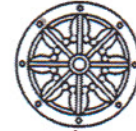


CHAPTER SIX

Buddhist Sects



Shortly after Buddha died in 486 B.C., a Buddhist council was called and was held in the ancient Indian city of Rajagrha. The purpose of the council was to establish doctrine that all Buddhists could agree on. The council apparently did not altogether succeed, because about a century later a Second Buddhist Council met to iron out the details. But there were many issues that could not be resolved. The debate led to the splitting of Buddhism into several schools and sects. (The word sect, as used here, refers to a religious group that separates itself from an established church or belief.) In this chapter, you will learn some facts about the most important of these schools and sects.

Theravada Buddhism

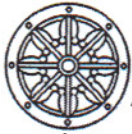
Theravada Buddhism is one of two large schools or groups to which most Buddhists belong. (The other is Mahayana Buddhism, which is covered next.) *Theravada* means “teachings of the elders.” As you learned in a previous chapter, Theravada Buddhism is the dominant form of Buddhism in southeast Asia. Most Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos follow this school of Buddhism.

Theravada Buddhists look to the Pali Canon of the Tipitaka as the authority in scripture. By so doing, they believe their form of Buddhism adheres more closely to the original teachings of Buddha. They point to Buddha himself in their belief that each person must find the way to enlightenment and Nirvana alone. They see Buddha as only a man. They do not worship him nor do they pray to him. Theravada Buddhists, in fact, do not pray

at all during worship. When they leave an offering at a statue of Buddha, they do so only in the hope of earning merit in their next life. Unlike Mahayana Buddhists in northern Asia, they have not created a pantheon (family) of deities to whom they offer prayers.

The followers of Theravada Buddhism see monks as the perfect models of Buddhism. It is even possible for young men to become monks on a temporary basis. During the rainy season, when there is little for farmers to do, many young men retire to a monastery for a short time and live the life of a monk. They shave their heads, don saffron robes, and carry begging bowls. When the rainy season is over and farming begins again, these young men leave the monastery and return to their usual life. Sometimes boys as young as 4 or 5 put on orange robes and spend a night in a monastery.

Monastic ordination, or the ceremonies surrounding a person becoming a monk, even serves as a coming-of-age ritual for many Buddhist boys. In some ways, it resembles the rite of passage (recognizing a young person as an adult) observed in other religions. Boys might spend from a few months to a few years in a monastery, studying Buddhist practices and learning to read and write. But they may, if they choose to do so, take the necessary vows and become regular members of a monastery.



3. How do Theravada Buddhists view Buddha?
4. Whom do Theravada Buddhists consider to be exemplary Buddhists?

Mahayana Buddhism

Many Buddhists did not agree with those who followed the Theravada school of the religion. They came to be called Mahayana Buddhists. *Mahayana* means “greater vehicle.” The term implied that there were different ways to attain Nirvana. It is the opposite of *Theravada*, which, as was mentioned previously, means “teachings of the elders.” Originally, Theravada Buddhism was referred to as Hinayana Buddhism. *Hinayana* means “lesser vehicle.”

Mahayana Buddhists believe that people need the help of others in attaining Nirvana. They do not agree with their Theravada counterparts who maintain that each person must find the way to nirvana alone. Mahayana Buddhists further say that because of reincarnation and the continuing birth/death cycle, all people are related. For that reason, Buddhists must help one another. This belief even applies to criminals. Mahayana Buddhists insist that you should help a criminal become enlightened because that person might have been your mother or father in a previous life.

For help in becoming enlightened, Mahayana Buddhists rely on bodhisattvas. A *bodhisattva* is someone who has already become enlightened but who has willingly postponed his or her entry into Nirvana to help others get there. A bodhisattva chooses to be reborn again and again for this reason.

Mahayana Buddhists recognize thousands of bodhisattvas. They pray to them for guidance and help. Thus, Mahayana Buddhists, unlike those of the Theravada school, have created a family of quasi-deities. *Quasi* is a prefix that means “almost or partly.” Deities, of course, are gods. So bodhisattvas are seen as being

almost god-like.

The most important celestial, or heavenly bodhisattva is Avalokiteshvara, or “The Lord Who Looks Down.” Avalokiteshvara is thought to “look down” on earth and protect people. He is the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In the Himalayan nation of Tibet, Avalokiteshvara is believed to be reincarnated in the person of the Dalai Lama. (More about the Dalai Lama, who he is, and the kind of Buddhism practiced in Tibet later in the chapter.)

Another important bodhisattva is Maitreya, the “buddha of the future age.” Maitreya is believed to rescue people in danger. You may be familiar with Maitreya and not know it. In China, Maitreya became the round-bellied Laughing Buddha. Perhaps you have seen a statue of the Laughing Buddha in a shop that features Oriental objects.

Two other bodhisattvas of note are Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, and Kshitigarbha, who provides comfort to the dead and protects children, travelers, and pilgrims.

The best known bodhisattva who has become a heavenly buddha is Amitabha, a name that means “infinite light.” In Japan, Amitabha is worshiped as Amida. He is believed to have established a paradise called Pure Land. Pure Land is one of the many offshoots of Mahayana Buddhism that is covered in another section of this chapter.

Mahayana Buddhism spread to the northern Asian nations of China, Japan, Korea, and Tibet.

Words to remember:

sect
pantheon
monastic
ordination
rite of passage

Tantric Buddhism

A third school of Buddhism exists in the Himalayan nations of Tibet and Nepal. It is called Tantric Buddhism. The word Tantric is derived from *Tantra* which means holy books dealing with rituals, discipline, and meditation. Because monks or priests in Tibet are known as lamas, Tantric Buddhism is also referred to as Lamaism.

Tantric Buddhism first appeared in Tibet in the 7th century A.D. It blended Indian Buddhism with ancient Tibetan beliefs. It is completely different from other forms of Buddhism. Its worship consists of reciting prayers and sacred texts, as well as the chanting of hymns. Much is also made of meditation around mandalas, circular diagrams that represent the universe. All of this is accompanied by the blowing of trumpets and the beating of drums. Magic charms and mystical incantations also come into play, and dancing lamas wear masks and perform ritual dances to appease the spirits.

At one time, more than one-fifth of the people of Tibet were lamas. That number decreased dramatically after the Chinese Communists seized control of the country in 1950. Still, lamas and the monasteries they occupy flourish to a certain extent. The highest lama is the Dalai Lama. Dalai means "ocean," indicating the power of this all-important priest-king. Tibet has had Dalai Lamas for centuries. As you have already learned, Tibetans believe the Dalai Lama is the reincarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

When a Dalai Lama dies, his spirit is believed to be reborn into a specially-chosen child. Oracles are consulted as to just where this child might be found. Then a search throughout the country begins. When the present Dalai Lama (who is the fourteenth) was found as a child, the oracles had a vision that led searchers to the farmhouse where the child was found. Like all previous Dalai

Lamas, the child had to pass certain tests. Among these tests was his ability to recognize objects from a former life.

The present Dalai Lama of Tibet lives in exile today. He left the country in 1959, and presently resides in Dharmasala, India.

Section Review:

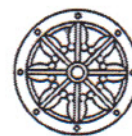
Zen Buddhism

Zen Buddhism is one of the many offshoots of Mahayana Buddhism. It is the predominant kind of Buddhism found in Japan. There are two schools or types: Soto and Rinzai. Soto Zen holds that enlightenment can be gradually attained. Rinzai Zen, on the other hand, teaches that enlightenment comes in a sudden flash of insight or awareness.

Zen Buddhism began in China, where it was called Chan. *Chan* means "meditation." According to legend, a wise Indian man named Bodhidharma once sat staring at the wall of a cave in China for nine years. During his period of intense meditation, he cut off his eyelids because their weight added to his weariness.

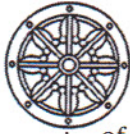
He also eventually lost the use of both legs from sitting in the lotus position (the position in which Buddha is usually depicted) for so long. But he supposedly attained enlightenment. It was this intense form of meditation that was brought to Japan in the 12th century A.D.

By far the most difficult form of Zen Buddhism to practice is Rinzai. Monks-to-be go through a very strict period of training. They are required to sit for hours in the lotus position. All the while,



Words to remember:

Hinayana Buddhism
bodhisattvas
Avalokiteshvara
Maitreya
Laughing Buddha
Manjushri
Amitabha
Amida
Pure Land
Tantric Buddhism
Tantra
lamas
Lamaism
mandalas
Dalai Lama
Dalai
oracles



Words to remember:

Soto
Rinzai
Chan
Bodhidharma
koans

they, and lay people (non-monks) seeking to become enlightened, try to think of nothing. They do not think of their families. They do not think of their jobs or daily concerns. "Be nothing, think nothing," is the principle followed.

Zen Buddhists of the Rinzai school also make use of koans. A koan is a riddle in the form of a paradox used to stimulate intuitive (as opposed to strictly rational) thinking. One of the better known koans is "Imagine the sound of one hand clapping." As an aid to meditation, koans are intended to encourage a person's mind to work in a different way. These riddles, along with shouts and blows on the part of monks, attempt to shock a person into sudden enlightenment.

Pure Land Buddhism

In addition to Zen Buddhism, there are at least five other offshoots of Mahayana Buddhism prevalent in Japan. The most important of these, Pure Land Buddhism, was mentioned earlier. Pure Land is also called Jodo-shu. It fulfilled the need some Buddhists felt for a heaven-like nirvana. It is believed to be a Most Happy Land ruled by a Buddha called Amida.

Pure Land scriptures describe Pure Land as a place where people suffer no pain and enjoy all kinds of pleasure. Heavenly music plays constantly, and there are beautiful birds everywhere. Lakes are filled with gems and ponds are lined with gold dust. When a good person who follows Pure Land Buddhism dies, he or she is said to be immediately reborn into Amida's Pure Land.

For Further Thought:

1. Which school or sect of Buddhism do you think more closely follows the original teachings of Buddha? Explain your answer.
2. Draw a map of Asia. Label and color red those countries where Theravada prevails. Label and color blue those countries where Mahayana Buddhism is predominant.
3. Pretend you are a monk in a Zen Buddhist monastery. Describe what you think your typical day would be like.
4. During the Middle Ages, Japan's warrior or knightly class, the samurai, were attracted to Zen Buddhism. Tell why you think the samurai would find Zen appealing.
5. Imagine yourself being whisked back by a time machine to the cave in China where the Indian holy man Bodhidharma has just emerged after nine years. Create a dialogue you might have had with this founder of Chan (Zen) Buddhism.
6. Consult your classmates and try to determine why Buddhism, which spread throughout Asia, eventually almost died out in India, the land of its birth.
7. What benefits do you think people derive from meditation, a ritual practiced in most religions of the world?