

# What Is Religion? & A Brief History of Buddhism

Jonathan S. Watts

Keio University, Tokyo, Japan

# What is Religion? Belief or Practice?

Which is more important: what you believe OR how you live?

- ❖ **Ortho-doctic 正教** - based on doctrine & belief; may be intellectual or faith oriented; proper understanding; Christianity (esp. Protestant)
- ❖ **Ortho-practic 正行** - based on practice and ritual; proper performance of religious acts; Islam, orthodox Judaism, Brahmanism, Japanese religion

The Buddha taught “right livelihood” (virtue 戒) based on “right understanding” (wisdom 慧) and “right awareness” (mindfulness 定)

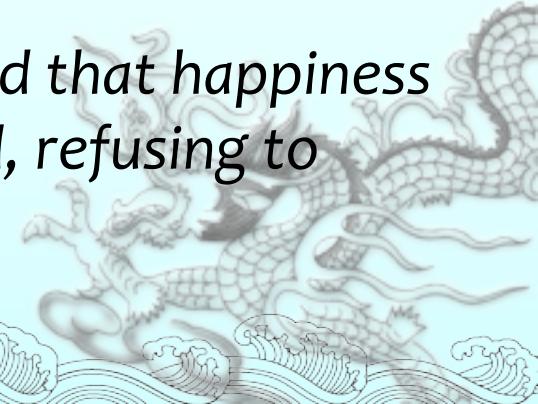
# What is Religion? This World or the Afterlife?

*What should we be more concerned about: what happens after death OR how we find happiness and lead a good life today?*

**Transcendentalism** views the world as impure and sees the solution in “transcending” the world, usually through achieving heaven after death. Tendency towards social passivity and escapism. Indian religion

**Immanentism** sees the world as either inherently good or as the only world, so that spiritual solutions are sought for in practical action and daily life. East Asian religion

*The Buddha taught the “Middle Way” emphasized that happiness is leading a good life now, which will lead onward, refusing to discuss the afterlife.*



# What is Religion? Impurity or Sin?

*What should be done when people do bad things: make a ritual, make them confess, punish them, condemn them to hell, forgive them?*

**Impurity 汚れ** is a breaking community standards and taboos, which may or may not be universally moral or ethical. Purification and ritual are required to re-establish purity. Ritual purity determines next life.

❖ **Sin 罪** is a breaking of universal, transcendent truths and their moral and ethical norms 道德. Confession 懺悔 and punishment or repentant acts 後悔 are then required. Change in individual attitude and conscience. Sin/Virtue determines fate in next life.

# What is Religion? Impurity or Sin?

- ❖ “Universal” religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam) focus on sin and the maintenance of egalitarian ethics. “Tribal” religions (Brahmanism, Shinto) focus on purity and ritual acts to restore social order, which may be egalitarian or not.

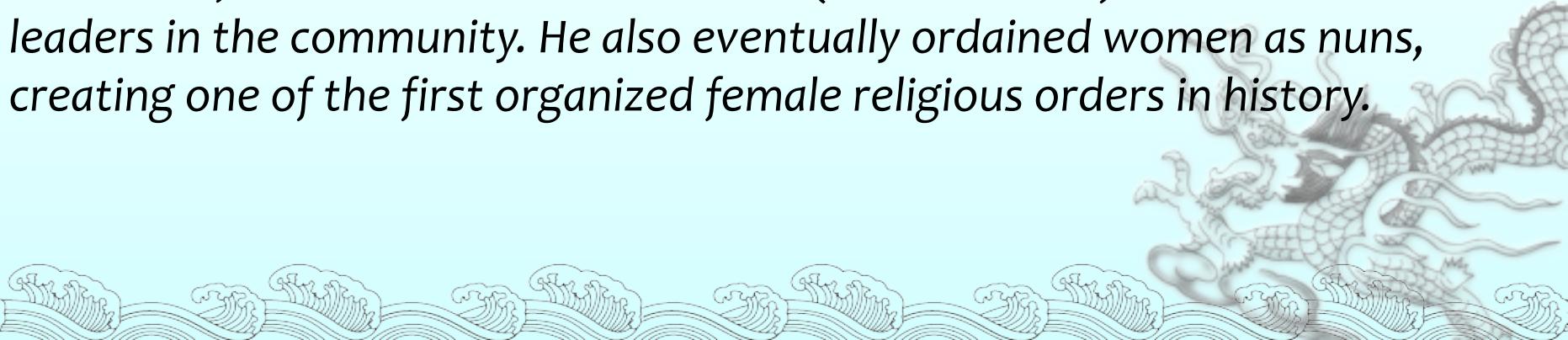
*The Buddha's Middle Way goes beyond both. He rejected the purity focused rituals of Brahmanism (early Hinduism). His teaching of karma as “intentional action” is similar to the sense of sin but rejects an external judgment by a creator God.*

# What is Religion? Universal Civilization or Tribal Nationalism?

*Is religion a failure or a problem as a means for legitimizing racism, sexism, and nationalism OR a way of bringing together people of many different backgrounds to be able to live with common morals and ethics?*

❖ The great “axial” 軸性 religions “universalized” the religious insights of their forerunners to create “salvation/liberation” available to any person. Going beyond “salvation/liberation” 救 (or the control of salvation) for a privileged class, gender, or tribe/nation.

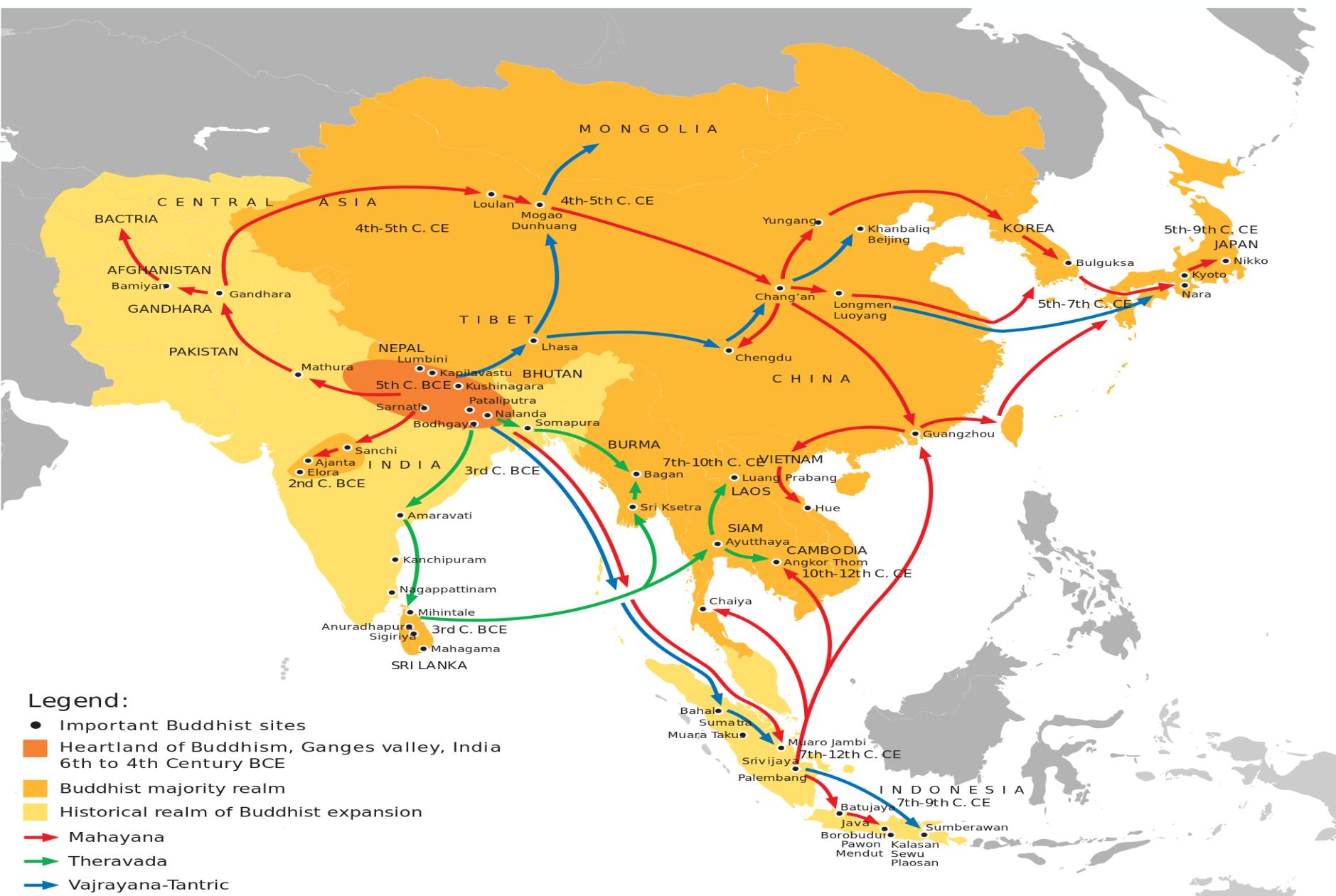
*The Buddha taught in his first of five ethical precepts 五戒 “non-harming” towards ALL sentient life 衆生, not just human life. He ordained as monks member of the low class and out-castes (untouchables) who became leaders in the community. He also eventually ordained women as nuns, creating one of the first organized female religious orders in history.*



# Beginnings and Significance of the Historical Buddha

- ◆ Siddhartha Gautama, a prince of the Shakya tribal republic, attained enlightenment and became known as the Buddha (the “awakened one”) around 528 B.C. in Northeast India on the Nepali border.
- ◆ He then wandered all over northeast India teaching “the Middle Way” (between asceticism and hedonism) for 40 years before his death
- ◆ He is credited with developing the first highly organized monastic community in India which included women and members of all castes, including “untouchables”.

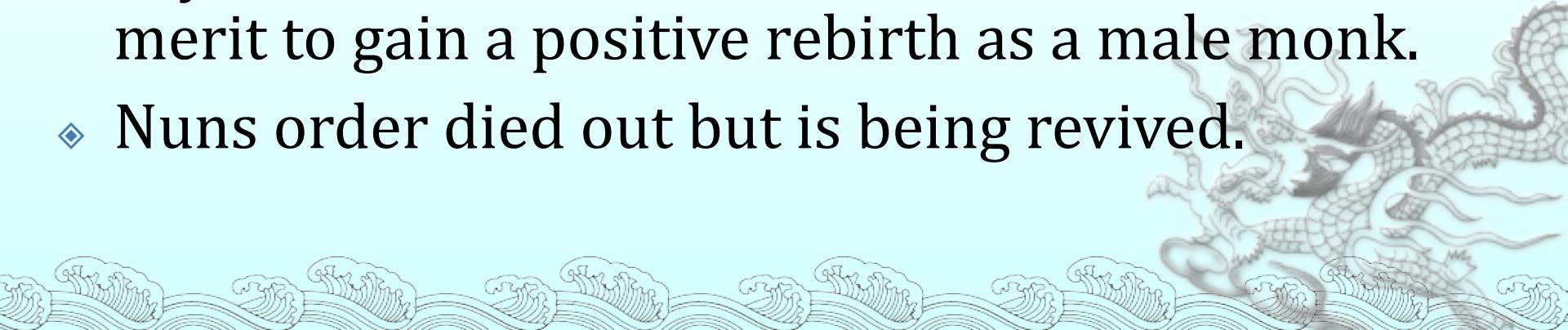
# The Spread of Buddhism



# 3 Basic Styles & Schools of Buddhism

Theravada 上座部仏教 (Teaching of the Elders):

- ❖ Sri Lanka and South East Asia
- ❖ orthodox
- ❖ maintains monastic style of early Buddhism
- ❖ transcendental in that nirvana is seen as a state beyond this world achieved over many lifetimes.
- ❖ Lay followers offer donations to monks to make merit to gain a positive rebirth as a male monk.
- ❖ Nuns order died out but is being revived.



# 3 Basic Styles & Schools of Buddhism

## Mahayana 大乘佛教 (Great Vehicle):

- ❖ East Asia
- ❖ reform
- ❖ central ideal of the bodhisattva who voluntarily stays in samsaric rebirth to work for the enlightenment of all beings
- ❖ immanent in that nirvana is found in the world of suffering (*samsara*)
- ❖ East Asian influence means many venerate family ancestors at Buddhist temples.
- ❖ Strong tradition of celibate nuns, esp. Taiwan



# 3 Basic Styles & Schools of Buddhism

Vajrayana 金剛乘佛教 (Diamond Vehicle):

- ❖ Tibet and Japan
- ❖ *tantra* 密教 or *mantra* 真言: guru leads students through a complex series of initiations and visualizations to gain enlightenment in this life.
- ❖ basically a branch of Mahayana (enlightenment is found in and through the body)
- ❖ some adopt unorthodox practices (regarding sex, alcohol, etc.)
- ❖ believes strongly in reincarnated teachers

# Core Buddhist Teachings

- ❖ Dependent Co-Arising 總起: There is no Creator God or original source to the universe. Simply a continual flow of causes and conditions.
- ❖ Not-self 無我: Thus, there is no soul or eternal self-existence. Human consciousness goes through an endless cycle of change and transformation.
- ❖ *samsara* 輪迴 and *dukkha* 苦: This endless cycle of change (*samsara*) is a source of endless dissatisfaction or suffering (*dukkha*).
- ❖ The Four Noble Truths 四聖諦: The Buddha thus taught to
  - 1) confront the reality of one's dissatisfaction
  - 2) discover and reflect on its causes (in greed, anger, and delusion)
  - 3) understand that nirvana (the ending of suffering) is attained through the cessation of these causes
  - 4) realize nirvana through the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path 八正道 of virtue 戒, mindfulness 定, and wisdom 慧



# Core Buddhist Teachings: the Noble Eightfold Path 八正道

❖ wisdom 慧 *prajna*

1. Right understanding

2. Right intention

❖ virtue 戒 *sila*

3. Right speech

4. Right action

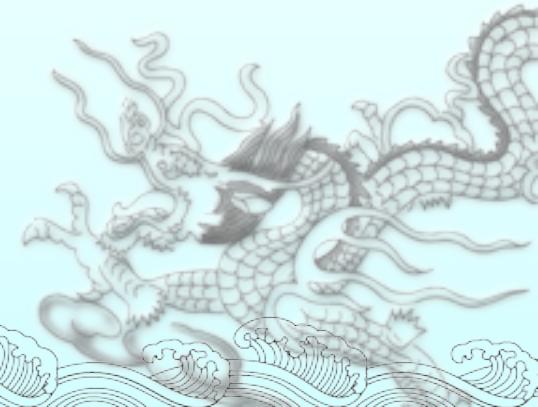
5. Right livelihood

❖ mindfulness 定 *samadhi*

6. Right effort

7. Right mindfulness

8. Right meditation



# Core Buddhist Teachings: Karma

Karma = “action” but what kind of action?

- ❖ Brahmanism/early Hinduism: **karma = ritual action**, meant to secure a favorable birth in heaven **by filling up heaven with merit (puñña)** for the person on whose behalf the ritual is done. By proper rituals the harmony between human behavior and natural law is maintained or re-established.  
**Impurity is cleansed by ritual.** Karma is not a moral or ethical law, but a social law that perpetuated the caste system (class and gender). Heaven was gained by **paying priests to perform rituals that ensured a good afterlife.**
- ❖ Ascetic Hinduism/Jainism: **karma = ascetic action**, meant to **cleanse the body and mind of impurities** accumulated in living in this world of suffering. “Bad karma” can be accumulated from intentional immoral actions or **unintentional ones.** Liberation (*moksha*) rather than heaven is gained by **ending re-incarnation and rebirth.** Impurity is cleansed by asceticism and **rejecting the physical.** Karmic action is **moral but not ethical**, focused on **individual escape** from the world of suffering. Women not allowed to practice ascetic Hinduism.

# Core Buddhist Teachings: Karma

- ❖ Buddhism: karma = intentional action, in mind, word, and deed. Actions follow the intentions and habits of the mind.
- ❖ “Bad karma” is accumulated from basic ignorance and the greedy/angry/deluded actions that come from it.
- ❖ Impurity is cleansed by the Noble Eightfold Path that combines mental and physical training.
- ❖ Liberation is “to extinguish” (to nirvana) this ignorance, hopefully in this lifetime.
- ❖ Karmic action is ethical, focused on helping oneself and others towards this goal. Women and all classes of people may become full practitioners.

