

BUDDHIST EAST ASIA: INTRODUCTION

The central aim of NEH summer institutes is enabling college and university faculty to develop new areas of teaching expertise: in our case, developing curricula and research materials related to Buddhist Asia. That is a very broad “area.”

- the glass half full: plenty of “space” in which to come up with personally useful projects (about which, more at lunch)
- the glass half empty: an impossible task
 - scope:
 - geographical, historical, linguistic, aesthetic
 - detail:
 - source materials: the standard East Asian edition of the Buddhist canon (*Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*) contains 2,920 texts in 100 volumes or around 100,000 pages
 - secondary literature tens of thousands of books, articles and films offering the most information-dense picture of Buddhism that has ever been available

The institute as “learning community”

- a minimal feature of such communities: *civility*
- to this I would add: aspirations for and appreciations of *diversity*
 - variety: a quantitative measure of multiplicity that implies nothing more than coexistence—something both visible at a glance and realizable at will
 - diversity: a qualitative index of the degree to which differences serve as resources for mutual contribution to sustainably shared flourishing—a relational achievement

As the Japanese literary and cultural theorist Naoki Sakai has noted, cultural difference is not an objectively observable fact; it is an experience of dismay, disruption and discomfort.

- working *through* cultural differences to learn-about, -with and -from others involves working *into* new ways of attuning-to/relating-with them
- this process of relational attunement can take place at different registers, including the semantic, somatic and aesthetic
 - that is one of the reasons for invoking the notion of a “total care system” for exploring and explaining the spread of Buddhism into East Asia
 - academic bias to the semantic register
- but one of the truisms about East Asian religions is that primacy is not accorded to belief or confessions of faith, but to somatically and socially embodied practice.

Buddhist traditions entered East Asia from the West in the first century CE, by means of a chain of local-to-local trading routes that stretched from what are now north India through Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, around the Gobi desert and east into central China.

- this morning, I want to set the stage with an overview of the history of Western engagement with Buddhist traditions
- followed by a brief discussion of Buddhist origins and core teachings

West Meets East: Round Two

Nearly 1,500 years after Buddhism first entered China, Christian missionaries first entered East Asia with the earliest documented encounter being the arrival in Japan of Jesuit missionaries from Goa, India, led by Francis Xavier (1506-1552) in 1549.

- an encounter mediated by translations that equated God and Vairocana Buddha, Heaven and the Buddhist Pure Land, and Christianity with Buddhism, resulting in a temple granted for Jesuits to use for their missionary activities
 - understood by Portuguese as a warrant to “produce Christian saints” and by Japanese as a warrant to seek adherents for Buddhist “reform teachings” from India
- later, a more sophisticated conversation of Zen and Jesuit interlocutors—including Joao Rodrigues (1561-1633)—resulted in a conceptual mash-ups of the provisional/ultimate truths, Shingon/Tendai rankings of *kengyō* (exoteric) and *mikkyō* (esoteric) teachings and practices, and Zen claims about transmitting the pure, founding insight of the Buddha
- further biasing by Cristoforo Borri (1583-1632), who lived in both Japan and Vietnam, and the Buddha’s deathbed confession that his 49 years of teaching had been a sham

A 2nd current of encounter: Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) introduced to the *Sutra in 42 Sections* which he understood as documenting that Buddhism was imported to China from India as the result of an aborted imperial mission seeking the “true teachings” of Jesus in 65 CE

- Ricci: Confucianism was a primordial blending of monotheist religion and science
 - Buddhism and Daoism were corrupting influences
- Rodrigues: Ricci’s claims as based on texts and second hand accounts rather than on actual “field work” which demonstrated that all Chinese religions were atheist
 - their “satanic” inner teachings and could be traced back to the Cain/Ham line
 - Buddhism from Egypt; Daoism from Persia; Confucianism from Mesopotamia

A final current: Voltaire (1694-1778) who contested biblical authority and Mediterranean hegemony, forwarded a “universal history” in which divine revelation was the birthright of all humanity, not some hardscrabble “chosen people” from the deserts of the Near East

- birthplace of civilization = India and Buddhism as partial cause for India’s divergence from its monotheistic and rational past (play: *The Tragedy of the Chinese Orphan*)
 - echoing Diderot’s (1713-1784) scathing view of Buddhism as based on “willing nothing, thinking nothing and feeling nothing”: Voltaire deemed Buddhism a religion the “excellences” of which could be readily and easily duplicated in an opium haze
- the result: study of Buddhism in the West was largely via Sanskrit and later Pali texts—a situation that remained virtually unchanged through the early decades of the 20th century
 - missionary “constructs” and garbled intercultural “conversations” gave way to literary encounters shaped by evolving scholarly, imperial and colonial agendas
 - philosophical ventriloquism: Schopenhauer and Nietzsche = Buddhism as foil for giving voice to a Germanic “will to power”

Turning point: 1893 World Parliament of Religions when Buddhist teachers began traveling to the West and adapting their teachings to serve the needs of new “learning communities”→open-ended, improvised blending of Asian and Western semantic, somatic, and social practices. (imagined, e.g., by Jin Chanxiang)

Somewhat ironically, the second great wave of Western interest in Buddhism was also first mediated by Japanese Zen: D.T. Suzuki as a “Buddhist ambassador” and later by Japanese scholars of Buddhist history.

- Suzuki’s carefully crafted presentation of Zen as an alternative to the industrial, military and technological excesses of Western rationality
 - the spread of Zen (an later other traditions of) meditation as *somatic* “corrective” for the personal and social malaise → institutional presence of Buddhism in West
- 1980s phase of scholarly disillusion → “invalidation” of traditional “in-house” histories by contemporary, text-supported and semantically-biased methods of inquiry
 - more recently, some academically-rigorous “revalidations” of core elements of traditional narratives
- but also surge of interest in Tibetan Buddhism complexly informed by contemporary geopolitics, the legacies 19th-20th CE engagements with “original” Buddhist texts in Sanskrit and Pali texts and their Tibetan conservators, and the rise of analytic philosophy

Question: What can we learn from this brief history of intercultural/interreligious encounter, especially with reference to understanding the encounters of East Asian societies with Buddhist traditions?

Buddhist Origins

Prior to 1893 World Parliament of Religions, few Buddhists would have identified themselves as generically “Buddhist.”

- on the ground, across Asia: different “ecologies of enlightenment”
- R. Campany: personally-transmitted “repertoires” of practices and supporting theories

The great variety of Buddhist traditions is in part a function of 1] Buddhist origins taking place during a period of dramatic rural-to-urban migration and industrialization; 2] the Buddha's insistence that teaching be conducted in local vernaculars; and, 3] rapidly expanding trade that enabled Buddhist personnel and paraphernalia to be transported across Eurasia.

But, given the typical, textbook presentation of Buddhism, why?

- Siddhartha Gautama (later known as Shakyamuni Buddha or the “enlightened one of the Shakya clan”) was born in the north Indian foothills of the Himalayas, most likely between 563 BCE (traditional date) and the mid-5th century BCE (contemporary scholarship)
 - left home at 29; did six years of meditative/ascetic training; attained enlightenment; formed an intentional community that valorized “leaving home” to lead lives of voluntary poverty and simplicity aimed at *nibbāna/nirvāṇa*: “blowing out” desires and attachments to “escape” the wheel of birth-and-death; finally, *parinirvāṇa* at age 80
 - textbook caricature: all is suffering...here's why...and here's a way out, forever

Why would such a “world-denying” religion appeal to political and community leaders? or to merchants and traders? or to intellectual and artistic elites? Short answer: Buddhism was not world-denying.

- a path open to all, regardless of gender or class; success based only on one’s own efforts

- *Therīgāthā* (73 nuns) and *Theragāthā* (264 monks) = testimony of efficacy
- Vinaya and evidence of continued familial relations within the ordained community and between the ordained and lay communities (Clarke reading; Liz Wilson)
 - evidence of merit-making donations made by/for families (G. Schopen)
- a path that also included new and apparently effective set of “ritual technologies”
 - *avadāna* literature of “karmic narratives” testifying to the power of “faith” or “conviction” (*śradhā/saddhā*) and merit-making (*punya/puñña*) practices
- at a socio-psychological level, as originally presented, Buddhist teachings can be seen as making sense to and helping people living in the “predicament of culture” (J. Clifford)
 - being at once “in” a culture and in a position of having to look critically “at” it
- but just as importantly, Buddhist teachings also included visions of functionally-organized and geographically-vast imperial rule, with religion = integration + protection
 - birth prediction: Siddhartha Guatama to be either political or spiritual leader: a “wheel-turning king” (*cakravartin; cakkavattin*) or a spiritually “blessed one” (*bhagavat*)
 - ideal polities: densely populated cities with bountiful food, music and the arts
 - King Ashoka (304-232 BCE) and Mauryan Empire
 - new modes of spiritual and material culture (Sanchi; Ajanta)
 - first intercultural high point: Kushan empire (2nd BCE – 3rd CE)

View of Buddhist origins is limited to the perspectives afforded by extant material/architectural evidence and evidence “internal” to the textual traditions of early Buddhism: the “three baskets” of the *sūtras/suttas*, the *vinaya*, and the *abhidharma*.

Core Buddhist Teachings

Buddha’s authority: not as divine prophet or omniscient deity, but as teacher/therapist—a skilled and charismatic communicator

- rather than comprehensive account of absolute reality as it is, he offers as analysis only of how conflict/trouble/suffering (*duḥkha/dukkha*) arise and guidance for their resolution

Texts present a constellation of core concepts/insights of which the most crucial is the insight that all things arise interdependently (*pratītyasamutpāda/pañiccasamuppāda*).

- strongly interpreted: relationality is ontologically more basic than ‘things-related’

Significantly, prior to his insight into the interdependence of all things and enlightenment, the Buddha attained 2 forms of “super-knowledge”: 1] perception of his personal genealogy and its lack of ‘origin’; and 2] perception of the functioning of karma in the process of “rebirth”

- in context of Indian cosmology, karma affects the relational context of continuity across lives, and determines birth as a hell-denizen, hungry ghost, animal, human, asura or god
 - six different *gati* or experiential/relational domains
 - pre-Buddhist ‘karma’: a cosmic order of linear cause-effect relations—*rta*
- Buddha’s innovation: delinking karma from any *transcendent order* and seeing karma instead as the ongoing expression of *emergent order*
- Buddhist teaching of karma = if you pay close and sustained enough attention to experiential/situational dynamics, it becomes evident that sustained patterns of our own values-intentions-actions → consonant patterns of outcomes/opportunities

- it is precisely the functioning of karma that demonstrates our freedom
 - changing values/intentions/actions always possible

In the sūttas, the Buddha claims realizing the interdependence of all things was like coming across a city long forgotten and overgrown by jungle—a jungle of views, desires, attachments and habits.

- Buddhist practice = “jungle clearing,” pulling out the roots of ignorance (*avidyā*; *avijjā*), craving (*trṣṇā*; *taṇhā*); aversion/hatred (*dveṣa*) and habituation (*saṃskāra*; *saṅkhāra*)
- faith/confidence (*śraddhā*; *saddhā*) in four “truths” or “realities” (*satya*):
 - 1] the apparent ubiquity of conflict, trouble and suffering (*duḥkha*; *dukkha*) in the human experience;
 - 2] the arising and persistence of conflict, trouble and suffering as a function of value-infused patterns of causes and conditions;
 - 3] possibilities for disrupting and dissolving those patterns;
 - 4] a pathway or method for accomplishing this personally through the embodied realization of moral clarity (*śīla*), attentive mastery (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*; *prajñā*)

The most basic method of verifying these truths/realities is to see all things as having 3 marks or characteristics (*lakṣaṇa/lakkhaṇa*): “for the purpose of realizing freedom from *duḥkha*,” practice seeing all things *as* troubling (*duḥkha*), as impermanent (*anitya/anicca*), and as without essence/self (*anatman/anattā*)

- seeing all things as troubled/troubling = shifting one’s perspective in *context* (basic ethical shift) and across *scales of interdependence*
- seeing all things as impermanent = nothing lasts, but also no situation is intractable
- seeing all things as without essence/self = is to regard all things and all the relationships constituting them as open to significant revision

In early Buddhist teachings, seeing things as without-self was connected with a deconstruction of our conventional sense of self or personal identity into five clusters or groups (*skandha*; *khandha*):

- being present bodily or materially (*rūpa*); being present in feelings of liking, disliking, neutrality (*vedanā*); being present perceptually (*saññā*; *saṃjñā*); being present habitually (*saṅkhāra*; *saṃskāra*); being present as one six modes of discriminating consciousness that emerge as the six sense organs interact with objects sensible to them (*viññāṇa*; *vijñāna*)
 - investigating these modes of presence, we find nothing that accords with the concept of self as an unchanging, underlying substance or entity
 - all that is evident are bodily, emotional, perceptual, habitual, discriminatory occurrences—phenomenal events arising and passing away

These “jungle clearing” practices open prospects for cultivating moral clarity (*śīla*), attentive mastery (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*pañña/pañña*) and progressing on the Middle Path.

Moral clarity or *śīla* is often identified with the rules and customs of the monastic community, and with precepts taken by lay practitioners. But more broadly it is an index of commitment to orienting relational dynamics in a liberating direction.

- a behaviorally significant transformation of being able to discern and respond effectively to the dramatic or karmic currents shaping the topographies and trajectories of our daily lives

Attentive mastery is my rendering of *samādhi* which literally means “concentration,” but which in Buddhist context refers to a quality of awareness that is neither buffeted nor caught by sensory events, thoughts or emotions, implying both focus and flexibility.

- emerges with energetic practice of mindfulness (*smṛtyupasthāna/satipaṭṭhāna*)
 - especially with regard to the five “components” of sentient being (*skandha/khandā*): bodily form, feelings, perceptions, habitual conditioning factors, and consciousness
- associated with complementary approaches to meditation: calming or settling meditation (*śamatha*) and insight meditation (*vipaśyanā/vipasannā*)

Wisdom in early Buddhist traditions was traditionally characterized as emerging with insight into interdependence and the shutting off of polluting inflows/outflows (*āsrava/āsava*) and mental defilements (*kleśa/kilesa*). In later, Mahayana traditions of the kind that became dominant in East Asia, wisdom was associated with realizing the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all things in combination with the cultivation of great compassion (*mahakarūṇā*).

- it is this valorization of *śūnyatā* that so vexed the Jesuit missionaries in Japan and China
 - yet, realizing the “emptiness” of all things is realizing that which is prior to all conceptualization, the subject-object or grasper-grasped dichotomy
 - *tathatā* or “suchness.” “thusness”
 - that which obtains in the absence of all “levels of abstraction”

The Buddhist Middle Path, then, is not a clearing or abstract midway point between the extremes of eternalism and annihilationism, asceticism and hedonism, or the more modern dichotomies of individualism and collectivism or universalism and relativism.

- instead, the Middle Path is perhaps best seen as traveled by moving perpendicular or oblique to the entire spectrum of all such dichotomies or dualisms
 - *Sūta Nipata*: most basic source of human conflict: “this is true; all else is false”

Yet, Middle Path ≠ skepticism or an embrace of the relativity. See: *Sakkapañha Sūta* (DN 21):

- conflicts ← jealousy & greed ← fixed likes & dislikes ← craving desires ← dwelling on things ← *prapañca* / *papañca* or mentally proliferating relational impediments
- ending conflict, trouble and suffering = “cutting through *prapañca*”
 - decreasing *akuśala* patterns of engagement and eventuality and increasing *kuśala* patterns
 - *kuśala* = wholesome or skillful to an exemplary or superlative degree
- conflict resolution occurs only through *resolutely and creatively enriching activity*, moving in the direction of appreciative and contributory virtuosity

Personal Ideals

In the earliest strata of Buddhist texts, the personal ideal is the *arahant* (Skt: *arhat*) or “worthy one” who has personally realized freedom from being subject to rebirth and the mental afflictions or defilements (*kilesa*; *kleśa*) that prevent virtuosic (*kuśala*) conduct.

- although freedom from the cycle of birth-and-death (*saṃsāra*) is often interpreted literally as some kind of final departure, it is clear that realizing this freedom could be accomplished in this life, with this very body

- *nibbāna* literally means “cooled down” or “blown out,” and figuratively points toward the absence of causes and conditions for conflict, trouble and suffering = emancipation from all forms of compulsory presence

As a personal ideal, being *freely present* implies being no longer subject to the compelling emotional attachments that both bind us and hold us forcibly apart within families and the mundane communities in which we lead our daily lives.

- being *free-from* the “fetters” (*saṃyojana*) that enmesh us in continued suffering
- being *free-to* engage others in ways that are emotionally apt
 - thus, well embarked on the Buddhist Middle Path = suffusing 10 directions with the immeasurable relational qualities of qualities of compassion (*karuṇā*), equanimity (*upeksā; upekkhā*), loving-kindness (*maitrī; mettā*), and joy in the good fortune of others (*muditā*) [see, e.g., *Tevijja Sutta*, *Dīgha Nikāya* 13]

In the somewhat later strata of texts associated with Mahāyāna traditions, the personal ideal is not just to reproduce personally the Buddha’s realization of freedom from *duḥkha*, but to emulate his intention to help all sentient beings author their own liberation—the ideal of the *bodhisattva* or “enlightened/enlightening being.”

- one becomes a bodhisattva through which bodhisattvas are endowed with unlimited responsive virtuosity (*upāya*)
- bodhisattva *freedom* ≠ progeny of *rational choice*, but of *compassionate commitment*
- practicing the six *pāramitās* or “perfections” as relational qualities
 - exemplifying generosity (*dāna*), moral clarity (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), valiant effort (*vīrya*), poised attentiveness (*dhyāna*) and wisdom (*prajñā*)