

tion with music and dance and sometimes wild celebration. All those features of prehistoric religion find a place in the Hindu tradition but so too do sophisticated philosophies. There is no demand for absolute uniformity of belief or practice. If you don't like Siva, try Vishnu. To be sure, there are demands of the family and of the caste that may curtail perfect freedom, but then there are many who, in the name of Siva or Vishnu, have called for an end to caste.

It should also be noted that Hinduism, like Buddhism, also spread through southeast Asia and Indonesia. One of the greatest architectural expressions of Hinduism is found in Cambodia. The famous Angkor Wat, long hidden in the dense forest, contains both Saivite and Vaishnavite temples of great size and beauty. Eventually Hinduism was supplanted by Buddhism as the primary religion of the area. In Indonesia, both Buddhism and Hinduism were successful in gaining converts. Indeed, the largest Buddhist *stupa* in the world is to be found at Borobudur on Java. By the 13th century, however, Islam had begun to spread there and today Indonesia is 88% Muslim and is the largest Muslim country in the world. Only little Bali has retained its Hindu religion.

China

Buddhism

After the Han Dynasty fell in the third century C.E., China entered a period of disintegration and reintegration for some four hundred years. During this period Confucianism went under a cloud, for many of its functions were connected with the empire. Although the Chinese never gave up the Confucian view of the family, the great universities stopped operating and the Chinese people felt in need of something new. It was just at that time that Buddhist monks, traveling along the silk road through Central Asia or up along the southern coast by boat, began to make inroads into Chinese culture.

And the Chinese were quick to see the sophistication of Buddhist philosophy and their own need for meditational discipline. They had lost faith in the old China and were looking for something that would address their needs.

The problem was that Buddhism arrived rather piecemeal and it was difficult for the Chinese to determine what Buddhism really taught. Moreover, the Chinese and Sanskrit languages could not be more different and thus there were many problems of translation. Sanskrit is a highly inflected language, like Latin and Greek, and can be made to express very complex philosophical ideas. Chinese, on the other hand, has very simple grammar with no verbal inflections. It is subtle, poetic, and, in its own way, capable of deep philosophical expression, but much of its vocabulary did not match Sanskrit words. At first, Chinese scholars tried to “match the meaning” (*geyi*) by using Daoist vocabulary, but that often led to more misunderstanding than understanding. It took the work of many very careful translators like the famous Kumarajiva (344–413 C.E.) before the Chinese could really begin to assess Buddhism and adopt what suited them.

What attracted the Chinese most were the Mahayana texts, like the Lotus Sutra (The *Saddharmapundarikasutra*) that begins, after an introductory chapter, with the story of the rich man and the burning house. According to the story, the rich man knew his sons were inside the house and needed to persuade them to get out as soon as possible. Knowing what they liked, he offered them gifts, but when they were safely away from the burning house, he actually gave them something else. The point is clear: what the Buddha promises us is not really what we will get. You must read the early sutras with a grain of salt for they are written just to get us out of a bad situation. In other words, the Buddha’s teaching is often an expedient device.

In fact, the Lotus Sutra sees everything that Buddhism teaches as an “expedient device.” Ultimately, it is all to free us, but must not be taken literally. Thus the text, written for an Indian audience, raises great questions about the Theravadin tradition that tended to take the Buddha’s teaching rather literally. At the same time, the Lotus Sutra also presents the Buddha, not just as a human teacher, but as a divine being, the Father of the World. Moreover, there are innumerable other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who populate this universe. There are other Buddha lands in parallel universes and sometimes Buddhas from other universes who come down to this earth. Suddenly reality become immensely huge; yet at the same time both time and space appear relative.

The events that are recorded in the text, in fact, have been repeated over and over again.

Is any of this to be taken literally? There is a subtle sense that all these stories are also expedient devices just to wake us up. In fact, however, many readers did take them literally and found in them a whole new vision of life and reality. The early Pali sutras pictured the Buddha as a man among men. Now the reader enters a world in which there not only are innumerable Buddhas but where the assurance is given that each person will also become such a Buddha. In fact, although we must work hard at meditation and other forms of spiritual exercise, we are really Buddhas already. No matter how bad things are, eventually, after more reincarnations, all of us, even the worst of us, will attain that ultimate end of Buddhahood. How different this is from the rather solemn, straightforward teaching of the “Four Noble Truths.”³⁶

Still another, very different message is to be found in the Pure Land (*Sukhavati*) texts. According to these writings, the world today is in decline and therefore people find it impossible to follow the teachings of the Buddha. What came easily to the disciples in the 6th century B.C.E. is no longer readily achieved. There is, however, a way out. Long ago a monk by the name of Dharmakara vowed to become a Buddha and when he did so he established a “Pure Land” in the West. There entry into nirvana is quite easy to achieve. Moreover, simple belief in the Amitabha Buddha and his Pure Land will cause you to be born in that Pure Land in the next life. So the whole point is simply to believe in Amitabha and everything will be fine.

Clearly, the message is very similar to the kind of Christianity that says, “All you have to do is believe in Jesus.” In a sense, the Buddha’s teachings are preserved—you will have to achieve nirvana—but no longer is that necessary here and now. Of course, as all Christians know who have ever tried, believing wholeheartedly in such a promise is not easy. The moment one tries to believe, doubts emerge. Therefore the Pure Land Sect (*qing du*) devotes

³⁶ Very simply the four Noble Truths are: 1) All life is suffering. 2) Suffering is caused by desire. 3) There is a way out. 4. The Way out is the 8-fold path.

much time to rituals that will help to bring that moment of total belief.

Believers chant over and over again “*Nianfo Amituo Fo*” with the hope that constant repetition will bring the needed faith.

In any event, Qing Du³⁷ Buddhism eventually became the most popular form of Buddhism in China. Up until 845 C.E. there were many, many sects of Buddhism in China, but at that time the emperor, concerned that the Buddhist religion had grown so powerful and rich, tried to purge the country of all foreign religions. Many sects were simply wiped out in the purge.

It should be noted, however, that many of these sects, like Tien-Tai, were preserved in Japan. Although Japanese and Chinese cultures are very different, Japan was able to absorb much from all of the Chinese religious traditions and then transform them into something very Japanese. Zen is the Japanese form of Chan and in some ways it carries on the continental tradition, but Zen does so in a very Japanese way. Dogen and Hakuin, Basho and Bankei learned much from their Chinese predecessors, but what they themselves express in thoroughly Japanese.

In any event, Qing Du did not need an elaborate library or temples to survive and, moreover, it appealed to the masses. So, while even Tien-Tai Buddhism, the sect that emphasized the Lotus Sutra, suffered in China an almost fatal blow, Qing Du prospered. In Japan it is called Jodo Shinshu or simply Shin Buddhism.

The other major Buddhist school that was to survive the persecution of 845 was founded, according to tradition, by Bodhidharma who came from India in the 6th century. Chan Buddhism, known in Japan as Zen, emphasizes the transmission of the Buddha Mind outside of scripture. Rather than choosing among the many divergent Buddhist texts from India, Chan teaches that Buddhism is not what you think. It is not a set of doctrines to be believed nor is it a vast mythology featuring Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. A famous Chan saying is: “If you meet the Buddha on the path, kill him.” Buddhism is not accepting someone else’s authority. It is neither philosophy nor theology. It is waking up.

³⁷ Wade-Giles, Ching Tu

This tradition came into its own in the Tang Dynasty in the 7th, 8th, and 9th centuries and, because it did not depend upon a library of texts, was able to survive the 845 suppression. The emperor could destroy temples and libraries of translated texts but not what was in (or beyond) the mind. Chan, with all its eccentricities, survived and prospered for centuries, though it never became nearly as popular as Pure Land Buddhism.

What made Chan unique were its unusual teaching methods and, eventually, its bizarre literature. Stories of the great teachers feature slaps and punches and apparent *non sequiturs*. The Chan Master Lin Chi is famous for his unexpected responses, but he is surely not alone. Although Huang Po may at times sound suspiciously philosophical, other teachers like Ma Zi, Nan Chuan, and Hui Hai certainly do not. Eventually, stories of these famous Masters were collected as *kung-an* (in Japanese *koan*)—one thinks particularly of the *Blue Cliff Record*³⁸—and became the basis for meditation. One famous example will have to suffice:

A monk once asked Master Joshu, “Has a dog the Buddha Nature or not?” Joshu said, “Mu.”³⁹

Students of Chan are given such a saying to meditate on day and night. Occasionally they meet with a Master to discuss the meaning they have found. If the *kung-an* does its work, an awakening, *satori*, will occur.

It should also be noted that during its long history in China, Buddhism absorbed many Chinese ideas. For instance, the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara came to China as a male. In China he was called Kuan Yin. At some point, however, he lost his mustache and became—female! At just about the same time that western Christianity was greatly enhancing the importance of the Virgin Mary, Kuan Yin was becoming China’s major goddess.

The Chinese also radically transformed Buddhism’s central symbol, the *stupa* or *dagoba*. Instead of a mound for burial it became a pagoda, a tower that one can climb, circumambulating the Buddha on each level. On the very top one can usually still see the *stupa*

³⁸ Chinese: *Pi Yen Lu*

³⁹ Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*. Trans. Sumiko Kudo (New York: New American Library, 1974) p. 19.

form with its mound and *chatra*. The pagoda is a wonderful symbol of how much China transformed Buddhism to suit its own purposes. It was this form of Buddhism that then made its way to Korea and Japan where each culture again transformed it to meet local needs and feelings. It is still Buddhism, but someone from Sri Lanka or Myanmar might scarcely recognize it as such at all.

Daoism

Long before the fall of the Han dynasty near the beginning of the 3rd century, the roots of what was to become Daoism had begun to grow. There were, of course, the philosophers, Lao Zi, Chuang Zi, and Lieh Zi whom we have already mentioned, and even before the Han dynasty was founded, there were men known as the *fang shi* in evidence. Many scholars believe that they were really the heirs of the prehistoric shamanic tradition so prominent in Central Asia. These were people who studied astronomical phenomena, herbs, magical potions and spells in their quest for healing powers and the secret of longevity. They were not really Daoists, but many of their ideas were later incorporated into Daoism. There were also alchemists whose ideas also affected some later Daoist sects.

The first organized Daoist movements, however, began in the late second century when the Han dynasty began to show signs of corruption and weakness. Both the Yellow Turbans and the Celestial Masters venerated Lao Zi and the *Dao De Jing*, but many of their ideas were hardly drawn from him. Both were rather apocalyptic in nature, predicting not just the end of the Han but the ushering in of a new age of peace. For the Yellow Turbans 184 C.E. was the year when the reign of "the Yellow Heaven" would begin. The Han emperor found such rhetoric quite dangerous and after a very bloody fight was able to suppress the movement, but the struggle marked the death knell of the Empire. It lingered for a while but collapsed early in the next century.

The other movement began in Sichuan after Zhang Dao Ling⁴⁰ received visions and a law from Lao Zi himself who was already being regarded by many as a deity. Zhang was confronted by Lao

⁴⁰ Wade-Giles, Chang Tao Ling