

# GETTING THE FOUNDATIONS RIGHT WHEN TEACHING ASIAN RELIGIONS

By Todd Lewis

*The person who knows only one religion understands none.*

—Max Müller

For teachers seeking resources to instill greater global literacy on world religions, it is the best of times and the worst of times. Cultural diversity in American schools is increasing, and the number of Hindu temples, mosques, and Buddhist meditation centers is rising. Because of popular media, references to Hindu gods, Daoist geomancy, or Buddhist karma teachings no longer seem exotic. Yet much information about Asian religions, whether promulgated by mass media or local practitioners, can be problematic to contextualize. Pernicious or idealizing stereotypes abound, and fringe groups (e.g., Hindu nationalists, new religions, New Age sects) aggressively try to cast their sectarian views as mainstream. Parents of students may impart idiosyncratic or distorted information as well. Well-intentioned educators must sort through all of this when teaching Asian religions. I have learned much from the many teachers with whom I have worked about providing an accurate foundation for student understanding of Asian religions. The essay that follows, based upon topics teachers have found most useful in my programs, is an attempt to provide such a foundation. Because much of my work has been in South Asian Buddhism, a large number of examples relating to this religious tradition are included in the essay, but many of the misconceptions about Buddhism are similar to other stereotypes that Westerners have about Asian religions.



October 14, 2009. President Barack Obama receives a red shawl from Sri Narayanachar Digalakote, a Hindu priest from Sri Siva Vishnu Temple, located in Lanham, Maryland, in the Blue Room of the White House, prior to the Asian American and Pacific Islander Initiative Executive Order signing and Diwali festival of lights ceremony.

Official White House Photo by Pete Souza.

Image source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Barack\\_Obama\\_receives\\_a\\_red\\_shawl\\_from\\_Sri\\_Narayanachar\\_Digalakote,\\_a\\_Hindu\\_priest\\_.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Barack_Obama_receives_a_red_shawl_from_Sri_Narayanachar_Digalakote,_a_Hindu_priest_.jpg)



The Sri Siva Vishnu Temple in Lanham, Maryland. © 2004 Syracuse University.  
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## ASIA AND THE HISTORY OF WORLD RELIGIONS

**Contextualize Asian religions within a world historical framework.** This means covering the traditions of shamans, the Abrahamic prophets, and the Asian sages. Humanity's first religion, shamanism, is still practiced with many variations by indigenous people worldwide. Shamans are spirit mediums who utilize the universal human capacity of achieving trance states of consciousness, either to enable spirits to speak through them, to free their souls to leave their bodies, to recover lost souls, heal, or to communicate with ancestral spirits in the afterlife. Shamanism is ubiquitous among indigenous people today across Asia, and spirit mediums coexist alongside all the major world religions.

The quintessential symbol of the sage is the water lotus sprouting in the muddy water (of this world). The flower, like the sage, rises above it to bloom magnificently and transcendently.

The great prophetic traditions are associated with the rise of monotheism in the ancient Near East and with the Hebrew biblical legend of Abraham as the exemplary devotee of the god Yahweh.<sup>1</sup> From episodes of dramatic inspired speech thought to be *from God*, the prophets revealed an evolving relationship between humanity and God. The biblical prophets defined this as the covenant—the central relationship in which Yahweh's blessings were promised to humanity in exchange for loyal worship and ethical actions based upon the Torah—the divine law of Judaism.

Christianity is distinguished from Judaism by identifying its founder, Jesus, as the messiah hoped for in the Hebrew scripture and predicted by the prophets. The life of Jesus, in the Christian view, shifts the scope of the covenant with God to all humanity. Only through identifying with his life and sacrificial death is salvation possible, as distilled in Trinitarian theology that sees God, Jesus, and the "Holy Spirit" as co-equal and one.

Youngest of the prophetic faiths is Islam. Muslims regard its founder, Mohammed, as the last of God's prophets in a line back to Abraham. The founder was a medium for Allah's messages to humanity embodied in the Qur'an. This text forms

the basis of Islamic law (*Shari'a*), a tradition Muslims regard as correcting departures from Abrahamic monotheism.

The sense that history has a divine purpose that progresses toward a definite endpoint in linear time is an important common belief of the prophetic traditions: an apocalypse marked by God ending prior creation, passing judgment on humanity, and opening a new life for the elect, while condemning others to eternal torment.

**Sage traditions differ profoundly from the Abrahamic monotheistic traditions.** In these traditions, revelation comes *from within* the experience of the individual, who as

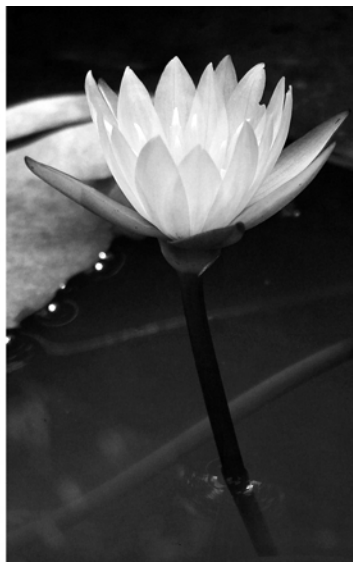
an intense spiritual seeker is most often a forest or mountain recluse. The sages' paths to revelation formed the great Asian traditions that would guide others. Here we find the Rishis of the Upanishads, the Buddha, the Daoist, and Confucian sages and a host of later figures such as Nanak, founder of Sikhism. The quintessential symbol of the sage is the water lotus sprouting in the muddy water (of this world). The flower, like the sage, rises above it to bloom magnificently and transcendently.



Christ on the Cross by El Greco, 1590.  
Image source: <http://faculty.saintleo.edu/reynolds/HON250-F03/projects/culture/Tintoretto/Christ%20on%20Cross%201590.jpg>.



Detail of Mohammed riding his magical steed, Buraq. From a miniature in the illuminated manuscript called *The Apocalypse of Muhammad* (now in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris).  
Image source: [http://zombietime.com/mohammed\\_image\\_archive/islamic\\_mo\\_full/](http://zombietime.com/mohammed_image_archive/islamic_mo_full/).



The Lotus flower.  
Image source: [http://bp1.blogger.com/\\_cRw9\\_SMr3sM/RyMAGnASVAI/AAAAAAAAAe8/rxxbE6ykedW/s1600-h/Lotus+2.jpg](http://bp1.blogger.com/_cRw9_SMr3sM/RyMAGnASVAI/AAAAAAAAAe8/rxxbE6ykedW/s1600-h/Lotus+2.jpg).

### “ASIA,” “THE EAST,” OR “THE ORIENT” ARE NOT USEFUL ANALYTICAL TERMS

Given Asia’s great diversity, grouping China, India, Japan, and Thailand together under “Asian Religions” as a unit of understanding invites students to lump together religious traditions that should be studied separately. Even presenting “Hinduism,” “Daoism,” or “Buddhism” as singular traditions is just as problematic as it is to treat Judaism, Christianity, or Islam as singular traditions.

Consider “Hinduism.” What actually exists throughout India are hundreds of separate traditions that famously contain the full global spectrum of alternative religious practices, ethical norms, and doctrines. In the case of theology, there are various forms of monism, monotheism, polytheism, and incarnation theology, as well as vibrant traditions of skepticism. Or, take the case of ethical reckoning of violence and non-violence. What would justify an assumption of a singular “Hinduism” in the following examples?

*In a Calcutta suburb, devotees lead a goat toward a temple priest, who then slits the animal’s throat, severs the head, and pours the spurting blood on an icon of goddess Kali. But in a desert oasis town in western India, a sadhu who has renounced all family ties, vows to practice complete nonviolence. Despite the apparent contradiction, no one would dispute that both animal sacrificers to Kali and the absolutely nonviolent ascetic are following ancient South Asian traditions.*

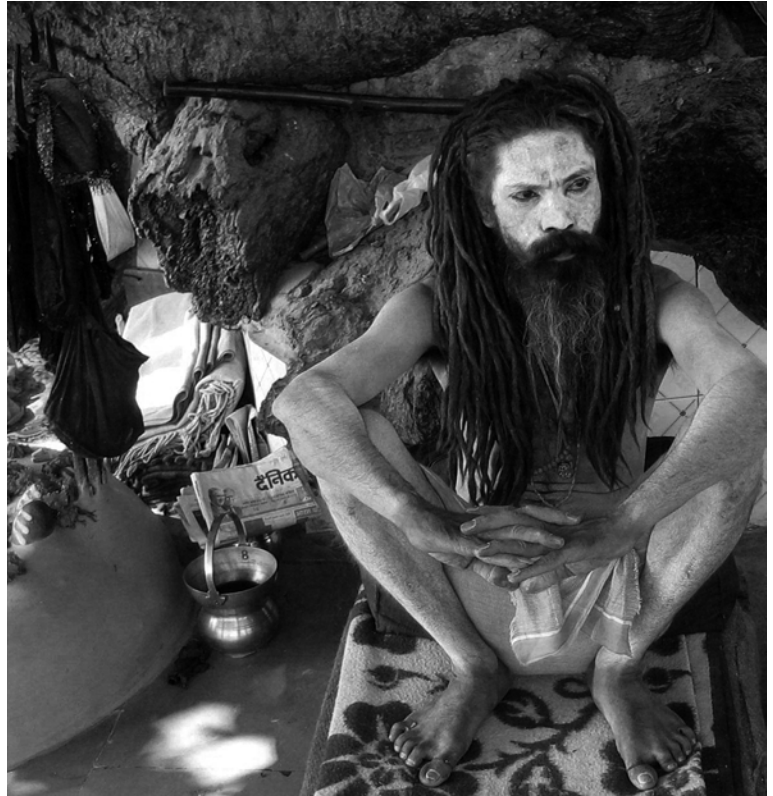
These two examples of seeming contradictions in “Hindu” belief and practice constitute only a few of many. While it is a fruitful question to explore what, if anything, constitutes the unity in this diversity beyond geography, the starting point for students learning about traditional India should certainly not be an implied assumption of unity.<sup>2</sup>

The same problem can appear in Daoism or Buddhism. Regarding the former: the fundamental understanding of the ultimate goal of “Philosophical Daoism” (as articulated by the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuang Zi*) is to realize the harmony of complete re-absorption into the natural world, especially when facing death. In complete contrast, the goal of “Religious Daoism” is to achieve immortality through meditation and the ingestion of alchemical elixirs. In Buddhism, differences between South Asian and East Asian traditions have caused the authors of a leading introductory textbook to re-title the most recent edition to a plural: *The Buddhist Religions*. The key insight is that teachers should recognize the undeniable diversities between and within the great sage traditions and become aware of the limitations of using the term “Asian Religions.”

### A “TIMELESS ORIENTAL WORLD” DOES NOT EXIST

The “timeless East” trope was first expressed during the Western colonial era; Asia is somehow not subject to the same laws of history or time as the West. As Edward Said highlighted in *Orientalism*, imperial apologists legitimized their own actions through asserting “the Orient” was backward and so far behind Europe that Asian peoples needed uplifting colonial rule.

While the “timeless” cliché endures, colonialism had critical effects upon religion, along with most other aspects of Asian cultures. Existing Asian religious traditions have been rebuilt from the ground up. Dislocations caused by colonialism and modernity also inspired religious reform movements, as well as the founding of thousands of “new religions” all over Asia. Over the last two centuries, Asian religions have been characterized by intense change, not some “timelessness.” This is an important classroom topic.



A sadhu relaxing on the bank of the river Ganga. Photo by Naresh Dhiman.  
Image source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/81959198@N00/311832594>.

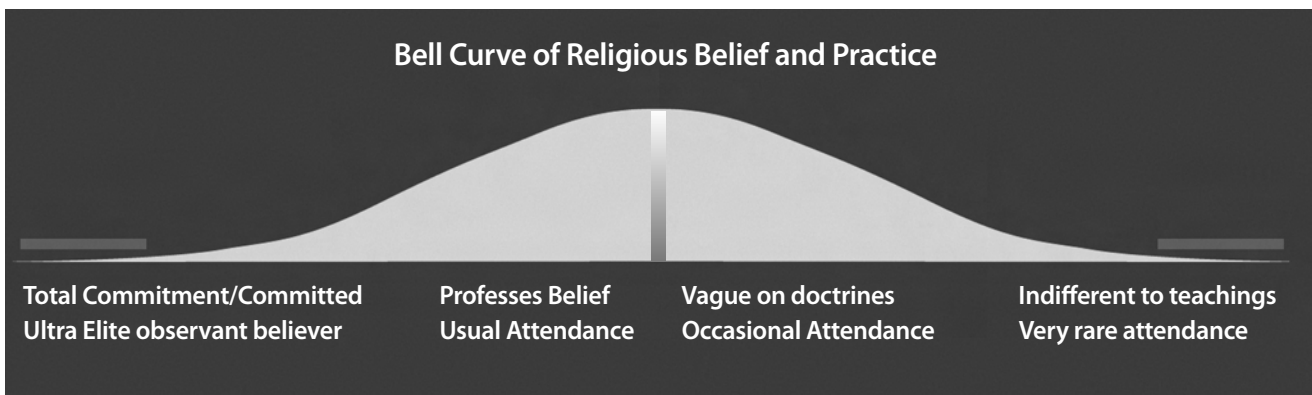
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## THE BELL CURVE IS A TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Development of student historical and sociological imagination is also important. Asian religions are not monolithic. They were not, and are not now, vague abstractions, but vibrant forces in real societies. Religious traditions have always adapted to, and have themselves shaped, the communities they entered. It is only by exploring the diversity of beliefs among followers that students can scale the importance of central beliefs and come to understand the “typical believer.”

The template of the bell curve is useful to display the typical range of beliefs in a given religious community. Although impossible to graph with exactitude, the effort to understand how religion exists for the elite, the average believer, and the hardly observant is a valuable exercise. The vertical axis plots the percentage of believers, the horizontal axis is a measure of belief vitality and ritual attendance.



Plotting a bell curve of belief and practice demonstrates that elite perspectives are not representative of the entire society of adherents.

On the left side are the virtuosi, an elite who have complete commitment and lifestyle to the highest religious ideals. Examples include the Tibetan Buddhist nun doing a three-year cave meditation retreat or the Hindu renunciant or Daoist monk who has turned the remainder of life into a religious pilgrimage. On the far right are those who are indifferent to doctrine or who disbelieve. In teaching about world religions, disaggregation of these groups assists student understanding of how world religions captured the imagination and elicited the loyalty of the majority in every society. Plotting a bell curve of belief and practice demonstrates that elite perspectives are not representative of the entire society of adherents.

Accounts of sages and saints, doctrinal discussions, and theories of salvation dominate both sacred texts and even some school textbooks, so teachers and students are naturally drawn to these ideas and the exemplars. They should be as thoroughly explored in Asia as elsewhere, because the elite inspired whole civilizations. In comparative perspective, the soaring accomplishments of Asian elites demonstrate that there were “world class” holy men, philosophers, poets, and artists who justly stand alongside counterparts elsewhere.

But the study of history does not stop with the virtuosi. While the elite are important, they are also not representative of all devotees or even typical adherents. Very few Buddhists are focused on nirvana-attainment; most Muslims do not approve of violence, or support terrorism; a very, very small percentage of Daoists concoct and quaff elixirs to attain immortality. Keeping this bell curve in mind directs all of us not to stop at the ultra elite or overly apply their experiences or outlook on life to all believers. It also conveys the important cross-cultural idea that religious communities everywhere, and the people who comprise them, have their saints and sinners, with most in between.

What is a good way to teach about this majority in the middle? A viable pedagogical method is to utilize materials that the same age cohort reads in Asia.<sup>3</sup> In all Asian religions, story traditions exist that parents and teachers have used for centuries to teach children about the founders, basic teachings, important sacred texts, and the lives of saints. Popular Asian narratives in English translation have been growing in number and quality. Indian stories in the *Hitopadesa*, the Buddhist *jatakas*, or exemplary Confucian virtue stories are essential resources for understanding those in the middle of the bell curve.

## EXORCISING “EAST” AND “WEST” FROM THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

The existence of a continuous “on the ground” singular Eurasian land mass extending from the Pacific Ocean west to the North Atlantic Ocean has been fully and finally ascertained in human awareness in the last five centuries. As Europeans came to dominate southern and eastern Eurasia, they projected their imagined view that the peoples of the western Mediterranean and especially Christian Europe occupied a zone wholly separate from the great land mass further east. Thus, the early modern dualistic separation of “West” from “East” was born.

Motivated by reasons ranging from Christian triumphalism to racist theories, Europeans came to view “West” and “East” as real entities. To this day, many feel that when they drive east and cross a bridge over the Bosphorus River in Istanbul, they have passed into Asia.<sup>4</sup> Separating Asia from Europe with a line only perpetuates misconception. To teach students uncritically Kipling’s couplet,

*East is East, and West is West  
And never the Twain shall meet*<sup>5</sup>

is to perpetuate a historical falsehood and distort student historical imagination. Let us recount a few of the reasons why:

- The spread of the Indo-European languages from central Asia across a geographical expanse that includes India, Iran, the Middle East, and Europe
- Trade goods from the Indus Valley traveled west to be traded in Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean before 1500 BCE
- The silk/horse routes linked east and central Asia to the Mediterranean and connected the regions as early as 800 BCE onwards—Romans wore clothes made of Chinese silk; Roman coins have been found in Chinese tombs
- Outposts of Greek civilization were widely established in Northwest India in the aftermath of the third century BCE invasion of Alexander the Great; some Greeks who settled in South Asia converted to Buddhism and may have made the earliest Buddha images

## WHEN THINKING ABOUT ASIAN RELIGIONS, DON’T USE CHRISTIANITY

To imagine the social organization of Asian religions, one needs to examine each one on its own terms. It is probably best to ask students not to consider Asian religions based upon their understanding of many organized Christian sects. Unlike several Christian denominations, most notably Roman Catholicism, Asian religions did not have a central figure of authority who imposed rules regarding ritual practice, places of worship, monastic institutions, or doctrinal orthodoxy in any way that resembled that of the popes or the Vatican in Western Christianity. There never was a “Buddhist church,” a pan-Daoist ecclesial authority, or central arbiter of Hindu doctrinal norms. Roman Catholicism stands by itself as the most centrally organized religious tradition in world history; it is an anomaly, not a model for any other world religion. Making clear to students that each Asian tradition maintained coherence over the centuries, despite lacking a singular institutional center of doctrinal authority, is a basic tenet upon which to build.

## SITUATING KARMA DOCTRINE: FREE WILL, FATALISM, DESTINY

The sage traditions of South Asia, beginning with the Upanishads and endorsed by the Buddha, hold that individual beings move from lifetime to lifetime, their destiny, and especially rebirth, determined by a natural mechanism of moral cause and effect called the karma-ripening (*karma-vikalpa*), a natural mechanism of moral cause and effect. Although diverse interpretations exist of how it works, fundamentally, it is karma from a previous lifetime or lifetimes that “fates” one to be born as a life form with certain qualities. But since new and ongoing actions (moral acts, rituals, and most powerfully, meditation) increase the accumulation of karma, most adherents are inspired to continue these practices.

The difficulty for many students lies in understanding how karma relates to nirvana or salvation, and how to “scale” it. Through spiritual perfection the saint has *ended all karma creation*, so at death no more “seeds” will ripen and lead to future rebirth. On the second issue, the basic

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question is often: Does karma determine everything that happens to a person? The answer is no. The Indic traditions recognized cause and effect relations in a variety of spheres of human life besides karma. Natural laws were formulated regarding medical practice, theories on how seasonal changes influence human life were followed, and effects from astrological time and deities were carefully charted and consulted. In early Buddhism, one text that makes this clear is *The Questions of King Milinda*. The King questions how the Buddha could have suffered in old age if he had been a perfected saint and thus was free of any bad karma. The enlightened monk Nagasena makes a clarifying reply:

*It is not all suffering that has its root in karma. There are eight causes by which sufferings arise . . . [1] superabundance of wind, bile, and phlegm, the union of these humours; variations in temperature; the avoiding of dissimilarities; [2] external agency; and [3] karma . . . So what arises as the fruit of karma is much less than that which arises from other causes . . . No one without a Buddha's insight (prajna) can fix the extent of the action of karma.*<sup>6</sup>

Number [1] includes medical categories of ancient India applied to individuals and how these humours interact with seasonal change and foods eaten; number [2] is the provision of random events; and [3] is karma. Note how the Buddhist sage demarcates karma's role in relative terms, and how problematic it is for a householder, or anyone less than a Buddha, to know exactly the state of one's own karma.

### CLEARING UP MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT BUDDHISM

It is especially dismaying to encounter persistent misunderstandings about this tradition despite its growing popularity in Euro-American societies. The assertion "Buddhism is atheistic" is true only in the sense that this tradition rejects the belief that there was a singular God who created the universe and now superintends it. In the larger sense, Buddhists are polytheists. The earliest texts teach the reality of many classes of gods who are part of the world of rebirth (*samsara*) and themselves subject to rebirth; some occupy heavenly worlds and travel to earth, influencing human events. There are also many kinds of lesser supernatural beings: angry gods (*asuras*), demons tending hells, and hungry ghosts. That Buddhists believe in these gods and demigods can be seen clearly by examining a Tibetan painting of a "Wheel of Life" showing the six realms of rebirth.

Even less coherent is the assertion that "Buddhism is just a philosophy, not a religion." The early canons encourage disciples to have faith (*shraddha*) in the Buddha, his community of monks, and his teachings. Another hallmark of religion is clear to anyone who has visited a Buddhist community in Asia and witnessed many daily rituals. Devotees circumambulate reliquary monuments called *stupas*, honor Buddha images in temples with flowers and incense, donate meals and robes to monastics. Faith, rituals, and sanctuaries are hallmarks of a religion. This characterization of Buddhism as "only a philosophy" began when the first Westerners attracted to it were eager to portray their newfound spiritual tradition's affinity as free of monotheism, compatible with science, and not corrupted by "superstition." This characterization remains an armchair intellectual's fantasy. To understand the 2,500-year history of this Asian religion, students don't need this unfounded misconception.

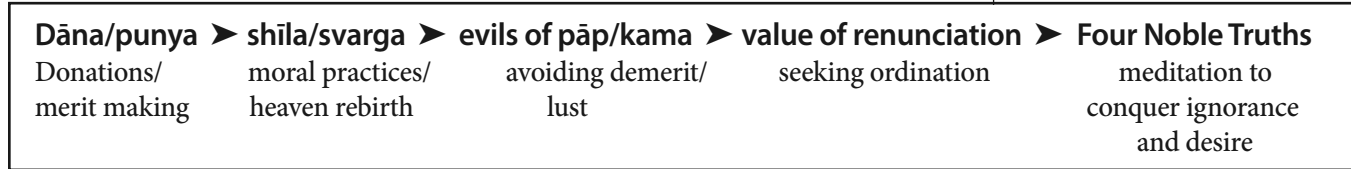


*The Wheel of Life.*

Image source: [http://shakyahandicraft.com/images/article\\_images/wheeloflife\\_1261891107.jpg](http://shakyahandicraft.com/images/article_images/wheeloflife_1261891107.jpg).

Another elitist misconception is that “the only *true Buddhists* are those seeking nirvana.” In most known Buddhist societies, only five percent of the population became fully-ordained monastics. Early records make it clear that not even all of these monks and nuns were rigorously meditating in search of nirvana. Many were teachers, ritualists, or preachers, while some concentrated on building and maintaining the monasteries and shrines. Few householders were engaged in this quest for nirvana either. Are all these devout non-virtuosi followers, yesterday and today, not really “true Buddhists?”

No. Early texts do discuss how to define religious pluralism in Buddhist communities. Monastics, laity, and even followers of other religions were all seen as converging “on the path” heading to eventual nirvana-realization. The specific progress of a Buddhist is charted as following diagram.<sup>7</sup>



Buddhist society is imagined as a hierarchy of different beings, but not as the imposition of a “spiritual democracy.” Individuals have different karma and so varying abilities, goals, and paths. The “gradual path” vision also entails functional communities in which Buddhists are mutually dependent on each other for donations and merit, linked through ritual and patronage, connecting advanced practitioners with others moving up along the “gradual path.” This vision has shaped and sustained Buddhist communities. A “true Buddhist” is anyone who takes refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha and who begins on this path.

“A Good Buddhist is a Poor Buddhist.” This common misconception results from an inaccurate generalization about householders from monks or nuns who must personally own little. For Buddhist laity, wealth is valued as a sign of good karma in past lives, and it is desired because it provides the means to make more merit as a patron of the Buddhist community. Consider the following two passages from the *Pāli Canon* in which the Buddha instructs a householder to seek “The Four Ideals”:

*Housefather, there are these four conditions which are desirable, dear, delightful, hard to win in the world. Which four . . . [1] Wealth being gotten by lawful means . . . [2] Good reputation gotten by me along with my kinsmen and teacher [3] Long life and attain a great age—[4] When the body breaks up, on the other side of death may I attain happy birth in a heaven!*<sup>8</sup>

The text proceeds to specify how moral and wealthy Buddhist householders should then work hard to do “The Four Good Deeds:”

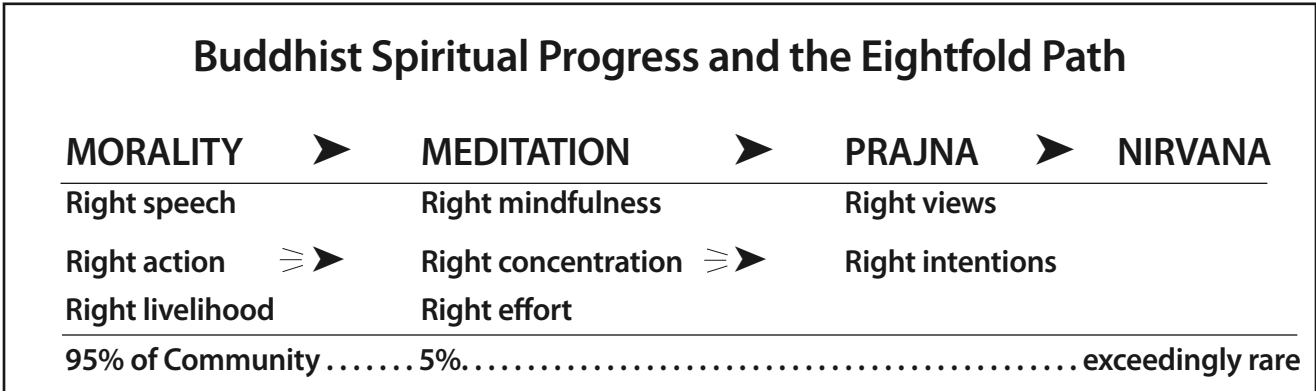
1. *[He] makes himself happy . . . he makes happy his mother and father, children and wife, servants and workmen, friends and comrades . . .*
2. *He takes steps for his defense and makes himself secure against all misfortunes . . .*
3. *Then he makes ritual offerings (bali) to relatives, guests, departed hungry ghosts, the king, and the gods (devata) . . .*
4. *Then he offers gifts to all worthy monastics and Brahmins . . . resulting in happiness and leading to heaven.*<sup>9</sup>

This canonical text is as important for understanding of Buddhist history as the “Four Noble Truths.” A careful reading shows that Buddhism fosters family ties, encourages “energetic striving” for economic success, promotes worship of hungry ghosts and local gods, justifies rightful seeking after worldly happiness and security, applauds religious virtues of faith and heaven-seeking, and underlines the virtue of being a donor and patron.<sup>10</sup> This defines life in the middle of the Buddhist Bell Curve that is still alive today in Asia.

For Buddhist laity, wealth is valued as a sign of good karma in past lives, and it is desired because it provides the means to make more merit as a patron of the Buddhist community.

THE BELL CURVE IN BUDDHISM

The historical imagination of Buddhism that follows from reading only the texts written by or for the monastics and philosophers will inevitably be skewed toward this elite. Taking only this small portion of the bell curve as representing the whole tradition is an enduring problem in the West. As we have seen, the tradition itself acknowledges inherent diversity within a Buddhist society. A treatise by the Buddhist scholar Buddhaghosha, a seventh century CE Sri Lankan monk, usefully divided into three stages the ideals set forth in the Eightfold Path. As depicted in the following chart, Buddhist life begins with the development of moral character. Along with ritual participation, moral living defines being a Buddhist for most adherents. A few individuals move on to the next stage, meditation. To the extent that meditation is successful, prajna develops.<sup>11</sup> When prajna is complete and perfected one experiences nirvana.



How can one see as the “same thing” the Abrahamic faiths’ belief in life as a “one time around” reality, alongside the Sage traditions doctrine of reincarnation? How much more different can two worldviews be?

It is easy for educators covering Buddhism to scale these central ideals and point out important conclusions: ninety-five percent of Buddhists are living solely in the morality domain. Until recently, only a few monks and nuns were regular practitioners of meditation. Among them, few reached high spiritual states (the cultivation of prajna), and attainment of enlightenment/nirvana was rare.

The finer points of Buddhist philosophy have always challenged the best human minds, in Asia and elsewhere. But if the other great stream of Buddhist tradition is in focus, it is also true that *understanding the great majority of Buddhists is not difficult at all*. Householders from the origin of the faith have focused primarily on moral living (avoiding bad karma), making good karma (ritual offerings, supporting the monastics), and occasionally engaging in spiritual practices.

ARE ALL RELIGIONS “SAYING THE SAME THING?”

This is a popular pronouncement commonly expressed in contemporary Euro-American societies and is an attractive viewpoint friendly to the much-needed promotion of inter-religious tolerance. But is it plausible? How can one see as the “same thing” the Abrahamic faiths’ belief in life as a “one time around” reality, alongside the Sage traditions doctrine of reincarnation? How much more different can two worldviews be? Can the theological conceptions of Yahweh and Allah, the Christian Trinitarian God, and those regarding Shiva, Krishna, and Rama be “the same thing?” The historian of religion asserts there are strong reasons why these traditions have remained separate over many centuries: they are irreducible to one, and these differences do matter.

Finally, again juxtapose Prophetic with Sage traditions. It is a common understanding across variants of the latter religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism) that the underlying reality of human nature is found when you “look within” and reach the inner life of mind and consciousness, that at the very core of our being there is bliss, pure spirit, harmony, truth, or the Buddha nature. Now consider Protestant Christianity. Most branches assert that humans are incapable of saving themselves due to the deformity of “original sin” and must depend upon the grace of God and faith in Jesus as the messiah, for reaching salvation. Can any two religious views of what makes us human beings be more diametrically opposed?

While it may feel good to claim, “all religions are saying the same thing,” my suggestion when teaching about Asia is to be alert for commonalities but equally attuned to differences. This means studying each world religion carefully on its own terms and assisting students to consider the differences, as well as the commonalities, of various belief systems. ■

Background image: The Dharma Wheel, symbol of the Eightfold Path.  
Image source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dharma\\_Wheel.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dharma_Wheel.svg).



... consider the Abrahamic faiths, and the doctrinal assumption of most sects that within us, deep down, lies the congenital deformity of “original sin.”



Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise by Masaccio. Fresco, early Renaissance dated 1424–25. Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence. Image source: <http://www.artbible.info/art/large/292.html>.

NOTES

1. “Yahweh,” “Allah,” and “God” are used as synonyms in this article. It should be noted, however, that there are important differences between the theologies of God that separate Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Students should understand them, as they are central.
2. The word “Hindu” does, in fact, derive from geography—the Indus River.
3. What is urgently needed is an international initiative to collect, document, and translate these curriculum materials found across Asia into English.
4. As historian Rhoads Murphy has noted, to accept the “East” and “West” colonial boundary along this line would mean that *all* the great world religions were “Eastern religions” that began in Asia. It also suggests, falsely, that Islam is an “Eastern Religion” instead of in the Abrahamic lineage.
5. Kipling’s entire passage, however, suggests that cultural differences are not unbridgeable:  
*But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,  
When two strong men stand face to face, tho’ they come from the ends of the earth!*
6. *Milindapañha* (with my insertion of italicized numbers)
7. This diagram illustrates the tradition’s own early and textually-located notion of pluralism among devotees is conveyed in development of *anupūrikathā*, “the gradual path.”
8. *Anguttara Nikāya IV, Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., in Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1999), 97.
9. *Ibid*, 98.
10. Note that these passages twice cite rebirth in heaven. Many Buddhists could—and still do—rightfully seek rebirth in heaven on the long road to nirvana.
11. This term, translated as “wisdom” or “insight,” is one of the most important doctrinal terms in Buddhism that is least encountered in English sources. Prajna is essential to enlightenment realization, it indicates the capacity to “see clearly” into reality as it is, tainted by suffering, impermanent, with humans lacking a permanent soul.

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