buddha (Buddhapada)[5]

It was several centuries after his death that statues first appeared, which may have arisen due to interactions with ancient Greece. One of the earliest statues depicts the Buddha standing. Many such Buddha images were found in the public sacred precincts of Gandhara, an ancient Indian region located in present-day north-west Pakistan. Later, statues of the Buddha in an iconic seated, cross-legged position would become widespread (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Standing Buddha[6]

Figure 3. Seated Buddha[7]

As for the Buddha's clothing, he is frequently shown loosely robed like the monks of today. But if were truly an ascetic it is possible that he wore only a loin cloth. Nobody really knows…

[5] See: The Yale University Art Gallery https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/112686
[6] Standing Buddha https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38820
[7] For example, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38157

1.2 Buddhist Doctrine

What exactly was Siddharta's vision or illumination? Put simply, Siddharta saw a way, a spiritual path, for humans to liberate themselves from the cycle of unenlightened existence (*samsara*) in which one is repeatedly born, dies and is reborn, and which liberation brings an end to "suffering" (*dukkha*).

1.2.1 Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism provide a simple framework for the intellectual battle to end this suffering. The first of the Truths is the *truth* of suffering itself. The second Truth is the *cause* of suffering, which is due to our 'ignorance' (another key Buddhist term[8]) about the nature of reality and experience. The third Truth is the *cessation* of suffering, which is achieved by an understanding of emptiness to see through the deception of one's emotions. The fourth Truth is the Eightfold Path, which is a programme of moral and intellectual training to bring about the cessation of suffering, to a state known as *nirvana* (see below).

The Eightfold Path is also known as the "Middle Way". Supposedly the Buddha taught that people should not go to excess, neither extreme asceticism nor hedonism and that a "middle way" was the only method to lead a moral life (Irons, 2008).[9]

There are eight steps or branches in the Eightfold Path as set out in the canonical texts. They are listed in an agreed order, but different writers (e.g. David-Néel, 1939; Dhammasami, 2019) do use slightly different descriptors (as indicated by the brackets below).

1. Right view(s)
2. Right resolve (or emotion or intention)
3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right living (or livelihood)
6. Right effort
7. Right attention (or mindfulness)
8. Right meditation (or concentration)

Right Views comes first in the list as it is (or they are) the most important and governs the whole programme of behaviours in the Path. In fact, the other seven items play only a subsidiary role, together helping to create and maintain Right Views (David-Néel, 1939). Following the Eightfold Path means inherently that a person must lead a morally good life. The person must overcome all "bad impulses" and replace them with the virtues of love and compassion (Smart, 1977).

Suffering is a key doctrinal concept and in fact gives Buddhism its *raison d'etre.* Perhaps not surprisingly, it also accounts for the perception of Buddhism as a pessimistic philosophy. However, this to misunderstand the Buddhist outlook, which is that it is necessary to understand the nature of suffering because of the possibility of achieving freedom from it – "*if we had no concept of liberation, then to spend so much time reflecting on suffering would be utterly pointless*" (Dalai Lama, 2000).

[8] Defined as a fundamental misapprehension or confusion about the nature of things (Dalai Lama, 2000; p.56).
[9] Middle Way "because it avoids the extremes of absolutism and nihilism" (Dalai Lama, 2005, p.129).

SUFFERING	THE CAUSE OF SUFFERING	THE CESSATION OF SUFFERING
This can be summarized in two definitions. 1. To be in contact with that for which one feels aversion. 2. To be separated from that for which one feels attraction, or, in other words, not to possess what one desires.	It is *Ignorance*, basis of the eleven other links of the Chain of Interdependent Origins. These eleven links may be arranged under three heads: 1. *Ignorance.* 2. *Desire*, which arises from Ignorance. 3. *Action*, which follows Desire, as a means of satisfying it. As a consequence of the sensations experienced in accomplishing the action, new desires arise. (*a*) A desire to feel again the same sensations, if the action has caused sensations of an agreeable kind. (*b*) A desire to avoid these same sensations, if the action has caused sensations of a disagreeable kind. This new desire urges us to the accomplishment of new actions—either to induce the desired sensations, or to prevent the repetition of disagreeable sensations. This action, in its turn, produces sensations which, as before, give rise to desires, and the concatenation of actions, sensations, and desires, giving rise to new actions, continues to infinity, so long as *Ignorance* exists.	It is the destruction of *Ignorance* which produces the destruction of *Desire.* The *Desire* having ceased to exist, the urge to *action* no longer arises. *Action* no longer taking place, the sensations resulting from its accomplishment no longer arise, and the *desires*, of which these sensations are the source, no longer arise. The cause having ceased to exist, the revolution of the Chain of Interdependent Origins also ceases.

THE WAY WHICH LEADS TO THE CESSATION OF SUFFERING

It consists in a programme of mental training, which may be summed up as follows:

Acquisition of Right Views

These comprise a perfect understanding of:

The Three General Characteristics	*The Four Truths*
The impermanence of all aggregates	Suffering
The suffering inherent in all aggregates	Its cause
The absence of an *ego* in all aggregates	Its cessation
	The Way which leads to this cessation

Having acquired *Right Views*, one knows the real nature of the objects composing the external world, and the real nature of oneself. Possessing this knowledge, one ceases to desire, out of delusion, that which produces suffering, and to reject that which produces happiness.

One practises an enlightened *Morality*, in the highest sense of the word. This does not consist in passive obedience to a code imposed by a God or by any other external power. Having oneself recognized perfectly those acts which it is good to perform, and those from which, for one's own benefit and for that of others, one should abstain, one's conduct conforms to the knowledge which one has acquired on this subject.

The *Means* of acquiring *Right Views* are:

Perfect Attention, which comprises: Study; analysis of the perceptions, the sensations, the states of consciousness, of all the operations of the mind and of the physical activity which corresponds with them; observation; reflection.

Perfect Meditation, comprising concentration of mind; a physical and psychical education which aims at producing mental and bodily calm, and acuteness of the senses (the mind counting as sixth sense), and awakening new perceptions, thus enabling the mind to extend the field of its investigations.

Table 1. Doctrine of the Buddha (David-Néel, 1939)

Despite the vast literature written and accumulated about Buddhism over the centuries, according to David-Néel (*ibid*, pp. 23-24) the Buddhist doctrine is actually very simple, and in fact it can be summarised on a couple of pages! As shown in Table 1 the essential components of Buddhist doctrine are: first, the 'Four Truths' on which Buddhism is based; second, the 'Chain of Interdependent Origins', which lies at the root of Buddhist doctrine and an inseparable part of it; and third, the way (or path) that leads to the cessation of suffering.

As can be seen in Table 1, the way is dependent on Right Views, which in turn depend on acquiring Perfect Attention and Perfect Meditation. As for the rest of the Buddhist literature, it is, "*really nothing more than a gigantic commentary, constantly amplified in the course of the centuries*" (David-Néel, *ibid*, p. 23). Importantly, though not explicitly stated in Table 1, there is no revelation about the origin of the world; there is no mention of a supreme divinity. One simply practices an "enlightened morality" of one's own volition, which does "not consist in passive obedience to a code imposed by a God".

According to the Dalai Lama, the entire teaching or *dharma* of the Buddha, is based on compassion (Dalai Lama, 2000). Moreover, the practice of developing a good heart and an "altruistic mind" is aimed at deepening our understanding of compassion. That is, it is not enough for oneself merely to feel compassion, but also to have a sense of responsibility to help others "*which extends to all sentient beings without exception*" (Dalai Lama, ibid, p. 157). More recently, the importance of compassion and altruism has been highlighted by well-known Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard (Ricard, 2016).[10]

1.2.2 Suffering

As suffering, *dukkha*, is so central to Buddhism it is important to understand what it is exactly. There are different interpretations, but in general it refers to the painful state or experience of human existence due to "delusions and afflictive emotions" (Dalai Lama, 2000). The concept embraces both the environment where we live and the individual beings living within it. However, suffering has to be seen in the context of another Buddhist concept, *samsara*. This refers to the cycle of 'unenlightened existence' in which one goes repeatedly from one state of rebirth to another, driven by negative emotions and *karma* (see below). So, as long as we are in this unenlightened state, all our joyful experiences are tainted and bring suffering (Dalai Lama, *ibid; p.55*).[11]

As stated above, at the time of Siddharta philosophic doctrines were widespread, and he would not have been the first person in India to ponder the cause of suffering. The oldest Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads, handed down orally for several centuries before the birth of the Buddha, contain evidence of such preoccupations among the intellectual aristocracy of the Brahmins and other Hindu philosophers (David-Néel, *ibid*). Possibly too, Siddharta would have been "*deeply conscious of the degrading thraldom of caste and the priestly tyranny of the Brāhmans*" (Waddell, 1895).

[10] https://www.matthieuricard.org/en/

[11] Strictly speaking, Buddhism distinguishes several types of suffering.

1.2.3 Dependent Origination

Dependent origination is the concept that all phenomena arise – are dependent on – the interaction of causes and conditions. In other words, no phenomenon exists with an independent or intrinsic identity, and no phenomenon arises suddenly from nowhere, fully formed. In fact, this complex network of interconnected causes and conditions underlies the evolution of the cosmos. This applies to consciousness as well as matter (Dalai Lama, 2005).

According to Buddhist doctrine, the causal process between suffering and its origins is called the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. It begins with ignorance (1), then proceeds sequentially to 'mental formations' or volition (2); to consciousness (3); to body and mind (4); to senses (5); to contact (6); to sensation (7); to desire or thirst (8); to grasping or attachment (9); to 'becoming' or existence (10); to birth and rebirth (11); and finally, old age and death (12). Note, in Table 1, the twelve links are called the Chain of Interdependent Origins. These twelve links are depicted around the famous Buddhist Wheel of Life, which illustrates the six realms of *samsara* (see below).

The canonical texts tell us that when the Buddha (or Siddharta) reached this point in his reasoning, he then reviewed it in the *reverse* direction. Thus, the alternative sequence was: ignorance not existing, mental formations do not exist; mental formations not existing, consciousness does not exist; consciousness not existing, the material body and mind do not exist; and so on to birth not existing, old age and death do not exist (or are not produced). Thus, *not* being reborn, the process of unenlightened existence or suffering ceases! (See David-Néel, *ibid*; Dalai Lama, 2000).

1.2.4 Karma

Karma is the idea that all actions have consequences in the moral realm and shape an individual's destiny and rebirth. *Karma* causes results in this life, the next lifetime, and all successive births (Irons, 2008).

Karma derives from the theory of the Law of Cause and Effect, which holds that because cause gives rise to effect which in turn becomes the cause of further effect, consciousness must be continual. It gathers experiences and impressions throughout one's life from one moment to the next. At the point of physical death, it follows that a being's consciousness contains an imprint of all these past experiences and impressions, and the actions (*karma*) that preceded them. It is this consciousness that is then 'reborn' in a new body – animal, human or divine (Dalai Lama, 1990). To give an example, a person who has spent his or her life mistreating animals might be reborn as a dog belonging to someone who is unkind to animals. Conversely, meritorious deeds in this life would accumulate and reduce negative *karma*, thereby assisting in a favourable rebirth in the next. Only when all negative *karma* has been eliminated is it possible to escape the 'wheel of suffering' and attain liberation (Dalai Lama, 1990).

In the episode of the BBC TV documentary *The Long Search* about Buddhism, at one point the presenter Ronald Eyre asks a woman in the Sri Lanka village he's visiting, "does been born a Christian mean I've done something wrong in my former life"? "Yes" she replies, laughing.[12]

[12] See Footprint of the Buddha.

1.2.5 Realms of existence

In Buddhist cosmology there are different realms of existence that are linked to the cycle of existence. There are several different classification schemes and one that appears in many paintings such as the *Thangka*[13] identifies six realms: 1. Realm of the gods; 2. Realm of the demi-gods; 3. Realm of human beings; 4. Realm of animals; 5. Realm of the hungry ghosts; and 6. Realm of hell (Igunma and San San May, 2019).[14] The mention of gods and demi-gods might seem strange for an essentially atheistic religion. However, Buddhism recognises different types of sentient beings, those with bodily forms perceptible to our senses, and those that are formless in the spirit world. These spirits may have supernatural powers or precognition abilities that are not open to us, but they are considered to be a part of the human world (Dalai Lama, 2000).

Another classification identifies three realms: Desire, Form and Formless. The human world is part of the Desire realm. Thus, our suffering in the Desire Realm means attachment (craving) to physical objects, thought processes and sensory experiences. It also means, perhaps surprisingly, attachment to pleasurable inner sensations of joy or bliss. Hence, the statement in Table 1 that having acquired Right Views, "*…one ceases to desire, out of delusion, that which produces suffering, and to reject that which produces happiness*".[15] Why does Buddhism claim that pleasurable experiences are states of suffering? Because, says the Dalai Lama, the pleasure is only relative (in comparison to painful experiences) and in time the pleasure fades – "*…the very same object that once gave you such pleasure might simply cause you frustration. That is the nature of things – they change*" (Dalai Lama, *ibid*; p.55).

1.2.6 Nirvana

According to Buddhist doctrine, the cycle of our unenlightened existence and suffering (*samsara*) is brought to an end by the final release from being reborn, which is known as *nirvana*. This is, however, a widely misunderstood term. It is not a state of perfect bliss, but the complete suppression of all the false constructions of our imagination (David-Néel, *ibid*) or more literally, the cooling-off or going out as of a flame being extinguished (Smart, 1977).

1.2.7 Meditation

Meditation is one of the key daily practices of Buddhism although it is not unique to Buddhism and is practiced by most other religious traditions.[16] Meditation is the English translation for the Sanskrit term *bhavana*, which carries connotations of cultivation. The Tibetan term *gom* literally means "to familiarise". Hence meditation is essentially an introspective mental practice of cultivating familiarity with, or awareness of, a given object. Theoretically, if the meditative practice is done correctly, gradually in the midst of the mind's "internal chatter", one can grasp a "luminous and knowing" experience of consciousness directed at the object (Dalai Lama, 2005).

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[13] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thangka#/media/File:Wheel_of_Existence.jpg

[14] The Buddhist realm of hell is completely different to that imagined by the Abrahamic religions. Whereas the latter hell is an eternal damnation, the Buddhist hell is a temporary state of existence. "*While some hells are worse than others, all of the suffering is deemed appropriate for the corrupt deeds evil-doers have committed in their lives. Though the time in hell is long, it is not eternal…Once the consequences of their evil deeds are over, hellish beings are reborn in the human world*" (Dhammasami, 2019).

[15] In the original book written in French, David-Néel uses the word *repousser* (translated as reject), not *rejeter*.

[16] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meditation

Meditation is a disciplined practice to remain in "pure awareness" by letting one's thoughts arise, but also letting them go without leaving a trace. If you let your inner chatter go on and on, distracted by thoughts of past events or the future, too preoccupied with oneself, you are not really meditating but ruminating, as the Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard puts it. Meditation proper is "*to dwell without distraction, yet effortlessly, in the freshness of the present moment*" (Ricard and Singer, 2017). There are numerous different meditation techniques both between and within various Buddhist schools or traditions. The Theravada Buddhist tradition emphasises *vipassana* (gaining insight); the Mahayana Buddhist tradition emphasises visualisations as a way to contemplate Buddhist teachings.

As to the physical practice of meditation, there isn't one universal approach that is followed.[17] Typically, it involves sitting cross-legged or kneeling on the ground (with or without a cushion), but sitting on a chair is possible too (e.g. Puddicombe, 2011). Control of one's breathing is important and typically the eyes are closed, but not always. Typically, the person meditates in silence (in silent surroundings), but some Buddhist forms of meditation also use mantras. The most well-known one is probably *Om mani padme hum*.[18] Nowadays there are also numerous online programmes and smartphone apps providing guided meditations, some free, some not.[19] Typically, a daily meditation is 10-15 minutes in duration, but some people prefer longer sessions from 45-60 minutes. Meditation can be practiced alone or with other people in a group session, inside a room or outdoors (see Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6). Basically, the number of ways of practicing meditation is almost limitless.

Importantly, meditation is not the same as mindfulness although the terms are often interchanged.[20] As noted above concerning the Eightfold Path, mindfulness is associated with Right Attention. By that is meant that a person should be attentive to their acts, both physical and mental, and not give way to any impulses without examining them. According to David-Néel (1939) "perfect attention is a means of learning to know oneself, to know the world in which one lives, and consequently to acquire *Right Views*" (see also Table 1).

In the BBC TV documentary *The Long Search*, the presenter Ronald Eyre explains what is meant by mindfulness as follows: "*when you are walking, know you walking; when you are sweeping, know you sweeping; when you are worrying, know you are worrying: when you are breathing, know you are breathing. Then you can start meditating*".[21]

In recent decades many varied mindfulness initiatives and programmes have been developed in the West. Mindfulness practice has also been growing among psychologist and neurologists including Compassion-Based or Compassion-Focused Therapy (e.g. Gilbert and Simos, 2022). However, to Buddhists these mindfulness movements are considered secular because they do not require one to subscribe to any Buddhist beliefs. There is no objection to such use and promotion of mindfulness if it helps reduce stress and suffering, but the Buddhist position is that it is fundamentally only one element of the Eightfold Path (Dhammasami, 2019).

[17] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_meditation
[18] A Sanskrit phrase meaning "Hail to the jewel in the lotus" used throughout Tibetan Buddhism (Irons, 2008).
[19] See e.g. The Best Meditation Apps of 2023.
[20] See e.g. 5 Differences Between Mindfulness and Meditation.
[21] See Footprint of the Buddha.

Figure 4. Zen meditation practiced at Zengården retreat.[22]

Figure 5. Outdoor group meditation.[23]

Figure 6. Meditating at home.[24]

[22] https://www.zentraining.org/index.php
[23] https://meditationinboston.org/events/free-outdoor-meditation-friday-at-630pm-with-gen-khedrub/
[24] https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/feb/04/seven-ways-to-start-meditating

1.3 History and Spread of Buddhism

The religion founded by the Buddha rapidly spread across India and much of Asia (see e.g. Berkwitz, 2017). As shown in Figure 7 it moved south and east into Myanmar (Burma), Thailand (Siam), Cambodia, Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and Indonesia, and to China, Korea and Japan; north and west into Tibet and Mongolia, and Afghanistan. Currently, Buddhism is most firmly established in Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar.

Of note, 'Longmen Luoyang' in China (see Figure 7) refers to the Longmen Grottoes, a spectacular collection of thousands of Buddhist stone statues and other artwork carved out of the limestone cliffs alongside the river Yi, in thousands of individual caves and niches.[25]

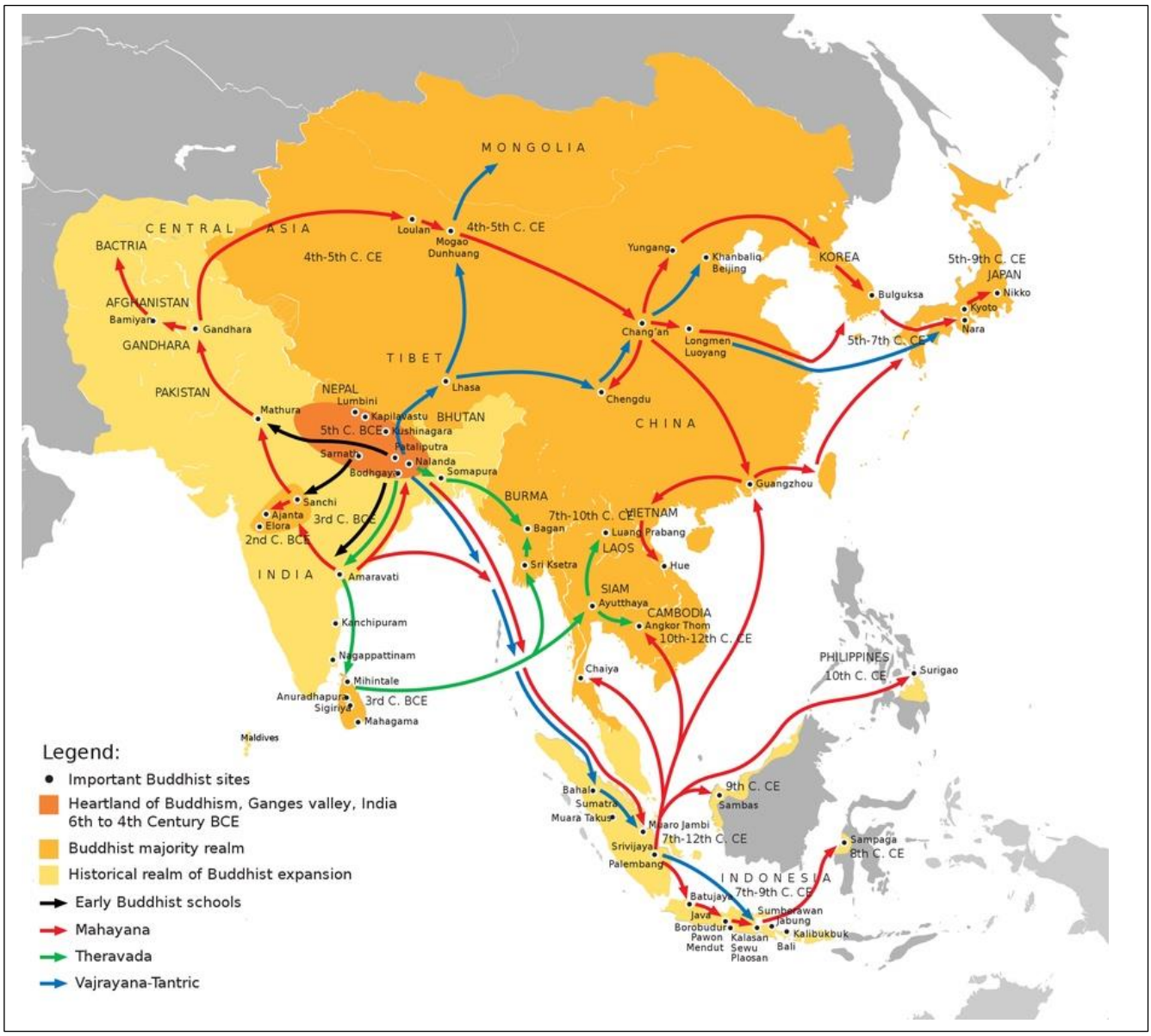


Figure 7. Spread of Buddhism across Asia (Gunawan Kartapranata, 2014)[26]

[25] https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1003/

[26] Map also appears in Igunma and San San May (2019).

Ironically, Buddhism has almost disappeared from India (<1% of population) and is a minority religion in Nepal too.[27] As remarked by Smart (1977), Buddhism has come to share with Christianity the oddity of having a minor presence in its birthplace, though highly influential elsewhere in the world.

With regard to Tibet, Buddhism spread into the country during the 4th century AD, but took several more centuries to supplant the native Bon religion. It differs from mainstream Buddhism in a number of ways. For example, the Tibetan tradition describes the Buddhist path in terms of the Five Paths (path of accumulation; path of connection; path of seeing; path of meditation; and the path of no more learning). Within this framework, the Eightfold Path described earlier would be subsumed under the path of meditation.

Buddhism was largely unknown in the West until the early 19th century. In fact, the term 'Buddhism' did not exist in any language until Orientalist scholars coined it to refer to the newly discovered religious practices in the East. The word *Boudhism* was introduced in the OED in 1801 and emerged as *Buddhism* in 1816 (Irons, 2008).[28] Various travellers, explorers and missionaries had of course encountered 'Buddhism' in the preceding centuries. However, these encounters were not with a recognisably distinct religion as perceived now, but instead with diffuse aspects of religious phenomena 'out there' in the Orient (Almond, 1988).

Interest in Buddhism grew in the West throughout the 19th century. A book called *The Light of Asia* published in 1879 was one of the first publications to popularise Buddhism for a Western readership.[29] The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was delighted that the tenets of Buddhism showed an affinity to his own philosophy (Abelsen, 1993). The famous mystic and author Madame Blavatsky who founded Theosophy, supposedly converted to Buddhism. The philologist and Orientalist scholar Professor Max Muller studied and wrote extensively about the religions of the East, including the translation of numerous Sanskrit texts.[30] However, whilst acknowledging Buddhism's merits, he was critical of not only its atheism, but its "incomprehensible" nihilism (Muller, 1869).

Moving into the 20th century, the Buddhist Society in London was founded in 1924.[31] In 1929, the French explorer and writer Alexandra David-Néel published her book *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, recounting her journey (in disguise) to Tibet and the capital Lhasa. It is claimed that her many books and teachings helped to popularise Buddhism in the West. In contrast, Buddhism also attracted considerable interest following the invasion and annexation of Tibet by China in 1950. Ironically, Tibetan Buddhism is probably the most well-known form of Buddhism in the West due to Tibet's tragic plight and the high profile (and considerable popularity) of the Dalai Lama. He has campaigned for Tibet's freedom (or autonomy) ever since he fled the country, but sadly he remains in exile unlikely ever to return. Tibet has been the subject of many film documentaries and several films with box-office success.[32]

[27] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_by_country
[28] https://www.oed.com/oed2/0028750
[29] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Light_of_Asia
[30] See e.g. Sacred Books of the East
[31] Buddhist Society https://www.thebuddhistsociety.org/
[32] See e.g. Kundun (1997), Seven Years in Tibet (1997).

In more recent decades, numerous Buddhist schools, temples, meditation and retreat centres have been set up around the world (but noting of course that Buddhism is not an evangelising religion). However, according to some writers, the nature of Buddhism has changed, particularly in the West. In Western Buddhism, elements are often adopted that are convenient and comprehensible for the practitioner in the West, and in line with the values of Western civilization (Igunma, 2019). Western Buddhism no longer offers its "cosmological vision—gods, heavens, hells, rebirth, karmic retribution", but instead options for improving the mental health of Western society's "engaged, creatively expressive, if neurotically divided, individual". The European mindset has even altered the self-understanding of Eastern Buddhists, leading to changes and modernisation of Buddhism in the East (Wallis, 2019).

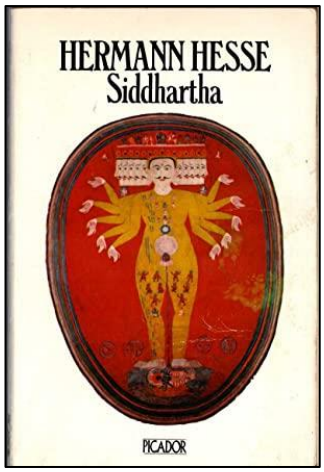
Philosophically, Buddhism is opposed to materialism, but it has undeniably become more commercialised or commodified in recent decades (Patt, 2001; Williams-Oerberg, 2021). Traditionally the laity is supposed to provide material support 'in kind' to monastic communities, but nowadays this support has become more money based. There are even cases of 'billionaire monks' living lavish lifestyles, which is, or should be, offensive to the core principles and beliefs of Buddhism. In the extreme, as in Thailand, there are regular reports of monks charged with money laundering, drunk driving, drug trafficking and even murder![33,34] Leaving aside the extreme situation in Thailand, it is evident that, in general, Buddhism has become more trivialised with Buddhist symbols sold as tourist souvenirs or cheap fashion objects robbing them of their meaning (Igunma, 2019).

As stated previously, following the Eightfold Path means that a person must lead a morally good life, practicing the virtues of love and compassion. Inherently, one of the main principles of Buddhism is non-violence, which means helping others or at the very least refraining from doing others any harm (Dalai Lama, 2000). Sadly, this basic principle is not always followed, as exemplified by the infamous cases in France of Sogyal Rinpoche and Robert Spatz. The former was for many years the most powerful Tibetan Buddhist leader in the West, who resigned and fled in disgrace when evidence emerged that he had regularly beaten, sexually abused and humiliated his followers (Finnigan and Hogendoorn, 2021). The latter was found guilty of sexual abuse and child kidnapping and given a suspended prison sentence.[35,36] Though less well known, the sexual behaviour of Sangharakshita, the founder of the Triratna Buddhist Order based in the UK, was also judged to have caused "confusion and pain" to some of his followers in the community (Adhisthana, 2020).[37]

Finally, it is worth noting that despite the increase in the number of its followers and its popularity, in absolute numbers Buddhism remains a minority religion accounting for <6.9% of the world's population (in 2015).[38]

[33] The Guardian (2013) Thailand cracks down on monks living it up with luxuries.
[34] Vice (2022) Buddhist Monks Keep Getting Arrested for Corruption, Murder and Drug Trafficking.
[35] See: Buddhism, the Law of Silence - Abuses in Tibetan Buddhism.
[36] Le Monde (2022) "Bouddhisme, la loi du silence"
[37] See also https://adhisthana.org/
[38] Pew Research data: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/pf_17-04-05_projectionsupdate_grl310px/

1.4 Discussion



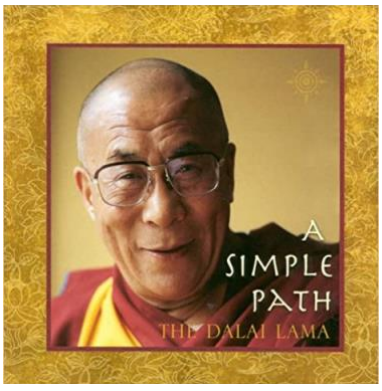
Buddhism has always held a fascination for me ever since I first encountered it. I don't recall when that was exactly, but possibly it was from reading the novel *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse or maybe I'd come across something about the Dalai Lama. He was frequently in the news because of the ongoing struggles for the liberation of Tibet, for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.[39]

Or perhaps, it was because I'd watched *The Long Search*, a great TV documentary, which was broadcast by BBC in 1977? The documentary covered all the main religions, not only Buddhism, and I enthusiastically bought the book that accompanied the TV programme (Smart, 1977).

Figure 8. Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse.

What was the attraction of Buddhism? Well, its rejection of a creator god and its conception of life as one (sentient) stage in a cyclical process of birth/death/rebirth makes Buddhism quite unlike any of the other major religions. Even if one didn't agree with, or know, some or all of its doctrine, one had to admire the breadth of its scope and its desire to understand the true meaning of life and the place of humans in an infinite, constantly evolving universe. Then, of course, there was the tantalising prospect of finding some sort of 'enlightenment'. Initially I didn't know exactly what Buddhism meant by that (and perhaps I still don't), but evidently the Buddhist monks with their serene smiles looked very happy about it. Interestingly, at one point in the episode of *The Long Search* about Buddhism, the presenter Ronald Eyre remarks that although the monks have effectively forsaken society, paradoxically, society is drawn to them.[40] Eyre's observation was directed towards the Buddhist community in Sri Lanka that the programme focused on, but undoubtedly the same could be said of many people in the West (see e.g. Losada, 2004).

So, given my interest in Buddhism, did I become a follower? Well, I'm afraid not. I had always had some misgivings about Buddhism despite the serene smiles of those monks. It seemed far too pessimistic about human nature, plagued by 'suffering'. The focus on detachment from one's emotions seemed a timid approach to life as well as frankly, unrealistic. Was it maybe just too passive? Or perhaps too self-indulgent with hours spent meditating? Wasn't that the opposite of practising altruistic love? And so on.



I think these misgivings about Buddhism were finally reinforced when I read the Dalai Lama's book, *A Simple Path,* and about which I wrote a short review.[41]

Figure 9. A Simple Path by The Dalai Lama

[39] https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1989/summary/
[40] Episodes of the TV documentary can be found on YouTube, e.g. Footprint of the Buddha.
[41] See Good overview, beautifully presented.

At one point, the Dalai Lama remarks that "*everything beautiful and good, everything that we consider desirable, brings us suffering in the end*" (p.56). I did not agree then, and thinking about it again now, I disagree even more. The Dalai Lama tries to explain what he means with this example:

> "*On an everyday level, for example, when you have good food, nice clothes, attractive jewellery and so on, for a short time you feel really marvellous. Not only do you enjoy a feeling of satisfaction, but when you show your things to others, they share in it too. But then one day passes (…) and the very same object that once gave you such pleasure might simply cause you frustration. That is the nature of things – they change. The same also applies to fame (…) The same sort of change can happen in friendships and in sexual relationships. At the beginning you almost go mad with passion, but later that very passion can turn to hatred and aggression…" (pp. 55-56)*

Now whilst it is true that today we live in a highly consumerist, materialistic world (both in the West and East), whilst it is also true there are people who endlessly crave things, who are 'shopaholics', follow fashion trends etc., this doesn't necessarily mean all or any of these people must inevitably become dissatisfied with their new items of clothing, jewellery or whatever else they have acquired. True, some things might be wastefully thrown away, but some might simply get replaced, matter-of-factly; some things might be retained and treasured for years. As for sexual relationships, early passion might indeed fade, but it might be replaced in later years by a calmer relationship equally or even more satisfying. In my view, this gloomy diagnosis of the Dalai Lama's that in life "*all our joyful experiences are tainted and ultimately bring suffering*" is fundamentally wrong, perhaps reflecting his rather naïve (monastic-based) understanding of human nature and human relationships. Besides, in the time of the Buddha, 2,500 years ago, the vast majority of the population were poor with few possessions, and few things to crave apart from food.[42]

It is important to note here that 'suffering', which is a very emotive term in English, is not the only translation of *dukkha*. According to the Dalai Lama, the word *duhkha* (sic) can also mean frustration and unsatisfactoriness (which he uses in the example above). Ronald Eyre in *The Long Search* (*ibid*) also proposes the term unsatisfactoriness. According to Smart (1977), *dukkha* means 'ill-fare', i.e. the opposite of *sukha* or welfare. And lastly, for Abelsen (1993) *dukkha* means unrest or a lack of inner peace due to the transitoriness of life. It is evident that these alternative translations of *dukkha* put the Buddhist concept in an entirely different light. Saying that things and events in life make one feel unsatisfied, frustrated or not at peace is far less disturbing or distressing than the implied pain and misery of 'suffering'.

[42] As David-Néel sagely remarked, in the time of the Buddha the poor in Hindu society were numerous, but no one was in danger of death from starvation except during a famine. Poverty in the form in which it exists in the West today had not yet been created (David-Néel, 1939, p.165).

Looking afresh at what is meant by suffering, also brings into question the interpretation of the origins of the Buddhism. It will be recalled (see Life of the Buddha above) that Siddharta had been shocked to learn of the harsh realities of people's daily existence, in particular their suffering from disease, old age and death. Be that as it may, no amount of meditation, mindfulness or other such practises is going to prevent a person from ageing and ultimately dying. Unless of course, the person avoids or escapes that suffering by in some way 'transcending' it, seeing it as a temporary stage of (sentient) existence, which given time will pass. Which I suppose is essentially what Buddhism teaches.

According to Buddhism, to avoid suffering one needs to become detached from any strong emotions, particularly negative ones.[43] Supposedly, through 'pure mindfulness' one can dissociate from the anger, perceive it as merely a collection of thoughts, and hence make the anger just fade away. To the extent that such detachment is really possible, it must logically also apply to positive emotions of love, caring, empathy or other strong emotions such as sorrow. These emotions are surely beneficial to happiness and a state to which you would want to attach, not detach? In the discussion between Matthieu Ricard and Wolf Singer on this issue (Ricard and Singer, 2017), Ricard argues, weakly, that the aim is not to cease to experience emotions completely, but to avoid being enslaved by them.

However, this does not really address the inconsistency that is inherent in Buddhism. According to the Dalai Lama (2000), emotions "have no valid basis" no matter how real and strong they may seem. If this is true of negative emotions, it must also apply to positive emotions. Buddhism cannot have it both ways although that is what it appears to want. It assumes that if negative emotions, bad impulses or "poisons" are made to disappear, dissolve or thought away, the positive feelings of compassion and altruistic love will somehow grow and flourish, *but these positive feelings will be valid*.

Interestingly, Singer argues that negative emotions have important functions for survival. He writes, "they have not evolved and been conserved by chance (…) they protect us and help us avoid adverse situations" (*ibid*, p.12). Ricard seems to accept this point when he says anger can also be rightful indignation in the face of injustice: "Anger can be a reaction that allows us to rapidly overcome an obstacle preventing us from achieving something worthwhile" (*ibid*, p.18). Also, the Buddhist aim to detach oneself from one's emotions and any distractions as a means of attaining some sort of inner peace, seems to me not only impossible, but a recipe for a very dull life. As Singer puts it, such detachment means subduing "other strong, precious, and utterly joyful feelings associated with highs and lows at the same time (…) taking equanimity in place of intensity" (*ibid*, p.84). I agree with Singer and would add that Buddhism, in its efforts to strive for "pure awareness", is possibly not experiencing life to the full.

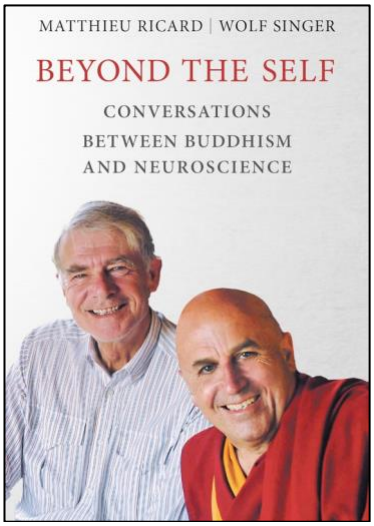


Figure 10. Beyond the Self by Ricard and Singer

[43] The three "root poisons" are greed, hatred and delusions, often depicted as the rooster, the snake and the pig in the Wheel of Life paintings.

An important concept in Buddhism is that there is no true self and that the "I" of the ego is illusory. The sense of permanence that most people feel about themselves has, it is claimed, no real foundation. This concept is certainly difficult to come to terms with especially for people from Western cultural backgrounds (Irons, 2008). The idea of striving to become "egoless" seems intuitively impossible. But if it were possible, does it serve any useful purpose to say that the self, the I, has no material reality, is a false construct of the mind? I'm not convinced. Matthieu Ricard has held up the Dalai Lama as an example of the perfect egoless individual, but Wolf Singer counters that a person having no ego problems, is really no different to someone having a strong personality, self-confidence, and (non-narcissistic) self. If you accept Singer's argument, it seems that Buddhism is merely advocating not being self-centred, which is hardly a profound revelation.

Another fundamental concept in Buddhism is rebirth, or reincarnation as it's also known, although the former term is preferred. As explained earlier, an individual's present life here in the world is regarded as a transitory stage in a cyclical process of birth/death/rebirth, which continues (but eventually ceases, it is hoped) as determined by one's accumulated *karma*. But what is the evidence for rebirth? From the Buddhist perspective, the main evidence appears to consist of cumulative testimonies (over centuries) from Buddhist monks and teachers whose personal experiences support their belief in rebirth. Whilst not doubting the sincerity of their beliefs, it's not what I would consider robust evidence. Other evidence draws on the world of parapsychology – research on past lives, near death experiences and out-of-body experiences (Poromaa, 2009; Carter, 2012). Poromaa (*ibid*) also includes research in quantum physics in support of rebirth: "A growing number of physicists and philosophers have suggested that quantum mechanical processes are somehow involved in the process that we call consciousness" (*ibid*, p.113). It's certainly an interesting idea!

Even if one accepts that rebirth is true or a real phenomenon in some form, it still leaves the question as to why the human population has significantly increased, and continues to do so? At the time of the Buddha, 2,500 years ago, there were perhaps 50-80 million people in the world; today the population is nearing 8 billion, a staggering 100-fold increase. Why hasn't the population remained constant? In response, Buddhists argue that the 'one-out, one-in' perspective of population is a fundamental misunderstanding of Buddhism, which says that consciousness is unbound by bodily form (see 1.2.4 Karma, p.6). Thus, several explanations for population growth could be hypothesised (Halliwell, 2011):

1. Sentient beings previously expressed in other non-human forms (e.g. animals, insects, etc) have been reborn as human;
2. An influx of energy from other planets, realms, universes – a kind of cosmic migration.
3. 'Human' consciousness has (for reasons unknown) manifested as a greater number of people than it did before.

It's a clever answer to the problem, but it strikes me more as imaginative speculation than well-reasoned science. But where's the harm in that? The universe is vast according to Buddhist cosmology and has always existed. In contrast to the beliefs of other religions, the universe wasn't created; there is no first birth. Consciousness is a basic foundation of the world, which has always co-existed with the material world (Poromaa, 2009).

This is certainly a fascinating idea and one that finds an echo in Iain McGilchrist's recent visionary tome called *The Matter With Things* (McGilchrist, 2021). Amongst numerous other insights, McGilchrist has argued that consciousness is an ontological primitive, something that exists and is part of the constitution of the cosmos, i.e. it can't evolve out of unconsciousness. So maybe Buddhism has more to offer than I first appreciated? As for rebirth, I leave the final words to a Zen teacher who invites us "to be open to the possibility that Buddha's teaching on *karma* and rebirth holds truths that can enrich our lives and help us in dying" (*ibid*, p.172).

Finally, we come to the Buddhist belief in the empty nature of reality, which perhaps underlies all the issues discussed above. In my view, this claim of the intrinsic meaninglessness of life – "*cling to nothing because there's nothing anywhere solid enough to cling to* – gives Buddhism an undeniable nihilistic streak. I am also prompted to add that any religion or philosophy that conceives of "16 types of emptiness" has been seriously over-thinking the problem![44] And Buddhism does not entirely refute this charge of nihilism even allowing for the importance it places on human compassion and altruism. Max Muller was not wrong when he wrote this:

> "*How a religion which taught the annihilation of all existence, of all thought, of all individuality and personality, as the highest object of all endeavours, could have laid hold of the minds of millions of human beings, and how at the same time, by enforcing the duties of morality, justice, kindness, and self-sacrifice, it could have exercised a decided beneficial influence, not only on the natives of India, but on the lowest barbarians of Central Asia, is one of the riddles which no philosophy has yet been able to solve". (Max Muller, 1857)*

To conclude, there is much to admire about Buddhism (as I do), but it is not a religion that I could seriously follow or embrace. Ultimately, the enlightenment of which Buddhism speaks and urges us to seek, is that life in itself has no intrinsic meaning. Yet, by leading a moral and compassionate life, accumulating good *karma* (or removing negative *karma*) you can finally escape the cycle of suffering by ceasing to exist – whoopee! If that philosophy appeals to you, then so be it, but as Smart (1977) put it, it can seem like a form of extinction or spiritual suicide. Supposedly, the Buddha's answer to this criticism was that if I still struggle for survival as 'me' and worry about the future then I have not gained true peace. Hmm.

As I remarked in my review of the Dalai Lama's book, even though at times the "*Simple Path*" gets a tad complex, the path is ultimately very simple and comes down to two basic principles: 1) develop a good heart, and 2) be your own master. I can live with that.

[44] Dalai Lama (2000) *A Simple Life*, p.121.

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