



A Short
Introduction
to Buddhism
Preliminary reading





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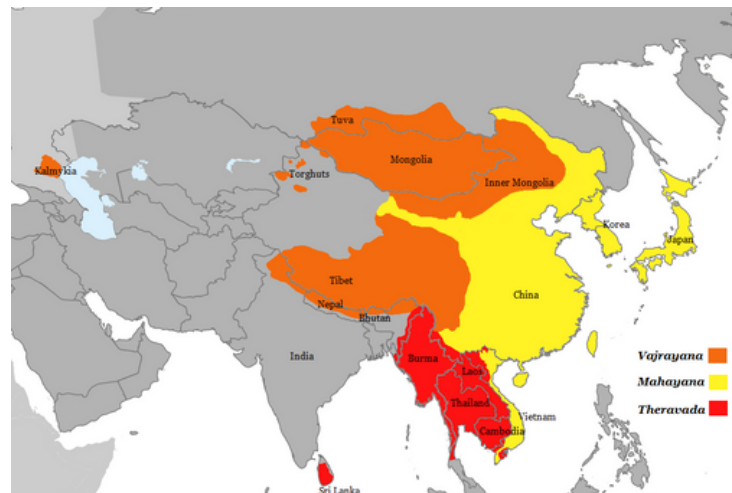
Introduction

If this is your first encounter with Buddhist philosophy, many of the ideas discussed in this course may sound new or unfamiliar. While it would be impossible to faithfully present two and a half millennia of philosophical inquiry in just a few pages, these notes will help you to grasp the fundamental concepts that you will encounter throughout the course. After a general introduction to the history and fundamental ideas of Buddhism, this document focuses on the Mahāyāna tradition (one of the three main branches in Buddhism). In particular, the key concepts of emptiness and dependent origination are explained according to Nāgārjuna's Middle-Way philosophy, which is the interpretation of Buddhism most often discussed during the course. You can find more information on other Buddhist schools in a separate document, *A Short Introduction to Buddhist Tenets*.

Historical Background

Modern scholars estimate that Siddhartha Gautama, who later became known as the historical Buddha (the awakened one), lived in India around the 5th century BCE. According to traditional accounts, Gautama was moved by his deep compassion for the suffering of all beings, who repeatedly experienced cycles of birth, ageing, sickness, and death (a cycle that, due to reincarnation, he perceived as endless). After years of intense study, meditation, and ascetic practices, he is said to have achieved enlightenment and completely broken free from the cycle of suffering and rebirth (*samsāra*). Following his enlightenment, he founded a monastic community (*Sangha*) and devoted his life to teaching the path to liberation and enlightenment (*Dharma*).

The teachings of the Buddha were transmitted by his disciples, first orally and then in writing. During the centuries, this led to the development of different schools and traditions. Today, there are three main branches of Buddhism: Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. Of these, Theravāda Buddhism is considered to be the oldest and, in many ways, the most conservative, as it rejects the authenticity of Mahāyāna sutras (later Buddhist scriptures, appearing after



around the 1st century BCE) and only recognises the teachings included in the so-called Pāli Canon. By contrast, Mahāyāna Buddhists consider as canonical not only the early scriptures of the Pāli Canon, but also the later sutras expounding the Mahāyāna path. This doctrine focuses on the Bodhisattva ideal, the wish to achieve enlightenment to be able to free all sentient beings from their suffering, and on the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*), a method of liberation based on the direct realisation of emptiness (*Śūnyatā*; see section on emptiness below). The third branch, Vajrayāna Buddhism, complements the Mahāyāna approach with tantric methods as a help to achieve Buddhahood.



After the death of the Buddha, numerous scholars and practitioners expanded and developed his teachings, leading to the development of different schools of thought. One of the most influential early Mahāyāna philosophers was Arya Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE). He is considered to be the founder of the Middle-Way school (*Mādhyamaka*), and his ideas have been profoundly influential in the development of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. A key aim of his work is to clarify the Buddha’s teachings on emptiness (*śūnyatā*), the idea that all phenomena lack an intrinsic and independent existence (see also the section below).

Another major figure in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism is Dignāga (c. 480 – c. 540 CE), considered to be one of the founders of Buddhist logic. His philosophical work addresses the question of epistemology, that is, how one can acquire valid knowledge about the world through perception and reasoning. Dignāga ideas were further developed by Dharmakīrti (6th or 7th century CE), whose work on valid cognition is discussed in more detail by Prof. John Dunne in Module 3. The epistemology of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti was integrated in the Middle-Way doctrine of Nagarjuna by Śāntarakṣita, who also contributed to the diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet in the 8th century CE



Nāgārjuna [c. 150 – c. 250 CE]



Dharmakīrti [c. 600* - c. 660 CE].



Dignāga [c. 480 – c. 540 CE]



Śāntarakṣita [c. 725–788 CE]

The Four Noble Truths

A central idea to Buddhist philosophy and practice is that our experience of suffering arises from a distorted perception of reality, which is the fundamental cause of all negative emotions. By bringing our understanding more closely in tune with reality, we can overcome mental suffering and be able to live more meaningful and constructive lives, and eventually achieve enlightenment and abandon suffering altogether. According to tradition, the Buddha's first teaching expounded his ideas about suffering in what are known as the Four Noble Truths:

- **The truth of suffering.** All sentient beings inevitably experience many types of suffering, such as the suffering of birth, aging, sickness and death, as well as the suffering of being separated from what is pleasant, encountering what is unpleasant, and not being able to fulfil one's desires. As long as we have misperceptions about reality, we cannot achieve long-lasting happiness.
- **The truth of the origin of suffering.** Like any other phenomenon, suffering is seen as arising from specific causes and conditions. Ultimately, it is not the result of misfortune nor a punishment from a divine/supernatural entity, but it arises from ignorance – that is, lack of an appropriate understanding of reality. Ignorance gives rise to mental fabrications and conceptual thought, which lead to craving, grasping, and attachment to sensory objects and self. Craving and attachment, in turn, are the main causes behind saṃsāra, the endless cycle of birth, ageing, and death.
- **The truth of the cessation of suffering.** This core presentation of the Buddhist teachings might, at first glance, appear somewhat grim or pessimistic, yet the fundamental message of the Noble Truths is a profoundly optimistic one: suffering is not random, causeless, or arising from the will of a supernatural entity, but it arises from causes and conditions. Therefore, it can be ended by eliminating its causes. This is the third Noble Truth: the complete and permanent extinguishing of suffering is possible.
- **The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering.** In the fourth Noble Truth, the Buddha explains how to achieve cessation of suffering. By realising the wisdom of emptiness (i.e., through a direct perception of the ultimate nature of reality), ignorance is destroyed. This, in turn, brings an end to the craving behind the endless cycle of suffering and rebirth. In Nāgārjuna's words:

‘With the cessation of ignorance, conceptualities will not arise... The entire mass of suffering thereby completely ceases.’¹

— Nāgārjuna

This last point is particularly important, as it makes understanding the nature of reality not merely a scholarly inquiry, but the very condition for individual liberation and enlightenment.

¹ Nāgārjuna, quoted in Westerhoff, Jan (2009). *Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780199705115



Emptiness

As seen in the second Noble Truth, the real cause of suffering is our ignorance of the fundamental nature of reality. What does this exactly mean, and in what way do we misperceive reality? According to Buddhism (as well as other contemplative traditions, such as Advaita Vedanta), our minds project a sense of intrinsic and independent existence (svabhava) unto ourselves and the objects around us. The Sanskrit term, svabhava, can be translated as ‘essential nature’ and refers to an intrinsic essence which is unconditioned, uncaused, and not dependent on other entities.

Mahāyāna scholars argue that all phenomena (objects, people, perceptions, ideas, etc.) lack svabhava: they are empty of an unconditioned, uncaused, and independent intrinsic essence. This lack of intrinsic existence is referred to as śūnyata, which is frequently translated to as “emptiness” or “voidness”. This idea is a recurrent theme in the Perfection of Wisdom sutras (including the Heart Sutra) and is the foundation of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy. Here, wisdom (as the opposite of ignorance) refers to a deep meditative state in which there is a direct, non-conceptual realisation of emptiness. This state is considered to be the doorway to enlightenment. The meditator understands that all phenomena have the same nature of a mirage, a drop of dew, a water bubble, or a cloud, and is therefore free from a mistaken perception of reality.

It is important to clarify that – as Nāgārjuna and other Middle-Way scholars clearly emphasise – emptiness is not the same as nothingness. The statement that “all phenomena are empty” simply means that, whatever phenomenon is considered, it is impossible to find an intrinsic, independent essence. In other words, this understanding of emptiness can be thought of as form of radical relativity: it does not deny existence, but independent existence. Therefore, all phenomena and views are seen as relative. Thus, the “Middle Way” avoids both the extreme of nihilism (thinking that nothing exists at all) and the extreme of absolutism (thinking that something exists intrinsically).



Dependent Origination

Like modern science, Buddhist thought recognises that phenomena are inextricably linked together in chains of causes and effects. According to Buddhist thought, all phenomena (objects, people, perceptions, ideas, etc.) arise in dependence upon other phenomena, which in turn depend on prior causes. It follows that, if the causes cease to exist, so do their products. Thus, the Buddha taught that all dependently arisen phenomena are impermanent, that is, they are subject to change and transformation. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, dependent origination is closely connected with emptiness of independent existence. The fact that phenomena arise in dependence on their causes, and do not exist without something causes them, proves that they are in fact empty of inherent/intrinsic existence. Again, in Nāgārjuna's words:

‘Since nothing has arisen without depending on something, there is nothing that is not empty.’²

— Nāgārjuna

In the next preliminary reading, *A Short Introduction to Buddhist Tenets*, you will find more detailed explanations about emptiness and dependent origination, and how these concepts have been understood by different schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Throughout the course, and especially in Modules 4 and 5, the concepts of emptiness and dependent origination will be discussed in greater detail. The key takeaway is that emptiness refers to the lack of an intrinsic nature, while dependent origination (or interdependence) refers to the arising of (relative) phenomena through the law of cause and effect.

² Nāgārjuna, quoted in Westerhoff, Jan (2009). Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction. *Oxford University Press*. ISBN 9780199705115