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RELIGIONS OF THE EAST: PATHS TO ENLIGHTENMENT

COURSE GUIDE

Professor Stephen Prothero
BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Religions of the East:
Paths to Enlightenment

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Course Syllabus

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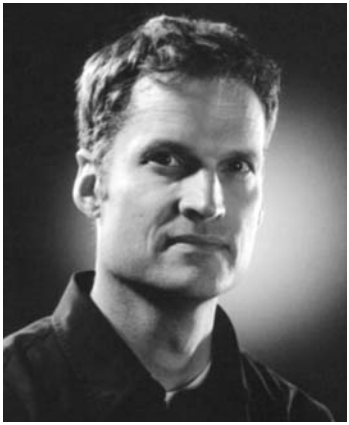

Photograph courtesy of Stephen Prothero

About Your Professor

Stephen R. Prothero

Professor Prothero is the chairman of the Department of Religion and director of the Graduate Division of Religious and Theological Studies at Boston University. A historian of American religions, Professor Prothero specializes in Asian religious traditions in the United States. He teaches courses on Asian religions, American religious history, Buddhism in America, Hinduism in America, death and immortality, and Jesus in America. His first book, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (1996), was awarded the Best First Book in the History of Religions in 1997 by the American Academy of Religion. He has published articles in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* and *Religion and American Culture.* He is also the coeditor, with Thomas Tweed, of *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History* and the author of *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America*. His most recent book is *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*.

Smiling Buddha, Angkor Thom, Cambodia

Introduction

The main aim of this course is to cultivate basic literacy in the principal religions of Asia: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. This course explores the origins of these religious traditions in Asia and their transplantation to the United States. The course considers three related issues: why religion matters, what the term "religion" means, and how Asian religions—especially Buddhism and Confucianism—wonderfully complicate that term.

Lecture 1:
The Nature of Religion
and How Asian Religions Complicate Things

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is William E. Paden's *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion.*

Why Does Religion Matter?

- Religion is not going away, despite claims by secular thinkers.
- Religion is an important factor in world affairs (for example, the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001).

Until fairly recently, it was an article of faith among intellectuals that religion and modernity were incompatible. Secularization theory stated that where and when modernity advanced, religion would fade away, both in society and in individuals. This was the view of Karl Marx, who called religion "the opiate of the masses." It peaked in the 1960s, when "Death of God" theology was in vogue and a *Time* magazine cover asked, "Is God dead?"

By the mid-1970s, secularization theory itself was starting to expire. The 1976 election of Jimmy Carter—a "born-again" Christian—made Americans increasingly aware of the importance of religion in public life. The so-called "Reagan Revolution" of the 1980s and the rise of the Moral Majority advanced this process.

By the 1990s, the old thinking about the disappearance of religion in the face of modernity was starting to look delusional. Smart sociologists admitted to making a mistake. Peter Berger (b. 1929), in *The Desecularization of the World* (1999), wrote:

> *The world today, with some exceptions . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled "secularization theory" is essentially mistaken.*

International events have also had a hand in making plain religion's enduring power:

- The 1979 Iranian Revolution
- The 1990s rise to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, which showed that right-wing political activism was not unknown even to the Hindu faith
- The tragic events of September 11, 2001

Today, the question is not whether religion is a force in history, but what sort of force it is. Is religion hazardous to your health? Is it good for you? Or both?

What Is Religion?

Everyone today seems to know precisely what religion is and what it does. Religion, some say, is a wonderful thing. It holds a society together. It gives

meaning to individual lives. It transports us to Heaven. Others say religion is a horrible thing. Collectively, religion divides us. Individually, religion drives us crazy. According to my students, "organized religion" is particularly bad. They prefer "disorganized religion," which they call spirituality.

The only people who don't know what religion is, it seems, are scholars like myself, who trouble our students with questions like, "What is religion?"

The term "religion" comes to us from the Latin *religio*, which means a feeling of fear in the presence of the gods and one's obligation to worship them. *Religio* is probably related to *religare*, which means to bind, to tie, to restrain, or to unite. So, early on, religion was associated with three primary principles:

- Binding oneself to God (or the gods)
- Sacred obligations: things one is *bound* to do
- Security: religion as an anchor in a wind-tossed world

Ancient Theories: The Greeks and the Romans

One early theory was that gods personified natural forces—naming and propitiating fire, lightning, rain, earthquakes, and other events in nature.

Enlightenment Theories

Enlightenment thinkers believed religion to be irrational—that, at its base, religion is rooted in emotion and experience.

- In 1755, David Hume (1711–1776) stated, "Religion's origins are in barbaric emotion, especially fear."
- Freidrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), in 1799, wrote that religion is a "feeling of absolute dependence."

Anthropological Approaches

In his book *Primitive Culture* (1871), the English anthropologist Edward Tylor (1832–1917) posited that religion originates in and is therefore essentially "belief in spiritual beings," or animism. This is a classic definition. For example, one dictionary definition of religion is "belief in the existence of a superhuman controlling power, especially of god or gods, usually expressed in worship."

Another English anthropologist, Sir James G. Frazer (1854–1941), in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1922), stated that there were three ascending categories in human cultures: magic, as practiced in polytheistic religions; monotheistic religions; and science, which was higher still. This theory contributed to the secularization assumption.

Sociological Approaches

Suggesting that religion was social, not individual, the French sociologist and philosopher Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) said,

> *Religion is a unified system of belief and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them.*

The key here is that religion is a group practice, not an individual experience.

Karl Marx (1818–1883), the German philosopher, social scientist, historian, and revolutionary, famously said that religion was the "opiate of the masses." He agreed that religion is social, but viewed it as a negative influence. Marx saw religion as an instrument of exploitation, a vehicle through which the "haves" oppressed the "have nots."

Psychological Approaches

A decidedly different approach to religion was taken by William James (1842–1910) in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902). James said religion meant "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine."

In books such as *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) argued that religion is "an illusion" and "the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity." Freud suggested that religion arose out of the Oedipus complex.

Phenomenological Approaches

The German theologian Rudolph Otto (1869–1937), in *The Idea of the Holy*, said that the essence of religious experience is awe, fear, and fascination of the transcendent "numinous"—a power that suggests the presence of God.

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) stated in *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1957) that the sacred is not only found in the God–human encounter, but also in the symbols, myths, and rituals of all cultures.

An Analysis

The preceding approaches, then, ask six different questions about religion:

1. Where did religion come from?
2. What is the "essence"—if any—of religion?
3. Is religion fundamentally individual or social?
4. What is the function of religion?
5. Is religion a good or a bad thing?
6. Is religion fading away?

Behind these questions, though, there are two basic types of definitions.

1. Substantive. There is religion when there is some *substance,* some *thing* (namely, a God or gods, spiritual beings, or the supernatural).
2. Functional. The essence of religion is not what it *is* but what it *does* (namely, function as social glue, give individuals a "feeling" of absolute dependence, or some other function).

A classic functional definition of religion was given by Paul Tillich (1886–1965) in *My Search for Absolutes* (1963): "Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern."

The Problem of Definition

Substantive definitions tend to be too narrow. They exclude things we suspect are religions. For example, can Buddhism, which has no gods, be a religion?

On the other hand, functional definitions tend to be too broad. They include things we suspect are not religions, such as Marxism, nationalism, or even baseball (if one assumes it is of "ultimate concern").

One resolution is to give up on "religion" altogether, as suggested by the Canadian theologian Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) in *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1991). Smith said that concern over religion in general takes the focus away from the actual religious experiences of real people—what today we might call "lived religion." Instead of talking of "religion" and "Hinduism" and "Buddhism," he said, we should talk instead about Hindus and Buddhists—not the "it" of religion, but the "they" (or "us") of religions.

An Analogical Approach

Think of religions in terms of "family resemblances," an approach used by the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) to discuss related terms, such as "game." As it turns out, there is no *one* key substance or function of a game, but there is a *family* of games with *family resemblances*—so, too, with religions, which typically share these characteristics:

- God(s) and supernatural beings
- Scriptures
- Rituals
- Myths
- Ethics/laws
- Worldviews
- Institutions (churches, synagogues, denominations, monastic orders)

Religious "Dimensions"

In his book *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (1999), Ninian Smart defines the characteristics of religious worldviews through seven "dimensions."

1. Practical and Ritual	Vedic religion, Jewish temple rites
2. Experiential and Emotional	Camp-meeting evangelicalism
3. Narrative or Mythic	Bhagavad Gita (devotional Hinduism), Death of Jesus/Buddha, Exodus story
4. Doctrinal and Philosophical	Nicene Creed (Christianity), Four Noble Truths
5. Ethical and Legal	Orthodox Judaism (following the Law), Shariah in Islam
6. Social and Institutional	Church, *sangha*
7. Material	Sacred places, such as the Ganges and Bodh Gaya

In trying to understand the “family members” that are the religions of the East, it is important to follow some strategies developed over the years by scholars of religious studies, especially in bracketing our beliefs in the service of empathetic understanding. The goal here is to understand and not to judge.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why would it be thought that religion and modernity are incompatible?
2. What is the secularization assumption?
3. How do you define religion?

Suggested Reading

Paden, William E. *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Sharma, Arvind, ed. *Our Religions: The Seven World Religions*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1991.

Lecture 2
Hinduism Before Hinduism: Vedic Religion

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's translation of *The Rig Veda: An Anthology of One Hundred Eight Hymns.*

Vedic religion is Hinduism before Hinduism started. It is a religion of sound, because it is a religion that takes seriously the power and reality of words and the sacred sounds that emanate from ancient religious texts. India, where Vedic religion originates, is a land of tremendous diversity. There today, many languages are spoken in quite distinctive regions among different social and religious groups. Religiously, India is the home of Hinduism; it's the home of Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism. It's also a place with many Christians and Muslims. Hinduism itself is characterized by tremendous diversity; there's no one creed, so some Hindus are monotheists and some Hindus are polytheists.

Aspects of Hinduism

Inside Hindu thinking, there are six different philosophical schools. There is even an atheistic school, for it is possible to be an atheist and be a Hindu. In the standard Hindu pantheon, there are many gods and many manifestations of each god. There are also many different paths to god.

There are four stages in life—the student, the householder, the retired, and the renunciant—and each comes with different ethical obligations. There are different aims of Hinduism. The religious aim is called *moksha*, or spiritual liberation, but Hinduism also has secular, or nonreligious, aims. The ethical one is dharma. Dharma means righteousness, law, duty. Doing your dharma is, after *moksha*, the second of the four aims in life in Hinduism. Another is called *artha*, which is wealth and power. This is the aim of the political and the business person. Another you might have heard of if you've read the *Kama Sutra* is *kama*, which means sexual passion. So pursuing sexual pleasure is an aim inside Hinduism, as is pursuing wealth and power, doing your duty, and pursuing spiritual liberation.

The Vedas

There's no founder to follow in Hinduism. It's different from Buddhism in that regard. There's no pope or authoritative religious community to separate orthodoxy from heterodoxy. What unites Hindus is orthopraxy, a kind of commitment to a shared practice, and a common reverence for the *Vedas*, the oldest scriptures of Hinduism. Hinduism has more adherents than any religion we'll study, behind only Christianity and Islam. It's the oldest religion we'll study. The classical theory says Hinduism began with an Aryan invasion, when Indo-European peoples came across the northern part of India and settled there. This theory is widely criticized today by Hindu fundamentalists, who want to see Hinduism as a creation of India without any outside influences. We do have, though, some archaeological evidence from what is

called the Indus Valley civilization, from about 2500 to 1500 BCE, of some building blocks of what would later be called Hinduism.

The *Vedas* are an early version of Sanskrit scriptures. "*Vedas*" means knowledge, or wisdom. They're the oldest Indian religious texts, from around 1500 to 900 BCE. They are ritual manuals that tell you how to perform sacrifices. They circulated orally for centuries, perhaps even millennia, and were finally written down by ritual specialists, priests of India called Brahmins. There are over a thousand hymns in the *Vedas*, and they are divided into ten *mandalas*, or sacred circles, each endowed with the power of god, who resides in the sacred sounds of the mantras that constitute the hymns. And this is part of why Vedic religion is a religion of sound, because it starts with an oral tradition. It focuses on the mantras that are spoken during the rituals and that make the rituals happen.

These mantras are associated with two things: the true, which is called *satya*, and *vukh*, which is speech. So the mantras are true speech. The *Vedas* are understood as eternal. They're classified as *shruti*, what is heard, as opposed to *smriti*, what is remembered. So *shruti* is older and original, *smriti* newer and secondary.

The *Vedas* are four. The oldest is the *Rig Veda*. "*Veda*" means knowledge and "*Rig*" means hymn, so this is hymn knowledge, ten books of one thousand twenty-eight chants praising many gods. This is the oldest and most important of the *Vedas*. The next two are called the *Yajur Veda* and the *Sama Veda*. *Yajur* means sacrifice, so the *Yajur Veda* is sacrificial knowledge. The *Sama Veda* is the musical elaboration of those formulas. The first three *Vedas* are used just by priests, so they're restricted to that particular group of religious experts, but the *Atharva Veda* entails practical charms, incantations, and prayers that ordinary people can use against sickness and demons, for success in business, and for success in love.

Each of these *Vedas* has four parts. The core is called the *samhita*, which is the basic text of the *Vedas*. The next of the four parts is called the *Brahmanas*, commentaries on the verses, often allegorical interpretations that try to explain the meanings of the sacrifice. The third of these four divisions is the *Aranyakas*, which literally means "forest books," because practitioners of Vedic religions in the forest had esoteric secret discussions about what the *Vedas* mean—and when these discussions were written down they became the *Aranyakas*. The most important after the basic texts are the *Upanishads*, which become the core text of the next form of Hinduism, classical Hinduism. The last part comprises later philosophical and metaphysical thought about the ultimate reality that underlies the cosmos, including the ultimate reality that underlies the fire rights and gives them power.

Together these *Vedas*, the four *Vedas* themselves and the four divisions inside each of them, depict a cosmos in which the demons of chaos are arrayed in a pitched battle against the righteousness of the gods. Much of the *Vedas* are hymns of praise to gods for giving the humans victory in war over their enemies. Others ask for health and wealth and longevity. But the most basic task of the *Vedas*, and of Vedic religion, is upholding the world via sacrifices. There is only a vague sense of the afterlife in the *Vedas*. There is a world called the world of the fathers that is a little bit like a heaven; there is a

world called the house of clay, which is under the earth and resembles hell. But for the most part, the focus is on this world. The idea is that the world will collapse if these fire sacrifices don't continue.

The key feature in Vedic religion is fire sacrifice, or *yajna*, and almost all of the *Vedas* are focused on fire sacrifice. The gods created the world through fire sacrifice, and fire sacrifice sustains the world today. It's performed by priestly specialists called Brahmins, and is always accompanied by mantras. The system of sacrifice here is symbiotic. Humans give the gods food. The gods in turn maintain the cosmic order.

Indra, Varuna, and Agni

This is a polytheistic religion. The first among these gods is Indra, who is most frequently mentioned in the *Vedas*. Indra is the god of war and weather, and the closest thing to a high god in the Vedic system. Indra is not a moral god. According to one scholar, Indra was "a ruffian from birth, an unfilial son, a lecherous youth and a gluttonous, drunken, and boastful adult." At the beginning of time, Indra destroys with a thunderbolt a dragon who had ruled over a world in chaos. After a pitched battle, Indra slays the dragon, paving the way for creation and for cosmic order and agricultural civilization.

Varuna is also called, like Indra, the supreme ruler. Varuna rules the heavens and the night sky. The stars are his eyes, so he's all-knowing. Unlike Indra, though, Varuna is moral. He is a guardian of the cosmic order and of social harmony, including promises and contracts. He gives happiness to those who are ethical and perform the proper rituals and sacrifices.

Another key divinity in Vedic religion is Agni, which comes from the Latin "*ignus*," which gives us the English word "ignite." Agni is the second most frequently mentioned god in the *Vedas*, the god of fire and sacrifice, still honored today in Hinduism, and also the god of hearth and home. Agni is a messenger between humans and the gods. He's the only god who lives in all three cosmological zones. He lives as fire on earth, as lightning in the atmosphere, and as sun in the sky.

Soma

Soma is a hallucinogenic plant. It is also the intoxicating juice from the plant and the god of that plant. So it means all three things: the plant, the drug, and the god. Soma is praised in a hundred and twenty hymns in the *Rig Veda*. According to the *Rig Veda*, the soma plant was stolen from heaven by an eagle, and priests who drank from it were inspired to compose the Vedic hymns. So it is associated with flights of poetic fancy, fertility and healing, and victory in war. Most of the Vedic gods are associated with nature, like soma is. There is a sun god, Surya; a wind god; and a mountain god called Rudra, who becomes important later in Hinduism as Shiva. It's also mostly a patriarchal faith, but there are a few goddesses: a goddess to night, a goddess to dawn, and also an intriguing goddess called Vak, or Vuk, of sacred speech, who represents the power of the mantra.

Chaos and Vedism in the Modern World

Religions are different, and they don't just differ from each other in terms of their goals. They also differ from one another in terms of their diagnoses of

the human predicament. In Vedic religion, the world is in chaos and the goal is cosmic order. The technique for achieving that goal is sacrifice. And who are the exemplars in this religion? The Brahmins, the priests who know how to perform these fire rights. So Vedic religion can be described as a tradition of priests performing sacrifices to the gods in order to keep chaos at bay.

Around the sixth or the seventh century BCE, Vedism gave way to classical Hinduism. It also gave way to two other Indian religions: Jainism and Buddhism. Vedism lives on, though, via its gods, many of whom survive in classical Hinduism. It lives on in the tradition of fire worship, which continues among Hindus to this day. There's also a legacy of Vedism in the ancient coming-of-age rite that initiates male children of the top three castes into the student stage, something like a Hindu bar mitzvah. Vedism may also be visible in modern-day speech acts, words that carry power, words that do something by virtue of being spoken, such as the words "I do" in a marriage or the words of the Roman Catholic Mass that turn the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus. Perhaps there is a sort of religion of sound that is surviving here. Even if that is a stretch, Vedism provides an intriguing example of a religion in which utterances have power in and of themselves.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How is Vedic religion a religion of sound?
2. What is the most basic problem the *Vedas* address?

Suggested Reading

O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger, trans. *The Rig Veda: An Anthology of One Hundred Eight Hymns*. New York: Penguin, 1982.

Other Books of Interest

Fieser, James, and John Powers, eds. *Scriptures of the East*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003.

Mahony, William K. *The Artful Universe: An Introduction to the Vedic Religious Imagination*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998.

Lecture 3:
Hinduism as a Way of Wisdom

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Gavin D. Flood's *An Introduction to Hinduism.*

New Questions

The development of Hinduism around 600 BCE resulted in classical Hinduism and also Buddhism. In this period, some mystics and philosophers grew dissatisfied with the ritual and practical focus of Vedic religion and the worldly focus of Vedism. They began longing for one ultimate reality behind the many gods. They began longing not just to wrench order out of chaos in this world, but also for more otherworldly goals. They used various yogas, or disciplines, including meditation and what we think of now as yoga, which is really hatha yoga, or a yoga of the body. They started using these techniques to answer these questions and to achieve these new goals, to cultivate a kind of liberating wisdom.

This development, the transformation of Vedic religion into Hinduism proper, is hinted at in two of the Vedic books mentioned earlier: the *Aranyakas* and the *Brahmanas*. As the prior focus on rites gave way to an emphasis on philosophical speculation and mysticism, renunciants, who are known in this tradition as *sannyasins,* replaced priests as the key religious elites. Vedic-style sacrifice remained part of the religion, but these sacrifices were increasingly interpreted symbolically. The focus shifted from performing fire sacrifices to interpreting the divine–human interactions that lay at the center of those sacrifices. The focus shifted from ritual action to philosophical speculation, from priests to renunciants.

Renunciants realized that there is an unchanging essence inside of each of us that is born over and over in different bodies in a never-ending cycle of life, death, and rebirth, which these early Hindus called *samsara*. They realized that this cycle is fueled in accordance with the theory of karma, whereby one's birth is a result of the good and bad actions one took in prior lives. They come to understand that the world of human experience is shot through with *maya*, which means illusion. The root cause of the mess humans have gotten themselves into is *avidya*, which means ignorance. The solution is wisdom, so Hinduism is going to become a tradition that focuses on the problem of ignorance and tries to respond to it with wisdom.

Scriptures and the Transmigration of Souls

The scriptures in this period expand to include not just *shruti*, what is heard, but also *smriti*, what is remembered. These so-called secondary scriptures include four areas: the *sutras*, short aphorisms of the sort found in the *Lao Tze* in Daoism; *shastras*, extended treatises in poetic verse; *Puranas*, ancient popular stories about the exploits of the gods; and, most importantly, the epics, the *Ramayana*, about the incarnation of Vishnu as Rama, and the *Mahabharata*, about the incarnation of Vishnu as Krishna.

As we move into Hinduism and away from Vedic religion, major gods become minor deities, so Indra becomes a quite unimportant and little-worshipped rain god. And minor deities become major gods: The obscure solar god Vishnu becomes one of the most popular. The most important development here philosophically is the development of a new problem, *samsara*, the flowing together of birth, death, and rebirth in a long cosmic cycle. On an individual scale, we can understand that after we die, we'll be reborn, and we'll live another life and die again and live another life again after that—this is the idea of reincarnation, the transmigration of souls. But it doesn't just happen with individuals. The universe is periodically created and destroyed too, as are the heavens and hells and gods.

Life was hard in ancient India. Hindus thought about it as a trial to live through, and so they sought *moksha*, spiritual release, liberation from the cycle of *samsara*. Classically, this solution was open to people who went through these four stages of life and lived as renunciants. Ordinary Hindus were not going to be able to achieve this, so for them there was a secondary goal: a better rebirth.

Moksha

Jnana yoga is a set of techniques to get us to *moksha*. The wisdom one is trying to achieve through these practices is fairly simple: Brahman equals Atman. The essence of the ultimate reality that we call God (or Brahman) is the same as the essence of the human soul (Atman). There's no distinction whatsoever between the two, and to know that is to be liberated.

The focus is on three dimensions: the experiential, the doctrinal, and the ethical and legal. The ethical and legal is the karma element. The doctrinal dimension takes us into the mysteries of Brahman, Atman, and *maya*. The experiential part involves mystical experiences. So classical Hinduism is a tradition of renunciants seeking to escape from *samsara* via a variety of self-realization practices that allow them to overcome ignorance and achieve liberating wisdom.

This is a hard path, a self-help path. No god does this for you, and, ultimately, it is restricted to religious elites. This is not a democratic religion. It is a religion for religious virtuosi, or specialists.

There are two ways of thinking about God here. One is *nirguna* Brahman, God without attributes. The other is *saguna* Brahman, God with attributes. The first is the one to which the writers and philosophers of the *Upanishads* were more attracted, and this is the more monotheistic idea of a god who is indivisible, who is one, who is beyond human imagining. The other idea is *saguna* Brahman, the absolute according to human imagination, not what God really is, but what God is to us—God personalized, God made human.

The apparent distinction between ourselves and God is illusory. All of the ever-changing world of human experience is *maya*, an illusion. From the perspective of ultimate reality, there's no distinction between the essence of God and the essence of the human soul.

Karma

The key spiritual insight here is the equivalence of Atman and Brahman. The key ethical concept centers on the idea of karma. One of the interesting things about *karma* is that it doesn't require God. The idea of reincarnation requires no divinity.

Varna means caste; *ashrama* means stages of life; and dharma means duty. So *varna ashrama dharma* means doing your duty based on your caste and your stage in life. The first stage is the student, from around age eight to twenty years or so, and entails education appropriate to your particular social class. The second stage is the householder phase, which entails fulfilling the demands of society by having children and a job. The third stage is that of the retiree, which entails separating yourself from society to focus on more spiritual matters—to move, in other words, toward the aim of *moksha*. The fourth stage, the renunciant stage, is not expected of everyone, but it's open to people who have gone through the retiree stage, and this is when you live as a homeless nomad, commit to celibacy, live outside the caste system, travel to sacred sites, possibly settle in an *ashram*, try to free yourself from attachments to gain mystical insight, and put an end to the cycle of *samsara* by gaining *moksha*.

In Christianity, if you ask an ethical question, there may be one answer. The Hindu answer in ethics is always going to be that it depends upon your stage in life and the caste that you come from. The *Gita* says, "There is more joy in doing one's own duty badly than in doing another person's duty well. It is joy to die in doing one's duty. But doing another person's duty brings dread."

Hinduism here is a way of knowledge. It focuses on the doctrinal and experiential dimension. It's also a way of morality in which the ethical and legal dimension is important. The path to knowledge is through experience, so it focuses as well on the experiential. So it's a doctrinal, ethical, experiential religion. In all these dimensions, however, Hinduism emphasizes the importance of the self—do your own duty, not the duty of someone else. Discover the reality of God by your own efforts, not through the efforts of someone else or even through the transfer of merit from a god. This is a difficult path, an extraordinary path. It's not a democratic path, but it gets easier. Hindus figured out a way to broaden the tradition to include more and more people and to make it a faith that is open not just to Brahmins, but to all of us.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What questions prompted the development of classical Hinduism?
2. What is *samsara*?

Suggested Reading

Flood, Gavin D. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

Hopkins, Thomas J. *The Hindu Religious Tradition*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1971.

Olivelle, Patrick, trans. *The Upanishads*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Lecture 4:
Hinduism as a Way of Devotion

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Diana L. Eck's *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India.*

As Hinduism developed, *samsara* remained the problem and *moksha* the spiritual goal. But, gradually, the goal became open to more and more people. Hinduism, in other words, democratized, and this happened right around the time of the rise of Christianity and the development of rabbinic Judaism. One result was the *bhakti*, or devotional, style of Hinduism.

The *Upanishads* offered basically one way to spiritual liberation, the discipline of knowledge, which could be pursued only by religious experts who'd withdrawn from society and family and workplace. But new scriptures, chiefly the epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, offered a new way to spiritual liberation, the discipline of devotion, or *bhakti* yoga.

Via these epics, Hinduism took on a new dimension. The gods moved from the impersonal Brahman, *nirguna* Brahman, to personal deities. The techniques shifted from achieving *moksha* on your own by the realization of the equivalence of Atman and Brahman, to a practice in which gods give you *moksha* as a kind of grace. Now ordinary people could achieve the ultimate goal of *moksha*. *Bhakti* Hinduism was so successful it largely eliminated Buddhism and Upanishadic Hinduism from India.

Bhakti Hinduism

Bhakti Hinduism is either polytheistic or monotheistic, depending on whom you ask. Many say there are an uncountable number of gods, but devotional Hindus typically worship just one god at a time. The key term here is *ishtadevata*, which means the god of one's choosing. This is an interesting inversion of the notion in the Hebrew Bible that God chose the Jews. Here you choose your god. And so *bhakti* Hinduism tends to have a built-in tolerance based on the philosophical distinction between the symbol and the thing symbolized, between God as God really is and the gods as they manifest themselves in human life. Or to put it in popular Hindu language: "Truth is one, but the wise speak of it in multiple ways."

Three Gods

Brahma is the creator, Shiva is the destroyer, and Vishnu is the preserver. This is the classic way of thinking about the Hindu trinity that emerges in *bhakti*-style Hinduism. One problem with this formulation is that Brahma is almost utterly unimportant in contemporary Hinduism; there is only one temple in all of India to Brahma. The other problem with this tripartite formulation is that followers of Vishnu and Shiva always claim that their god does all the tasks (in other words, their god creates, destroys, and preserves).

Vishnu

Vishnu is the most popular god, and Vishnu comes in ten avatars, or divine descents. In Hinduism, God isn't incarnated once, as in the Christian tradition, but is incarnated many different times. Vishnu's avatars include a fish, who appears in a great flood story; a tortoise; a boar; a combination of man and lion; Rama in the *Ramayana*; and Krishna in the *Mahabharata*. Some also say that Buddha and Jesus are incarnations of Vishnu, which is another way that Hinduism exhibits a tendency to break down boundaries between itself and other religious traditions.

Classically, Vishnu is said to be the sustainer god, but he is also a creator god in the sense that Brahma sprang from his navel, according to some Hindu stories. Krishna is a good god, but something of a prankster. He plays the flute. He's beautiful, charming, flirtatious, and loving. He's also paired, as Hindu gods are, with consorts, including the female divinities Lakshmi and Radha.

Shiva

The second most popular choice of divinities in India is Shiva. Shiva is a more ambivalent deity, a mixture of good and bad, wrath and love. Indra comes down as Rudra the storm god of the mountains in the *Vedas* and is transformed into Shiva. Shiva has many faces: creator, preserver, destroyer. He has many consorts, including Uma, Paravati, Durga, and Kali. Shiva appears as an ascetic yogin meditating in the Himalayas, a human skull in one hand, a begging bowl in the other, sauntering around cremation grounds. In India, there are aniconic images of divinities. One of the most intriguing is the Shiva linga, which is an image that looks like the male and female sex organs put together. It symbolizes the union of male and female and the union of Shiva and Shakti, a female goddess. The most famous image of Shiva is Shiva Nataraj, which is the dancing Shiva with many heads and many arms, calling creation into being and destroying evil with a dance.

There is a myth in which Brahma, who's classically the creator god, and Vishnu, the sustainer god, are arguing about which of them is supreme, and so they call in the *Vedas* to mediate. The *Vedas* say Shiva is supreme, and instantly a huge column of light and fire pierces the earth. Brahma and Vishnu go to investigate and follow this light for thousands and thousands of years. They return to the place where the shaft of light pierces the earth and they see the head of Shiva emerging from the light. Vishnu bows down and honors him as lord, but Brahma won't honor Shiva. As punishment, Shiva cuts off one of Brahma's five heads. The idea here is that Brahma used to have five heads; now he has only four, and a skull sticks to Shiva's head as karmic evidence of his wrongdoing. So he wanders all over India trying to free himself from this skull, and it's only when he comes to Benares, the place where this shaft pierces the earth, that the skull drops and he's free from the karmic effects of that activity. The story tells us that Shiva is superior to Vishnu and to Brahma, and also that Benares is a city of Shiva and is the sacred center of Indian spirituality. It's the reason Benares is called the City of Light. Benares is so important in Hinduism today that many Hindus believe that if you merely go to Benares when you're about to die, then, upon dying there, you will achieve *moksha* immediately.

Shakti

The third of these great divinities is Shakti, or the Mahadevi, the great goddess. Shakti is seen primarily as the energy of Shiva in a pairing that shows the truth of the union of opposites of male and female. We tend to think of the stereotype in the West of the male as being active and the female passive, but among Hindu goddesses and in Hindu thinking it's the female who's active and the male who is passive. So Shakti is the active energy in the pairing that she has with Shiva. Shakti's also revered not just as a pair with Shiva, but as a free-standing goddess of her own. Perhaps most importantly, she's understood to be the energy behind all of divinity. Shakti has the power to make things happen in *bhakti* Hinduism. She's also understood as the fertilizing and purifying power of the river, particularly the most sacred river of India, the Ganges. And she is the mother of the universe who protects her children from adversity. She appears in two major forms in Hindu mythology. One is as a loving, auspicious divinity. And one is as a terrific and angry divinity. She also appears as Durga, who has eight arms and rides a tiger. Kali is even better known in the West. She haunts battlefields and cremation grounds. She hangs out with the dead, which is understood to be polluting in India rather than purifying. The sword she carries is bloody. She wears a garland of skulls. A severed arm hangs from her waist. Her tongue hangs out, and it drips with blood. Yet devotees say that she is a loving mother figure. She fights for them and is hell-bent on ensuring justice for her children. In other words, she's a goddess of justice and is very popular among the poor for just that reason.

Ganesha

Ganesha is the most ubiquitous of the Hindu deities. He is the guardian of thresholds, a remover of obstacles, and a bringer of success. Ganesha is funny. He has an elephant head. He is fat and friendly. He's the son of Shiva and Paravati, who is one of the consorts of Shiva. The story of his unusual form is that Shiva, having been away for a really long business trip, comes back and sees a man in his house. Outraged and jealous, he cuts off the man's head. But the man turns out to be his son. Paravati weeps, and Shiva consoles her by promising to put the head of the next being that passes by on his son. That being happens to be an elephant.

We often see Ganesha at entrances to homes and temples in his capacity as the guardian of thresholds. Benares is protected by dozens and dozens of Ganeshas at eight different compass points all around the city.

Bhakti

Bhakti is a ritual tradition that respects life-cycle rituals of birth and marriage and death, a tradition that has festivals such as the Festival of Diwali, which is an October commemoration of Lakshmi, who's the goddess of wealth and good fortune. Given this focus on ritual, it's a return of sorts to the sacrificial focus of the Vedic period. But now the focus is on *puja*, honoring your chosen deity with a gift. The idea here is that you make your life *puja*. You make your life worship. You make your life offerings to god so that Krishna will undo the bonds of your karma. This is a really interesting idea because, classically, in the *Upanishads*, no one can undo the bonds of your karma. Only you can do that. But now we have a new ethical idea, which is

that karma can be undone by the gods. This particular kind of worshipping takes place at home and in the temple. In the temple, you don't have congregational worship, you just go when you go and make some kind of offering. This can also be done in the home. *Puja* unfolds in a series of steps. The first is to invite the deity to come and take seat in an image. Then the god is welcomed in a number of standard actions modelled on how you show hospitality to guests (including offering food). The most important element in *puja* is called *darshan*, which has to do with seeing and being seen. It's a reciprocal moment, a moment when you look at the god and the god looks at you and you have an intimate connection. After *darshan*, you are given back what's called *prasad*, or sacred leftovers. Hindus have always known the gods don't eat actual food. They eat the essence of the food. Then some *prasad* is given back to worshipers. So there's more reciprocity and exchange. The *puja* ends when you leave the temple, or you allow the divinity to take leave of the home.

Storytelling

Stories become really important, along with gods and worship, inside the *bhakti* tradition. Arguably, the center of *bhakti* religion is storytelling, listening to narratives, especially epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and especially the *Bhagavad Gita*, the song of Lord Krishna. This is the most read and revered Hindu scripture. The story of the Gita is a story of interfamily squabbling and fighting. There are two families, a good and bad family. They're at war with one another and they happen to be cousins. The good family is called the Pandavas, and they're fighting against their cousins over who is going to rule North India. The protagonist in the story is Arjuna, who is the greatest Pandava warrior. Before the battle, Arjuna sees that his opponents are relatives and friends and teachers, and he experiences a crisis of conscience. He drops his weapon and turns to his charioteer. (The charioteer happens to be Krishna, but Arjuna doesn't know that he's a god.) Arjuna says he can't fight, because he doesn't want the bad karma of killing many close relatives. He says he needs to become a renunciant instead. So the charioteer, Krishna, engages him in a wonderful philosophical discussion. During the dialogue, the charioteer lays down a new understanding of Hinduism that's going to be at the center of the *bhakti* faith. Where there were two yogas, now there are three. There isn't just *jnana* yoga and karma yoga (the discipline of action), there is another option: *bhakti* yoga.

Moksha is then available to lay people. You don't need to be a renunciant anymore. You don't need to quit your job to achieve *moksha*. Dharma and *moksha* can be pursued at the same time. It's possible to affirm the world, do your dharma, and yet somehow achieve *moksha*. As a practical matter, Krishna tells Arjuna to fight, because it is his duty. It is his *varna ashrama dharma*. He is a member of the warrior caste, and warriors are supposed to fight. In fact, he'll get bad karma if he refuses. But then Krishna says that death is inevitable for all of us. We cannot really kill or be killed because the Atman in each of us is unborn and eternal. Arjuna is supposed to act selflessly and without ego, and he's supposed to offer his actions to god without any attachment to the fruits of his actions. If he acts in this way, he will not have bad karma. At the end of the story, Krishna reveals himself and Arjuna

bows down and worships him as the supreme lord. What's interesting about this ending is that it has led some people to believe that the battle here is not really a physical battle, but a spiritual battle for our souls. It is a story about desire and renunciation, that it is possible to live a life of renunciation as a lay person. The key issue is being devoted to god. Another idea is that there are many paths to God. There is not just one path. There is the *bhakti* path. There is the *jnana* path. And all go to God.

Bhagavad Gita

Translated by Dr. Ramanand Prasad of the American Gita Society

Arjuna

There Arjuna saw in both armies fathers and grand-fathers, teachers, maternal uncles, brothers, sons . . . as well as friends. . . . Arjuna was overcome by excessive pity, and spoke in great grief:

"Seeing these kinsmen, O Krishna, I am standing here eager for war, but my limbs droop down and my mouth is quite dried up; a tremor creeps over my body; and my hairs stand on end; the Gandiva bow slips from my hand; my skin burns intensely. I am unable, too, to stand up; my mind whirls round; O Krishna! I see bad omens, and I do not perceive any good that will come from killing my kinsmen in battle. I do not wish for
victory, O Krishna, nor sovereignty, nor pleasures: what is sovereignty to us, O Govinda, what are enjoyments, and even life? Even those, for whose sake we desire sovereignty, enjoyments, and pleasures,
are standing here for battle, abandoning life and wealth—teachers, fathers, sons as well as grandfathers, maternal uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons, brothers-in-law, and other relatives. These I do not wish to kill, though they kill me, O destroyer of Madhu, even for the sake of sovereignty over the three worlds, how much less then for this earth?"

Source: Richard Hooker, Washington State University at www.wsu.edu

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What gods comprise the Hindu trinity?
2. Why does Ganesha have the head of an elephant?

Suggested Reading

Eck, Diana L. *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Edgerton, Franklin, trans. *The Bhagavad Gita*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Hawley, John Stratton, and Donna M. Wulff, eds. *Devi: Goddesses of India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Lecture 5:
Sikhism: The Way of the Disciples

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Gurinder Singh Mann's *Sikhism.*

Sikhism is a relatively recent religion. It's the youngest of the world's great monotheistic faiths. Sikhism arose in the sixteenth century in India. Currently, there are approximately twenty million Sikhs worldwide. The vast majority live in the Punjab region of North India, where Sikhism originated. There are also substantial numbers in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. There are actually about 600 places of worship, called *gurdwaras,* thresholds of the gurus, outside of the Punjab in the Sikh diaspora. Sikhs revere ten sixteenth- and seventeenth-century gurus and a sacred scripture that consists largely of those gurus' teachings, although there are other teachings in the scripture as well. They have a strong community identity, fostered in part by an appearance that includes beards and turbans for men.

The key dimension of Sikhism is the social and institutional dimension, being a member of the community, of what's called the *khalsa*. Although Sikhism is a world religion, it has an ethnic quality, with a sacred center and a sacred language. Islam is a missionary religion and anybody can become a Muslim. Yet it has an ethnic element, because the Qur'an is only authoritative in the original Arabic and because Mecca, in Saudi Arabia, is the sacred center. Sikhism has interesting parallels. The scriptures are in Punjabi and there's also a Mecca of sorts, the Golden Temple in Amritsar in North India.

Guru Nanak

The first stage of Sikh history begins with its founder, Guru Nanak, from the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. He was born in the Punjab, near Lahore, in what today is in Pakistan. He had Hindu parents, who were probably devotees of Vishnu, and he was acquainted with Islam. Guru Nanak left home to wander India as a renunciant. He met a teacher named Kabir, an Indian mystic who gloried in obscuring the distinctions between religions, especially the distinctions between Hinduism and Islam. Kabir opposed caste and idol worship, said that Hinduism and Islam shared one God, and claimed that God should be called Sat Nam, or True Name.

In 1499, at age thirty, Guru Nanak had a vision. God said to him that he wanted him to repeat the name of God and tell other people to do likewise. And so Guru Nanak became a *bhakti* devotee of one God without attributes, of *nirguna* Brahman. He mixed devotional Hinduism with Islam, which entails the *nirguna* idea that you can't describe God. He downplayed the importance of priests and rituals. He opposed caste. He said that you can realize God on your own through the key practice of meditating on the divine name. He also said that you can achieve the religious goal through many religions. They are all just different paths up the same mountain.

After a period of wandering, Guru Nanak settled down. His followers gathered into a community in 1519 and took the name of Sikhs, which means learners, or disciples. Their credo is the following: "there is one supreme being, the eternal reality; he is the creator, without fear and devoid of enmity; he is immortal, never incarnated, self-existent, known by grace through the Guru, the eternal one from the beginning through all time."

The Gurus

After Guru Nanak's death, there was a successive line of ten gurus, who are all understood to possess the same divine essence as Guru Nanak, though it is important to remember that they are not gods themselves, nor was Nanak.

The fourth guru was Guru Ram Das, who established Amritsar as a sacred center, a sort of Mecca for the Sikh faith. This is interesting because Guru Nanak was not a proponent of pilgrimage and there is considerable ambivalence about pilgrimage in the tradition. But Sikhs do develop their own sacred center in Amritsar, North India. The fifth guru, Guru Arjan, is a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century figure, and he codifies the scripture. Called the *Adi Granth,* this is a compilation of poetry, hymns, and revelations of Sikh gurus. Guru Arjan also built a pilgrimage center in Amritsar, which came to be known as the Golden Temple. He emphasized the distinctions between Sikhs and Hindus and Muslims.

The first guru wanted to talk about God as the God of Sikhs and Hindus and Muslims, blurring the distinctions as Kabir, his teacher, did. But as the tradition developed, it became increasingly important for the community to understand who it was as opposed to Hindus and Muslims. This is where the tradition started to move in a social and institutional dimension. Guru Arjan, the fifth guru, said that he "did not keep the Hindu fast, nor the Muslim Ramadan," that he served "him alone who is [his] refuge, the one master who is also Allah" (the Muslim word for God). So he broke with the Hindus and with the Muslims. This issue of identity became particularly important with the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh, who was a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century figure. He declared Sikhs to be the *khalsa*, the community of the pure, and this is where the social dimension became so important. He gave ways for Sikhs to distinguish themselves by sight from practitioners of other religions.

Sikhism moved in the direction of sectarianism under this tenth guru. The way that Guru Gobind Singh did this was with the Five K's, so-called because each of the words, in Punjabi, begins with a k. One is long, uncut hair (for men) with a beard and a turban. The second is a hair comb used to comb this long hair. The third is a steel bracelet worn on the wrist. The fourth is a kind of special shorts. The last one is the *kirpan*, a ceremonial dagger or sword. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru, also renamed Sikh men Singh, which is a name for lion, and Sikh women Kaur, which means princess.

After the death of Guru Gobind Singh, the guru lineage ended. The authority of the guru was invested in scripture and community. The authority went into the *Adi Granth* and into the *khalsa*. Sikhism became a religion of the book, not just a religion of the guru. In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh gave a speech and asked if anyone would lay down his life for the true faith. No one responded, but finally one man walked forward. His name was Daya, which means compassion. Guru Gobind Singh took him into a room, cut off the

head of a goat, and reemerged with blood on his sword. He asked if there were any other Sikhs who would offer themselves for sacrifice. A man named Dharm, which means duty, came forward, and another goat was killed. And then three more people came up, their names meaning firmness, effort, and honor. These five men became the first members of the *khalsa*, and this is where Sikhism emerged with a clear focus on the social and institutional dimension, an emphasis on community.

The Second and Third Stages in Sikh History

The second stage in Sikh history runs from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. As the Moghul empire declined, Sikhs gained control over areas of the Punjab where the tradition had started, consolidating control over the entire Punjab in 1799. What had been a small, sectarian religion in the midst of religious majorities all of a sudden became a majority. They held on until the British took over the Punjab in the late 1840s. The third stage, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, started with an effort to purify the Sikh community in response to the British confusing who were Sikhs and Hindus. (They would use the phrase *Hindoos* to mean Sikh, Hindus, and Muslims.) At the same time, particularly after the Indian Renaissance, Hindus tried to say that Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains were Hindus too. But Sikhs wanted their own tradition.

In 1902, to create, enforce, and define an orthodoxy for Sikhism, Sikhs created something like the National Council of Churches that we see in the United States for Protestant denominations. A 1919 British massacre of Sikhs in Amritsar led to the politicization of the Sikh tradition, and Sikhs started to mobilize politically, particularly during the fight that culminated in 1947 with Indian independence. Sikhs supported Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, which became the ruling political party in India. But when the Punjab was split into Pakistan and India, Sikhs became rivals of the Indian National Congress and started to demand a homeland for themselves. The result was a Sikh-dominated Punjab state inside India, but not a Sikh nation-state. Today, militants inside the tradition are still demanding a Sikh homeland that they call Khalistan, which they want to be inside but separate from India. The most recent political upheaval with Sikhs occured in 1984 when the Indian army took the Golden Temple in an attempt to root out Sikh militants there, which led to riots and the deaths of thousands of people. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India was assassinated by Sikh bodyguards, and this led mobs to commit even more assassinations of Sikhs.

Origins and Symbols

Sikhs understand their origins in terms of divine revelation. This is a religion that comes from God, they say, not human history. Yet historians see some influences on Sikhism from other traditions, most particularly from *bhakti* Hinduism: ideas such as the karmic cycle of *samsara*, of *maya*, of dharma, approaching God via scriptures and via gurus, trying to get out of the cycle of *samsara* through other help (in this case, the grace of the guru and help from God). There is influence from Islam too, notably the idea that God is not to be anthropomorphized. There is influence from Sufism, a mystical version of Islam, particularly in the idea of repeating the name of God. Sikhism departs definitely from Hinduism on issues of caste, which it opposes. Sikhism is also

not interested in having *sannyasins,* who are celibate, or priestly orders.

The first key symbol in Sikhism is the guru, the closest thing for Sikhs to an incarnation of God. The guru is not to be worshipped. The ten gurus are teachers, not avatars. They are guides to getting you to *moksha*. They mediate between you and God, who is understood as an eternal guru, and the scripture too is seen as a guru.

The second key symbol is the scripture itself, the *Adi Granth*, which means original book and became known as the *Guru Adi Granth*: 3,000 poetic works by six of the ten gurus and writings by saints who are not Sikh. It opens with a symbol meaning one creator, which is an important image for this monotheistic faith. The key beliefs are two. One is tolerance, which says that God is the God of all human beings and all religions and that many paths lead to God. The second belief is the idea of monotheism. The word for God here is Vahi Guru, sometimes Wahi Guru, which means "hail guru." It's obviously a greeting to God, but it comes to serve as a name for God too. This God is the omniscent and omnipresent creator and sustainer of the world.

Key Practices

One key practice in the tradition is remembering, speaking, and meditating on the name of God, keeping God on your mind at all times. Another practice is reverence of the *Adi Granth*. At the center of the *gurdwara*, the congregational center of Sikh worship, is a platform holding the scripture, which in Sikh worship is literally treated like royalty. Sikhs bring offerings to it and leave with *prasad*. In this case, though, worshippers do not see the God, but they hear the scripture. So divinity comes to them not through the eyes, but through the ears. The center of the service is reading, singing, and elucidating the text. Another key practice is wearing the Five K's for Sikh men. Another practice is communal worship, hymn singing, prayer, hearing the *Adi Granth*, and sharing a communal meal called the *langar*. Other practices are private meditations, concentration on the divine name, celebrations of the birthdays of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, and a festival of the formulation of the *khalsa* in 1699 by Guru Gobind Singh. Sikhism also entails following a code of personal conduct that includes rising earlier, reciting scripture, and worshipping communally while keeping the name of God on your mind in a cycle of daily prayers.

The key problem continues to be *samsara*. The solution is liberation from *samsara* by becoming one with the Vahi Guru by chanting the divine name, which is said to conquer the ego and overcome self-reliance. This is a kind of yoga, bringing that key insight of Vedic religion of the power of speech into *bhakti*-style worship.

Until quite recently, Sikhism was most visible in the United States via the followers of Yogi Bhajan, who brought Sikh beliefs and practices to countercultural youth in the 1960s and 1970s via a group that was initially called the Happy, Healthy, Holy Organization (now called the Sikh Dharma in the West). This group mixes Hinduism with the power-of-positive-thinking tradition. Sikhs are not yet active in the public square in the United States, though they did become more visible after September 11, 2001. So, gradually, Sikhs are becoming a part of the fabric of American life.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What were the key teachings of Guru Nanak?
2. What are the Five K's?

Suggested Reading

Mann, Gurinder Singh. *Sikhism*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Mann, Gurinder Singh. *The Making of Sikh Scripture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

McLeod, W.H. *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

Lecture 6:
Hinduism and Sikhism in America

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Polly Trout's *Eastern Seeds, Western Soil: Three Gurus in America.*

Immigrant Hinduism and Sikhism in the United States began in the late nineteenth century with a fairly modest immigration, about 7,000 people between the 1890s and World War I. Some college students came to the East Coast, but the vast majority were agricultural laborers from the Punjab who came to the West Coast. Almost all were men. They were called Hindoos, regardless of their religion. About 10 percent were Muslims, and the vast majority were Sikhs. The first Sikh gurdwara (place of worship) was built in Stockton, California, in 1912. Sikh men, because there weren't Sikh women around, married Mexican-American Catholics and created fascinating creole homes that blended Sikhism and Mexican-American Catholicism.

Indian Immigration

There was fierce nativist resistance against these so-called Hindoos. There was a riot in Bellingham, Washington, where hundreds of people were kicked over the border into Canada. In 1917, the United States government responded to fears of Indian immigration by cutting it off.

In 1903, there was an interesting U.S. Supreme Court case about a Sikh. The law said that naturalization was open to free white persons, and this law was broadened after the Civil War to include persons of African descent. One year earlier, in 1902, there had been a Supreme Court case with a Japanese American (*Ozawa* v. *United States*), and the Supreme Court, in denying citizenship to this Japanese American, said that "white" meant Caucasian. According to the prevailing racial theories of the time, Sikhs and Hindus from India were Caucasians. But the court decided in *United States* v. *Thind* (1923) that you had to be white not in a scientific sense, but in a popular sense, and so the Sikh man was denied citizenship.

In the early twentieth century, Hinduism and Sikhism stalled in terms of temple building and spreading the faith, because there were not any immigrants who could enter the country and keep these traditions developing. This changed in 1965 when the U.S. Congress altered immigration law to allow people from Asia back into the country. And this time, not just men, but women, families, and highly educated people arrived, a capable and wealthy cohort of immigrants. They built temples in the 1970s. One of the first was the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Pittsburgh. It was dedicated there in 1976 in part because of the confluence of rivers in Pittsburgh. The power of the goddess Shakti resides in the rivers, and the Ganges is an important place for Hindu piety. And so this confluence was seen as a particularly auspicious place to put a temple. After that, temples started to spring up in almost every major American city. When these temples were first built, patrons had to compromise between the main Hindu deities: Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti.

Usually, these divinities have temples of their own, but in the United States, Hindus couldn't immediately afford so many temples, so their pioneering temples became ecumenical. Gradually, additional temples were built in each American city: a North Indian and a South Indian, a Vishnu temple and a Shiva temple.

Trends in the United States

One of the most intriguing trends is the trend toward ecumenism. The trend of Hinduism in the United States is away from the sectarian worship of a particular divinity and toward more of an irenic worshipping of different sorts of divinities. A second trend is toward what in Protestantism and Catholicism is called the Social Gospel. This is the idea that religion isn't just about saving souls. It's about helping other people. It's about soup kitchens. It's about homeless shelters. If you go to the Hindu temple in Atlanta, you will find an active soup kitchen program. Another trend is feminization, where women are increasingly taking on leadership roles in temples. Another trend is to inject the American landscape with the geography of Hindu mythology. When a temple is consecrated, there is a series of prayers and hymns that call down the power of the gods by describing the place in terms of Hindu cosmology. So in the United States, the priests who perform these chants speak in Sanskrit about the Mississippi as if she were the Ganges. In this imaginative process, rivers in the United States become rivers of India, and mountains in the United States become the Himalayas.

Temples in the United States have social as well as religious functions. In India, you don't need a temple to teach Hindi to your kids. That's done in the culture around you. You don't need a temple to do Hindu dances or Indian dances, because that's done in a dance studio down the road. But in the United States, temples function in both ways. In India, they are one level. In America, temples have basements for lecture halls, Sunday School rooms, and dance studios.

Americans are monotheists, for the most part. Polytheism is generally seen as a little less advanced. And so Hindus feel pressure to talk about their faith in monotheistic terms. In India, you go to a temple when you want. In the United States, there are congregational worship services for Hindus.

Marriages are typically arranged in India and are not understood in terms of romance, but in terms of family ties. Children born in the United States don't usually like arranged marriages, and so they negotiate with their parents between arranged marriages and love marriages. In the process, there has emerged a middle way in which parents suggest partners to date and the children decide whom to marry.

The *Bhagavad Gita* has become an important scripture, and there's a strong pan-Hindu sensibility. In India, there's a sense that "I'm a worshipper of Shiva," and in the United States, there's a sense of "I'm a Hindu," because that broader identity works in a more diverse atmosphere. Many of these trends can be found in the United Kingdom and Western Europe as well.

Gurus

Americans have an intriguing love affair with gurus. Traditionally, Asian cultures are quite accepting of spiritual authority, but American culture is built

on a revolution against a king, on Enlightenment principles of equality and liberty, and on Protestant ideas of the priesthood of all believers. You might think that gurus would fare badly here because of this incipient egalitarianism, but many guru styles have been quite successful. There are, for example, guru-based movements with non-Asian followers inside Hinduism. These are movements that have a Hindu teacher, but that attract white people. One was the Divine Light Mission (later called Elan Vital), established in 1970 and run by a teacher called the Boy Guru, because he was very young. Another one of these is Yogi Bhajan and his Happy, Healthy, Holy Organization, which was established in 1969. There are movements with gurus in absentia. The one most popular in the United States and Europe is the movement behind Satya Sai Baba, a faith healer and prophet who lives in India.

Another category is gurus who refuse to be seen as gurus. The classic one is Jiddu Krishnamurti, who was quite popular in the 1960s and 1970s. He taught the pathless path and would say, “Don’t take me as your guru” and “Don’t listen to anything anyone tells you, including me.” People flocked to him, of course.

There are also American-born gurus. There’s a fellow named Richard Albert, who was a Harvard psychology professor and friend of Timothy Leary who tried to merge teaching of Asian religions with drug culture. Another guru is a figure from the late-nineteenth into the twentieth century, a mysterious figure who may have been named Peter Koons and was later named Pierre Bernard. The media called him “Oom the Omnipotent,” and he was a convert who established, in 1909 in New York, a group called the Tantrik Order of America, probably the first Hindu group established by a non-Asian American in the United States.

Movements

The Vedanta Society started with a fellow named Swami Vivekananda, a nineteenth-century figure from India. He’d been a follower of Ramakrishna, who taught the unity of all religions, an important feature of Vedantism. Vivekananda was beloved by the newspapers and magazines. He spoke English in a wonderful Irish brogue. He criticized Christian missions and was a devotee of Kali, that ferocious female divinity, but he downplayed his *bhakti*-style devotionalism, thinking it would be criticized as idol worship. He talked about the equivalence of Atman and Brahman, and he pushed a Hindu Social Gospel in terms of caring for the poor. He established the Vedanta Society in 1894. Out of this movement, there came another guru: Swami Paramananda.

Swami Paramananda

Swami Paramananda became very important on the West Coast. He got in trouble in New York City with another guru, so he moved from New York to Boston and Los Angeles, starting Vedanta societies in both places. He established a mountain retreat in Southern California called Ananda Ashrama, and he wore suits and drove fancy cars and delivered radio talks. He was called the Hollywood star swami, and, in a way, he initiated the current Hollywood fascination with Asian religions. Eventually, he split from the Ramakrishna

movement over the question of female authority. Many of his disciples were women and he appointed women to run his societies, but the organization in India refused to accept women as his successors.

Swami Yogananda

Swami Yogananda came to the United States as a delegate to an interreligous meeting in 1920 in Boston, the International Congress of Religious Liberals. He stayed and established a group called the Self-Realization Fellowship, now based in Los Angeles. He came with an explicit mandate from a teacher who told him to Westernize Hinduism. His movement became the most influential Hindu movement in the United States before World War II. It displaced the Vedanta Society and it peaked at about 150,000 members. It declined when Yogananda died in 1952, but his teachings linger on, in particular in his *Autobiography of a Yogi,* which became a countercultural hit in both the United States and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. The dimension of religion that he focused on is the experiential dimension. He called his yoga Kriya Yoga, a mix of body postures, Hindu Tantrism, and esoteric Hindu teachings.

Transcendental Meditation

A third movement is Transcendental Meditation. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi came to the United States before the immigration laws were opened up and his became the most popular religious import in the 1960s and 1970s, especially after it was embraced by celebrities, including the Beatles and the football star Joe Namath. It started with an Indian-born teacher who earned a physics degree, studied meditation, and established a movement called the Spiritual Regeneration Movement in India. After he came to the United States, he broadened his emphasis from individual spiritual advancement to social improvement. Over time, Transcendental Meditation claims grew grander. One of these claims was that you could reduce crime by having enough people perform TM in their city. This social element of Transcendental Meditation led to the establishment of the Maharishi International University in Fairfield, Iowa, in 1975. It also led in the 1990s to a movement called the Natural Law Party, which ran a number of candidates for elected office.

Transcendental Meditation is a kind of nondualistic Hinduism that combines chanting and meditation. It's rooted in the ideas of the nondualistic philosopher Shankara, an eighth-century figure. It begins when a guru whispers a mantra to a student in a secret way. One intriguing claim is that Transcendental Meditation is not a religion. One reason practitioners argue this is that they want it to move out into the culture, to be able to be taught in public schools or in social settings that aren't religious. The view here is that Transcendental Meditation is nonsectarian. There are no special clothes or change of lifestyle. So the key themes are that it is scientific, simple, and practical.

Swami Prabhupada

A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada's movement is called the Hare Krishnas, or the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. There's a

big debate in religion about what works best to get followers. The Hare Krishnas decided sectarianism was the way to go. And this is a classic case of the success of an Asian religion that pushes its difference with American culture rather than its similarities. Hare Krishnas are vegetarians. They wear, classically at least, outfits that mark them as Hare Krishnas. They shave their heads in a particular style. The key teaching is *bhakti,* a devotional form of Hinduism rooted in the teachings of a sixteenth-century Hindu reformer Guru Caitanya Mahaprabhu. This is a monotheistic version of the Vaishnava faith that focuses on Krishna. They have a core practice, like we saw in Transcendental Meditation, and that is chanting a mantra: "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama."

Hinduism has become an American religion, both in groups with export gurus and in groups that basically comprise immigrants. Until recently, commentators spoke of U.S. faith-based organizations as rooted in churches and synagogues. Increasingly, they are broadening that language to include Buddhist centers and Muslim mosques and Hindu temples. There's a relative lack of interest, not only in the United States, but also in Western Europe, in the ritual and doctrinal and narrative sides of Hinduism, and so gurus tend to emphasize the experiential.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did immigration law affect the growth of Hinduism and Sikhism in America?
2. What is the American attitude toward gurus?

Suggested Reading

Trout, Polly. *Eastern Seeds, Western Soil: Three Gurus in America*. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Jackson, Carl T. *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Mann, Gurinder Singh. *Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Lecture 7:
Theravada Buddhism:
Buddha, Dharma, Sangha

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught.*

Buddhism is a major world religion comprising 6 percent of the world's population. It's a reform movement that grew out of Hinduism at the same time as the Upanishads. Unlike Hinduism, it has no founder, has no god, and opposes the caste system. It's a little different from Hinduism in that it is missionary. Buddhism is also not a revealed faith. But, like Hindus, Buddhists adopt the core ideas of the Upanishadic perspective, ideas like *samsara* and karma and asceticism and meditation.

Buddhism begins as a *jnana* path, a knowledge path. It is a tradition for renunciants, whom Buddhists call *arhats,* which means "the worthy." The problem is still *samsara*, or, more precisely, the problem is the suffering that characterizes *samsara*. Suffering in the Buddhist world is called *dukkha*. Spiritual liberation is still the goal, but now it's called nirvana, which refers to blowing out suffering, like the blowing out of a candle.

Theravada Buddhism is also sometimes called mainstream, or monastic, Buddhism. The word Theravada literally means "the way of the elders," so there is a sense of tradition and of the ancient. Theravada Buddhism is one of the oldest and most orthodox forms of Buddhism, and it comes from and is most powerful in the southern part of Asia.

The key dimensions of Buddhism parallel Hinduism of the *jnana*-yoga type. Buddhism stresses experience, ethical and legal concerns, and doctrinal and philosophical matters. The most important is the experiential. Is Buddhism a religion? It doesn't have a god or a savior. Rather, the Buddha is said to be a pathfinder. There's no individual soul. There's not just no emphasis on faith, there's an argument against faith. The Buddha says to believe only if you see it's true for yourself. The Buddha offers teaching, but no revelation. The Buddha doesn't care about the afterlife. He is interested in getting rid of suffering. Was the world created? Are there gods? He says these questions don't lead to edification, which is to say we should leave them alone.

When you convert to Theravada Buddhism, you say the Three Jewels: "I go to the Buddha for refuge; I go to the *dharma* for refuge; I go to the *sangha* for refuge." Buddha, dharma, and sangha are this tradition's three key symbols. *Dharma* means duty in Hinduism, but in the Buddhist tradition, it means teaching. The *sangha* is the community of monks and nuns.

Siddhartha Gautama

The Buddha was born in the sixth century BCE in North India, in a place called Lumbini, which became a sacred place for Buddhists. He was born to a wealthy and powerful ruler. His first name was Siddhartha, the accomplisher. His family name was Gautama. And he was later named Shakyamuni,

which means the sage of the Shakya clan. A seer told his father that Siddhartha would become a great ruler or a great sage. He would be either a great seeker after *artha*, the wealth and power aim, or he would be a great seeker after *moksha*, the spiritual goal. His father wanted him to be a ruler, not a religious man, so he raised his son in luxury, shielded him from the world, and tried to keep him ignorant of suffering. The son was dutiful, married at age sixteen, and had a child, but he wanted to see the world. His father arranged a tour and asked the charioteer to make sure the child did not see anything that would launch him into a religious quest. But the Buddha-to-be saw an old man, and his charioteer revealed to him that everyone ages.

Siddhartha went back into the palace and said that he wanted to see more of the world. He went on tour again and saw a sick person. The charioteer told him that sickness happened to everyone. Siddhartha then saw a corpse, and the charioteer told him that this is everyone's fate: People get sick, people get old, and people die. Then Siddhartha saw a *sannyasin*, a renunciant, and a possible answer to the problem of sickness, old age, and death. At age twenty-nine, Siddhartha vowed to leave his life and seek the deathless. He renounced his ties to his wife, family, power, and status.

Now a Hindu renunciant, he studied with gurus, and worked with five fellow seekers who lived a life of extreme asceticism, strictly disciplining their bodies. But he realized that both hedonism and asceticism were traps; each is an extreme. He decided to leave these five fellow seekers and take a middle path. He went to a place in North India called Bodh Gaya, and he sat under a Bo tree, vowing not to move until he achieved enlightenment. Mara, who is the goddess of sense pleasures, tried to distract him with lust and greed, but he persevered. In the first watch of the night, he saw his past life. In the middle watch, he saw that existence is characterized by *dukkha* and *anicca* and *anatman*. Essentially, life is full of suffering and impermanence. In the third watch, he saw the great chain of cause and effect that gives rise, through ignorance and desire and attachment, to suffering. He saw where suffering comes from and figured out that it was possible to eradicate it by getting rid of ignorance and desire and attachment. In short, he was enlightened. So at age thirty-five, he was called the Buddha, the one who is awake.

The Buddha realized that what he came to know, he came to know by his own experience. He knew he couldn't teach it and he knew that if he tried to teach it, he would be misunderstood, and so he was tempted to live the rest of his life in silence. But he had compassion and realized that he had a duty to other human beings. So he went to a place in North India and found the five ascetics he had left before and delivered to them his first sermon. He then traveled for forty-five years all over India, dying in a small village called Kushinara, another sacred place in India, at the age of eighty. His last words epitomized the self-help ideal: "Be lamps unto yourselves. Work out your own liberation with diligence."

Buddha is not a proper name. It is a title that means the awakened one. The Buddha is not a savior or a god. He is a pathfinder, an example. It is important in Theravada Buddhism not to cling to the Buddha or make him an object of worship.

Sangha

The second key symbol is *sangha*, which means the community of monks and nuns. This is the social and institutional dimension in Theravada Buddhism, established by the Buddha to maintain and propagate the dharma. The revolutionary aspect of this *sangha* is that it accepts all castes.

Later Buddhists expanded this idea to include lay people, so *sangha* came to mean the whole Buddhist community. But in the Theravada model, originally, this idea of *sangha* included only the monks and nuns who were traversing the middle path that the Buddha found. As with the Hinduism of the Upanishads and *jnana* yoga, there's very little for the laity to do except to give alms to monks and hope for a better rebirth. The community of monks and nuns lived by rules of monastic discipline, including not touching money or eating in the afternoon. They only ate in the morning. There was no dancing, sleeping on comfortable beds, or sex. The goal of these monastics is to become *arhats*, monks and nuns who have achieved some level of enlightenment.

Dharma

The last of Buddhism's three key symbols is dharma, doing one's duty, which in the Buddhist sense entails leaving behind society to seek enlightenment. Here dharma starts to take on the meaning of teaching rather than duty.

There are two main dharma teachings. The first is the three characteristics of existence, and the second is the Four Noble Truths. The three characteristics of existence are *dukkha*, *anicca*, and *anatta*. *Dukkha* means suffering. This is the nature of human existence, according to Buddhists. In analyzing the problem of *dukkha*, Buddhists begin with the idea of *anicca*, which means impermanence, or transience. Everything changes; you suffer because you wish that things didn't change.

Another characteristic of existence is *anatta,* the idea that there is no soul or self, a denial of the Hindu teaching of Atman. The Buddha says that there is no preexisting, eternal, spiritual entity inside of us that transmigrates from lifetime to lifetime and defines who we are. Suffering exists, but no sufferer is found. This is a denial of the idea not only of the soul but also of the self. What seems to be the self, the "I," is actually a word, and Buddhists put it in quotes. "Me," or "self," is a conventional name given to something else, the five *skandhas:* matter, feelings, ideas, volition, and consciousness. But if there's no self, what transmigrates? The Buddhas say that the *skandhas* will transmigrate.

The second key teaching in Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths. The first Noble Truth is that there is suffering. The second is that suffering has an origin. It comes from thirst, from craving, from desire. Suffering comes from clinging and attachment to ideas, views, opinions, and beliefs, as if they were really true, as if they were unchanging and essential. Most fundamentally, the truth of the origin of suffering is that suffering comes from ignorance. The origin of suffering is described in classic Buddhist teachings as a twelve-fold chain of what the Buddhists call dependent origination, or the notion that everything arises in a dependent relationship with something else. Everything

has a cause, so if suffering has a cause, people should be able to find what the cause is. It starts with ignorance, and ignorance begets desire, including the desire for rebirth, which is one of the reasons why we're reborn. All these things produce birth and decay and old age and suffering.

The third Noble Truth is that *dukkha* can be blown out. There is the cessation of suffering, and this is called nirvana. Buddhists describe it negatively as the blowing out of thirst or attachment. But they describe it more positively as freedom, as harmony, as bliss, as peace. They describe it too as enlightenment, awakening. But ultimately, it is not describable.

The last of the Four Noble Truths is the path to the cessation of suffering, the Noble Eightfold Path: right understanding, understanding the nature of experience of *dukkha*, *anicca,* and *anatta*; right thought, to think without lust, anger, or cruelty; right speech, not to lie, not to gossip; right action, not to kill and steal, not to take drugs, to be charitable, to be generous; right livelihood, right effort; right mindfulness; and right concentration.

Part of the Eightfold Path is being an ethical person. Another part is *samadhi*, or mental discipline, which includes right mindfulness, right concentration, and right effort. And then the third part is called wisdom, or *prajna*, and that's right view and right thought. The intent of this teaching is to eradicate the ignorance, desire, and attachment that lead to suffering.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Is Buddhism a religion?
2. What is the middle path?

Suggested Reading

Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught*. New York: Grove Press, 1974.

Other Books of Interest

Armstrong, Karen. *Buddha*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2001.

Lopez, Donald. *Buddhist Scriptures*. New York: Penguin, 2004.

Robinson, Richard H., Willard L. Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2004.

Lecture 8
Mahayana Buddhism: Emptiness and Compassion

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Paul Williams's *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations.*

Buddhism develops, changes, and diversifies over time by moving from Theravada to Mahayana Buddhism, from the way of the elders to what's called the great vehicle of Buddhism. It's tempting to distinguish sharply between Hinduism and Buddhism, to think about Hinduism as being theistic and devotional and to think about Buddhism as being atheistic and wisdom-based, but both traditions start with an elite path for renunciants, a kind of *jnana* path. And then each tradition develops a popular path for lay people, a *bhakti* path.

Mahayana Buddhism

Bodhisattva Buddhism, or Mahayana Buddhism, means the great vehicle. This is a description developed by Mahayanists themselves, and they contrast their tradition to what they call the lesser vehicle, their name for Theravada Buddhism.

Mahayana Buddhism is "great" because it is more universalistic in the sense that lay people can achieve nirvana. You don't have to be a renunciant or a full-time religious person to get the religious goal. It is greater in the sense that everybody can become a Buddha. In fact, in some Mahayana interpretations, we are all already Buddhas.

In the early forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, the only thing ordinary people could hope for was a better rebirth. Lay people became dissatisfied with that. They wanted to do more than just support monks and nuns, so Buddhism democratized. The problem remained suffering, and the goal remained nirvana, but the techniques broadened. Whereas Theravada Buddhists had achieved nirvana on their own merit, Mahayana Buddhists insisted on the possibility of the transfer of merit, of achieving nirvana via other help, via the help of bodhisattvas, who are understood to be embodiments of compassion. In other words, Buddhism developed, as did Hinduism, from a difficult path of self-help to an easier path of other help. Mahayana Buddhism is far more religious, most notably in seeing the Buddha as an eternal rather than historical being, as someone capable of performing miracles and acting like a god. There is a shift toward the narrative, toward the mythic, toward storytelling.

Mahayana Buddhism, *Bhakti* Hinduism, Rabbinic Judaism, and Christianity all arose around the same time, but Mahayana Buddhists trace their tradition to the Buddha himself. They claim that there were secret Mahayana teachings that were concealed until the world was ready for them. A more historical argument about the origins of Mahayana is that Mahayana started with *stupas*, which are large funerary mounds supposedly covering a relic of the Buddha. These became pilgrimage sites where people went to gather and

commune with the Buddha. Gradually, the emphasis shifted from worship at *stupas* to contemplating scriptures of the Buddhas. So there was an elevation of the Buddha to divinity.

Over time, Buddhists focused less and less on the dharma, on the teaching, neglecting the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. In the Mahayana *sutras*, there was more emphasis on the Buddha, who went from being a man to a supernatural savior whose job it is to bring all of us into nirvana, who can take on any form, human or animal, and who can perform miracles. Eventually, Mahayana Buddhism moved into Tibet and mixed with Hinduism to form the Vajrayana tradition, but it also moved into China, where it mixed with Chinese meditation practices and Daoism to become Chan. In Japan, it mixed with Shinto to form other Japanese forms of Buddhism.

Key Ideas

There are five key ideas in Mahayana Buddhism: Buddha, bodhisattva, emptiness, compassion, and *upaya.* The Buddha transmigrates from a pathfinder to an eternal, magical Buddha who makes multiple descents into history. There are many Buddhas in many different periods, sometimes called celestial Buddhas. Bodhisattva literally means "enlightenment being," but the key virtue of the bodhisattva is not so much enlightenment as compassion. A bodhisattva is a being on the edge of enlightenment, who wants wisdom for himself but has compassion for others. So he vows to become a Buddha and takes the bodhisattva vow, which says that he will not enjoy nirvana until everybody else can, because it would be selfish to go into nirvana while others suffer. Inside this view is a critique of the *arhats* of the Theravada tradition who seek after wisdom for themselves rather than helping other people. After he takes this vow, the bodhisattva moves on to practice the six perfections: the perfection of giving, the perfection of morality, the perfection of patience, the perfection of energy, the perfection of meditation, and the perfection of wisdom. The last step is the attainment of Buddhahood, but this may be eternally put off.

One of the most famous examples of the bodhisattva is Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. The most important virtue of a bodhisattva is compassion, so the one who most embodies it will be the most popular. Avalokiteshvara comes, like Krishna, to Earth repeatedly to save human beings in peril. He is often imaged with many arms, a way to demonstrate his great power.

The argument is that Mahayana Buddhism is greater than Theravada Buddhism because it puts compassion before wisdom; *arhats* are selfish and the bodhisattvas are not. Like Buddhas, the bodhisattvas are magical. They seem to violate the law of karma because they can transfer merit from themselves to others.

Emptiness

The third Mahayana ideal is emptiness. Theravadins say that the self is not really unitary because it can be broken down into five *skandhas*. The Mahayana tradition goes further and says that the *skandhas* themselves are composites, or empty of own being. All things in the universe are empty of

own being. Everything changes, and everything is composite. The essence of things is their emptiness. Nirvana itself is empty. Buddhahood too is empty and indistinguishable from non-Buddhahood. The dharma is empty too. There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, no suffering, and no extinction of suffering. Even emptiness is empty. Even emptiness cannot be clung to as the rock upon which all existence stands. This is called nondualism, as seen in Hinduism, where Atman and Brahman are the same. Mahayana Buddhists apply this idea across the board and say that everything is nondual. Everything is empty, so there is no distinction between nirvana and *samsara*. It is nirvana of a sort to know that we are already living in nirvana, as opposed to waiting for it at some future point.

Compassion

Compassion is the fourth key idea. We want to embody compassion, not just wisdom. We want to care about our neighbors. We want to have this megalomaniac idea that we're going to take everybody into nirvana before we go in ourselves. The Buddhist thinker Shantideva said that all misery in the world arises from desiring for oneself, and all happiness arises from desiring happiness for others.

Upaya

The fifth and last of these ideals in Mahayana Buddhism is *upaya*, typically translated as "skillful means." Mahayana *sutras* contradict one another and they contradict the Theravada scriptures. Why does the Buddha teach one thing in one place and another thing in another? The answer is that the Buddha has skilful means and knows that clinging to ideas will cause suffering. So he's going to uproot whatever doctrines people cling to. The Buddha can take different forms for different people, and the Buddha might even lie to you in order to save you. Anyone you encounter could be a Buddha, so you must be alert.

Mahayana vs. Theravada Buddhism

So how do Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism differ? The first distinction is between traditionalism and orthodoxy in the Theravada and adaptationism and accommodationism in the Mahayana. The Theravada approach takes great pride in holding fast to tradition. Mahayana is an adaptationist faith, eager to change, and it's justified by the idea of skilful means. So Mahayana adapts best in the West.

Another difference is scriptures, which are limited to "Three Baskets" in the Theravada view. Mahayana scriptures expand and add many more scriptures. Another distinction is that the Buddha in the Theravada is a pathfinder. He's not supernatural and there's only one Buddha in each historical period. In the Mahayana, the Buddha is a quasi-divinity. There are many Buddhas, not just one. Another interesting idea of the Buddha is that, in the Theravada, Buddhas die. In the Mahayana, Buddhas do not die. They are eternal and the apparent death of a Buddha is only apparent, not real. The Buddha needs to teach things through his death, so he pretends to die.

The other distinction is the one between the ideal of the *arhat* and the ideal of the bodhisattva. In the Theravada, the best way to achieve merit is through

monasticism, and so Theravada tends to be more restricted to men. The bodhisattva idea emphasizes compassion. You can achieve the religious goal through the help of others, so it's open not just to monastics, but also to lay people, and because it's open to lay people, it's more open to women.

In the Theravada, nirvana is for *arhats* only. In the Mahayana tradition, nirvana is open to everyone. In fact, there is another paradox in the Mahayana tradition: we have all already achieved nirvana; we are all already Buddhas; we need to realize that we're Buddhas and start to act like it. Another distinction is between *jnana* and *bhakti.* Theravada is a *jnana* path, a path for philosophers. Mahayana is a *bhakti* path, a path for devotees. In the Mahayana path, there is a kind of *puja* to the Buddhas, worship of the Buddhas. There is also the distinction between the notion of *anatta*, in which the five *skandhas* are real, and the belief in the Mahayana tradition that everything is empty.

Theravada Buddhism is a tradition of renunciants seeking release from suffering by their own efforts, and Mahayana is a tradition of lay people seeking not only nirvana but also Buddhahood through the assistance of quasi-divine beings called bodhisattvas. Is Buddhism really a religion if it doesn't have gods, saviors, or souls? Depending on your view, maybe no, maybe yes. But Mahayana, by any definition, is a religion.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why is Mahayana Buddhism called the great vehicle?
2. What is meant by the Mahayana ideal of emptiness?

Suggested Reading

Williams, Paul. *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Other Books of Interest

Eckel, Malcolm David. *Buddhism: Origins, Beliefs, Practices, Holy Texts, Sacred Places*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Lecture 9:
Zen Buddhism:
Koans and Zazen

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind.*

Zen Buddhism is a Mahayana school from Japan. Of all the Buddhist schools, Tibetan Buddhism is probably the best known in the West. But before the 1990s, when the Dali Lama brought on a Tibetan Buddhist boom, that honor belonged to Zen Buddhism. In fact, there was a big Zen boom in the 1950s thanks to the interest of the Beat generation in Zen.

Zen is one of the three classical forms of Japanese Mahayana Buddhism, each of which has roots in the Mahayana Buddhism of China, and each of which originates in Japan in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These three traditions are Pure Land Buddhism, Nichiren Buddhism, and Zen Buddhism.

Pure Land Buddhism

Pure Land Buddhism can be compared with *Bhakti* Hinduism. It is devotional and more popular than Zen in Japan. It focuses on a Buddha, not on a particular scripture or technique. The key concept is the Pure Land. The basic idea is that Buddhas are lords over realms they have created through the miraculous powers they have developed as part of their achievement of Buddhahood. A Pure Land is a world system in which almost everything is conspiring to get you to nirvana. So you hope for rebirth in the Pure Land. Pure Land Buddhism can be seen as a response to the problem in Hinduism and Buddhism in which religious elites can attain the religious goal, but lay people cannot. Here, ordinary lay people can hope for rebirth in the Pure Land, not just for a better rebirth on Earth. The Pure Land is made perfect by the wisdom and compassion of a particular Buddha. It is not utterly unlike the Christian notion of Heaven, though it is recognized as a kind of halfway house rather than a final resting place. But how do you get to the Pure Land? You have faith in a Buddha and in the vow he has taken to save all beings by bringing them into the Pure Land. This tradition has been described as salvation by grace through faith. It sounds a bit like the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, though Pure Land Buddhism came a few centuries earlier. How do you generate this grace through faith? Well, you need to hear of the Buddha. So the key practice becomes not meditation, but saying the Buddha's name. This is reminiscent of Sikhism, where saying the name of God is stressed. In each case, there is great power in words.

Nichiren Buddhism

The second form of Buddhism from Japan, again from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, is Nichiren Buddhism. Here, the focus is not on a particular Buddha, but on a specific text. In the Mahayana tradition, there was a tremendous expansion of the scriptures, which are all attributed to the Buddha, and so schools tend to differentiate themselves by focusing on a

particular text. The Nichiren form of Buddhism focuses on the Lotus Sutra, and for that reason, it is sometimes called the Lotus School. The word "Nichiren" comes from two words. One is *ren*, which means lotus, the flower (a symbol of Buddhism), and the other is *nichi*, which means sun (a symbol for Japan).

One key feature here is exclusivism. There is a stereotype that Asian religions are tolerant, but this is a quite exclusivist school. The claim of Nichiren Buddhism is that there is no way to nirvana except via the Lotus Sutra. The Pure Land sect is anathema. So Nichiren Buddhism is not a tolerant faith. A key practice here is *shakubuku,* which means strong or aggressive evangelism. Another important practice is chanting. The Lotus Sutra is the object of *bhakti*-style veneration in a home shrine, where it is encoded in a *gohonzon,* a hanging scroll on which the Lotus Sutra chant is written. The aim is to turn this world into a paradise, rather than waiting for rebirth in the Pure Land. In this school, it is believed that chanting works, and it doesn't work just for nirvana; it works in this world. Nichiren Buddhism is visible today in a group called Soka Gokkai International, a lay movement inside Nichiren Buddhism.

Zen Buddhism

The third of these schools in Japan is Zen Buddhism. Here the focus is not on the Buddha or a text, but on a technique: meditation. The word Zen comes from a transliteration of the Chinese word *ch'an,* or meditation. In focusing on meditation, Zen practitioners reject the importance of gods, of Buddhas, of scriptures, of rituals.

Advocates say that Zen goes back to the historical Buddha. The key story concerns the Buddha, who is asked one day to teach the dharma. Instead of teaching the Four Noble Truths, he picks up a flower and says nothing. Everyone is confused. But one disciple sees the wisdom of this sermon and is immediately enlightened. He smiles and the Buddha recognizes his smile as evidence of enlightenment. This flower sermon teaches that truth is direct, instant, ordinary, and unmediated. It comes outside of scripture. The other thing emphasized here is the idea that knowledge, wisdom, and enlightenment are transmitted from a master to a pupil, something that is quite common in Asia. But here the guru is called a Zen Master. Another Zen element present in this story is the Buddha's recognition of the mind of enlightenment in his student.

The goal is to see one's own Buddha nature, which, according to the Zen tradition, is the original nature of all of us. If Buddhism can be criticized for being pessimistic, this is an optimistic tradition in the sense that we all have Buddha nature inside of us; we just need to recognize it. Two more Zen impulses are biblioclasm and iconoclasm: we don't need bibles; we don't need scriptures; we don't need images. There is a tradition in Zen of literally burning the images of the Buddha, even burning *sutras* themselves.

Four Techniques

The techniques of Zen are many. We will take up four. The first, which comes from the name of the tradition, is *zazen*, which means sitting meditation.

A second technique is the *koan*, a nonsensical question or riddle that cannot

be solved rationally. It is designed to frustrate the ordinary mind and is given by a *roshi* (teacher) to a student. The term means the magistrate's table, which is a place in court where the truth is discovered. So the term *koan* carries this notion of being an opportunity to discover the truth. And the solution to a *koan,* in keeping with Zen, must be intuitive, immediate, personal, and experiential. One of the more famous *koans* is, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Another is, "How did your face look before you were born?" It is important that the answer not be formulaic. It has to come out of the Buddha nature that is inside us, and it has to be judged by one's teacher as authentic. It might be a shout, a laugh, or some kind of nonsensical reply—that is up to the *roshi*.

A third technique is manual labor. The Zen tradition is famous for seeing manual labor (drawing water, carrying wood) as being as important, perhaps more important, as the reading of scripture. Performing the tasks of an ordinary person is a form of Zen practice. Here again we see nondualism. There is no distinction between carrying wood and *zazen*. They are both avenues to enlightenment. They are both ways to cultivate Buddha nature.

The fourth technique is the arts. Here the book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is a well-known example. However, classic arts associated with Zen are flower arranging, tea ceremony, and haiku. These arts are meant to cut off the rational mind and to stop one's thinking and analyzing. Each of these forms is taught by a master to a student.

Zen and the West

Simplicity and naturalness are values in Chinese and Japanese cultures that are not values in India. But they come into Buddhism, into Zen, because the Chinese and Japanese care about them.

As Zen develops, it breaks into two branches: Rinzai Zen and Soto Zen. Rinzai Zen is brought by the Rinzai sect in the late twelfth century to Japan. It focuses on the *koan*. Soto Zen is larger numerically and focuses on *zazen.* The key figure is Dogen, a thirteenth-century thinker who focused on what he called "silent illumination" Zen, which is to say Zen without *koans*. He said *koans* are intellectual games and emphasized just sitting instead. He said that enlightenment doesn't have to come in a flash; it can come gradually. So this is also a less elitist form of Zen. In order to do Rinzai Zen, you have to have a relationship with a teacher. In Soto Zen, you can do it on your own. So Soto becomes the most popular Zen form in Japan.

Zen arrived in the West in 1893 at the World's Parliament of Religion, through an important Japanese lay person named D.T. Suzuki, a translator and a writer who took up residency in the United States and published multiple books on Zen. He helped to bring on the Zen boom of the 1950s in the United States and Western Europe. One of Suzuki's arguments is that Zen is not a religion: "For Zen has no God to worship, no ceremonial rights to observe, no future abode to which the dead are destined, and last of all, Zen has no soul whose welfare is to be looked after by somebody else and whose immortality is of intense concern with some people. Zen is free from dogmatic and religious encumbrances." Zen is a kind of freedom, in other words and Zen is not religion.

Suzuki also said that Zen is not a philosophy. It is a form of mysticism found across the world's religions. In other words, Zen can be adopted. You don't have to be a Buddhist to practice Zen.

Many have argued that Western understandings of Zen have been unduly influenced by Suzuki. And some have started to refer to his take on the tradition as Suzuki Zen—to underscore the idiosyncrasies of his approach. The chief objection is that Suzuki presented a highly Westernized and romanticized image of Zen. Another claim is that Zen is not really as opposed to ritual and scripture as Suzuki and others have insisted. In fact, in monasteries across Japan, monks and nuns have spent days and days memorizing scriptures and practicing rituals. Suzuki and his followers have been criticized too for arguing that Zen is not one form among many of Japanese Buddhism, but a catchword for the universal quest for reality. Suzuki, in some ways, has failed to see the way in which Zen is a historical product of a particular time and place. But Zen is a particular religion, as are all the religions we've studied. It comes out of a particular time, a particular culture, and a particular place.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How does one get to the Pure Land?
2. How do *koans* lead to enlightenment?

Suggested Reading

Suzuki, Shunryu. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. New York: Weatherhill, 1973.

Other Books of Interest

Earhart, H. Byron. *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003.

Suzuki, Daisetz T. *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. New York: Grove/Atlantic, 1991.

Lecture 10:
Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Robert A. Thurman's *Essential Tibetan Buddhism.*

Tibetan Buddhism was once seen as an example of the Mahayana path, but now it's typically viewed as a third *yana.* This Buddhist vehicle goes by many names.

The Names of Tibetan Buddhism

The first name for Tibetan Buddhism is Vajrayana Buddhism. *Vajra* means thunderbolt, and a thunderbolt is an unbreakable thing that breaks everything else. The emphasis here is on power, the power to achieve enlightenment or to make miraculous things happen, both of which are rooted in the notion of emptiness, or *sunyata.* Vajrayana Buddhism, therefore, is a Buddhism of power, rooted in the magic of emptiness.

The second name is Tantric Buddhism, or Tantrayana, the vehicle of Tantra. These practices developed in India. They're a part of Hinduism, and there are many scriptures and ritual manuals associated with them. Tantrism is interested in the union of opposites, and it includes sexual practices, or at least sexual visualization that sees the nature of the cosmos as manifested in the union of the male and the female.

The third name is Lamaism, so named because of the importance of lamas, who are spiritual teachers or gurus. This is a guru-based form of Buddhism in which the guru is called the lama, as in the Dalai Lama.

The fourth name for Tibetan Buddhism is Mantrayana, because of the emphasis on mantras, the sacred sounds that go back to Vedism.

The fifth name is Esoteric Buddhism. There's a sharp distinction between insiders and outsiders in this tradition. There's a notion of secret, private transmission. There are texts that can be taught to you early on, and there are some that can't be taught until you develop a certain level of practice.

The last name is Tibetan Buddhism, so termed because it took root in Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism began somewhere around the third century in North India. Then in the eighth century, it moved into Tibet, where it really took hold. The early elites were called *siddhas,* which means those who achieve, those who have magical powers to help ordinary people. In other words, they have a kind of bodhisattva quality. The other elites alongside them are monks and gurus, who are seeking enlightenment. Both of these groups are called lamas. So the ideal moved from the *arhat* in Theravada to the bodhisattva in Mahayana to the lama in Tibetan Buddhism.

Lamas

Lamas are understood to be reincarnations of a bodhisattva. The earliest sect in Tibetan Buddhism is called the Red Hat sect, or the Nyingmapa ("Ancient Ones") sect. These are noncelibate monks, monks who marry and have children. They live like princes in palaces, and their authority runs through bloodlines. It starts in the eighth century with these magic-making yogis who come up from India into Tibet and build the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery.

The next sect is the dominant one: the Yellow Hats, the Gelugpa sect, ("Virtuous Ones"). It begins with a reformer called Tsong Khapa, a fifteenth-century figure. This is the movement now headed by the Dalai Lama. The goal of this sect is to purify Buddhism by merging the virtues of Mahayana and Theravada. The key figure is Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, but there's also a greater emphasis here on monastic rules, including celibacy, on the Buddhist sutras, and on learning and debate.

These Yellow Hats strongly believed in education, so they set up elaborate monasteries for children who wanted to learn about Buddhism. Because they were celibate, the monastic leadership could not go through bloodlines, so the Yellow Hats developed something like apostolic succession in Catholicism. After a lama dies, there is a long search for a child, typically born forty-nine days after the death of the lama.

The first Dalai Lama was recognized in the fifteenth century, and he was said to be the reincarnation of Avalokiteshvara. The fifth Dalai Lama gained religious and political control of Tibet in a theocracy, a spiritually run political order. And today's Dalai Lama, who continued to rule until the Chinese took over in 1959, is the fourteenth. The cultural revolution of China in the 1960s and 1970s tried to suppress Tibetan Buddhism, particularly in Tibet. A battle was waged there with millions of people killed before 1959. The Dalai Lama was sent into exile, and he brought this religion out into the open in India. For his efforts, he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

Syncretism

Tibetan Buddhism synthesizes elements from Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. From Theravada, it gets the emphasis on monasticism, and from Mahayana, it gets the philosophical idea of emptiness. Practitioners claim that their Buddhism is about both compassion, the key value in Mahayana, and wisdom, the key value in Theravada.

Tibetan Buddhists borrow too from the indigenous tradition of *Bon,* which means truth, or reality, a kind of shamanism in which spiritual elites go into trances, exorcise demons, and travel out of their bodies into other realms.

A third source is Hindu Tantra, which is sometimes called sexual yoga. It's esoteric and magical, rooted in nondualism and preoccupied with desire. The classic Buddhist idea is to renounce desires. Tantra, in both its Hindu and its Buddhist forms, indulges desires, quenching through indulgence rather than renunciation. Visualizing the erotic connection between a man and a woman becomes a way to learn nondualism, the union of opposites that aren't really opposites, male and female, wisdom and compassion.

The key beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism are nondualism, the *siddhi,* and the lama. Nondualism maintains that things that we think are distinct turn out not to be. Male and female, wisdom and compassion, are not different from each other in any ultimate sense. Purity and pollution are not different from each other. Nirvana and *samsara* are not dual. The world of our experience is the world of bliss. The last nondualism is between Buddhas and non-Buddhas; we are all Buddhas already.

Siddhi is success or achievement. We have the power to achieve enlightenment. We have the power to have health and wealth and live a happy life.

The last of these ideas is the lama, "the one who is superior." In the Tibetan Buddhist case, we take four refuges to be a Buddhist: "I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the dharma; I take refuge in the *sangha;* and I take refuge in the lama."

Tibetan Buddhism is essentially a *bhakti* path when it comes to practice. The key piety of ordinary people is giving alms to monks and nuns, but there's also the piety of *puja,* giving offerings to Buddhas and bodhisattvas. There's also turning the prayer wheel with prayers to the Buddha.

Advanced Practices

Advanced practices for monks and nuns include meditation as visualization. Tibetan monks and nuns will look at a mandala, a magical diagram of the cosmos that shows where important Buddhas and bodhisattvas exist in the world. It shows hells and ghosts and gods too. Practitioners conjure up an image of the Buddha at the center of the mandala and visualize themselves as that Buddha. Then they imagine they are the Buddha united with his or her consort, receiving knowledge and power through that act of union. Then they dissolve themselves into emptiness. And then they return to the world with power to engage it compassionately and wisely in the service of other people.

A second practice for monks and nuns is reciting mantras. Sacred sounds have power in both this world and the next. Mantra recitation can move you away from the causes of suffering and toward nirvana.

Partaking of the five forbidden things is a third advanced practice. These five forbidden things are wine, meat, fish, certain kinds of grains, and sex. These are not supposed to be done by Tibetan Buddhists, at least not by monks and nuns, but a lama might instruct a student to partake of these things in order to help the practictioner realize the nondualism of purity and pollution.

The fourth practice is the sexual ritual, probably the most commonly misunderstood element in Tibetan Buddhism. Sex rites are far less important today in Tibetan Buddhism than they were in classical Hindu Tantra, and they are often eliminated or spiritualized. The way these sexual rites work is that a lama will teach you to imagine yourself as a Buddha in a sexual embrace with a consort. But there were probably times that monks would have sex as a spiritual practice.

The Book of the Dead

The two most important dimensions of Tibetan Buddhism are the experiential dimension and the doctrinal. Reading scripture is important, but so is the

experience of enlightenment. Tibetan Buddhist scriptures include the Tibetan *Book of the Dead,* whose original title literally means "liberation through hearing in the intermediate state." The intermediate state is the *bardo,* a Tibetan word for a limbo between one thing and another. The *bardo* discussed here is between death and rebirth. So the text offers liberation by listening to words as you're moving between death and rebirth. This book is classically chanted by monks, read to the dying person as a guide through the forty-nine days between death and rebirth. How you react to the challenges of these days determines your rebirth. So this is the period where the karmic residues that are in your being bubble up, and the decision is made about how and where you are going to be reborn. The chants are addressed to your consciousness; Tibetan Buddhists believe that consciousness survives bodily death.

There are three stages that the Tibetan *Book of the Dead* marks out. In the first, you see a blinding, frightening light. What you're supposed to do is recognize this light as the miraculous dharma body of the Buddha, and if you know that, you immediately achieve nirvana. But most people can't do this. Assuming you don't recognize this light, you move into the next stage, in which you experience seven days of wonderfully peaceful deities that parade in front of you. The key here is not to be attracted to them, to know them instead as parts of yourself, to know that they are the Buddha. If you are able to do that, you will achieve nirvana. But that's difficult. So then there are seven days of wrathful deities. The key here is not to be repulsed by them, to know they too are the Buddha. But again, most people can't do this. So they go to the last stage, where there is no escape from *samsara.* The goal becomes a good rebirth. This stage determines, dependent on your prior karma, how and where you're going to be reborn.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the significance of Vajrayana Buddhism's association with the thunderbolt?
2. What does "Dalai Lama" mean?

Suggested Reading

Thurman, Robert A. *Essential Tibetan Buddhism*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

Dalai Lama. *My Land and My People: The Original Autobiography of His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet*. New York: Warner Books, 1997.

Paine, Jeffrey. *Re-Enchantment: Tibetan Buddhism Comes to the West*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 2004.

Rinpoche, Sogyal. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.

Lecture 11:
Buddhism in America

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Richard Hughes Seager's *Buddhism in America.*

Statistics about the number of Buddhists in America are tricky. It's fairly easy to say that there are about a million Hindus in the United States, but it's hard to know how many Buddhists there are. Telephone surveys are typically done in English, and as a result, they miss a lot of recent immigrants who do not speak English, particularly people from Southeast Asia. Another problem is that many Buddhists don't think that Buddhism is a religion, so if you ask what religion they are, they may say none. We do know that there are over 1,200 American Buddhist centers in the United States, and estimates for the total number of Buddhists range from a half million up to six million. But many more Americans are influenced by Buddhism, and we tend to refer to these people as sympathizers, those who may read Buddhist books or go on an occasional retreat or think about their lives in terms of the Buddhist Noble Truths, but who haven't officially joined a Buddhist center.

One in seven Americans has had some significant contact with Buddhism, and one in eight says Buddhism has influenced his or her religious life. So, in this sense, Buddhism is a significant contributor to the American religious landscape.

Divisions of Buddhism

The most obvious division of Buddhism is the classical split of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. Another division is into meditators and chanters. Buddhists can also be divided into monastic and lay practitioners, though in the United States there's an interesting intermediate category between monastic and lay. This may be one of the most important contributions of Americans to Buddhism, the creation of middle paths between the lay life and the monastic life (most classically seen in weekend retreats, where a lay person spends time in a monastery). Another division is between lifestyle Buddhists and hard-core practitioners. The most common division, though, is between birthright Buddhists, people who are born into the faith, who are immigrants or descendants of immigrants for whom Buddhism is a cultural matter, and convert Buddhists, the sympathizers and converts who are more countercultural, for whom being a Buddhist is not a family practice.

The sympathizer story starts in 1844 with the Transcendentalists: Thoreau, who wrote *Walden,* and Emerson, who thought the core of religion was finding god in nature. The Transcendentalists were interested in Confucianism, Sufism, and Hindu philosophy. They were interested in Buddhism, but the first translation into English of a Buddhist scripture did not come until 1844 in the Transcendentalist magazine *The Dial*. This was a key moment, when it became possible for an ordinary American to learn Buddhism. The

Transcendentalists did this, but they didn't do it very well. Emerson praised the *Bhagavad Gita* as a renowned book of Buddhism, getting the wrong religion. Thoreau knew Buddhism better. In his book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,* he talked about his love of the Buddha and Jesus, but intimated he liked the Buddha better. So the Transcendentalists were the first group of thinkers in America who took Asian religions seriously.

The second group, and the first real organization, to do that was the Theosophical Society, which was founded in 1875 in New York. Initially, Theosophists were interested in spiritualism, in how to talk with the spirits of the dead. But during the first few years of the organization, they increasingly grew interested in Asian religions. The two founders, Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, who was from the United States, traveled to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), going first to India. In 1880, they converted, and so Olcott became the first U.S.-born American to formally embrace Buddhism.

In 1893, the World's Parliament of Religions brought Hinduism and Buddhism into the United States. It brought Buddhism in the form of a Sinhalese Buddhist, Anagarika Dharmapala, a Theosophical Society sympathizer, who came and talked about Buddhism, as did a Zen teacher from Japan, Soyen Shaku. Shortly thereafter, a man named D.T. Strauss converted to Buddhism in part as a result of the World's Parliament of Religions. Boston Buddhists were romantic types who loved the art of Asia and the art of Buddhism. In the 1940s and 1950s, a group called the Beats, through the influence of D.T. Suzuki, became interested in Buddhism, and then there was more interest in Buddhism in the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, and more interest in the 1990s with the Tibetan Buddhism boom. So there's a whole heritage, a lineage, of Kerouac and the Boston Buddhists and Henry Steel Olcott and Thoreau, an American tradition of engagement with Buddhism.

Converts and sympathizers encounter Buddhism in three main ways: One is through a textual encounter with Buddhist books. Another is through a person, a teacher, an interpersonal encounter. And another is through art, an artifactual encounter. You get something different out of a religion depending on how you encounter it. Buddhism has come largely into America, at least among sympathizers, almost entirely through books, which can illuminate, even as they distort.

Soka Gakkai International-USA (formerly known as Nichiren Shoshu of America, or NSA) serves as an interesting story of the development of a Buddhist faith in the West. It's likely the largest Buddhist group in America today, and it is certainly the most diverse, comprising Hispanics and blacks along with whites and Japanese. This group has roots in thirteenth-century Japan, in this case Nichiren, an "other help" devotional faith that focuses on the Lotus Sutra. And it first came to the United States in 1960. In that year, the president of this lay movement, Daisaku Ikeda, arrived in the United States and founded what came to be known as the NSA. He was the leader of the lay wing called the Value Creation Society. Its core practice is chanting. Another practice is venerating the *gohonzon,* a scroll displayed in one's home that represents the Lotus Sutra. Initially, this movement attracted Japanese Americans, but it was very successful with converts. So unlike the Buddhist Churches of America, which are almost entirely Japanese, this is

not an overwhelmingly Asian group. About a third of the memberships are blacks and Hispanics. This group is successful in America in part because of its instrumentalism, or wordly focus, its affirmation that, through chanting, one can attain health and wealth and happiness. It's also interesting because it's been aggressively nationalistic, one feature of it in Japan. When it came to the United States, it was quite pro-American. This was particularly clear during the bicentennial period, when the NSA organized a fife and drum corps that pretended to be patriots. An interesting development came in the early 1990s, disrupting what had been a fragile peace between the priestly part of this group and the laity. As the laity got more and more important, the priests started to feel squeezed out of the religion, and there followed a classic battle between the priests and the laity. In the early 1990s, priests raised the price of a *gohonzon.* The lay practitioners revolted, saying priests were just interested in money, not spirituality. Then the lay members, who tended to be more cosmopolitan and liberal, and kind to other religions, held a service in which their members sang Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." The priests said it was heretical to have a Christian song performed in a Buddhist context. A battle broke out and a split occured. It was a classic dispute over the importance of ritual versus faith, over the authority of the priests versus the laity. Finally, the priests excommunicated the entire membership and said they would not give them the scrolls any more. And so the lay members had to do the things that the priests used to do. But the group seems to be thriving. In 2001, they established a university, Soka University in California, that was accredited in 2005 and had its first graduating class in that same year.

The Immigrant Story

The second story is the immigrant story, which begins with the discovery of gold in California in 1848 as immigrants came from China to what they called Gold Mountain. Of course, the Chinese brought their religions with them. They made home altars and public shrines. They put up Buddhas, Confucian sages, and popular folk deities. These were essentially syncretic temples. By the end of the century, there were four hundred of these shrines where Buddhism was set up alongside these other religions of China. As a result, Buddhism had a powerful presence on the West Coast.

Politicians played a key role in the saga of immigrant Buddhism. We tend to think Americans have separation of church and state, which is true. But we also have lawmakers who can change immigration rules. This happened in 1882 with the Chinese Exclusion Act, which effectively cut off immigration from China and made it impossible to bring Buddhism from China to the United States. So the story of American Buddhism after 1882 was taken over by the Japanese, who began to arrive in Hawaii in the 1880s and the continental United States in the 1890s. The vast majority were practicing Pure Land Buddhism. They built temples in Hawaii in 1889 and they built them in the mainland in San Francisco in 1898. In 1899, they established the first Buddhist denomination in America, which had the interesting name of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (in imitation of the YMCA). So already we can see the imitative nature of American Buddhism. This group was later renamed the Buddhist Mission of North America, and later still was referred to as the Buddhist Churches of America. Before World War II, immigration

legislation cut off immigration from Japan, particularly in 1924. Many Buddhist temples had to close their doors, because they were not getting an influx of immigrants. The true challenge came in 1942, when President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which allowed American officials to arrest and incarcerate Japanese Americans in internment camps. Before the end of the war, over 120,000 were interned, including virtually every member of the Buddhist Mission of North America. Some of the earliest to be rounded up were priests, because priests were thought to be particularly threatening to American military officials, who felt they might not be loyal to the United States. The effects were many, but one of the most important was that the Buddhist Church of America was Protestantized. The most obvious way this happened was the renaming, in 1944, of the Buddhist Mission of America to the Buddhist Churches of America. The liturgical manuals from this group started to be written in English. They also added hymns that were clearly imitative of Protestant Christian norms, and they created catechisms—again in imitation of Christians—and called their leaders bishops.

Since the 1950s, when Zen became popular, and especially after 1965, when immigration reopened from Asia, the Buddhist Churches of America have had a lot of other Buddhist groups to compete with, and it's no longer the largest group. Today its numbers are fading, particularly as Japanese-American children are Americanized. There are now only about 17,000 adherents in sixty-one temples.

Buddhists have been in the United States for multiple generations, however, and they're more comfortable in some ways than these recent immigrants. so when it comes to important political and social issues (such as school prayer), they're willing to weigh in, lending a Buddhist voice to matters of national concern.

Two Buddhisms

American Buddhism is a tale of two Buddhisms, immigrant Buddhists and their descendents, on the one hand, and groups of U.S.-born converts and sympathizers on the other. Both have monastic and lay practitioners, but their experiences are distinct. In fact, even when two groups share a physical space, when they share a center, they typically interact very little. But the distinction between immigrants and converts is not absolute. In the Buddhist Churches of America, for example, many of the priests are white. Many of the most successful convert groups were established by immigrant teachers, and many are run today by Tibetans, Koreans, or Thais. And some children of sixties' and seventies' converts are now birthright Buddhists themselves.

Both of these groups struggle with the Americanization question. Buddhism in Asia has been there for millennia, and in the United States, it has only been around a century and a half, but there still seem to be some interesting patterns. One is social engagement. There's a new form of Buddhism that we refer to as engaged Buddhism. Some people are even calling this the fourth *yana,* the fourth vehicle. Groups such as the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and the Zen Peacemaker Order are trying to say Buddhism needs a social conscience. And they are merging the teachings of Buddhism with the Social Gospel traditions of the West, particularly of Protestantism.

A second trend is simplification, particularly the tendency to reduce Buddhism to practice. When a Buddhist meets a Buddhist in the United States, particularly on the convert side, she tends to say, what's your practice? In a recent survey of Buddhists and sympathizers in the United States, over nine out of ten said meditation was their single most important Buddhist activity, and 93 percent had gone on retreat, so this is a form of Buddhism that really emphasizes practice, as opposed to doctrine or ritual.

Another trend is secularization. A number of Buddhists say Buddhism is not a religion, Buddhism is not about beliefs. There's a book by Stephen Bachelor called *Buddhism without Beliefs* that represents a secularization of Buddhism, a taking away of its religious and doctrinal aspects. There's a teacher named John Kabat-Zinn who focuses on meditation for stress reduction and wants his techniques in the public space, so he argues that Buddhism is not religion.

Another trend is Anglicization, the trend toward translating *koans* and chants from Japanese into English, making English a language of Buddhism rather than relying on Asian languages.

Yet another trend is instrumentalism, using Buddhism as an instrument to get a car or a job. Instrumentalism is the idea that Buddhism can help you in this world; it can reduce your stress, make you a better father or a better mother. Another trend is Protestantization, Christianization, trying to wedge the square peg of Buddhism into the round hole of Christianity. And then the largest and broadest trend is democratization, a shift in authority away from priests to lay people. This is seen in the feminization of Buddhism, where women increasingly are participating in the religion. They're running monasteries. They're leaders in Zen centers. Over half of the Buddhists in the United States are women. So democratization and laicization have made Buddhism more egalitarian in America.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are the main divisions of Buddhism in America?
2. How has Buddhism changed in the United States?

Suggested Reading

Seager, Richard Hughes. *Buddhism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Fields, Rick. *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*. Boston: Shambhala, 1992.

Tweed, Thomas A. *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Lecture 12:
Confucianism:
Becoming Human by Becoming Social

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is D.C. Lau's translation of *Confucius: The Analects.*

Confucianism is, along with Daoism and Buddhism, one of the Three Teachings of China. Of these three teachings, Confucianism is the most influential. It's been important throughout Chinese history, and it's been successfully exported, particularly to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Confucianism doesn't have a creator god, but it has an impersonal force called heaven that watches over human life and legitimates the political power of rulers. It has no institutional hierarchy and no real concern with the afte life or liberation from this world to the next. Confucius emphasized actions in the world. He focused on social relations, the etiquette and rites that make social harmony possible.

The Five Classics

Confucianism is an eighteenth-century term from Western Europe for the school of teachers of the five ancient Chinese classics: the *Book of Poetry,* the *Book of Rites,* the *Book of Documents,* the *Book of Changes,* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Each of these texts sees Confucius as its editor. Confucianism takes its name from this great teacher. According to a neo-Confucian thinker, Tu Wei-ming, these books embody five great visions.

The first is the *Book of Poetry,* the earliest anthology of Chinese poetry. The social vision of the world is contained in the *Book of Rites,* which describes ancestral rites and state rituals and rules of etiquette. The *Book of Rites* says society is not about individuals pursuing rites and contracts, as in the modern West, but that society is a web of relationships, so it's important how you interact.

The *Book of Changes* is an effort to understand, through numerology and divination, the metaphysics of change. The theory is that change occurs through the ceaseless interaction of yin and yang, the female and the male principles. The *Book of Documents* is a collection of historical records and speeches from the earliest Chinese dynasties. It shows how rulers ruled and how those who ruled virtuously created better governments, an important theme in Confucianism. The last of these books, the *Spring and Autumn Annals,* contains the historical vision. It records the actions of rulers from the eighth to the fifth century BCE in the State of Liu, where Confucius lived. Confucius gives his judgment about the ethics and propriety of these rulers in the *Spring and Autumn Annals.*

The Life of Confucius

Confucius's father and mother both died when he was a child. He married young and had two children. He had no formal education, but educated him-

self. In his twenties, he started to attract students. The period in Chinese history in which he lived is called the Warring States Period, the fifth to third century BCE. The Zhou dynasty was collapsing, and China was breaking into fiefdoms. Like other intellectuals in this period, he was concerned about the problem of social order. At age fifty-three, he started wandering around, trying to find a ruler who would let him implement his ideas, including a key idea that rulers need to be wise and humane. He had no luck, but he earned a reputation as a teacher, and students flocked to him. He taught them about humaneness, propriety, and how to become a *junzi,* which is a noble person. He claimed all along that what he was teaching was outlined in the Five Chinese Classics, but he provided his own interpretations.

Teachings of Confucianism

Confucius has a key text, called the *Analects of Confucius.* These analects are the conversations between Confucius and his followers. One key idea is that social harmony comes from a combination of individual transformation, self-cultivation, and social rituals. Excellence, harmony, and order come from humans enacting their social roles properly. Individuality should be subtle and muted; it should be considerate of other people. So this is more a model of conformity than nonconformity.

Li

Of the many virtues in Confucianism, the foremost may be *li,* which means manners, or ceremony. *Li* is doing what is appropriate in a given time and place and doing it in the proper manner. Confucius downplayed the reality of spiritual beings, but he understood the social importance of sacrificing to ancestors. *Li* is especially concerned with rituals of this sort, but it also includes ethical actions, propriety, manners, and etiquette. According to Confucians, etiquette makes social life more harmonious.

Li includes a number of broader concepts: the rectification of names; the doctrine of the mean; the five great relationships; *shu,* which means reciprocity; and *xiao,* which means filial piety. The rectification of names is the idea that people should act according to their roles. In other words, if you're a prince, act like a prince; if you're a father, act like a father. We should speak plainly, and rulers should speak plainly, or they will lose the trust of the people.

The second idea is the doctrine of the mean. This specifies that one should not do anything in excess, one should avoid extremes, and one should follow the balanced and harmonious way of heaven.

The next idea is the five great relationships, something particularly associated with Confucianism. Social order begins in a harmonious home and extends outward through society, which then returns the harmony back to the home. So if you want a good society, you need to return to these five great relationships. The first is father and son, which is the model for all parent-child relationships. The second is elder brother to younger brother. The elder brother assumes responsibility for raising younger siblings in the absence of a parent, and the younger siblings need to be compliant. The third is the husband and wife. The husband is the protector. The wife is the protected. The fourth relationship is friend to friend, and the notion of friendship in

Confucianism is quite serious. The teacher-student model is based on this understanding of friend to friend, that the teacher has more information and is therefore sharing that information with the student. And the last, perhaps most important, at least in terms of politics, is the ruler-subject relationship. Here Confucius argues that the ruler needs to care for the subjects and the subjects, in a reciprocal relation, respect and obey the ruler. At the time, this was a revolutionary teaching.

Shu is reciprocity, or deference: Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you. The last of the ideals that is packed into this concept of *li,* is *xiao,* which means filial piety. This is something valued throughout Asia and may be one of the real differences between the East and the West. Here is the devotion of all family members to the well-being of one another, to remembering ancestors, to respecting elders and parents, to caring for children. Included in the idea of filial piety is the practice of mourning rights, exhibiting appropriate behaviors after death.

Jen

A second key Confucian virtue is called *jen,* which means humaneness, consideration for others, benevolence toward others. Underlying all social conventions and proper conduct in human relationships is this injunction to be humane. And the virtue arises from acting in accordance with *li.* Confucian virtues are social virtues. This is one way that Confucian life differs considerably from life in the United States and Europe, where it's considered virtuous to stand out. In this Confucian model, it's possible to exhibit traits that are unique, but they always need to show the humaneness of *jen,* and they don't want to make you stand out.

Xin

The second great thinker in Confucian history is Mencius, who lived between the third and the fourth century BCE. He is typically described as a kind of optimist, or idealist. As the Xiao dynasty continued to degrade, people lost confidence that things were going to improve on the social and political side. And so many started to focus inwardly on cultivating the heart mind, or the *xin,* in Confucian life. But this self-cultivation is not merely a private quest of the individual. It's understood as a public necessity that's aimed at nurturing the innate moral sensibilities inside all of us. Everyone, according to Mencius, has the ability to become a sage. Social harmony comes from the *xin,* which has four seeds of virtue: feelings of compassion that breed benevolence, feelings of shame that breed dutifulness, feelings of courtesy and modesty that breed the observation of rites, and knowing what is right, which breeds wisdom.

Impact of Confucianism

The problem in Confucianism is like the problem in Vedic religion: social chaos. Confucianism was a middle path between two alternative groups: the Realists, who sought social harmony via force, and the Mohists, who sought social harmony via universal love.

Confucianism was adopted as official state policy during the Han dynasty, which, beginning in 135 BCE, made Confucianism into the state religion and the dominant force in education, politics, and ethics. Confucianism

existed, however, as one of many religions in China. Thanks to Confucius, access to public office in China came not through the hereditary passing down of jobs from fathers to sons, and not through an old boys' network, but through learning and intelligence. But over time, Confucianism lost power. It was neglected in China as intellectuals gravitated toward Buddhism and Daoism. It was revived during the Song dynasty of the tenth through the thirteenth century CE as neo-Confucianism incorporated aspects of Daoism and Buddhism.

Confucianism was influential throughout Chinese history. It became important in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. It doesn't have a particularly visible presence in the West today, either in Europe or the United States. But it is present in the lives of Americans of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese descent. There's some interest, too, in a new understanding of Confucianism, particularly in the United States. A modern intellectual movement, actually called New Confucianism, was begun by bringing Confucianism into conversation with contemporary intellectual trends, including pragmatism in American philosophical thought.

Over time, especially over its first millennium, Confucianism became increasingly more religious. As it developed, there was more and more emphasis on shrines and temples. Nonetheless, of all the religions in this course, it is the least "religious."

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the goal of Confucianism?
2. What are some key Confucian virtues?

Suggested Reading

Lau, D.C., trans. *Confucius: The Analects*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Fingerette, Herbert. *Confucius: The Sacred as Secular*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1998.

Ivanhoe, P.J., and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2000.

Lecture 13: Daoism: Becoming Human by Becoming Natural

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Livia Kohn's *Daoism and Chinese Culture.*

Daoism is another of the Three Great Teachings of China. It's present in the West most visibly in martial arts academies. Daoism used to be associated purely with classic texts like the *Lao Tzu,* but there are actually two types of Daoism. The first is philosophical Daoism, and the second is religious Daoism.

Like Confucianism, Daoism is a product of the Warring States Period of the fifth to the third centuries BCE. Its problem, as with Confucianism, is social chaos. Like Confucianists, Daoists believe that social harmony is produced through individual self-cultivation. But new paths to this goal arise with the Daoists. They say that you can get order and individual self-cultivation not so much through social manners, ethics, education, and the reverent imitation of ancient sages, as through new avenues, such as naturalness, spontaneity, and freedom. Here the individual breaks out of social bonds and the routines of ritualism. The focus is not so much on humans in relation to other humans, but on humans in relation to nature.

Daoism is trying to get you to become human by becoming more natural, as opposed to Confucianism, which is trying to get you to become human by becoming more social. One of the means to this end is absorption into the Dao, which comes by following the patterns of the natural world through intuitive wisdom rather than via book learning. The sage opposes Confucian civilization as artificial and the etiquette of Confucianism as unnatural. These sages don't want to be drawn into the routines of civilization. Daoism is a more individualistic and mystical counterpoint to Confucianism. It's also a religion of ambiguity. A religion that survives for millennia has to be ambiguous, because it has to be able to shift and change as society changes. Daoism glories in ambiguity and in paradox. In this sense, it also has parallels with Zen. Daoism's key text is the *Daodejing* (*Tao te ching*). This is a poetic text attributed to the founder of Daoism, Lao Tzu, which literally means old master. There's some sense that this book might have been written by multiple authors a long time after the life of Lao Tzu, if this person actually existed. It's the most widely translated book in the world after the Bible, and the second most influential Chinese book after the *Analects* of Confucius.

Dao means way and *de* means power and *jing* means scripture, or classic. So the *Daodejing* means the classic of the way and its power. This book criticizes Confucian rituals and socially mandated roles as forced and unnatural. It presents the Daoist sage as an alternative to the Confucian sage. It's typically interpreted in the West as a philosophical and religious treatise along the lines of Thoreau, but it also contains utopian politics of small noncompetitive communities living in harmony with nature. In it, the image of water is

important, as are the images of the valley, the void and darkness, and the mother and the female. Key terms include simplicity, gentleness, relativity, tranquility, harmony, spontaneity, and naturalness.

Key Concepts of Daoism

The first key concept is the Dao, which is sometimes described as the way, or naturalness, or ultimate reality. It's also described as the source, because the Dao is the source out of which everything arises: Out of the one, the many. As Lao Tzu puts it,

> *Dao produced the one, the one produced the two, the two produced the three, and the three produced the ten thousand things. . . .*

In other words, creation came from the Dao, which produced yin and yang, the two. Then the two produced the three, yin, yang, and the union of yin and yang. And the three produced the rest of the cosmos. The Dao also sustains all things. It's eternal and vast and harmonious and subtle, but ultimately indescribable and mysterious.

The second key concept is the yin and yang, which literally refers to shaded and sunny, complementary opposites. When one becomes too important, the cosmos is thrown out of balance, but when they are together, they promote harmony. The yang is the male, the active, the warm, the dry, the light. The yin is the female, the passive, the cool, the moist, the dark.

Daoism sees society as dominated by Confucianism, by yang, by the more active male principle. It's arguing here for more yin in order to achieve balance.

One of the key metaphors here is the softness of water. The *Daodejing* says nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water, but nothing is superior to it in overcoming the hard and the strong. Weakness overcomes strength, and softness overcomes hardness. Daoists in the United States could point to the Grand Canyon, where this supposedly weak thing has created an amazing natural landscape.

The third key concept is *wu wei,* usually translated as nonaction. More accurately, it is nonaggression, noninterference. The unnatural actions are those social rites that you feel forced into by etiquette and by Confucianism.

Another idea is *ziran,* which literally means "self-so," or to be natural. To let something take its natural course, like water that flows down hill, is exhibiting this virtue of *ziran.* This is associated with naturalness and with spontaneity, and one can obtain it by emulating patterns in nature, or by attempting to live with the wonder and innocence of a child.

The last concept is feng shui, which literally means wind and water. Feng shui is an effort to situate one's home or workplace in accordance with the natural and optimal flow of energy, the flow of *chi.* Feng shui helps you to live in accordance with nature, rather than against its flow.

Zhuangzi

The second key Daoist text is the *Zhuangzi*, attributed to Chuang Tzu, a fourth- to third-century BCE figure. He's a contemporary of Mencius and is

the philosopher famous for refusing to mourn the death of his wife. The theory here is that change is inevitable and death is nothing to fear, so the Daoist sage shouldn't mourn the death of his wife; he should be happy for the life that she led and aware that change is happening all the time. Chuang Tzu wrote the first seven chapters of this book. Some later chapters were written by followers, who often had different ideas, so the text contains contradictions. It's esoteric, mystical, nonsensical, and funny. It's written in parables and stories as opposed to the aphorisms of the *Daodejing.*

In the *Zhuangzi,* there's a focus on living a natural life, with quietude, simplicity, humor, and spontaneity. There's an emphasis on the naturalness of ever-changing cycles and patterns in the natural world, a focus on harmony, but in more philosophical, or religious, terms. There is little interest in politics. The *Zhuangzi* plays with the idea of the limitations of language, of experience that can't be put into words. If the Dao is made clear, it is not the Dao*,* writes Chuang Tzu. There's also the idea of the sage as a perfect person who is free, who does not put himself forward actively, who owns nothing, who is beyond feelings and worries, and who is useless. Consider the story of a tree that lives because it has many knots and no one will cut it down. Its uselessness makes for its vitality. Merging with the Dao doesn't have a use, but merging with the Dao is the highest spiritual state. It's a state of mind of detachment without differentiation of perception, something like the nondualistic mystical union seen in the Atman-Brahman idea in Hinduism.

There are self-cultivation techniques in the *Zhuangzi* for identifying with the Dao. One is called free-and-easy wandering, which is one way to be useless, to be free, to be natural, because you're out wandering in nature. Another is breath control, a meditation known as sitting and forgetting.

Religious Daoism

Religious Daoism is an important secondary development. It emerged during the later Han dynasty, of 25 to 220 CE. *Bhakti*-style Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism, and religious Daoism happened around the same time. Religious Daoism integrated into philosophical Daoism ancient Chinese beliefs and practices such as shamanism. It also integrated ideas from Chinese medicine about parallels between the body and the cosmos. The goal became health, longevity, and physical immortality. In the year 125 CE, a teacher named Zhang Daoling integrated Lao Tzu's philosophical Daoism with popular religion and focused on healing accomplished via ritual, confessions, and magic, particularly the magic of alchemy and elixirs. Though the hope for immortality was at first for physical immortality in this life, it later developed into something like spiritual immortality. The techniques for this immortality included sexual restraints to preserve *chi,* special diets, purification rights, breath control, and meditation practices.

Zhang developed the idea of a celestial bureaucracy of gods and immortals that was modeled after the earthly government in China. In some ways, he was bringing Daoism back toward the ritualism of Confucianism. He instigated a hierarchical monastic community with a liturgical and ritual tradition. He also allowed lay members and priests to marry and live at home.

Types and Social Roles of Daoists

Over time, three kinds of Daoists emerged. The *literati* were politically oriented and devoted to classic texts. More communal Daoists were related to particular Daoist religious organizations. And self-cultivation Daoists nurtured life in an attempt to attain physical and spiritual immortality. To be a Daoist, one can follow all three patterns: Study the worldview, be socially responsible, perform rituals, pray to gods, and undertake self-cultivation for health and spiritual advancement. The aims of Daoist practice are both this-worldly and otherworldly. The focus is on the sort of manipulation of the world that we often associate with magic.

A key development inside religious Daoism is the founding in the twelfth century of a school called the Complete Perfection School, founded by Wang Chongyang in the year 1167. This is a strictly monastic tradition, and it becomes the largest contemporary Daoist school in the entire world. This Complete Perfection School represents a new type of Daoist monasticism that aims at the goal of immortality through an inner alchemy that draws on an array of metaphors and symbols to explain the body. Everything in your body is correlated to something in the cosmos. You engage in visualization meditations that are meant to refine the *chi* in the body into a kind of perfected, immortal, spiritual body that's not confined to the earthly realm. One of the ironies of this approach is that some of the elixirs that were used were actually poisonous.

In the West and in the United States, there are hundreds of books on Daoism, many of which start with the words *Dao of . . . .* There are also dozens of books on sex and Daoism. A book called *The Tao of Pooh* takes Winnie the Pooh and his friends and puts them in the service of Daoist truths. But this volume represents just one effort to translate the truths of this Asian religion into more popular language.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How does Daoism differ from Confucianism?
2. What is the significance of yin and yang?

Suggested Reading

Kohn, Livia. *Daoism and Chinese Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Three Pines Press, 2001.

Other Books of Interest

Despeux, Catherine, and Livia Kohn. *Women in Daoism*. Cambridge, MA: Three Pines Press, 2003.

Kohn, Livia. *The Taoist Experience: An Anthology*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

Lecture 14:
Pop Goes the Buddha:
Asian Religions in Popular Culture

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Carole Tomkinson's *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation.*

One of the curious features of Buddhism in the modern West is how it has mingled and merged with popular culture. In Christianity, there are Christian rock groups and Christian rap groups and chick-lit for Christians and New Testaments for young girls that look like *Cosmopolitan*-type magazines. Books like *The Purpose-Driven Life: What Am I Here For?* sell by the millions, and Christian movies are doing even better. But Christianity is not the only religion that makes the cover of *Time* magazine or *TV Guide.* Buddhism has gone pop too. In fact, it looks like we've just concluded the last of three great awakenings in American Buddhism.

The Three Buddhist Awakenings

As early as the 1880s, Henry Thoreau was calling the Buddha "my Buddha," but the first Buddhist vogue did not come until the end of the nineteenth century. It was bracketed by the 1879 publication of Sir Edwin Arnold's book *The Light of Asia: The Life and Teaching of Gautama Prince of India and Founder of Buddhism,* which rendered the life of the Buddha in free verse, and the World's Parliament of Religion in 1893 in Chicago, where Buddhist teachers first acquainted Americans with Buddhism. The Theosophical Society, the first American organization devoted to promoting Asian religions, was founded in 1875, and its two founders converted to Buddhism. It was in this period that the Boston Buddhists got their Buddhist interests not from Sri Lanka, as the Theosophists did, but from Japan. Today, their collection of Buddha images from East Asia form the core of the Asian collection at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

By the mid 1880s, the Episcopal priest Philip Brooks said that a large part of Boston preferred to consider itself Buddhist rather than Christian. In the 1890s, a New York newspaper said that it was not uncommon to hear a New Yorker say he was a Buddhist. But for the first half of the twentieth century, Buddhism receded from public view.

The second Buddhist awakening came in the 1950s, and this time Zen was the Buddhism of choice. Its emphasis on naturalness, silence, freedom, and spontaneity was seen by many as the perfect antidote to the stultifying Judeo-Christian orthodoxy of Eisenhower's America. Typically, this Buddhist vogue is traced to the Beats: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and others. But the original source was the American businessman Dwight Goddard, who went to China as a Baptist minister. After wandering into a Buddhist monastery, he embraced Buddhism, came back to the United States, and founded a fairly traditional monastic order called the Followers of Buddha. Goddard's dream was a bicoastal community of Buddhist monks who would

spend part of the year in California and the rest of the year motoring in vans across America spreading the Buddha's dharma. He published a book called *A Buddhist Bible,* a 1932 collection of Buddhist scriptures and Daoist texts. Jack Kerouac read this book and was turned on to Buddhism.

In the 1950s, as Kerouac and others talked about Buddhism as something hip and different, there occurred other surfacings of popular interest in Buddhism. The composer John Cage brought Zen to the *avant garde* music scene with a piece of music called *4:33*—four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. Jack Kerouac wrote *The Dharma Bums* in 1955, prompting *Time* magazine to report that Zen was growing more chic by the minute. The 1960s saw a flurry of new Zen institutions, but Buddhism had by then ceased to be the Asian religion of choice in the United States. That distinction belonged to Hinduism. In fact, the 1960s brought on Hinduism's one and only pop vogue. After immigration laws were changed in 1965, there was a flood of gurus, and countercultural types flocked to those gurus. The Maharishi Mahesh Yogi spread Transcendental Meditation, in part by making it fashionable, by recruiting celebrities to act as spokespersons. The jazz great John Coltrane also turned on to Hinduism in the 1960s. He did three albums, *Om, First Meditations,* and *Meditations,* that showed the influence of Tibetan Buddhism and particularly of Vedanta-style Hinduism. *Time* magazine proclaimed 1968 the "Year of the Guru," right around the time that Hinduism had lost its hip edge.

The third Buddhist awakening comes closer to our time. In the 1970s and 1980s, born-again Christianity was in the ascendant, but the success of the Moral Majority and the Religious Right in U.S. politics didn't stop Baby Boomers and their Gen X children from gravitating to Buddhism in the 1990s. This created a phenomenon referred to as "Boomer Buddhism." If Theravada Buddhism was important in America's first Buddhist awakening, and Zen was the magic at the center of the second awakening, then Tibetan Buddhism was the Buddhism *du jour* in America's third Buddhist vogue. This boom began at around the time that *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* began publishing in 1991, and it was going strong when *Time* published a 1997 cover story on America's fascination with Buddhism.

By the end of the decade, the Dalai Lama had won the Nobel Peace Prize, written a variety of bestselling books, and become something of an American saint. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk who went into exile in France in 1966 after criticizing the Vietnam War, became something of a household name too. Hanh wrote a variety of bestselling books on his way to becoming a leading advocate of "engaged Buddhism," a term he coined to describe the engagement of Buddhism with society. The Dalai Lama appeared in Apple Computer's "Think Different" ad campaign. Buddhism's third great awakening could be seen in a lot of different media, including films, television, rock concerts, and even advertising. But Buddhism was far more of a bookish affair, spread more in print than in person. There are roughly two hundred *Zen and the Art of . . .* books in print, including *Zen and the Art of Falling in Love* and *Zen and the Art of Stand-Up Comedy.* Buddhist bestsellers used to come once in a decade, but in the 1990s, Buddhist writers could sell a hundred thousand books at a time. At one point, the Dalai Lama had two books on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

One place where Asian religions are most vibrant is martial arts academies. Martial arts got a major boost from Bruce Lee in the 1960s and 1970s, the *Karate Kid* movies of the 1980s, and the *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* children's television show of the 1990s. Today, there are thousands of martial arts academies in the United States and millions of practitioners, making *dojos* perhaps the number one place in America where people encounter Buddhism and Daoism.

Yoga has also merited a *Time* magazine cover and has attracted celebrities such as Sting. There are a wide variety of ways to teach and to practice yoga. Many are utterly secular, and some are quite religious. The more religious are aware that yoga is a discipline that comes out of Hinduism and that it was originally aimed at *moksha,* at achieving the union of Atman and Brahman. But there's a strong tendency to secularize the practice of yoga in the United States.

Asian Religions in America

The big question is whether pop culture is good for Asian religions. It's clear that attention in movies and in bookstores is helping to spread awareness of the Buddhist tradition. But is Buddhism being banalized in the process?

In 1958, during the Buddhist boom, Alan Watts, a popularizer of Asian religions in Great Britain and the United States, wrote that "Beat Zen" is "always a shade too self-conscious, too subjective, and too strident to have the flavor of Zen." Watts then reflected on the fundamental problem with the transmission of Asian religions into American culture: "The attraction in America or Europe of some people who are interested in Asian religions has to do with getting away from something rather than moving toward something." Watts saw here a tendency to read new religions either with or against the grain of the religions of a person's youth, to make them conform either to American culture or to the counterculture.

Henry Steel Olcott was the first American to convert to Buddhism. But even as he was trying to get away from the Protestantism of his youth by becoming Buddhist, he just couldn't shake it. As he looked around Sri Lanka and talked to Buddhists, he always had a sense that they somehow weren't proper Buddhists, because they didn't have a catechism or a creed they followed. What he was seeing wasn't that they weren't proper Buddhists, but that they weren't Protestant Buddhists, like himself. What's hard for Americans, from Olcott to the Beats, is to let these religions be themselves. If Buddhism is always busy reinforcing the countercultural view, or the cultural view, when does it have time to simply be itself? What contributions can Asian religions make to American or European society if Buddhists and Hindus and Sikhs are always mindful of the necessity of appearing American, or if they're unconsciously carrying around rebellions in their head against their Jewish-Christian conscience? Thai Buddhist teacher and abbott at the Metta Forest Monestary near San Diego, California, Thanissaro Bhikkhu (formerly known as Geoffrey DeGraff) says that much of the Buddhism he sees around him is a grand game of telephone: "Things get passed on from person to person, from one generation of teachers to the next, until the message gets garbled beyond recognition." This tendency is as old as Buddhism itself. Buddhism changed

when it moved from its home ground in India into Tibet. It changed again when it moved to China and changed again when it moved to Japan. But the tendency of lay Buddhists to compromise Buddhism to local pressures has typically been checked by monastics. And monasticism has had relatively little power in America. Thanissaro Bhikkhu adds that renunciation, which lies at the core of the monastic experience, is "the huge blindspot in American Buddhism." The philosopher George Santayana once said that "American life is a powerful solvent. It seems to neutralize every intellectual element, however tough and alien it may be, and fuse it in the native good will, complacency, thoughtlessness and optimism." Time will tell whether Buddhism and other Asian religions are neutralized by this powerful solvent of American life, but it's clear that America is changing these traditions.

Conclusion

The old story about religions being different paths up the same mountain just doesn't seem to apply to Asian religious traditions. These faiths don't agree on the problem, the human predicament. They don't agree on the goal or the solution to that problem. They come up with different techniques for religious advancement, and they look to different sorts of exemplars to motivate their everyday lives. Some seek to get out of *samsara,* the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, while others seek to embrace social life and find the highest fulfillment in its rituals and etiquette. There is diversity across the religions and inside the religions. But amidst this diversity, it seems there is one thing on which Asian religions might agree. And that is that they're all striving after something that might be called humanity. They are all striving to define what it is to be a human being. Repeatedly, these traditions say that humans are gods, that humans are Buddhas, that humans are bodhisattvas. If that is the case, then it must also be the case that gods and Buddhas and bodhisattvas are humans too. The one thing they share is a desire for us to be more human, to be more humane in the sense of being ethical, but also in the sense of not feeling inferior or superior to other people, realizing that we are all in this predicament together. Asian religions encourage us to be truly human and to look to the gods and the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas not as models for escaping from human life, but as models for living human life as it was intended to be lived. The way forward, in other words, may be not so much to transcend our humanity, as to embrace it.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why was Zen Buddhism the Buddhism of choice in Eisenhower's America?
2. What did George Santayana mean when he said that America is a "powerful solvent"?

Suggested Reading

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