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ESCHATOLOGY

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## CHAPTER 8

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# BUDDHIST ESCHATOLOGY

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JAN NATTIER

To speak of Buddhist eschatology is, in a sense, a misnomer. If eschatology is understood to refer to “final things”—that is, the idea that the world will one day come to a definitive end—there is simply no parallel in the Buddhist tradition. On the contrary, Buddhist scriptures regularly refer to “beginningless *samsāra*,”<sup>1</sup> a cycle of birth and death of the universe (as well as of the individual) for which no starting point can be discerned. Nor is there an end, for Buddhists share with members of other Indian religions (notably the Hindus and the Jains) the idea that the universe passes through an unending series of cycles of manifestation and nonmanifestation. Not surprisingly, therefore, there is only the briefest reference to Buddhism in the article on “Eschatology” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*,<sup>2</sup> and the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (Buswell ed., 2004) has no entry for eschatology at all.

This being said, Buddhist sources do refer to what Zwi Werblowsky has aptly termed “relative eschatologies.”<sup>3</sup> On the cosmic level, one can speak of the end of a particular phase of manifestation or nonmanifestation of the universe as a whole or, within this larger framework, the end of a specific cycle of devolution or evolution. On the historical level, Buddhist scriptures predict the demise of the Buddhist religion itself, holding that Buddhism—like all causally constructed phenomena—will eventually come to an end. Here too, however, there is a pattern of repetition, for previous Buddhas are said to have lived and taught in the distant past, while others are expected to appear in the future.

It is only on the level of the individual living being (not only human beings, for reasons to be discussed below) that Buddhist texts do speak of an ultimate and final end. Indeed, the entire purpose of the Buddha’s teachings, as portrayed in the earliest extant sources, was to provide his followers with the means to escape from

the treadmill of *samsāra* once and for all. This could be accomplished by carrying out a process of self-cultivation (including training in morality, meditation, and insight) that would ultimately lead to a complete and definitive awakening to the understanding of reality as it is, the experience known as *nirvāṇa*. By replicating the Buddha's own awakening, his followers too could finally escape from the painful process of rebirth, generally referred to in Indian sources as "redeath" (*pu-narmṛtyu*).

In a chapter of this length, it is impossible to do justice to the vast spectrum of views on these topics that have been propounded by Buddhists over the course of some two and a half millennia of history, and in radically different cultural contexts.<sup>4</sup> We will attempt to ensure a modicum of balance in the following discussion, however, by including perspectives found in later scholastic literature and in scriptures unique to the Mahāyāna as well as in earlier canonical sources. Where applicable, we will also take note of variations particular to certain geographical regions and of developments that have emerged in recent Buddhist history.

## COSMIC ESCHATOLOGY

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### Early Buddhism

From the perspective articulated in many of the earliest extant Buddhist scriptures, the topic of cosmic eschatology should not even be raised. A profoundly anti-metaphysical stance informs much of this literature,<sup>5</sup> and questions as to whether the universe is infinite or finite, eternal or non-eternal, are explicitly rejected as not conducive to attaining the ultimate goal of liberation from rebirth.<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, there is no systematic cosmology to be found in early Buddhist literature.

Certain elements of what would later develop into the elaborate cosmologies of various Buddhist schools, however, can already be discerned in these early texts. The idea of alternating periods of cosmic manifestation and nonmanifestation, widely shared in India at the time, is taken for granted; likewise it is assumed that each cycle of manifestation begins at a peak of perfection, subsequently declining to a period of immorality, epidemics, famine, and war. Once this nadir is reached, the cycle will reverse itself, and a prolonged period of progress will ensue.

Buddhists also hold that the world has no creator and that the karma ("action") of living beings is sufficient to propel the universe on its unending course. The cycles of rise and decline are thus viewed simply as the natural order of things (*dharmatā*), the cosmic background against which the individual drama of the quest for liberation from *samsāra* is played out.

## Scholastic Elaborations

Buddhist thinkers did not remain content with these general scenarios, however, but sought to bring them into clearer focus, subdividing and calculating the duration of each cycle of rise and decline. A complete cycle of manifestation and nonmanifestation came to be referred to as a “great eon” (*mahākalpa*), which in turn was subdivided into four “incalculable eons” (*asamkhyeyakalpa*), viz., (1) a period during which the destruction of the universe takes place; (2) a period of the duration of destruction (that is, when the universe is nonmanifest); (3) a period of renovation, during which the world gradually comes back into being; and (4) a period of the duration of renovation (that is, when the universe is manifest).<sup>7</sup> To describe the vast time scales involved, Buddhist writers often turned to an analogy found already in the canonical sūtra literature: if someone brushed a huge mountain made of solid rock with a fine piece of cloth once every hundred years, the mountain would crumble to pieces before an incalculable eon had expired.<sup>8</sup> Other writers, not satisfied with simply gesturing toward the immensity of time involved, attempted to calculate the incalculable, coming up with a variety of figures, all of them with unimaginable numbers of decimal places.<sup>9</sup>

Each of these four incalculable eons, in turn, was subdivided into twenty “intermediate eons” (*antarakalpa*). Such divisions have little meaning during the phase in which the universe is nonmanifest, but during the period of manifestation these subperiods take on particular importance, as they mark the boundaries between periods of progress and decline. During the golden age at the peak of the cycle, the human lifespan is at its maximum of 80,000 years (84,000, according to other sources). After billions of years have passed, the lifespan will decline to its minimum of 10 years, and war, famine, and sickness will prevail.<sup>10</sup>

The deterioration of lifespan and living conditions is correlated with spiritual decline as well, for at the peak of the cycle, living beings are said to be naturally moral, while at the nadir, they have lost all sense of right and wrong. Only when the very bottom of the cycle is reached do a few living beings begin to ask whether they might have brought this destruction upon themselves, and they then begin to uphold traditional morality once again.<sup>11</sup>

There is, then, an element of moral determinism—that is, the idea that conditions in the universe are determined by the conduct of living beings (including gods, ghosts, and animals as well as human beings)—in the scenario outlined above. The overall picture, however, is that the process is automatic, unvarying from age to age. Where we do find variation is in the means by which the universe is destroyed.

Scholastic sources distinguish three types of cosmic destruction: dissolution by fire, by water, and by wind.<sup>12</sup> Each type is correlated with a different extent to which the universe is destroyed, for despite references to “nonmanifestation” or “the duration of destruction,” Buddhist sources hold that such destruction is never complete. Instead, even during periods of nonmanifestation, a few of the upper heavenly realms are spared. When destruction is by fire, it reaches upward to the

Brahmā heavens, thus consuming the lowest nine heavens in the Buddhist cosmological system. Destruction by water consumes an additional three, those of the “radiant” (*ābhasvara*) worlds. Most destructive of all is dissolution by wind, which reaches to the next three levels as well, destroying the realms known as the “auspicious” (*śubha*). At this point, only the heavens known as the “pure abodes” (*śuddhāvāsa*) belonging to the realm of form (*rūpadhātu*) and the still higher heavens of the formless realm (*arūpadhātu*) will remain. It is in these surviving heavens that those living beings who have not yet attained nirvāṇa at the end of the eon will be reborn, there to await the next period of manifestation of the world.<sup>13</sup>

There is widespread agreement in Buddhist scholastic writings that our world is presently in the early stages of a period of manifestation; thus we do not find any expressions of concern that the universe as we know it is about to end. What we do find, however, is an awareness that we are presently at a relatively low point on a cycle of decline and that conditions will become far worse before a cycle of progress can begin again.

## Mahāyāna Developments

The scenario outlined above involves tremendous time scales and posits a cosmos of vast extent, with more than two dozen heavens (quite literally “above,” in a vertically structured universe) and a comparable array of hells below.<sup>14</sup> Yet despite its grand scale, it is still a single and unified system, with the known world inhabited by human beings—centered on the Indian subcontinent and referred to as *Jambudvīpa* in these texts—as its central point of orientation. In scriptures composed beginning around the first century BCE by adherents of the form of Buddhist practice known as the Mahāyāna (“Great Vehicle”),<sup>15</sup> however, this perspective is greatly expanded. Here we find references to “world systems throughout the ten directions”—that is, worlds like our own located in each of the four cardinal directions, the four intermediate directions, the zenith, and the nadir. The emergence of this vastly magnified vision of the universe appears to have been related to, and perhaps indeed elicited by, a new concept of Buddhist practice known as the path of the bodhisattva (see below, “Personal Eschatology”).<sup>16</sup> Be that as it may, adherents of the Mahāyāna could now envision a far broader range of possible worlds in which to be reborn, some of them far grander than our own.

## Cosmology and Modernity

As Buddhism has spread to the Western world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and as Asian Buddhists have become more aware of the findings of modern science, the description of cosmic cycles found in classical texts has acquired new significance. Some Buddhists have seen a similarity between the scenario of alternating manifestation and nonmanifestation and certain contempo-

rary cosmological theories, notably the form of the so-called big bang theory in which the universe explodes from a highly condensed ball of matter to produce the world as we know it, only to collapse (after many eons) into this compressed and, for practical purposes, nonmanifest form once again. Buddhist apologists (like their Hindu counterparts) have pointed to these similarities as evidence for the validity of their own traditions, vis-à-vis the much shorter time scales posited by the Middle Eastern monotheistic religions.<sup>17</sup>

The idea that we are currently in a devolutionary cycle, however—which includes the idea that the human lifespan is in the process of declining from 100 years (in the time of Śākyamuni Buddha) to a minimum of only 10—conflicts both with scientific data on the human lifespan and with Western ideologies of human progress. As a result, in most contemporary Buddhist communities, this idea has quietly moved off the stage.

## HISTORICAL ESCHATOLOGY (1): THE LEGACY OF ŚĀKYAMUNI BUDDHA

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The vision of cosmic evolution and devolution described above is central to Buddhist scholastic theory, but it appears to have had relatively little impact on the lives of average believers. Far more immediate were concerns not about the end of the cosmos, but the impending extinction of the Buddhist religion itself.

It is a cardinal teaching of Buddhism that all phenomena that participate in the process of cause and effect—all “conditioned things” (*samskṛta-dharmas*) in technical parlance (see below under “Personal Eschatology”)—are transitory.<sup>18</sup> And with admirable consistency, Buddhist thinkers have applied this analysis to their own religion, predicting its inevitable extinction and formulating a variety of timetables for its demise. To say that Buddhism would eventually disappear was not, of course, to suggest that the truths the Buddha had discovered in his experience of nirvāṇa were themselves impermanent; these insights were said to hold in all times and places, whether a Buddha is present to articulate them or not. Rather, in speaking of the eventual disappearance of their own religious tradition, Buddhist writers present it as having been founded by a particular individual, transmitted in texts (initially oral) memorized by fallible human beings, and practiced within a socially constructed community of believers. It is Buddhism as a religious institution, in other words, that is classified as a “conditioned” phenomenon and thus vulnerable to decay and death. While this idea has not had equal salience in all periods of Buddhist history, it has been a regular refrain, reflected in the often-quoted statement that it is great good fortune to be born in one of those rare periods when the Buddhist teachings are known.

The idea of the eventual disappearance of Buddhism is always tied to the career of a particular Buddha, and not surprisingly most discussions of the disappearance of the dharma (here used in the sense of “Buddhist religion”) focus on the teachings of the one Buddha known to both secular and religious history, Siddhārtha Gautama (also known as Śākyamuni). To understand how the finitude of his religious legacy was understood, however, we must consider how Buddhists have understood the category of “Buddha” itself.

## Early Buddhism

The word “Buddha” means simply “awakened one,” and refers to a person who has attained nirvāṇa on his own (i.e., without the assistance of an awakened teacher) and subsequently teaches his discovery to others. Those who attain liberation by following a Buddha’s instructions are referred to not as Buddhas but as arhats (“worthy ones”), a title also applied to the Buddha himself. A third (and rather shadowy) category consists of pratyekabuddhas, those who have attained awakening on their own but do not teach. The uniqueness of a Buddha thus lies both in his being the first to discover the path to nirvāṇa and in his willingness to share his insight with others.

Two constraints on the appearance of Buddhas in the world appear to have been widely accepted. First, only one Buddha can appear at any given time, for the appearance of two pioneering discoverers of the nature of reality would be redundant. Second, one can become a Buddha—as opposed to an awakened follower of a Buddha, i.e., an arhat—only in a world that knows nothing of Buddhism. Since a Buddha is defined as one who discovers the path to nirvāṇa on his own, he must do so not only in a world in which no other Buddha is currently living and teaching, but in a world that is devoid of any knowledge of Buddhism at all. A third assumption that also seems to have been universally accepted is that it is possible to attain Buddhahood only during a period of decline. Thus the very fact that a particular individual has attained ultimate awakening as a Buddha is, ironically, also evidence that the world is moving inexorably toward the nadir of the cycle.

For early Buddhists, in sum, the appearance of a Buddha in the world is extremely rare. Yet it is not unique, for other Buddhas have appeared in the distant past, and others will appear in the even-more-distant future. In each case, however, the duration of his teachings (commonly referred to as his “dharma”) is finite. Thus despite the truth of its teachings, every Buddha’s religion is certain, sooner or later, to come to an end.

Of greatest concern, of course, was the duration of the dharma of the Buddha of the present age, Śākyamuni. The earliest accounts predicted that Buddhism would endure for 500 years after the Buddha’s death, a statement regularly intertwined with a story that the Buddhist teachings would have survived for a full thousand years were it not for the Buddha’s fateful decision to admit women, as well as men, to his monastic order. In the version found in the canon of the Theravādins, the Buddha addresses his closest disciple, Ānanda, as follows:

If, Ānanda, women had not retired from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by the Tathāgata [i.e., the Buddha], religion, Ānanda, would long endure; a thousand years would the Good Doctrine abide. But since, Ānanda, women have now retired from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by the Tathāgata, not long, Ānanda, will religion endure; but five hundred years, Ānanda, will the Good Doctrine abide.<sup>19</sup>

The Buddha goes on to make a number of unflattering analogies, comparing the effect of women on the monastic community to that of mildew on a field of rice, or rust on the sugar-cane plant.<sup>20</sup>

## Scholastic Elaborations

The above account does not appear in the literature of all Buddhist schools, and it probably does not go back to the lifetime of the Buddha himself, but it is sufficiently widespread that it is thought to stem from a relatively early date.<sup>21</sup> A serious crisis of legitimacy ensued, however, once 500 years had actually passed. Not surprisingly, revised figures for the duration of the Buddhist religion soon appeared, with the earliest produced by a simple doubling of the initial figure to 1,000 years. This revised total may well have been shared by a number of Buddhist schools, but by far the majority of extant sources in which it occurs belong to the ordination lineage known as the Sarvāstivādins. Some texts simply offer the revised figure without comment, not confronting the previously authoritative tradition directly. The *Mahāvibhāṣā* (a Sarvāstivādin scholastic treatise composed in perhaps the second century CE but preserved only in a seventh-century Chinese translation), however, suggests that the Buddha had intended the figure of 500 years to refer only to the period of the dharma's maximum effectiveness—that is, the time when, by diligent practice of those teachings, his followers could still attain liberation. The teachings would then remain available for another five centuries, though during this latter period it would be extremely difficult to reach the goal.<sup>22</sup>

## Mahāyāna Developments

The approach found in the *Mahāvibhāṣā* is echoed (or perhaps vice versa) in many Mahāyāna scriptures, where two periods in the history of Buddhism are described. In these texts, the first period, in which Buddhist practice is still fully effective, is called the period of the “true dharma” (*saddharma*), while the second is called the true dharma's “semblance” or “reflection” (*saddharma-pratirūpaka*). These terms clearly convey the sense that, though Buddhism continues to survive in the second period, it is gradually fading away.<sup>23</sup>

Eventually, of course, 1,000 years elapsed as well, and at this point all consensus in Mahāyāna scriptures disappears. Subsequently, there emerged new predictions containing a variety of timetables, ranging in duration from 1,500 to 2,500 years.



## Regional Variations

The figure of 2,500 years (subdivided into five 500-year periods) seems to have enjoyed a period of popularity not only in India but in China as well, yet in all living Buddhist cultures even larger numbers eventually prevailed. A figure of 5,000 years was made popular in Sri Lanka by the fifth-century commentator Buddhaghosa, subsequently becoming standard in Southeast Asia as well. A comparable figure of 5,104 years became influential in Tibet and Mongolia, derived from an eleventh-century tantric text.<sup>24</sup>

In East Asia, by contrast, a completely different timetable was developed, based on the concepts of *saddharma* and *saddharma-pratirūpaka* mentioned above. Translated into Chinese as *zhengfa* “true dharma” and *xiangfa* “semblance dharma,” respectively, these expressions came to be considered in conjunction with the indigenous Chinese term *moshi* “final age.” In this context, the latter appears to have generated the neologism *mofa* “final dharma” around the beginning of the fifth century CE, and from the sixth century onward, Chinese commentators interpreted *mofa* as the name of a third and final period in Buddhist history.<sup>25</sup>

Estimates made by Chinese writers of the duration of the True and Semblance Dharmas remained fairly modest, with the two periods together usually totaling either 1,000 or 1,500 years. The third period, by contrast, is regularly described as lasting for 10,000 years. The expression “10,000,” however, does not simply refer to a specific figure, but has the connotation of “an immeasurably large number” in Chinese. Thus, in using this number, Chinese authors conveyed the distinct impression that the era of the final dharma was here to stay.

The date of the onset of this third period was variously calculated, generally beginning in 552 CE in Chinese sources and in 1052 CE in texts composed in Japan. In both of these cultures, however, the sense that the final dharma was impending or already under way inspired intense reflection on how best to practice Buddhism in this decadent age.

The prospect of learning to live within a prolonged end time engendered a kaleidoscopic range of responses. Some, such as Xinxing (540–594, founder of the “Three Stages” school in China) and Eisai (1141–1215, founder of the Rinzai Zen school in Japan), saw in the onset of this latter period an incentive to work harder, to redouble one’s efforts in order to make spiritual progress in an inauspicious age.<sup>26</sup> Others, including Daochuo in seventh-century China<sup>27</sup> and Hōnen, Shinran, and Nichiren in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Japan,<sup>28</sup> saw the challenge of living in a period of *mofa* (Jpn. *mappō*) as necessitating radical innovation. In particular, what was needed were easier practices suited to the less spiritually advanced beings who had been born into this age of decline. While most Buddhists remained pessimistic about life in the final age, Nichiren (1222–1282) took the opposite stance. For him, despite challenging worldly conditions, *mappō* was the best time to be born, for in this “new dispensation” a simple yet powerful religious practice—the recitation of the title of the Lotus Sūtra—had now been made universally available to all.<sup>29</sup>

## HISTORICAL ESCHATOLOGY (2): OTHER BUDDHAS, OTHER WORLDS

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### Maitreya, the Buddha to Come

While the life and teachings of the so-called historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, have naturally been the central concern for most Buddhists, the idea that his legacy is gradually fading away and ultimately will disappear has inspired some to focus instead on Maitreya, who is expected to be the next Buddha to appear. Maitreya is unknown in the earliest scriptures, which refer only to Buddhas of the past. By around the beginning of the Common Era, however, belief in Maitreya was already widespread. His image can be found, together with that of Śākyamuni (and a broad array of Greek and Iranian deities), on the coins of the Kushan king Kanishka, who ruled northwestern India and adjacent regions in the first or second century CE.<sup>30</sup> Maitreya is also mentioned countless times in Buddhist scriptures, both those preserved in Indian languages and those translated into Tibetan and Chinese.

A vast span of time was expected to pass between the death of Śākyamuni Buddha and the coming of Maitreya, who will not appear until just after the next cycle of progress reaches its peak. Once again, scholastic writers have attempted to calculate the time involved, with the most common result being a figure of 5.6 billion years.

Maitreya's era, though distant, is often described as a "golden age," and many devotees have aspired to be born in his time. Others, wishing for a more immediate audience with the future Buddha, hoped instead to be reborn in the Tuṣita heaven, where Maitreya (now still a bodhisattva) presently resides. Still others strove to encounter him in a visionary experience in the present. In rare cases—and exclusively in areas influenced by pre-Buddhist Chinese messianic expectations—the timetable for Maitreya's advent was radically shortened, leading to the expectation that he would appear (or had even appeared already) in the present age.<sup>31</sup>

### Buddhas in Other Worlds

In most respects (with the exception of those few in East Asia who expected Maitreya's imminent appearance), the constellation of beliefs and practices surrounding the future Buddha is quite traditional. Devotees born during his time are regularly described as attaining arhatship and not Buddhahood, and the rule that only one Buddha can appear in the world at a time still seems to hold. At the same time, however (c. first–second century CE), in certain Mahāyāna circles a new interpretation of the one-Buddha rule came into view: while it might be necessary to wait for billions of years to meet the next Buddha to appear in *this* world, the fact

that there are other worlds throughout the ten directions meant that in some of them there might well be other Buddhas living and teaching in the present. Once introduced, this idea spread rapidly, and the names of specific Buddhas came to be associated with particular directions. Devotees thus aspired to be reborn in the eastern world of the Buddha Akṣobhya, for example, or in the western land of Amitābha. New scriptures extolling these possibilities began to appear by the first century CE, and those recommending the cult of Amitābha, in particular, soon gained a wide following in East Asia.<sup>32</sup>

## PERSONAL ESCHATOLOGY

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### Early Buddhism

In a religion which holds that both the manifestation of the universe and the appearance of a Buddha in the world are recurring events, it is only on the level of the individual that a genuine end point can be discerned. For however uncountable the number of rebirths one might experience—and a common analogy holds that each person has drunk more mother's milk in the course of cycling through *samsāra* than the amount of water in the ocean—Buddhist scriptures state emphatically that the process can be brought to an end. Indeed, the Buddha is quoted as saying that the one and only purpose of his teaching is to allow others to attain liberation:

As the vast ocean, O disciples, is impregnated with one flavor, the flavor of salt, so also, my disciples, this law (dharma) and discipline (*vinaya*) is impregnated with but one flavor, with the taste of deliverance.<sup>33</sup>

The way to reach this goal is not to rely on the gods (who are seen as mortals useful for granting worldly benefits, but irrelevant to the spiritual path), nor for that matter to cultivate a relationship with the Buddha himself. Rather, the goal is reached by exerting one's own efforts, following the path the Buddha taught. By training oneself in morality, meditation, and insight, a disciple of the Buddha can replicate his experience of *nirvāṇa*.<sup>34</sup>

That it is possible, in theory, for all living beings to reach this ultimate state does not imply that all will do so (or even will desire to do so) within this very life. On the contrary, a corollary of the fundamental assumption of "beginningless *samsāra*" is that human beings are born into this world with very different spiritual dispositions, created by the actions they carried out in the past. While some can indeed attain *nirvāṇa* in this lifetime, such exceptional individuals are understood to have already completed a long period of preparation spanning many previous lives. For the average Buddhist, whether lay or monastic, the task is to lay the necessary foundation in this life so that the goal can be reached later on.<sup>35</sup>

For those who have not attained *nirvāṇa* and are still subject to the cycle of *saṃsāra*, early Buddhist sources refer to five possible realms of rebirth: in addition to being born as a human or an animal, one might be reborn as a god (i.e., in a heavenly realm), as a hell being (in one of the lower realms where beings suffer for their evil deeds), or as a ghost.<sup>36</sup> All of these destinations, however, are temporary, for when the karma that brought one to a particular realm is exhausted, he or she will die and be born in another place.

Early sources consistently describe spiritual progress as the result of a gradual process of self-cultivation, with choices made by the individual (and their resulting karmic effects) determining the speed with which one approaches the goal. Once one has moved beyond the stage of a beginner (or, lower still, a nonpractitioner), four stages are distinguished along the way: (1) a stream enterer (*śrotāpanna*), who will experience seven more lives at most before the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, (2) a once-returned, who will return to the world once more and will attain *nirvāṇa* in that lifetime, (3) a nonreturner, who has not yet attained liberation but is certain to do so without returning to this world again, and (4) an arhat, who has already experienced *nirvāṇa* and thus is experiencing his or her final life.

The word *nirvāṇa* means “blowing out,” and indeed much of the discussion of the goal in early Buddhist literature proceeds in terms of elimination: the extinction of desire, the termination of suffering, and the end of rebirth. Yet there is a positive strand of interpretation as well, for *nirvāṇa* receives such epithets as “blissful” (*sukha*), “peaceful” (*sānta*), and “auspicious” (*śubha*). Moreover, early narratives of the Buddha’s experience of awakening describe him as attaining a “threefold knowledge” (*trividyā*): the ability to remember his own previous lives, the ability to see others throughout the universe dying and being reborn according to their karma, and the certain knowledge that he had succeeded in bringing rebirth to an end.<sup>37</sup>

Given that the ultimate goal is to bring rebirth to an end, one might expect that much would be said about what happens after one who has attained *nirvāṇa* experiences his or her final death. But the early scriptures treat the most basic question on this topic—does such a person continue to exist after death, or not?—as “wrongly put,” not answerable in the form in which it is phrased and not conducive to progress on the spiritual path. Given this reticence, some Western observers have viewed early Buddhism as nihilistic, teaching a doctrine of self-annihilation. But the texts are quite consistent in maintaining that what is annihilated is not one’s “self,” for the Buddha rejected all ideas about an eternal self or soul that were circulating in his time.<sup>38</sup> Instead, early scriptures focus on the elimination of desire and of ignorance about the nature of reality and, as a result, the suffering that is otherwise endemic to sentient life.

## Scholastic Elaborations

While generally adhering to the taboo on speculation about what becomes of a liberated person after death, monastic thinkers expended considerable efforts in attempting to understand the process by which liberation takes place. One of the

fundamental conceptual tools used in this effort was a distinction between two types of entities: those that are conditioned (*saṃskṛta*), i.e., those that have resulted from a process of cause and effect, and those that are unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*) and thus uncreated or unproduced. Only one entity of the latter type was universally accepted by all schools: the unconditioned entity (*asaṃskṛta-dharma*) known as nirvāṇa.<sup>39</sup>

To say that nirvāṇa is unconditioned is to portray it in far more positive terms than it might seem, for conditioned entities (*saṃskṛta-dharmas*) are by definition both changeable and transitory. An unconditioned entity, by contrast, is not subject to change of any kind. Among the array of metaphors used to describe nirvāṇa, many of them—a harbor, a place of rest, a city (from the perspective of a traveler arriving from a dangerous journey through robber-infested lands), or an island (from the perspective of a sailor whose ship is foundering at sea)—convey the sense of arriving, at long last, at a destination that is truly secure.

There remained the problem of describing what it means for such an unconditioned entity to be experienced in this life. The Buddha continued to live for some forty-five years after attaining nirvāṇa, occasionally suffering from injury or illness during that time. This was easily explained, however, as the result of residual karma accrued prior to his awakening. Although a liberated being no longer creates new karma—for karmic effects, whether good or bad, are created only when actions are carried out with reference to belief in a self—the results of deeds committed prior to experiencing nirvāṇa must still be experienced in this life. Scholastic thinkers thus distinguished between “nirvāṇa with residue” (*sopadhīśaṇnirvāṇa*), i.e., an experience of awakening in this lifetime, and “nirvāṇa without residue” (*nirupadhīśaṇnirvāṇa*), the final release experienced by an awakened person at the time of death.

## Mahāyāna Developments

Early Buddhists agreed that there was a single spiritual goal for all beings: the attainment of nirvāṇa, as the Buddha had done. Around the first or second century before the common era, however, some introduced an alternative view. While most disciples of the Buddha could (and should) eventually become arhats, a few might choose to spend far more lifetimes in saṃsāra, cultivating the extensive merits that would allow them to become a Buddha instead. By doing so, they could guarantee that—after the inevitable extinction of Śākyamuni’s teachings—the same truths could be discovered again.

The path leading to Buddhahood was referred to as the *Mahāyāna* “Great Vehicle” by its advocates, and its practitioners called themselves *bodhisattvas* (“*bodhi* beings,” i.e., Buddhas to be). Many of the practices required of bodhisattvas were the same as those required of candidates for arhatship, but bodhisattvas were also expected to cultivate six “perfect virtues” (*pāramitās*), generally listed as (1) giving (*dāna*), (2) morality (*śīla*), (3) patience (*kṣānti*), (4) exertion (*vīrya*), (5) concen-

tration (*dhyāna*), and (6) insight (*prajñā*).<sup>40</sup> Though most of these virtues were also recommended (sometimes using the same terminology) in earlier Buddhist texts, bodhisattvas were expected to practice them to a more extreme degree. Thus, the perfection of giving (*dāna-pāramitā*) involved not merely donating one's property, but giving away one's body parts (an eye, for example) or even one's life. The most famous example is the story of Śākyamuni Buddha, in one of his previous lives as a bodhisattva, donating his own body to feed a starving tigress and her cubs.<sup>41</sup>

The path to Buddhahood was thus portrayed as far more difficult than that leading to arhatship, and the goal was seen as different as well. While both the Buddha and the arhat are definitively liberated from *samsāra*, the former is said to experience a superior awakening. Though an arhat has full spiritual knowledge (a prerequisite to liberation), a Buddha has full worldly knowledge as well. Mahāyāna texts thus distinguish between the "ordinary" *nirvāṇa* of the arhat and the far greater enlightenment of a Buddha (labeled *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*, "supreme perfect awakening"), of which a frequently occurring synonym is "omniscience" (*sarvajñatā*).<sup>42</sup>

For women, this innovative spiritual vocation brought with it a new obstacle, for while women could and did attain arhatship during and after the lifetime of the Buddha, Buddhahood, by definition, could be attained only by men.<sup>43</sup> Thus, if a woman embarked on the path of the bodhisattva, she would necessarily have to be reborn as a male before reaching the goal.<sup>44</sup>

For bodhisattvas, as for aspirants to arhatship (known in Mahāyāna texts as *śrāvakas* "auditors"), distinct stages must be traversed along the way. A crucial turning point, according to early Mahāyāna scriptures, is the attainment of the stage of nonretrogression (*avaivartika*), after which one's eventual Buddhahood—though still in the unimaginably distant future—is assured. Later Mahāyāna thinkers formulated far more elaborate descriptions, and several quite different sets of ten bodhisattva stages are known.<sup>45</sup>

For many (perhaps most) Indian Buddhists, the bodhisattva path remained an option for the intrepid few. One Mahāyāna philosophical school, the Yogācāra, distinguished five spiritual types, including those destined for Buddhahood, those destined for arhatship, those destined for *pratyekabuddhahood* (a state of awakening considered by some to be intermediate between that of the Buddha and of the arhat), and those whose destination is yet to be determined. A fifth category, those who have done such evil deeds that they no longer have any possibility of being liberated (*icchantikas*), subsequently provoked considerable controversy in East Asia.<sup>46</sup> While one's membership in a particular category is said to become fixed at a certain point, it should be emphasized that this very fixity is not an instance of a Buddhist predestination theory, but is portrayed as the result of the individual's own prior choices.

Over the course of time, however, advocates of the Mahāyāna increasingly came to consider the choice of the *śrāvaka* path as selfish, holding that it focused on one's own individual liberation alone. The bodhisattva path, by contrast, was seen as an expression of compassion for all beings and thus far superior in both its

motivation and its goal. While those who chose to attain arhatship could indeed do so, this was now considered to be a far inferior destination.

A small minority of Indian Buddhists, however, held that all practitioners are on the path to Buddhahood whether they realize it or not. Arhatship is not a genuine state of liberation, but an illusory rest stop on the inexorable path to Buddhahood. The best-known Indian scripture to articulate this view (known as the “one vehicle,” *ekayāna*) is the Lotus Sūtra, which later became widely influential in China.<sup>47</sup>

A different expression of discomfort with the idea that both Buddhas and arhats, upon attainment of liberation, are definitively freed from rebirth in *samsāra* can be seen in the Yogācāra idea of “nirvāṇa without a foothold” (*apratisthita-nirvāṇa*), according to which an advanced bodhisattva remains neither in nirvāṇa nor in *samsāra*, but works continually for the benefit of others.<sup>48</sup>

## Regional Variations

In India, the idea of a gradual path leading from the unawakened state to nirvāṇa, or to the *bodhi* of a Buddha, remained the predominant view, as would later be the case in Central and Southeast Asia as well. In China, by contrast, the idea that all living beings already possess the awakened state of a Buddha—known in East Asian sources as “Buddha nature”—was widely held. According to this view, the object of spiritual practice is not to become something that one is not (i.e., an awakened being), but simply to discover one’s already existing Buddhahood (see Buswell and Gimello 1992).

In two Japanese Buddhist schools, the idea of a “path” itself came to be considered misleading. In the Sōto Zen school founded by Dōgen (1200–1260), meditation practice is described as an expression of one’s inherent Buddha nature rather than as a means to attaining that state. And in the “True Pure Land” school (Jōdo Shinshū) founded by Shinran (1173–1263), any practice at all is viewed as placing confidence in one’s own efforts (*jiriki*, “self-power”) and is rejected as an expression of pride. What devotees should do instead, in this final age, is to throw themselves on the mercy of the Buddha Amitābha (Jpn. *Amida*), leaving it up to him to ensure their rebirth in the pure land.

## Modern Developments

In the contemporary world, one finds a wide range of opinion as to whether awakening can still be attained in our day. Theravāda Buddhists in Sri Lanka generally hold that it is no longer possible to attain arhatship, while their coreligionists in Thailand and Burma point to living examples to support the opposite conclusion. Tibetan Buddhists (who, as Mahāyānists, are aiming for Buddhahood rather than arhatship) have preserved the idea that the path is both grueling and long. Yet they also draw inspiration from the ritual repertoire of tantric Buddhism, which holds

out the possibility of Buddhahood within this very life. In East Asia, where the impact of Buddha-nature theory has been widespread, there is less attention paid to “attaining” Buddhahood and more discussion of how to manifest one’s inherent Buddha nature in the world (especially in Nichiren-inspired new religious groups, such as the Sōka Gakkai, the Reiyūkai, and Risshō Kōseikai). In the West, and to a significant degree also in modern Taiwan (less so in other regions of Asia, though there are important exceptions, such as the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka), Buddhist practice has come to be identified with social service, improving life here in saṃsāra rather than focusing primarily on leaving saṃsāra behind.

In the West one also sees, however, a dramatic trend toward jettisoning many traditional doctrines, for a substantial number of first-generation practitioners (especially those of European ancestry) have abandoned not only the concept of liberation from saṃsāra, but the idea of the cycle of karma and rebirth as well. Such “minimalist” practitioners—numerous in Zen communities and in the Theravāda-derived Vipassana meditation movement, less well-represented in most Tibetan-based Buddhist groups—generally focus on living a full life in the present, devoting little time to speculation on what will happen when this life comes to an end.<sup>49</sup>

## NOTES

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1. For convenience and consistency, all Indian Buddhist proper names and terms, with the exception of titles of texts, will be given in Sanskrit (rather than in Pāli or any of the other canonical languages in which Buddhist texts were transmitted). Text titles, however, are given in the language of the text itself. Chinese names and terms are romanized according to the pinyin system, except when quoting from the work of others.

2. Zwi Werblowsky, “Eschatology,” in Mircea Eliade, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), vol. 5, pp. 148–151.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 149a.

4. The Buddha (known prior to his awakening by his clan name, Gautama, or his given name, Siddhārtha, and referred to especially in Mahāyāna sources as Śākyamuni, “Sage of the Śākya People”) was born in the southern part of what today is Nepal in or around the fifth century BCE, and spent his long teaching career traveling throughout the northeastern part of the Indian subcontinent. Buddhism subsequently spread throughout the subcontinent and on to Sri Lanka in the south, reaching into what is today Afghanistan by the third century BCE. By the first century CE, Buddhism had spread across Central Asia to China, from which it would subsequently be disseminated to Korea and from there to Japan. The diffusion of Buddhism to Southeast Asia is less well documented, but a Buddhist presence is thought to have been established in the region by the first century CE, though it became a dominant feature of the religious landscape only several centuries later. The last Asian cultures to come under Buddhist influence were those of Tibet (c. seventh century CE) and Mongolia (thirteenth century CE), whose Buddhist traditions accordingly reflect the latest phase of Buddhism on the Indian subcontinent. More recently, beginning in the late nineteenth century and accelerating rapidly during and after the Vietnam era (from the 1960s), Buddhism has attracted a following in



Europe, North and South America, and the British commonwealth nations of Australia and New Zealand. Needless to say, the inhabitants of these very diverse cultural regions have emphasized and deemphasized quite different strands of the Buddhist tradition, as well as creating distinctive syntheses of their own. Two excellent surveys that attempt to sketch the overall contours of Buddhist history are Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Richard Robinson et al., *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction*, 5th ed., with revisions by Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2005).

5. An often-cited example is the *Atthakavagga* section of the *Suttanipāta*, which is considered to belong to the oldest layer of the Pāli canon. For an English translation, see K. R. Norman et al., *The Rhinoceros Horn and Other Early Buddhist Poems: The Group of Discourses (Sutta-Nipāta)* (London: Pali Text Society, 1985).

6. Such questions are classified as “undetermined” because they are not properly phrased (and thus cannot be answered) and/or because they are irrelevant to the quest for nirvāṇa. See, for example, the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* iv.373–400 and the *Majjhima-nikāya* i.395, 426–431.

7. See, for example, the *Abhidharmakośa*, ch. 3.

8. See the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* ii.180–181.

9. See La Vallée Poussin 1908, p. 188b, for some examples.

10. For a diagram of this system and further discussion, see Nattier 1991, pp. 15–19.

11. Narrative accounts of this process can be found in the *Cakkavatti-sihanāda-sutta* and the *Aggañña-sutta* (*Dīghanikāya*, nos. 26 and 27). For a new translation of the latter, see Steven Collins, *Aggañña Sutta: The Discourse on What Is Primary* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2001); for a discussion of its contents cf. Gethin 1997.

12. A detailed discussion of these various forms of destruction and their results can be found in the *Visuddhimagga*, XIII.30–66.

13. The scenario described here is that of the Theravāda school; there are minor variations in the accounts found in scriptures transmitted in other ordination lineages. For a convenient summary of this process, see Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 123–126, and the chart on pp. 116–117.

14. On Buddhist heavens and hells, see Sadakata 1997 and Reynolds and Reynolds 1982.

15. Scholarly understanding of the origins and development of the Mahāyāna has made rapid progress in recent years, and most older publications on the topic are now seriously out of date. For a brief discussion, see below under “Personal Eschatology”; for a detailed account, see Nattier 2003.

16. On the bodhisattva path as a key factor in the emergence of ideas of multiple world systems, see Jan Nattier, “The Indian Roots of Pure Land Buddhism: Insights from the Oldest Chinese Versions of the Larger *Sukhāvativyūha*,” *Pacific World*, 3rd ser., no. 5 (2004): 179–201.

17. See, for example, Buddhadasa P. Kirthisinghe, *Buddhism and Science* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004).

18. A formula occurring already in early Buddhist literature, and still quite central in Theravāda Buddhism today, is that of the “three marks of existence,” viz., (1) all conditioned things are transitory (*anitya*), (2) all conditioned things are vulnerable to suffering (*duḥkha*), and (3) all things—whether conditioned or not—are devoid of a soul or self (*anātman*). For a highly readable (if somewhat modernized) discussion of these topics, see Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (1959; repr., New York: Grove, 1974).

19. See the *Vinaya*, *Cullavagga* X.1.6; English translation from Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translations* (1896; repr., New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 447.

20. On the position of women in early Buddhism and the probable milieu within which this story was formulated see Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," in José Ignacio Cabezán, ed., *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 3–36.
21. For a detailed discussion, see Nattier 1991, pp. 28–33.
22. For a translation of this passage, see Nattier 1991, pp. 43–44.
23. For a detailed discussion of the categories of "true dharma" and "semblance dharma," see Nattier 1991, pp. 66–89; for Mahāyāna developments, see *ibid.*, pp. 46–56.
24. The calculations that yielded this figure were based on the *Kālacakrantra*, a text composed in India during the period of Muslim invasions, probably during the eleventh century CE (see Newman 1987). An alternative tradition (known in Tibet as the "sūtra tradition") offers the same timetable as Buddhaghosa, viz., 5,000 years, and may be derived from some of the same texts (Nattier 1991, pp. 58–59).
25. Nattier 1991, pp. 90–118.
26. See Hubbard 2001 and Stone 1985.
27. See David W. Chappell, "Tao-ch'ō (562–645): A Pioneer of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism" (Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 1976), especially pp. 144–150.
28. See Stone 1985.
29. See Jacqueline I. Stone, "Nichiren and the New Paradigm," in *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999).
30. On the Kushan pantheon, see John M. Rosenfield, *Dynastic Arts of the Kushans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).
31. On these four types of interpretation, see Jan Nattier, "The Meanings of the Maitreya Myth," in Sponberg and Hardacre 1988.
32. See Luis Gómez, *Land of Bliss* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996).
33. *Cullavagga* IX.i.4.
34. On the relationship between the Buddha and the practitioner and some difficulties in applying Western categories such as "worship" and "devotion" to Buddhist materials, see Nattier 2003, pp. 156–170.
35. While in rare cases a layperson might succeed in attaining liberation, in the overwhelming majority of cases, renunciation of home and family and ordination as a monk or nun are said to be required.
36. Later sources sometimes add a sixth realm, that of the *asuras*, or "jealous gods," powerful beings whose heavenly delights are tainted by their envy of the still-better situation of the gods (*devas*).
37. More specifically, the Buddha is described as realizing that he had accomplished the elimination of the contaminants (*āsrava*, lit. "outflow"), viz., sensual desire, the desire to remain in existence, spiritual ignorance, and the commitment to doctrinal views. The elimination of these four items is equated with the achievement of liberation from *samsāra* in early Buddhist scriptures.
38. For a highly readable discussion of this topic, see Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*. Not all Buddhists would agree with this stance; for a discussion reflecting a Thai (rather than a Sri Lankan) perspective, see Harvey 1995.
39. The word "dharma" has multiple meanings in Buddhist usage, including the natural order of things (also *dharmatā*), what is moral (and therefore should be done), and even "Buddhism" itself. A fourth meaning—the one used here—is a technical scholastic usage, in which dharma refers to particular entities, in the sense of "the smallest discernible components of reality as experienced."

40. A longer list of ten perfections is found in some later texts; see Leslie S. Kawamura, "Bodhisattva(s)" and "Pāramitā (Perfection)," in Buswell 2004.
41. For an English translation of one version of this widely circulated tale, see Edward Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1959).
42. For a detailed discussion of the emergence of the Mahāyāna, see Nattier 2003, especially pp. 73–170.
43. This view was not peculiar to Mahāyāna scriptures, but is assumed in virtually all Buddhist texts.
44. See Jan Nattier, "Gender and Awakening: Sexual Transformation in Mahāyāna Sūtras," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (in press).
45. See Kawamura, "Bodhisattva(s)," in Buswell 2004.
46. On these five categories, see David Seyfort Ruegg, *La théorie du tathāgatarbha et du gotra: Études sur la sotériologie et la gnoséologie du bouddhisme* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1969). On the category of the *icchantika*, see Robert E. Buswell, Jr., "The Path to Perdition: The Wholesome Roots and Their Eradication," in Buswell and Gimello 1992.
47. For a brief summary of these attitudes toward the bodhisattva path, see Nattier 2003, pp. 171–178.
48. See Luis O. Gómez, "Nirvāṇa," in Buswell 2004.
49. For a perceptive discussion of this secularizing trend, especially in the Vipassana movement, see Egil Fronsdal, "Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness," in Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds., *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 163–182.

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