Buddhism And Sidhartha Essay, Research Paper

Buddhism

Buddhism Buddhism, one of the major religions of the world, was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, who lived in northern India from 560 to 480 B.C. The time of the Buddha was one of social and religious change, marked by the further advance of Aryan civilization into the Ganges Plain, the development of trade and cities, the breakdown of old tribal structures, and the rise of a whole spectrum of new religious movements that responded to the demands of the times (Conze 10). These movements were derived from the Brahmanic tradition of Hinduism but were also reactions against it. Of the new sects, Buddhism was the most successful and eventually spread throughout India and most of Asia. Today it is common to divide Buddhism into two main branches. The Theravada, or “Way of the Elders,” is the more conservative of the two; it is dominant in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand (Berry 23). The Mahayana, or “Great Vehicle,” is more diverse and liberal; it is found mainly in Taiwan, Korea, and Japan, and among Tibetan peoples, where it is distinguished by its emphasis on the Buddhist Tantras (Berry 24). In recent times both branches, as well as Tibetan Buddhism, have gained followers in the West. It is virtually impossible to tell what the Buddhist population of the world is today; statistics are difficult to obtain because persons might have Buddhist beliefs and engage in Buddhist rites while maintaining folk or other religions such as Shinto, Confucian, Taoist, and Hindu (Corless 41). Such persons might or might not call themselves or be counted as Buddhists. Nevertheless, the number of Buddhists worldwide is frequently estimated at more than 300 million (Berry 32). Just what the original teaching of the Buddha was is a matter of some debate. Nonetheless, it may be said to have centered on certain basic doctrines. The first of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha held, is suffering, or duhkha. By this, he meant not only that human existence is occasionally painful but that all beings; humans, animals, ghosts, hell-beings, even the gods in the heavens; are caught up in samsara, a cycle of rebirth, a maze of suffering in which their actions, or karma, keep them wandering (Coomaraswamy 53). Samsara and karma are not doctrines specific to Buddhism. The Buddha, however, specified that samsara is characterized by three marks: suffering, impermanence, and no-self, or anatman. Individuals not only suffer in a constantly changing world, but what appears to be the self, the soul, has no independent reality apart from its many separable elements (Davids 17). The second Noble Truth is that suffering itself has a cause. At the simplest level, this may be said to be desire; but the theory was fully worked out in the complex doctrine of “dependent origination,” or pratityasamutpada, which explains the interrelationship of all reality in terms of an unbroken chain of causation (Conze 48). The third Noble Truth, however, is that this chain can be broken, that suffering can cease. The Buddhists called this end of suffering nirvana and conceived of it as a cessation of rebirth, an escape from samsara. Finally, the fourth Noble Truth is that a way exists through which this cessation can be brought about: the practice of the noble Eightfold Path. This combines ethical and disciplinary practices, training in concentration and meditation, and the development of enlightened wisdom, all thought to be necessary. For the monks, the notion of offering extends also to the giving of the dharma in the form of sermons, to the chanting of scriptures in rituals (which may also be thought of as magically protective and salutary), and to the recitation of sutras for the dead (Corless 57). All of these acts of offering are intimately involved in the concept of merit-making. By performing them, individuals, through the working of karma, can seek to assure themselves rebirth in one of the heavens or a better station in life, from which they may be able to attain the goal of enlightenment. Zen Buddhism Zen or Chan Buddhism represents a movement within the Buddhist religion that stresses the practice of meditation as the means to enlightenment. Zen and Chan are, respectively, Japanese and Chinese attempts to render the Sanskrit word for meditation, dhyana (Coomaraswamy 94). Zen’s roots may be traced to India, but it was in East Asia that the movement became distinct and flourished. Like other Chinese Buddhist sects, Chan first established itself as a lineage of masters emphasizing the teachings of a particular text, in this case the Lankavatara Sutra (Coomaraswamy 96). Bodhidharma, the first Chan patriarch in China, who is said to have arrived there from India in 470 A.D., was a master of this text. He also emphasized the practice of contemplative sitting, and legend has it that he himself spent nine years in meditation facing a wall (Davids 101). With the importance of lineages, Chan stressed the master-disciple relationship, and Bodhidharma was followed by a series of patriarchs each of whom received the dharma, or religious truth, directly from his predecessor and teacher. By the 7th century, however, splits in the line of transmission began to develop, the most important of which was between Shenxiu (606-706) and Huineng (638-713), disciples of the 5th patriarch, Hung-jen. According to a later and clearly biased legend, Huineng defeated Hung-jen in a stanza-composing contest, thereby demonstrating his superior enlightenment (Davids 104). He was then secretly named 6th patriarch but had to flee south for fear of his rival’s jealousy. The split between Shenxiu and Huineng accounts for the southern and northern branches of Chan, which competed vigorously for prestige and state support. Huineng’s branch dominated in the long run, and by 796 an imperial decree settled the matter in his favor posthumously (Berry 122). By then, however, Huineng’s branch was itself beginning to subdivide into several different schools. The subsequent history of Chan in China was mixed. The sect suffered from the great persecution of Buddhism in 845. It recovered better than many Buddhist schools, however, partly because, in contrast to other monastic communities, Chan monks engaged in physical labor, which made them less dependent on state and lay support (Davids 109). During the Song dynasty (960-1279), Chan again prospered and was a leading influence on the development of Chinese art and neo-Confucian culture (Conze 105). It was during this period that Chan was first established in Japan. Within 30 years of each other, two Japanese monks, Eisai (1141-1215) and Dogen (1200-53), went to China, where they trained respectively in the Linji and Zaodong schools of Chan (Davids 112). These they then introduced into Japan. Rinzai emphasizes the use of the koan, a mental stumbling block or riddle that the meditator must solve to the satisfaction of his master. Soto lays more stress on seated meditation without conscious striving for a goal, or zazen. Both schools fostered good relations with the shoguns and became closely associated with the Japanese military class (Berry 127). Rinzai in particular was highly influential during the Ashikaga period (1338-1573), when Zen played an important role in propagating neo-Confucianism and infusing its own unique spirit into Japanese art and culture. The heart of Zen monasticism is the practice of meditation; it is this feature that has been most popular in Zen’s spread to the West. Zen meditation highlights the experience of enlightenment, or satori, and the possibility of attaining it in this life. The strict training of Zen monks, the daily physical chores, the constant wrestling with koans, the long hours of sitting in meditation, and the special intensive periods of practice, or sesshin, are all directed toward this end. At the same time, enlightenment is generally thought of as being sudden. The meditator needs to be jolted awake, and the only one who can do this is his Zen master (Davids 113). The master-disciple relationship often involves private interviews in which the Zen trait of unconventionality sometimes comes to the fore; the master will allow no refuge in the Buddha or the sutras but demands from his disciple a direct answer to his assigned koan (Davids 114). Conversely, the master may goad the disciple by remaining silent or compassionately help him out, but with the constant aim of trying to cause a breakthrough from conventional to absolute truth (Corless 131).

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