The Foundations of Buddhism Study Guide

The Foundations of Buddhism by Rupert Gethin

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The Foundations of Buddhism is intended as an introduction of Buddhism to the lay reader. The author emphasizes throughout the book that Buddhism is not confined to one strand or tradition, but instead is a wide-ranging and extraordinarily complex set of religious practices and philosophical beliefs with a 2,500 year history. The book focuses on common threads between the major Buddhist traditions and attempts to bring out shared beliefs, practices and philosophies.

Buddhism divides into three major traditions, the Theravada tradition of Sri Lanka and South-East Asia or "Southern" Buddhism, the Mahayana tradition of East Asian in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam or "Eastern Buddhism", and Tibetan or "Northern Buddhism." All three traditions originated in ancient Buddhism in India in an area where it has practically disappeared.

The author not only focuses on Buddhist beliefs but on scholarship on the study of Buddhism. Rather than emphasize the differences between Buddhist traditions, he tries to bring out similarities in each chapter, despite realizing that the way a Buddhist laywoman in Bankok and a nun in Lhasa conceive of Buddhism may differ substantially. In this way, the author hopes to go beyond a simple textbook view of Buddhism along with its historical developments. This book is also unique in its detailed explanation of Buddhist cosmology, the doctrines of no self and dependent arising, the idea of the path of meditation and the elaborate and philosophical Abhidharma framework.

After a brief introduction, the Foundations of Buddhism divides into ten chapters. Chapter 1, The Buddha, introduces the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, and the little that historians known about him. While some Buddhists are focused on his literal life, most see his life as a legendary tale meant to have religious and philosophical significance. The author also explains the nature of a "Buddha" figure. Chapter 2, The Word of the Buddha, elaborates the concept of Dharma and Buddhist Scriptures in terms of Sutras and Abhidharma. Chapter 3, Four Truths, explains the central doctrines of Buddhism that suffering is the disease that can be eliminated by the cessation of desire.

Chapter 4, The Buddhist Community, explains the structure of Buddhist monkish orders and their origins, the Sangha and lay community. Chapter 5, The Buddhist Cosmos, explains the Buddhist hierarchy of being and realms along with the key connection between psychology and cosmology in Buddhist thought. Chapter 6, No Self, explains the Buddhist concept of the self and its critique of traditional concepts of the self. Chapter 7, The Buddhist Path, explains the role of faith and conduct in Buddhism and the diverse practices of meditation.

Chapter 8, The Abhidharma, explains the complex "higher" teaching of Buddhist and analyzes it as a system of Buddhist thought. Chapter 9, The Mahayana, explains the key concept of the "great vehicle" path to Buddhahood and the traditions of Mahayana practice. Finally, Chapter 10, Evolving Traditions, outlines the developments within the

three traditional schools of Buddhism geographically and theologically along with Buddhism's spread into the West.

Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

"Buddhism" picks out a large number of sub-religions and a long religious and philosophical tradition that is two and a half millennia old. It has included at various points the largest parts of Asia, Afghanistan, parts of Persia to Japan, to Sumatra and Java and Mongolia and Russia. Half of the world's population lives in places where Buddhism was, at least at some point, the dominant religious influence.

Today Buddhism can be divided into three traditions. First, there is the Theravada tradition of Sri Lanka and South-East Asia, or "Southern" Buddhism. It is conservative and it closest in doctrine and practice to the ancient Buddhism in BCE India. It is followed by over 100 million in Sri Lank, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos.

Second, there is Mahayana Buddhism or "Eastern Buddhism," the tradition found in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. It originated in a movement of ancient Indian Buddhist thought from around two millennia ago. It did not embrace all of Buddhism. It is very diverse, coexisting with Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto and communism. Depending on how one counts, between 500 million and 1 billion people follow Mahayana Buddhism.

Third, there is Tibetan Buddhism, sometimes called "Northern" Buddhism. It is closer to Mahayana but it actually a form of Tantric Buddhism. It has 10 to 20 million followers and is found primarily in Tibet and Mongolia and parts of Nepal and Himalayan India.

All three traditions maintain connections to ancient Buddhism. This volume is intended to introduce the reader with no knowledge of Buddhism to this tradition without totally separating the three traditions; instead, it looks for what is common between these traditions. The author focuses on common heritage to avoid the faults of separate treatments of the traditions and helps to challenge the "textbook" view of the development of Buddhism and fits better with modern scholarship. Buddhism is typically seen as a history of an elitist Theravada Buddhism being challenged by a more populist and egalitarian Mahayana Buddhism, but this is not so.

The author also wishes to explain scholarly and critical issues in the study of Buddhism over the past century and a half. Thus, the book is scholastically distinct in its exposition of Buddhist cosmology, no self and dependent arising, the path of meditation and the theoretical Abhidharma framework.

Chapter 1, The Buddha, The Story of the Awakened One

Chapter 1, The Buddha, The Story of the Awakened One Summary and Analysis

Much of what scholars know about ancient Buddhism comes from excavating ruined Buddhist stupas, or monumental burial mounds, enshrine relics of the Buddha and Buddhist "saints", or arhats. Buddhism was originally an Indian religion, starting in the fifty century BCE, and was deeply influential in India for another fifteen centuries. Buddhism then spread through old Asian trade routes. By the twelfth century, Buddhist institutions had almost disappeared from India and Buddhism flourishes in the countries beyond Buddhism today. Many of these traditions still look back to the historical figure of the Buddha, someone who belongs to a people calls the Sakyas. He was the Sakya-muni or "the sage of the Sakyas", or "the Lord Buddha".

Buddhism has spent much time focusing on who and what the Buddha is. Today it is seen as a title for "one who has woken up." These individuals are very rare and extraordinary. Most humans are asleep and do not see the world "as it is", which produces suffering. But a Buddha knows reality directly and is released from suffering. A Buddha also teaches due to his sympathy and compassion for suffering beings in order to help them avoid suffering.

We know little about the historical Buddha. The earliest sources date from the fourth and third centuries BCE. But the earliest Buddhist sources in the Jain and brahmanical traditions do not mention him at all. Instead, the Buddha is original presented as a sramana ,or "one who strives," a term common to Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. Understanding the historical Buddha requires understanding the sramana tradition.

This "renouncer" tradition represents a movement of individuals who leave their place in society to focus on the spiritual life, becoming dependent on others for alms. Almost all the early renouncers were male, though some were female. Three activities preoccupied these individuals: going naked in all weather, enduring all physical discomfort, and the cultivation of meditative and contemplative skill to generate altered states of consciousness to bring the individual deep knowledge of the world. Finally, philosophies developed to justify these practices and explain the knowledge they represented. Some groups favored some practices over others. These differing practices are found in the Buddhist texts. Some list six types of renouncer, others ten.

One significant religious tradition that explains the Buddha's historical context is the brahmanical tradition. In the second millennium BCE, a nomadic people moved into the Indus valley and spoke Sanskrit; they were known as the Aryas. They had cultural influence throughout the north Indian plains and when the Buddha was born in the early fifth century BCE they had been influential in India for over a thousand years. The Aryan

vision of society was based on a hereditary group known as the brahminas whose original literature is the Vedas, dating back to 1500 BCE. Vedic literature came in several classes in the Buddha's day. The final class of literature, the Upanishads, was still forming.

The brahmanical tradition understands society as a hierarchy of ritual purity and a complex system of ritual and sacrifice. There are Aryas and non-Aryas, of which the first contains three hereditary classes in descending order of purity: brahmanas, who maintain and teach the Vedas, ksatriyas or earthly rules and vaisyas, who generate wealth by farming and trading. There are all "twice born" and go through initiation to study the Vedas.

Non-Aryas are the class of servants who are to serve the other classes; these are not the castes of later Indian society, but it is the ideology upon which the caste system is based. The hereditary ritual status marked out those classes that were excluded and included. The value system of the wandering ascetic often contradicted this view of society, however. Buddha's teachings were formulated in response to some brahmanical teachings.

Buddha's dates of birth and death are unknown. Some claim he lived eight years and date him between 566 and 486 BCE, though these dates are challenged. The Buddha known as Siddhartha Gautama was the son of a rajan, or local chieftain, on the Indian-Nepalese border, and so had a privileged upbringing. At some point he came to dislike his comfortable life and was upset by a sense of suffering that awaited him and others, seeing pleasures as empty. He then became a wandering ascetic on a religious and spiritual quest, following many teachers and practices, though without satisfaction.

While meditating under an asvattha tree on the Nairanjana River in the Indian state of Bihar, he had a profound religious experience of bodhi, or "awakening", coming to understand the nature of suffering, its cause the path to ending it and its cessation within the experience. He then devoted his life to teaching this to others. His following quickly grew, and when he died at age eighty, he had established a well-organized community that was supported by the larger community and was mendicant. His cremated remains were made into relics and placed in stupas. However, beyond this, little is known about the Buddha. The Buddhist tradition often emphasizes that the story of the Buddha is not history or meant to be and should be read symbolically.

The legend of the Buddha focuses on the events of his awakening and first teaching. The Buddhist and general Indian world-view maintains that sentient beings can all be reborn and have no real beginning or end. The Buddhas often have countless previous lifetimes. Eons ago, an ascetic named Sumeda encountered a former Buddha who inspired him to become a Buddha and then generated a path to cultivation of ten "perfections": generosity, morality, desirelessness, vigor, wisdom, patience, truthfulness, resolve, loving kindness and equanimity.

Buddhists think that the appearance of buddhas is very rare. Often the Buddha, when separated from the flesh, is called a bodhisattva. There are legends of the original

Bodhisattva who was born knowing that he would achieve Enlightenment and that this would be his final rebirth. It is legend that the Bodhisattva was born to the Skaya people and was named Gautama. However, as he grew up, he lost his memory of his life separated from the body. Gautama's birth was his "fourth" act, and there are twelve acts that characterize his life. Thus Gautama's life is represented as having twelve successive stages.

Eventually Gautama gains awakening and comes to possess "the four noble truths" about the nature of suffering. They are gained in a causal chain known as "dependent arising." A later tradition describes the awakening in terms of the Bodhisattva's encounter with Mara, the power of all experience to seduce and ensnare the unwary mind. Mara's daughters supposedly tempted him with sensual pleasures. Legend maintains that the Buddha made an "earth-touching gesture" which is represented in Buddha status to this day.

When Mara was defeated, Gautama achieved his goal. He then spent seven weeks seated under the Bodhi-tree experiencing emancipation. He was initially not inclined to teach but he eventually changed his mind. The Buddha is thought to have taught for forty-five years. Eventually Buddha's body dies and he instructs his followers to place his ashes in stupas.

One cannot say that the Buddha exists or does not exist after death. Buddha at this stage is not a human or a God, for in Indian and Buddhist thoughts, souls can change from animals to humans, humans to gods, and so on. The Buddha is born a man but could have spent previous lives as a god. A Buddha then is sui generis, just a Buddha. All beings have the ability to become buddhas. Buddhas are motivated only by generosity, loving kindness and wisdom and have no pride, attachment or hostility.

Buddhas are thought to have three bodies, the physical body that is seen, an extraordinary body developed in meditation, and the Dharma-body constituted by perfect qualities that make up the Buddha's personality. These qualities are perfect conduct, meditation, wisdom, freedom and knowledge and understanding.

Gautama is the only Buddha to achieve awakening without aid. All others must be helped. Thus, there are two kinds of Buddha, the first Buddha and disciples. Yet some may become Buddhas through teaching and not teach others. This creates a tension in Buddhist thought, for buddhas are the same, yet the first Buddha is special. Buddha is also no savior or god, but is a teacher that can save others from suffering. Yet having the presence of a Buddha is our best hope of salvation.

The first Buddha started the wheel of Dharma and established the Sangha, a community of disciples. The three jewels of Buddhism are the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Going to these three jewels for refuge defines a person as a Buddha.

Chapter 2, The Word of the Buddha, Buddhist Scriptures and Schools

Chapter 2, The Word of the Buddha, Buddhist Scriptures and Schools Summary and Analysis

The Buddha wrote nothing, nor did his disciples write down his teachings. As a result, Buddhism cannot be reduced to a philosophical system of thought; Dharma is its central organizing concept. It is reality and the way we should act, so it has a descriptive and a prescriptive aspect. The Buddha saw Dharma as profound, hard to see and sublime and unable to be be acquired through reading or direct information. This is partly why knowledge of Dharma was not written down. Instead, the Buddhist tradition points to the succession of teachers and pupils to communicate dogma. Thus, the Sangha mediated its transmission. Though, Dharma is also a textual tradition created by writing down later disciples' teaching.

A generally accepted ancient tradition is that there is an authoritative "word of the Buddha", and it is thought to have been written down soon after Buddha's death. Three principal "canons" of Buddhist scriptures survive, corresponding to the three main traditions of living Buddhism. Many were translated, and their meanings may have changed. Theravada Buddhism traces its canon back to Mahinda, a third century Sri Lankan monk, son of the emperor Asoka. Today two versions of this Nikaya/Agama information exist in Chinese. There are four books, which arrange Buddha's discourses. The Pali texts are the original and are the ones the author considers authoritative. There is also a "minor" collection of Buddha's teachings recognized as having authority. The Pali canon, the Chinese Tripitaka and the Tibetan Kanjur all cover ancient monastic discipline.

The Nikayas/Agamas are groups of sutras or discourses. They always begin with "Thus have I heard. At one time the Lord was staying at ..." The idea of a well-defined permanent canon is problematic in Buddhism, as illustrative by "the four great authorities" one might appeal to in order to find authentic Dhamra. Thus, authoritativeness is complex in Buddhism. There is also a method known as the general principles of the Buddha, the Abhidharma. We know quite a bit about the Abhidharma literature in several schools. Finally, a standard ancient Indian "canon" of texts contains three groups, the Sutra Pitaka (discourses), the Vinaya Pitaka (monastic discipline) and Abhidharma Pitaka (further Dharma).

Ancient Buddhist schools and their exegetical literatures have complex histories. They originate from distinctions among monks and nuns, or the Sangha. These were not the deep splits associated with Christianity and "heresy". The Sangha employ two communal ceremonies, the ordination ceremony and the regular rehearsal of the rule of life. Holding a specific point of view on a specific matter is not a justification of expulsion from the Sangha, though there are some schismatic leanings in Sangha interpretations

of Buddhist doctrines. This led to varied traditions and splits within the Sangha, into Sthaviras and Mahasamghikas. Further schools developed as well. They converged on certain doctrines and diversified on others. Often ancient Buddhist texts record the list of schools, which are sometimes thought to be eighteen in number. The production of the principles and method of Abhidharma probably came first from Buddha's original disciples. But the exegetical reflections of early schools are lost, though some created in the future are still around.

Centuries after Buddha's death, the ancient schools changed, though they still split the Sutra, Vinaya and Pitakas, though generating distinct interpretations of Abhidarma. New texts thus started to appear, and the origin of some are debated, which the author discusses.

Chapter 3, Four Truths, The Disease, the Cause, the Cure, the Medicine

Chapter 3, Four Truths, The Disease, the Cause, the Cure, the Medicine Summary and Analysis

Early teachings of Buddha are solutions to the fundamental problem of life, of suffering. There are four truths concerning suffering, truths concerning its nature, its cause, its cure and the medicine. These truths are not a Buddhist creed, however; they are four realities, not propositions. The starting point of the teachings of Buddha is the reality of suffering. In fact, suffering is everywhere. Everyone will suffer, or deal with duhkha, a term rich in meaning. There is self-evident suffering, such as physical pain. Some see Buddhism as a bleak, world-denying philosophy because of its concept of suffering, but Buddhists see this reaction as a refusal to face reality.

Early Buddhism must be seen in terms of the growth of renouncer groups, who all agreed that suffering tends to characterize human life and the happiness is only achieved by avoiding the world. For convincing people of this, historians often see Buddha as a charismatic personality and genius. But the Buddhist tradition after Buddha developed the concept of duhkha in detail. The tradition often sees Buddha as a doctor and the four truths as a diagnosis. Thus, Buddha's teachings are medicine for suffering. For Buddhism, then, religion is not primarily a belief system but a set of practices. Thus, some may not see Buddhism as a religion, but as a system of conduct and theory of the nature of human life. In fact, in one incident, the Buddha refused to give concrete answers to propositional questions about the nature of life. He seems to have considered the answers irrelevant to Buddhist practice.

Buddhism has no problem of evil. Instead, suffering is just a fact of existence. Some see this as bleak but instead Buddhism has a message of hope. Suffering is created by beings because they maintain a "thirst" to repeat existence, and this produces delight and greed. They want sense desire to be fulfilled and seek both existence and non-existence. This thirst cannot be quenched, and this leads to suffering. Desires seem like a stream at first but accumulate into a river. Craving and attachment become ends in themselves. Buddhist monks may be seen as having desires to follow Buddhist precepts, but instead they seek to remove the motivations to do otherwise. Thus, Buddhists have a list of "fetters" that do not result from craving. There are three fundamental forms of being defiled in Buddhism: greed, aversion and delusion, and they can combine and interact.

The end of suffering is called nirvana. Nirvana is difficult to conceptualize because it is three things - an event, the content of an experience, and a state or condition of persons. It literally means "blowing out", and to Buddhism it means "the absence of craving." After having entered nirvana, greed, hate and deception are not in the mind. While a person must die, if she experienced nirvana, she will not be reborn. Instead,

she will cease to be a being and dissolve into separate physical and mental qualities. This creates a death experience known as khandha-parinibbana. Thus nirvana is a condition of buddhas after death and an "unconditioned realm" that one knows when Enlightenment comes. Seeing nirvana as a goal is seen metaphorically.

The way to end suffering specifies Buddhist practice. They counteract the three defilements, greed, hatred and delusion. Instead, there is non-attachment, loving kindness, and wisdom. There is also a noble eightfold path of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. The items of the path are not stages but instead come to be knit together and depend on one another. Buddhism sees the ending of suffering as a path of rehabituation, and this produces a progressing series of practices, from generosity through good conduct and finally meditation. To see the four truths, minds must be clear and still. So one must have these three things to get the right clarity and stillness.

Chapter 4, The Buddhist Community, Monks, Nuns, and Lay Followers

Chapter 4, The Buddhist Community, Monks, Nuns, and Lay Followers Summary and Analysis

Buddhism grew out of the ancient Indian renouncer tradition, which was based in renunciation of household life and dependence on the generosity of others for material needs. Thus, Buddhism requires a community of support. Buddhist monks must ask the community for support. Thus, ordination includes regulations about corporate acts of the Sangha.

Becoming a Buddhist monk could occur without much ceremony. But initiation includes a novice stage and becoming a bhiksu proper. The Theravadin Vinaya requires being seven or eight to be a novice and the recitation of the rules of training. One can be fully ordained at twenty. When he is ordained, he is told he can rely on four basic resources and a small number of personal possessions.

Theravada ordination remains relevant to all Buddhist traditions, though robe colors vary, as do other aspects. One ordination occurs, the monk is governed by the complete set of rules that compose the pratimoksa. The rules vary, 227 for the Theravada, 258 for the Tibetans and 250 for the East Asians, but the basic set is the same. Expulsion occurs through sexual intercourse, stealing, murder and lying to claim spiritual attainments. There is a second category of rules that can lead to probation. A third category prescribes various misdemeanors which require confession. Nuns have similar requirements and today exist only within East Asian Buddhism.

The Buddhist monastic rule in the Vinaya contains for concerns: unity of the Sangha, the spiritual life, dependence on the Sangha and community and appearance of the Sangha in the eyes of that community. Maintaining the community is required for Buddhist practice, and Buddhist monks must regulate community life for their benefit. Thus, the Buddhist monk has a relationship of trust with his supporters.

The ideal Buddhist monk life is based on the homeless wanderer. But the development of the Sangha produces problems for such a model because monks are given a prescribed way of life that requires being settled. Evidence shows that early Buddhism had stationary monks. The communities had residential quarters, a teaching hall, a posadha hall (for recitation) and a monastery, with a stupa, a Bodhi-tree and a shrine hall or image house. Communities varied in size, some containing more than 3,000 monks. Some monasteries became wealthy, which contradicts Buddhism to some degree. But most monasteries were removed from central society and had various ascetic regulations to prevent such accumulation.

The Sangha is an autonomous organization with no formal links to the government, though relations have developed. Kings have been patrons of the Sangha, for instance. And so states often interfere.

The core of Buddhist spiritual life, lay in punya, or "merit", that is gained from good actions to generate good karma. These actions help the developments of the eightfold path. Meritorious work binds the community. These are the practices of generosity, also in the Sangha. The Sangha has some duty to be helpful to the laity, and merit for them is based on ethical conduct. Monks must also meditate and worship. Some must teach. The success of the Sangha may have compromised the ascetic ideal but it did not eliminate it.

What about at present? Much of the historical pattern is maintained, though there are some differences. For instance, there is today some laxity about handling money, among other things. The ascetic ideal has been gradually reduced.

The Buddhist community has male and female lay disciples. They declare that they go to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha for refuge, making them Buddhists. These also somewhat pursue the path of generosity, good conduct and meditation. Some promotion of generosity involves practices that extend to monks, such as transferring merit and rejoicing in the merit of others. Pilgrimages, among other practices, have evolved as well.

Chapter 5, The Buddhist Cosmos, The Thrice-Thousandfold World

Chapter 5, The Buddhist Cosmos, The Thrice-Thousandfold World Summary and Analysis

Buddhists have a cosmology that includes their conception of the problem of life, duhkha, or suffering. Existence is unreliable and this produces duhkha. Buddhists thus often analyze the difference forms of existence which led to a cosmology. Many believe that the universe is eternal; it is also not merely inhabited by humans and animals but by gods in a hierarchy of subtlety and refinement. There are many world-systems as well, some holding that there are thousands, others a billion. Earlier accounts are less specific.

The developed cosmology of the Abhidharma accepted thirty-one levels of existence and associated classes of beings that any being can migrate into. Lower levels of being are arranged as world-systems. The place where a being is born is determined by karma, which is acquired by the intentional actions of a being in body, speech and mind. Realms also have different types of beings.

The system of realms is not arbitrary but built on Buddhist psychological insights on the nature of consciousness and what produces those states. Buddhists equate cosmology and psychology and experienced states of mind. Thus, bad action is tied to bad psychology and bad psychology motivates bad action. These psychologies and actions lead to descents into hells. The opposite goes for good actions and psychologies.

The hierarchy of the cosmos reflects the hierarchy of psychology. World systems are formed out of lower level realms and psychologies but they are not static, rather, expanding and contracting across eons. In worlds that are destroyed, beings are reborn according to karma. The more fantastic cosmologies of Buddhism merely account for all possible experiences. Note that nirvana is kind of the top, thirty-second realm, but it is not really a realm and so it is excluded.

The cosmology of Buddhism has also allowed it to take in "folk religion", and so hold to the existence of minor gods and the like. Different traditions have different accounts and so, say, Indian Buddhism contains various Indian gods, and so on. Belief that beings can answer help for assistance may be thought to be in tension with Buddhism, but this is not so. Buddhist monks are free to ask for help in achieving karma, for instance. The early Buddhist texts reflect this multiplicity of beings, though "pure" Buddhism recognizes no supernatural being.

The Buddhist cosmology is a stark contrast to the Judeo-Christian idea of a single world with a determinate creation. There are countless world-systems in eons of cycles. Buddhism acknowledges no determined end or beginning. The author cautions against

tying Buddhist cosmology to modern astronomy and physics; the languages are too different. Buddhist cosmology is essential a psychological theory.

Chapter 6, No Self, Personal Continuity and Dependent Arising

Chapter 6, No Self, Personal Continuity and Dependent Arising Summary and Analysis

The ceasing of the world is to be found in the mind, and so the Buddhist conception of one's experience of the world and consciousness is crucial to understanding Buddhism. The Buddhist critiques the notions of "self", which were originally aimed at other understandings of the self that Buddhism arose in reaction to. For instance, the early Upanishads hold that the self cannot suffer and never changes due to experience. But the Buddhist critique of self also relates to universal questions about personal identity.

The Buddhist conception of experience in the Abhidarma separates experience into five "aggregates" or skandhas for physical and mental events: bodily phenomena, feelings, labeling and recognizing, volitional activities, and conscious awareness. For Buddhists, these five types of experience have no essential unity and cannot be controlled and so there is no self. Further, because experience is changeable and the self, to exist, must have an unchangeable element, experience cannot comprise the self and so it cannot exist. Finally, Buddhists think the notion of "self" has no meaning separate from specific experiences.

For Buddhists, there is no "thing" or "I" that is experiences, only experiences are introspected. Instead, this is elusive. Consciousness is constantly changing and the individual self is nothing. The early Upanishads admitted that the self was mysterious, but the Buddhists critique goes one step further. There is no self; language and the seeming connection between experiences gives us the impression that there is.

Some will find Buddhism implausible because it denies the self. For instance, how is moral behavior possible if there is no self? The Buddhist in fact thinks that choices are made from certain perspectives that consist in relations between two or more experiential domains. It has no reality, but choice can be made from it. Thus, choice is depending on connections arising between experiences. This is called "dependent arising." Experiences naturally lead to other types in a chain of twelve links of causality. One who sees this pattern sees the Dharma itself. But there is no constant essence underlying the experience, and at death, this causal connectedness does not end. Buddhists claim that the connection between experiences is enough for moral responsibility. Thus the Buddhists conception of self is not nihilistic.

The idea of the self thus comes from delusion or ignorance and thus the conception of the self is essentially connected to craving. We construct self because of craving, and to stop craving, the conception of self must be destroyed. This idea is important for its less developed stages in early Buddhism; the author then discusses some of the evolutions of the twelve links of dependent arising. Some differences exist between the traditions.

The details are complex, but Buddhists do not apologize for this because they claim that experience is in fact very complicated. The Buddhist concept of the self acknowledges that we can choose what to experience and which connections will most regularly occupy us, however. In contrast, the Buddhist also thinks we experience "death" at every moment. To eliminate self, the connections of dependent arising must be manipulated. The process of engaging in wholesome action helps the process. Thus, the chain is often called "the wheel of becoming."

The author ends by examining whether the Buddha himself denied the existence of self. While explicit passages do not contain denials, there are elements out of which the Buddhist doctrine can be derived.

Chapter 7, The Buddhist Path, The Way of Calm and Thought

Chapter 7, The Buddhist Path, The Way of Calm and Thought Summary and Analysis

Chapter seven focuses on the practice of Buddhism; while theory is important for monks and committed laity, Buddhist practice is more expansive than theory. Again, Buddhist practice is encapsulated in the eight-fold path, but more is involved. Faith has an important role, though it is not a "cognitive" faith but is rather "affective" or a positive emotional response to Buddhist teaching. Faith is manifested by going to the three "jewels" of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha for refuge. It is not clear how early BuddhistS worship, but worship probably focused on stupas. The Buddha of early texts seems critical of brahmanical ritual and denies that faith and rituals end suffering, but he is not necessarily against the activities altogether.

Generosity and good conduct are key to Buddhist practice. The lay follower refrains from harming living creatures, stealing, sexual misconduct, deception and excessive intoxicants. They are largely self-explanatory and prevent one from engaging in the ten kinds of unwholesome action. The five precepts and ten bad actions help make sense of right speech and right action in the eight-fold path.

Buddhists famously engage in meditation, which include bhavana and yoga. The first is primarily a mental or spiritual exercise and develops deep states of concentration and wisdom. Minds contain defilements that must be removed by these practices. Seeing the nature of the mind is crucial to avoiding the five "hindrances." The mind must be stilled and pushed into different states of consciousness which involve focus on six ideas, the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, good conduct, generosity and mindfulness of death. The most extensive meditation is practiced at monasteries by a minority of Buddhist monks.

Beginning with finding a quiet place and sitting cross-legged, the meditator must stop the wandering mind because it is defiled and lacks skill. Mastery generates stages and signs of joy at removing the hindrances. Certain altered states of consciousness are associated with mastery as well. The practice of meditative absorption is called dhyana and involves balancing five mental qualities which the author discusses.

Meditators should focus on developing insight into the four truths. This is called insight meditation, looking for the impermanence and instability of the world, seeing their imperfection, and that they are not the self. Seven purifications are involved in this form of meditation, again described by the author in some detail. Various traditions have different steps and practices, but all aim at removing defilements and entering altered states of consciousness as a path to eliminating self, gaining insight, and ultimately ending suffering.

Calm and insight are deeply connected, and they manifest the two fundamental types of meditation. The first weakens attachment to experience and removes defilements while the second helps one see experiences and self as flawed. The relationship between the two types of meditation is a live issue in both Buddhist tradition and Buddhist scholarship.

Chapter 8, The Abhidharma, The Higher Teaching

Chapter 8, The Abhidharma, The Higher Teaching Summary and Analysis

The abhidharma is literally the "higher" Dharma. It refers to both a set of books thought to be the word of the Buddha, the Abhidharma Pitaka and a system of thought and exegesis laid down in these books and commentaries on them. It is thought out and taught by buddhas alone. Hearing it recited, understanding or not, can have a profound effect. The collections of seven books have two goals - articulating an exhaustive account of the world in terms of its constituents and works that concern areas of dispute that arise as a result. The canonicity of the Abhidharma has been challenged, but it has still had a deep impact. A number of Adhidharma manuals exist that the author discusses.

The author conceives of the Abhidharma as a system of Buddhist thought; it is not a mere group of discourses of the Buddha. Instead, it presents the universal aspects of Buddha's teachings defined with precision. The Abhidharma tries to systematically state Buddha's teachings, and it the theoretical counterpart to meditation experiences. In it, physical and mental events are called dharmas. Dharma is how things are, and these events are the building blocks of how things are. Dharmas are all that exist, like atoms. Some types of dharmas are continued and others are unconditioned. A dharma might also be described as a simple awareness of some object, the experience of being conscious, and they have precise definition. Then types of consciousness are classified and these constituents are used to give a picture of the combination of dharmas that comprise a healthy mind.

In the Theravadian Abhidharma, mind takes two forms, being involved in process and being free of it, such as in a deep, dreamless sleep. Simple process consciousness combines perception and investigation of objects. The non-process consciousness is the state that a being is born in. The foundation of human rebirth is rooted in eight types of consciousness that follow from good karma, either in one's lives as a whole or in the immediately preceding life. There is also a consciousness in between incarnations.

Abhidharma is at root a device to increase understanding and encourages attention to mental states; one must know the laws and principles of the mind in order to govern it properly. The Abhidharma also combines the analysis of the fundamental parts of reality with the causal relations between the parts. This generates a number of problems and questions that the author addresses in some detail. There are some systematic answers to these problems, such as the answers the Sarvastivadins provide, though others see their answers as too abstract.

Chapter 9, The Mahayana, The Great Vehicle

Chapter 9, The Mahayana, The Great Vehicle Summary and Analysis

The Buddhist notion of a well-defined canon is illusive. In face, the defining idea of Buddhism is Gautama's superior awakening and his development of all spiritual qualities. His path is called the maha-yana, or "great vehicle" of the Bodhisattva. It is not clear when the idea of the maha-yana arose. The Maha-yana is composed of sutras that list the bodhisattva path, the perfection of wisdom, "ideas only", "embryo of the Tathagata", the Lotus sutra, the pure land sutras and the meditation sutras.

All Buddhism has a bodhisattva path, which all derive from the story of the ascetic Megha and his meeting the previous Buddha, Dipamkara. It lays down the career of the disciple and the bodhisattva and how they are distinct and unequal. The inequality of the teacher-student relationship is not always emphasized, including Indian Buddhism. Sometimes the separation between the student or hinyana and the Mahayana is simply the separation of different steps on a gradual path that leads to perfect buddhahood.

Some Buddhas proceed far enough to become transcendent; at death they may achieve final nirvana. At this stage, a Buddha neither exists nor does not exists and is never seen but still active. He acquires magical powers to transform himself and the world to benefit all. The pre-Mahayana tradition believed that only one Buddha can exist at a time, though previous buddhas are still recognized. In Mahayana Buddhism, worship of previous buddhas is practiced.

The student of the Buddha lacks perfect wisdom and perfect compassion as the Buddha has. The path to perfect buddhahood thus requires wisdom to be perfected, and this requirement has lead to the generation of literatures, or Wisdom literature like the Abhidharma. The Wisdom literature emphasizes not only the world's impermanence but its seeming permanence. It also maintains that the Abhidharma can be misused and converted into a distortion in the mind. Individuals must therefore come to grasp an emptiness of mind and regard themselves as empty. The wisdom of ordinary persons is thereby downgraded.

Nagarjuna, living in the second century, probably gave rise to the middle school of Buddhist philosophy. He wrote a work, "Root Verses on the Middle", which analyzes the concept of emptiness and situates it as the Buddha's main teaching; he also emphasized that emptiness does not require one to believe that nothing exists. Despite this, nirvana is not an "Absolute Reality." Instead, emptiness is ultimate reality. The author then discusses further elaborations of the conception of the Perfection of Wisdom. Some traditions are seen as undermining the Abhidharma enterprise because Abhidharma involves outlining and analyzing detailed Buddhist concepts, whereas

emptiness seems to denigrate this. The author also emphasizes that the teaching of emptiness may not be wholly ahistorical. The idea of emptiness has also captured some of the Western imagination.

The "Ideas-Only" tradition tries to explain the world not in terms of emptiness, but rather in terms of the workings of the mind. It sees the world as consisting only of mental states and ideas. The author then reviews the types of experience, deepening somewhat the account from previous chapters. The perfection of experience is ultimately seen in terms of non-conceptual knowledge and destroyed the experience of separate subject and object. Some scholars wonder whether this tradition is a form of philosophical idealism. This school, the Yogacara, seems to be the high point of North Indian Buddhist philosophy. Both schools, the Madhyamaka or emptiness and the Yogacara or ideas-only are sorts of Mayahanism. The chapter ends with a discussion of the Tathagatagarbha tradition, which emphasized that all persons have an intrinsic "Buddha nature", though some in other Mahayanist schools think that some may not have the capacity for buddhahood.

Chapter 10, Evolving Traditions of Buddhism, South, East, North and West

Chapter 10, Evolving Traditions of Buddhism, South, East, North and West Summary and Analysis

Chapter ten covers the spread of Buddhism from its early spread in South-East Asia, beginning with the Sri Lankan story. Buddhism came to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE. The formation of Theravada Buddhism there was completed by 1000 CE. It has been a center of Buddhist thought since that time and has evolved three divisions of the sangha. During the fifth century, the classical form of Theravada doctrine was established.

Indian influence started to enter South-East Asia in the first century CE on into 1000 CE. Theravada was sent here from southern India, not Sri Lanka. Theravada Sangha flourished at this time and on into Thailand. Little was left in Cambodia after the Pol Pot regime, however.

Buddhism in China, Korea and Japan can be called Eastern Buddhism as it shares a common scriptural resource in the Tripitaka. Buddhism came to China in the early third century BCE under the Han dynasty. By the fourth century CE, it had traveled to Korea and to Japan by the sixth. Buddhism flourished during the T'ang dynasty between the seventh and tenth centuries and began to decline in the fifteenth century.

The Mahayana was only in infancy when Buddhism came to China, and so the Chinese canon had its own formative period in the middle of the second century. Texts began to be translated at this time and were translated not as a whole, but over a thousand years. East Asian Buddhism consists of two major sets of schools, one native to China and the other with Indian counterparts. This division exists within Korean and Japanese Buddhism as well.

The Japanese notion of zen, or ch'an, comes from the Sanskrit dhyana, which the book has explored. It reflected an important school of East Asian Buddhism following a legendary Indian monk Bodhidharma who immigrated in the fifth or sixth century CE as its first leader.

"Pure Land" Buddhism is a form of early Buddhism that believes other buddhas teach in other realms of the universe known as "pure lands" and many of these Buddhists aim to be reborn there. This form of Buddhism is mostly Chinese and Japanese in more recent periods. The author also discusses the Tien-t'ai and Hua-yen schools of Chinese systematic Buddhism and Nichiren Japanese Buddhism.

Northern Buddhism exists in Tibet and Mongolia. There were two Buddhist diffusions in Tibet that the author discusses. Indian canonical Buddhist texts were also translated

over a long period in Tibetan Buddhism as well, in two groups, the Kanjur and the Tenjur. Tantric Buddhism was an esoteric path to Mahayana that arose between the seventh to twelfth centuries and is the last evolution of Indian Buddhism into a new, distinct group. Tibetan Buddhism has four main schools with sub-schools, which the author covers. However, the author maintains that Tibetan Buddhism has not developed unique Tibetan traditions of Buddhism like the Chinese.

Europeans probably first interacted with Buddhism in the third century BCE through the Greeks, partly through trade routes. Buddhist scholarship in the West began in the late eighteenth century and influenced many famous thinkers in the nineteenth, like Schopenhauer and Thoreau and in the twentieth, like T. S. Eliot. A number of Europeans migrated to Buddhist lands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well. In Europe and America, Buddhist groups were created as well. All schools of Tibetan Buddhism are represented in the US, as is the Japanese Zen version of East Asian Buddhism. In the last quarter-century, a number of Westerners have become Buddhist monks.

The author ends by emphasizing that Buddhism remains a vibrantly practiced religion despite its ruthless treatment at the hands of totalitarian Asian governments. It has also started to appeal to the West.

Characters

Siddhartha Gautama

While there is the legend of the Buddha and the symbol of the Buddha, there existed a man who is often referred to as The Buddha and his name was Siddhartha Gautama. He is undoubtedly the central figure of the book. While little is known about Gautama, some important details stand out. The Buddha was born in 563 BCE in modern-day Nepal and died in 483 BCE in modern day India. The founder of Buddhism, he is considered the supreme "awakened one." Accounts of his life are thought to have been summarized and memorized by his followers after his death.

Raised the son of a king and living in luxury, the Buddha began to be influenced by his understanding of human suffering early on. At age twenty-nine, he encountered a number of sick people, which caused him to run away from his palace home to become a mendicant. He and five companions tried to find enlightenment through a number of means and failed, until forty-nine days of meditation. At the end of the meditation, the thirty-five-year-old Gautama is said to have attained Enlightenment. From then on, he was known as the Buddha and developed the philosophy of the Four Truths.

For some time, the Buddha wondered whether or not he should teach to human beings and eventually decided to do so. He then acquired disciples and began to travel along the Ganges River, engaging in teachings. A company of Buddhist monks known as the sangha formed, and the devotion of the Triple Gem began. For the next forty-five years, the Buddha taught to everyone who would listen. At eighty, the Buddha died, although he is said to have entered the state of Parinirvana, a deathless state without the body. During his teaching period, he developed the practice of the eight-fold path among other ideas.

Buddhist Monks

Buddhist monks are the lifeblood of Buddhism. The Buddha himself was a monk of sorts, at least setting the tone of Buddhist monastic practice. Buddha's early disciples were all monks who took up the various ascetic practices of celibacy, fasting, poverty and right conduct; they wrote down Buddha's teachings and turned them into the Buddhist scriptures and they evangelized the Eastern world, from India to Japan and Mongolia to Thailand and Vietnam. Buddhism has no Pope, and it rarely has a developed hierarchy among monks between monasteries. Some monks have a degree of authority, like the Tibetan Dalai Lama, but other monks past their novitiate develop their own interpretations of Buddhist practice and theory, though they usually hew to tradition.

While Buddhist monks are discussed constantly throughout the Foundations of Buddhism, their practices and community structured are outlined in chapters four and

chapter seven. Chapter four discusses the Buddhist community. Initially ,Buddhist monks followed an older "renouncer" form of monasticism, which was a form of mendicant wandering in a location where the monk relied entirely on the generosity of others in various villages to support him. However, this ideal has faded into a form of settled life in a monastery. Typically monks form a monastery to rely on and support one another, but they must also rely on the lay community for support and maintain good relations with such communities through acts of service. While many early monks engage in acts of service, however, more advanced monks must spend their time meditating in order to reach Enlightenment.

Chapter seven explains the Buddhist practice of meditation. Most will not be aware that there are two fundamental types of meditation - the meditation of calm and the meditation of insight. The former is practiced in order to calm and empty the mind. It is an earlier form of meditation in the developmental process. The meditation of insight is focused on grasping wisdom, that the world is unstable and unsatisfactory and that the self does not, strictly speaking, exist.

Mahayana Buddhists

The form of Buddhism most common in East Asia and which has the most members. It is unique in recognizing the Mahayana sutras that the Theravadas reject.

Theravada Buddhists

Perhaps the earliest school of Buddhism that survives, it is conservative and the predominant religion in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. It has 100 million followers and focuses on the four noble truths.

Tibetan Buddhists

Buddhism of Tibet and the Himalayas, which focuses on the three vehicles of Buddhism, the Foundational, the Mahayana and the Vajrayana. It is the smallest Buddhist school.

The Self

Buddhism holds that there is no self in the sense that other traditions conceive of it, as a unity beyond experience. Instead, selves are merely constructs imagined out of unifications and connections between distinct mental and physical events.

Deities

Buddhism is full of major and minor deities, though it acknowledges the existence of no God in the Western sense.

Buddhas

Those humans or other beings that exist in a state of perfect Enlightenment, or more broadly, to anyone who has attained nirvana.

Mara

The demon that tempted the Buddha, attempting to draw him from the eight-fold path with sensual pleasures. Mara symbolizes the death of spiritual life. He is regarded both as having a spiritual existence and as being a psychological metaphor for the process of doubt and temptation that obstruct Enlightenment.

The Sangha

Roughly, an "assembly" with a common vision, it refers within Buddhism to the monastic Sangha that consists of a group of ordained Buddhist monks and nuns. The Sangha must maintain and advanced the teachings of the Buddha.

Objects/Places

Stupas

Mounds that hold Buddhist relics, often thought to be ashes of the Buddha's body.

Dharma

"Dharma" in Buddhism refers to either the teachings of Buddha that generate Enlightenment or the most basic elements of the experienced world. It is among the most fundamental concepts in Buddhist theology and one of the three Jewels.

The Four Noble Truths

Perhaps the most fundamental teaching of Buddhism, it is the teaching about suffering. The first truth concerns the nature of suffering, the next the origin of suffering, the third the cessation of suffering, and fourth the path that leads to the end of suffering.

Dependent Arising

A central doctrine in Buddhism and shared by all schools it is a form of awareness that arises from the intersection of basic mental and physical events. It is associated with the doctrine of no self, which holds that the only form of self is the awareness that holds between different experiential modalities.

Emptiness

Sunyata, emptiness is a phenomenon that results from realizing that the world has no intrinsic identity but is impermanent. Achieving the realization of emptiness is key in Mahayana Buddhism.

The Abhidharma

Third century BCE or later Buddhist texts that are systematizations and scholarly analyses of Buddhist doctrines as found in the sutras.

Buddhist Cosmology

Buddhism has a very complicated cosmology which is directly tied to their complex theory of human psychology. Psychological states and realms of the cosmos are directly correlated.

Karma

The idea of an action or deed that affects the cycle of life, moving one upward or downward in the cycle of rebirth.

Reincarnation

Buddhist doctrine teaches that all beings are reincarnated until they reach Enlightenment.

Awakening/Enlightenment

The experience that completely translates an individual into nirvana. Buddha is the only human being that Buddhist believe has attained it (though some dispute this).

Craving/Suffering

Suffering in Buddhism is thought to be caused by the craving not only for pleasure and material gain but by the desire to have a self.

Themes

Common Threads, Distinct Traditions

Rupert Gethin states that his aim in The Foundations of Buddhism is to avoid the common emphasis in Western Buddhist scholarship of teaching the reader that Buddhism is a varied religious tradition with many strands and will, in contrast, focus on common threads within Buddhism. Gethin worries openly that the unity within Buddhist thought is diminished by a sole focus on the separateness of Buddhist traditions. Furthermore, he seeks to avoid the insinuation that one or another form of Buddhism is the "truer" form.

Broadly speaking, Buddhism consists of three main traditions. First, there is the Theravada tradition of Sri Lank and South-East Asia. This is commonly known as "southern" Buddhism, It is generally speaking perhaps closest in doctrine and practice to ancient Buddhism as it existed in the earliest centuries of its existence in India. It has over 100 million followers throughout Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos.

The East Asian tradition of Mahayana Buddhism or "eastern" Buddhism is spread throughout China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. This movement began alongside Christianity and is extremely diverse, having coexisted with many other religions. It is the largest group of Buddhists, ranging from half a billion to a billion followers depending on how one counts.

The Tibetan Buddhism, or "northern Buddhism", has Tibetan scriptures and is somewhat closer to Mahayana Buddhism, but focuses on Tantric Buddhism. It has between 10 and 20 million members in Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal and the Himalayan area in India.

While the nature of the common traditional elements of Buddhist is open to dispute, Gethin decides to focus on nine common elements between all three traditions: (i) the history and legend of the Buddha, (ii) the scriptural continuity of Buddhism, (iii) the concept of the four noble truths, (iv) the practices of monks and lay Buddhists, (v) the cosmology of Buddhism, (vi) the emphasis on no self and depending arising, (vii) the practice of moving from good conduct to meditation and higher understanding, (viii) the theoretical Buddhist systems, especially the Abhidharma and the Madyamak and (ix) the bodhisattva path.

The Four Truths

Perhaps the primary emphasis of Buddhism is on the concept of the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are the primary teachings of the Buddha concerning the central struggle of humanity and its solution. Broadly speaking, the four truths are groups under the headings of the disease, the cause, the cure and the medicine. The central problem of human life for Buddhism is the duhkha, or "suffering." Suffering is a pervasive feature

of human life. For Buddhists, birth involves suffering, aging consists in suffering, being sick is suffering, dying, sadness, pain, depression and anxiety are suffering. Understand the pervasiveness of suffering is the first noble truth.

The second noble truth is the understanding of the cause of suffering. The cause is the "craving" or the thirst to continue to exist. This desire for existence generates enjoyment, greed, sensual pleasures and an excessive clinging to life. Even the desire to believe in a consistent sense of self is a cause of suffering.

The cure for suffering is the cessation of the thirst, which is the third noble truth. Buddhists can only escape suffering by removing and killing their craving. They must let go of it and of themselves in a spirit of emptiness, self-denial and insight.

Finally, the fourth noble truth is the medicine to remove suffering. The medicine is, concretely, the noble eightfold path, which includes right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Theory and Practice

Gethin also focuses on the complex relationship between the theory of Buddhism, its philosophy, cosmology and theology, with the practice of Buddhism, self-denial, rules of conduct, monastic practice, forms of meditation and the generation of altered states of consciousness and insight.

On the one hand, many will not realize that Buddhism has a very rich philosophical tradition. This tradition is to be found primarily in the Abhidharma, or higher dharma, which is a series of writings intended to systematize all the teachings of the Buddha. It also contains a wide range of classifications of types of mental and physical experience, of the realms of being and existence in the form of a detailed cosmology, a theory of the nature of the self and why it is a pervasive illusion and even an ontology which conceives of the world in terms of the basic constituents of dharma.

On the other hand, Buddhist practice consists at first in compassionate practice and self-denial. The early stage Buddhist must learn to engage in right conduct and be filled with compassion for other human beings. As he progresses along the gradual path towards Buddhahood, he will come to practice meditations of calm and meditations of insight aimed at achieving stillness and emptiness on the one hand and philosophical insight on the other. The next step, rarely reached, is Buddhahood.

Many Buddhist practitioners find the Abhidharma and other systematizing inclinations in Buddhism to miss the point of Buddhist practice. The system is only a propositional representation of what is ultimately a non-propositional series of truths to be experienced. However, systematization is seen by others as helpful for making sense of Buddhist teaching and forming and organizing effective Buddhist practice.

Style

Perspective

The author of the Foundations of Buddhism is Rupert Gethin, who was Lecturer of Indian Religions in the Department of Theology and Religious Students at the University of Bristol. He was also co-director of the Centre for Buddhist Studies at the University of Bristol. For this reason, the reader should regard the author as an expert in the study of Buddhism. As Gethin notes, he has taught Buddhism to students for some time and is quite familiar not only with Buddhist scholarship, but with how to make Buddhism accessible to the lay person.

The views of scholar and teacher characterize the perspective of the Foundations of Buddhism. Gethin is torn between two roles. On the one hand, he aims to explain Buddhism to the uninformed lay person in a way they can understand. On the other, he aims to produce a book that will have some interest to Buddhist scholars. As a result, while Gethin often describes Buddhist doctrine in clear terms, he sometimes adds to the depth of the text by citing differing scholarly opinions about various aspects of Buddhist history, doctrine and practice.

Gethin also has a scholarly emphasis that he seeks to draw out in the book. All too often, in Gethin's opinion, scholars of Buddhism go out of their way to tell Western audiences that there is no single, monolithic "Buddhism" but instead there are many Buddhisms. Gethin clearly finds this commonplace opinion of Buddhist scholars tiresome. He worries that this emphasis not only obscures important similarities between traditions, but also opens the door for the question about which form of Buddhism is "purest." So he makes an explicit attempt to focus on the common ideas held among all three major Buddhist traditions.

Tone

The tone of the Foundations of Buddhism mimics its perspective. Again, Rupert Gethin is both a distinguished scholar of Buddhism and a teacher of Buddhism to uninformed audiences. He therefore has to combine the perspectives of a scholar of Buddhism, who attends to important fine details and debates, and as a teacher of Buddhism, who must speak in general terms. Thus, two tones emerge from the text.

The tone of the teacher is someone who clearly admired the Buddhist tradition but who is neither eager nor hesitant to make a case for Buddhist doctrines. Instead, he often both defends Buddhist doctrines against common critiques but presents a number of important tensions within Buddhist ideas. He also speaks in plain terms, using plain language in order to communicate Buddhist ideas. As teacher, he boils down complex doctrines into terms the reader can understand.

But the tone of Gethin the scholar points beyond the simple statement of complex doctrines to the subtleties and vast depth of the areas he touches on. For instance, Buddhist cosmology contains a shockingly large number of realms of reality and types of phenomenal experience. While Gethin reviews the categories, he makes clear there is much he must leave out. He is also often intent to delineate important disagreements among Buddhist practitioners and theologians on the one hand and Western Buddhist scholars on the other. The scholarly tone is less light. Instead, it is heavier on the reader, containing many details that are sometimes overwhelming. However, Gethin is aware that the details can be burdensome and says as much.

Structure

The Foundations of Buddhism has a relatively straightforward structure as one would expect from a work intended partly as a textbook and introduction to a complex topic. The book contains a brief introduction and ten chapters, along with a series of helpful tables, maps, linguistic notes, a glossary and select bibliography. The introduction covers the three different schools of Buddhism and Gethin's unique approach of focusing on common threads rather than differences.

Chapter one, The Buddha, explains what historians know about the person often referred to as the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. It covers the legend of the Buddha and the concept of a "buddha" as a general title. Chapter two, The Word of the Buddha, explains the concept of Dharma in writing and practice, covers the recitation of scriptures, introduces the concept of the Abhidharma and the sutras and discusses the rise of the ancient Buddhist schools.

Chapter three, The Four Truths, explains the nature of Buddha's teaching, the nature of suffering as a disease, the craving as an origin of suffering, nirvana and the cessation of suffering and the eight-fold path as leading to the cessation of suffering. Chapter four, The Buddhist Community, explains the original practices of Buddha's followers, monastic ideals, wandering and settled monastic life, the spiritual life and lay community practices and social structure.

Chapter five, The Buddhist Cosmos, explains the Buddhist conception of space and time and the relation between their cosmology and psychology. Chapter six, No Self, explains the Buddhist concept of the self and their critique of the standard conception of the self. It also explains the concept of dependent arising. Chapter seven, The Buddhism Path, explains the Buddhist concept of faith and right conduct and distinguishes between calm meditation and insight meditation. Chapter eight, The Abhidharma, explains it as a system of Buddhist thought, discusses the importance of karma and rebirth and philosophical issues within the Abhidharma system.

Chapter nine, The Mahayana, introduces the ideas of the vehicle of the bodhisattva, transcendent buddhas, emptiness and the ideas of several distinct schools of Buddhist practice, while chapter ten, Evolving Traditions of Buddhism, explains the various schools of Buddhism, their histories and geographical locations.

Quotes

"The term 'Buddhism' refers to a vast and complex religious and philosophical tradition with a history that stretches over some 2,500 years, taking in, at one time or another, the greater part of Asia, from Afghanistan and parts of Persia in the west to Japan in the east, from the great islands of Sumatra and Java in the south to Mongolia and parts of southern Russia in the north."
Introduction, p. 1

"'Buddhism' is something of an intellectual abstraction: in reality there is not one Buddhism but many Buddhisms."
Introduction, p. 2

"For the following reasons he is a Blessed One: he is an Arhat, a perfectly and completely awakened one, perfect in his understanding and conduct, happy, one who understands the world, an unsurpassed trainer of unruly men, the teacher of both gods and men, a blessed Buddha." Chap. 1, p. 9

"The earliest Buddhist sources state that the future Buddha was born Siddhartha Gautama, the son of a local chieftain ... in Kapilavastu on ... the Indian-Nepalese border."
Chap. 1, p. 14

"I am chief in the world, I am best in the world, I am first in the world. This is my last birth. There will be no further rebirth." Chap. 1, p. 19

"To the Buddha I go for refuge; to the Dharma I go for refuge; to the Sangha I go for refuge."
Chap. 1, p. 34

"A special tradition outside the scriptures; not founded on words and letters; pointing directly to the heart of man; seeing into one's own nature and attaining Buddhahood."
Chap. 2, p. 38

"This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: the thirst for repeated existence ...."
Chap. 3, p. 59

"This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: the complete fading away and cessation of this very thirst—its abandoning, relinquishing, releasing, letting go."
Chap. 3, p. 59

"Come, monk. Well taught is the Dharma. Live the spiritual life for the complete ending of suffering."
Chap. 4, p. 87

"What determines in which realm a being is born? The short answer is karma: a being's intentional 'actions' of body, speech, and mind ...."
Chap. 5, p. 119

"What determines in which realm a being is born? The short answer is karma: a being's intentional 'actions' of body, speech, and mind ...."
Chap. 5, p. 119

"According to Buddhist analysis a person should be seen as five classes of physical and mental events that arise dependently at any given moment in time and also over a period of time."
Chap. 6, p. 142

"On this set I gained knowledge."
Chap. 8, p. 202

"If you desire this life, you are not a religious person. ... If grasping ensues, you do not have the view."
Chap. 10, p. 271

"Nearly 2,500 years ago, 'out of compassion for the world, for the benefit and welfare of the many', Buddhist monks began their journey south to take the word of the Buddha across India."
Chap. 10, p. 276

Topics for Discussion

How much does the historical Buddha matter to the Buddhist traditions?

What are the Four Truths? How do Buddhists understand them?

What was the original Buddhist monkish ideal? What has that ideal evolved into?

What is the connection between Buddhist psychology and Buddhist cosmology?

What is dependent arising? To what extent is it a replacement concept for the self?

What is the Abhidharma? Explain in detail.

What is the Mahayana?

What are the three major Buddhist traditions? What are the distinctions between them?