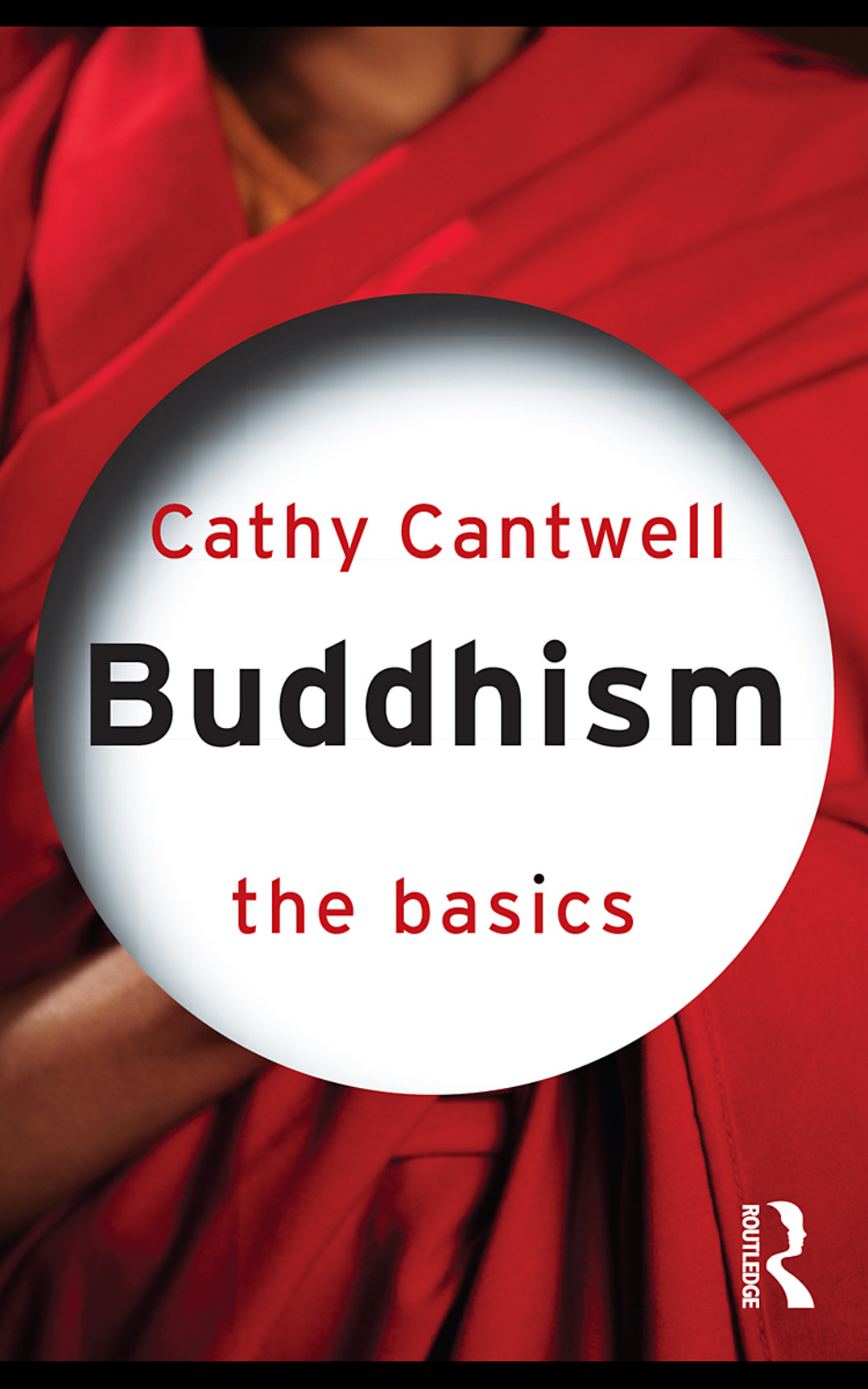
Cathy Cantwell
Buddhism
the basics
ROUTLEDGE

BUDDHISM

THE BASICS

Buddhism: The Basics provides a thorough and accessible introduction to a fascinating religion. Examining the historical development of Buddhism and its presence today, this guide covers:

- principal traditions
- practices and beliefs
- ethical guidelines and philosophy
- religious texts
- community

With helpful features including a detailed map of the Buddhist world, glossary of terms, and tips for further study, this is an ideal text for students and interested readers wanting to familiarise themselves with the Buddhist faith.

Cathy Cantwell is an academic researcher at the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford. She specialises in Tibetan Buddhism, and has worked on eleventh-century manuscripts, an eighteenth-century scriptural collection, and contemporary Buddhist ritual manuals and practice. She has taught widely in UK Higher Education and is joint author of *Early Tibetan Documents on Phur pa from Dunhuang*.

The Basics

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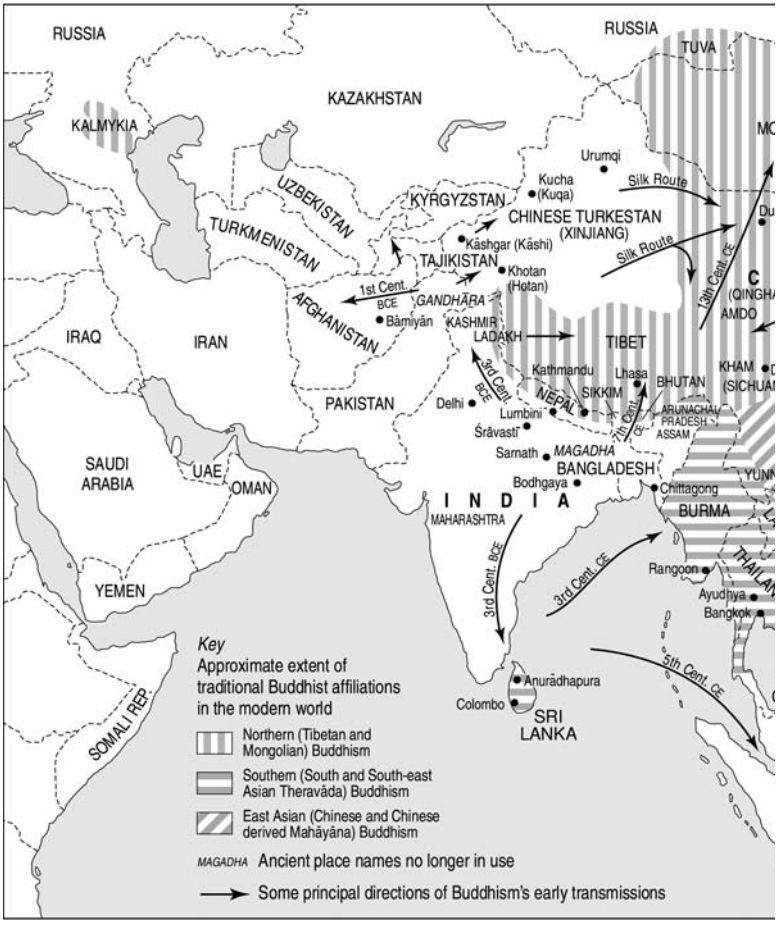

Map of Buddhism in Asia Showing the main directions of the historical spread of Buddhism, and the approximate locations of the major Buddhist regions in the modern world


BURYATIA
Ulaanbaatar
INNER MONGOLIA
4th Cent. CE
1st–2nd Cent. CE
7th Cent. CE
NORTH KOREA
SOUTH KOREA
JAPAN
Beijing
Seoul
Tokyo
6th Cent.CE
Shanghai
Chengdu
Taipei
TAIWAN
Hong Kong
Macao
Hanoi
HAINAN DAO
2nd Cent. CE
VIETNAM
PHILIPPINES
Phnom Penh
CAMBODIA
BRUNEI
SINGAPORE
Borobudur
JAVA

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INTRODUCTION

HOW PERENNIAL ARE THE BASICS OF BUDDHISM?

A Buddhist friend of mine commented, on hearing that I was writing on the Basics of Buddhism, that the task must be utterly different from writing on many other academic subject areas. For Buddhism, the 'Basics' are constant, he reasoned, quite different from a subject such as Sociology, which changes all the time. He had a good point: as in most religions, in their attitudes to their spiritual heritage, Buddhists hold that the Buddha Dharma, the essential truths revealed by the Buddha, are timeless and unchanging. These teachings will certainly be explored in this book, but it is quite likely that the Basics as presented here will look at least a little different from how the Basics might have looked thirty years ago – or indeed, how they might look in thirty years' time. Why should this be so?

One reason is the state of Buddhist Studies as an academic discipline as opposed to Buddhism as a religious path. The teachings may change little, but our knowledge and understandings of them change and develop. In the early twentieth century, beyond its Asian heartlands, knowledge of Buddhism was sparse. The work of translating the major collections of texts into European languages was in its infancy, and nineteenth-century archaeological discoveries in India had just begun to uncover evidence that allowed glimpses of the early history of Buddhism. It was not until the second part of the twentieth century that Buddhist Studies began to flourish in various university departments throughout Western countries, not only in the relative obscurity of specialist schools for classical 'Oriental' languages, but in Religious Studies, Anthropology,

Philosophy, and Asian Studies. Much has been achieved – but there are many more discoveries to be made, historical understandings to be clarified, more of the extensive textual corpus to be edited and translated, as well as the social and practice dimensions of Buddhist communities to be further explored. The picture we now have of the Basics of Buddhism has developed a good deal, and it is inevitable that that picture will be further added to, and perhaps even transformed by those additions.

Moreover, it is not only the expansion of knowledge in the subject area that is responsible for our changing understandings. Modern academic work proceeds within a wider field in which the focus and the framing of the material changes in response to the academic climate. This is partly a result of advances and developments in academic research, and also of attitudes and interests beyond the university ivory tower. For instance, a generation ago, few people would have expected the issue of gender to be discussed in a book on the Basics of Buddhism, but now, few would write on a major religion without some reference to gender roles! Thus, the Basics as considered here will to some extent reflect current thinking and interests in Buddhist Studies, while not neglecting the central preoccupations of Buddhists themselves.

A rather more fundamental reason why the Basics may not be *quite* so unchanging as they initially appear, is that timeless 'truths' nonetheless manifest or are revealed at specific historical moments. Even the most conservative Buddhist traditions historically accepted additions to their canonical corpus after the earliest discourses and rules on monastic conduct were collected together, and openness to commentarial literature continued for many centuries. In the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition – as we shall see – textual revelation remained active in India and some traditions preserved the practice of revealing new texts in other Asian countries. This seems to have happened in early Chinese Buddhism, and is still witnessed in Tibet.

BOX 1: THE MAHĀYĀNA

The Mahāyāna ('Great Vehicle') Buddhist tradition first developed during the first century BCE and the first centuries CE. It accepted the earlier Buddhist scriptures as 'Buddha Word', and much of the early

Buddhist heritage of teaching and practice, but it also recognised new texts, the Mahāyāna sūtras/discourses, as scripture, and it gave a central place to the teachings in these texts, which we will examine later. Mahāyāna scriptures continued to be revealed for much of the following millennium, and Mahāyāna scholars made significant contributions to Buddhist philosophy. The Mahāyāna did not, however, develop its own monastic order as such. In India, monks following Mahāyāna traditions might be found within the monasteries of the early Buddhist orders. Later, and internationally (with the exception of Japan), where monasteries have Mahāyāna affiliations, monks still maintain the rule of conduct of one or another of the early Buddhist traditions.

The Buddhist scriptural heritage is vast. It does not consist of a single book or even a few volumes, but of a number of huge many volumed collections, each preserved by one or another Buddhist tradition. The diverse and dynamic nature of the textual heritage may be easily forgotten given that most Buddhist schools closed their canons long ago, but the principle that wisdom may manifest afresh has never been altogether eclipsed in Buddhism. In the contemporary context of rapid social change, political and economic challenges facing traditional institutionalised Buddhism, and increasing international cultural exchanges, there has been much re-thinking and re-working of the Buddhist heritage. How Buddhism changes, evolves, and re-presents its 'basics' is as interesting as how its core interests and assumptions persist.

BUDDHISM TODAY: A SKETCH

According to modern research, the Buddhist tradition began in North-east India in the fifth century BCE. It developed and diversified over time within its original homeland, until it declined for various reasons, including the hostility of some Hindu kings and the Islamic takeover of international trade. Except in the far south where Buddhism lingered slightly longer, the remaining Buddhist monasteries were destroyed by waves of Muslim invaders from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries CE. By the time its last institutions collapsed, however, it had been firmly established in many other Asian

countries, having begun its internationalisation by the third century BCE, when the emperor Aśoka did much to encourage and promote its expansion. Different areas in Asia received Buddhist teachings at different times and from different Buddhist traditions, and varying political and social contexts in the recipient countries also sometimes led to the sponsorship of one group of Buddhists at the expense of others. Since the Buddhist order had always been decentralised in organisation, and very early in Buddhist history, different lines of monastic descent began to preserve their scriptural collections separately, there was little to integrate the international Buddhist community. Thus, we have a situation in which quite different Buddhist traditions thrived in different countries, often (despite some notable exceptions) with little communication between them. Western scholars once used to speculate that national cultural characteristics made one form of Buddhism more popular in one country than another, or that certain forms of Buddhism are somehow more inherently attractive to wider groups of people than others, and that this would account for the particular spectrum of Buddhist beliefs and practices in different areas. There is, however, little evidence to substantiate such ideas. Historical accident, or particular historical events with their own complex causal explanations – such as particular kings promoting specific traditions for their own reasons – are entirely sufficient to explain the patterns of religious affiliation across Asia. But an added ingredient to this picture is that the various received traditions were then further developed or adapted in the regions where they became rooted. Innovation did not only take place through textual revelation. As a 'living religion', practice traditions were adapted and developed, so for instance, there are a great many styles of Buddhist chanting in Asian countries. For our purposes, three points of significance follow:

- The Buddhist traditions that survived into modern times reflect some but not all of the historical strands of the religious heritage.
- These traditions may appear, at least on the surface, very different, with different religious languages, texts, monastic conventions, and popular practices.
- This apparent diversity does not necessarily represent dissension or dispute between traditions, but rather, different historical trajectories of separate lines of descent.

Thus, we should avoid imputing sectarian hostility between traditions which have adhered to contrasting beliefs or practices. To give just one example, it is often said that Mahāyāna Buddhism disputed with or is opposed to Theravāda Buddhism – the two major forms of Buddhist affiliation which have survived today, about which we shall say more in this book. Yet when the Mahāyāna developed in Northern India and in Central and East Asia in the early centuries CE, Theravāda Buddhism was already based far away in Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka), and it did not take a central role in Buddhism's evolution in the northern areas. In so far as the Mahāyāna developed an identity in opposition to non-Mahāyāna doctrine, its debating partners were principally of the Sarvāstivāda tradition, which later died out as a separate order, although it left its mark in the monastic code used in Tibet and in the philosophy curriculum studied by Mahāyāna Buddhists. And the Theravāda had earlier rejected some of the Sarvāstivāda doctrines which became the butt of Mahāyāna critiques.

BOX 2: THE THERAVĀDA

The Theravāda (the 'Tradition of the Elders') developed from one of the principal ancient Buddhist orders, and it sees itself as in direct continuity from the earliest Buddhist community. It preserves the only surviving complete corpus of early scriptures in an ancient Indian language, Pāli. It also draws on later commentarial works, including those of Sri Lankan scholars during the first millennium CE.

So, while we need to be aware of diversity, we also need to be aware that the major extant Buddhist traditions do not represent direct parallels to the historical schisms in Christianity or Islam. They are not equivalents to a unified Christian Church separating into Eastern and Western Churches, nor of Western Christianity dividing into Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, nor of Islam splitting into Sunni and Shi'ah traditions. Buddhism has had its historical schisms, but the fault lines do not quite correspond to the major traditions today, and furthermore, doctrinal differences did not always translate into separate institutional or monastic affiliations.

MAJOR BUDDHIST TRADITIONS

The diverse forms of Buddhism, which have survived into recent times, can mostly be categorised into three major regional groupings. None are unified into single hierarchical structures, but all have features which integrate them internally and make them distinctive in relation to each other. These groupings are:

(1) Southern Buddhism, found in Sri Lanka and South-east Asian countries, particularly Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. The main thread holding this group together is Theravāda Buddhist texts and practice. Theravāda Buddhism derives from one of the ancient Indian schools of Buddhism (see Text Box 2).
(2) Northern Buddhism, practised in Tibet and the surrounding Himalayan areas, and in other areas where Buddhism spread from Tibetan sources, such as parts of Central Asia, principally Mongolia. The Buddhism of this branch derives from later Indian Buddhism especially of the Pāla dynasty (Bengal, eighth–twelfth centuries CE), incorporating Buddhist monastic scholarship, Mahāyāna (see Text Box 1) and tantric traditions (see Text Box 3). It preserves large collections of scriptural and commentarial texts in Tibetan, including a comprehensive set of translations from Sanskrit sources as well as a vast indigenous literature.
(3) East Asian Buddhism, practised in East Asian countries: China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and in other countries with substantial ethnic Chinese populations. East Asian Buddhism mainly derives from the Mahāyāna traditions which were established in China in the early centuries CE, although the textual heritage in Chinese includes earlier Buddhist scriptures and a few tantras.

BOX 3: BUDDHIST TANTRIC TRADITIONS

Tantric traditions built on early Buddhist adaptations of ancient Indian magical rites using sacred syllables in Sanskrit. In Mahāyāna sūtras, strings of such syllables were used to grant protection or to epitomise the teachings. From around the seventh century CE, sacred Buddhist texts called *tantra*s, taught a new form of Buddhism which used such sacred syllables or *mantra*s as techniques for gaining Enlightenment. Parallel to similar developments in other Indian

religions, tantric Buddhism (also called the *Mantra Vehicle*) makes use of visualisation, mantra recitation, and ritual meditations to transform ordinary experience into an enlightened wisdom display.

In the contemporary period, globalisation is making a significant impact on this general classification. One striking feature of recent times has been cultural exchange between Western and Asian countries, which has included the expansion of Buddhism in the West, along with Western influences acting on Buddhism in the East. But if on the surface less remarkable, perhaps of greater significance to Buddhism has been the increasing interplay and exchange which the traditional Asian Buddhist groups have had with each other. For instance, we find Theravāda Buddhism becoming established in Nepal, and Tibetan Buddhism expanding in Hong Kong and Taiwan. This does not simply indicate that each geographical area is becoming more varied, but more importantly, that the traditionally established groups need to respond to the new alternatives, and the newer groups may need to adapt and re-think their own traditional practices to cater for their new followers. Moreover, not only do we witness different traditions teaching and practising in the same area, but interchanges also include the study and training of Buddhists of one tradition in the monasteries and countries of another.

Other significant modifications to the classification today occur due to the development and expansion of all manner of new Buddhist organisations, especially in urban areas. In part, this reflects the weakening (or even breakage) of ties between secular socio-political and traditional religious structures and, in part, it reflects the ongoing adaptations of Buddhism to modern urban life. Some new organisations may innovate merely in terms of greater orientation to lay Buddhist practice than their traditional counterparts, coupled with selective choices in drawing on traditional material. But other new organisations may reflect postmodern trends to 'mix and match' religious teachings, and find their inspiration in new mixes of the Buddhist heritage, or even of Buddhist and non-Buddhist spiritual traditions. Buddhism in the West also varies from explicit attempts to construct a specific tradition outside its geographical base,

to spiritual organisations integrating Buddhist ideas and practices culled from many different traditional sources. Nonetheless, the threefold categorisation remains generally valid, and it is useful in understanding the derivation, affiliations and religious orientations of specific Buddhist organisations today.

WHAT THE BUDDHA DID *NOT* TEACH: MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT BUDDHISM

PRIOR 'KNOWLEDGE'

I have often found that new undergraduate students may find the initial stages of Religious Studies courses more intellectually challenging than those of degrees in Anthropology, with which I am also familiar. At first sight, this might seem surprising: most Religious Studies students arrive at university furnished with considerable experience of studying Religion in a non-confessional manner at school, and many have qualifications in the subject. Even mature students, who may have little or no background in the academic study of Religion, come to the subject with relevant life experiences and may be quite widely read in the subject area. In contrast, beginning Anthropology students may never have studied the subject formally before, and may arrive at university with rather vague ideas about what it entails. Yet, as useful as the background knowledge which Religious Studies students bring to their studies may be – and there is no doubt that it *is* helpful to begin university study with prior knowledge of the subject one is embarking upon – it may also be necessary to unravel and re-think some of the ideas one has picked up along the way. Even professional academic researchers are not immune from mistaken assumptions. I sometimes suddenly discover that a specific piece of 'knowledge' I have, which I may have learnt and intellectually internalised when I first became interested in Buddhism as a teenager, is quite simply wrong, and I need to re-examine the facts.

A LIGHT-HEARTED ALLEGORY

For Religious Studies students, and especially those studying Asian religions, there are additional hazards. We find some rather

misleading widely held social views about what religions in general, and Asian religions in particular, are about, coupled with the understandable tendency for school education to seek to identify key areas of study which are uniform across all religious traditions. Let us imagine the hypothetical example of a community of people, say, of Chinese descent, who have preserved Chinese Confucian traditions which focus on family lineages and ancestor veneration. Suppose they have had little historical exposure to other religions, and their school educators wish to introduce children to Christianity in a sympathetic manner which draws links between the familiar and the foreign tradition. They may go through the Bible, selecting whatever references they can find to the respecting of ancestors – perhaps Abraham's family lineage might make a good start, and the recital of Jesus's family line of descent in the opening sections of Matthew's Gospel would seem especially promising. No doubt the commandment to honour parents can also be given prominence in presentations of Christianity. Fine – but will this give the pupils a good appreciation of Christianity's main concerns? Probably not. Let's now add another ingredient to our example. Suppose Christian groups have been active in our community of Chinese descent over the last fifty years or so. In today's world, the Christian movements which have most success may not represent the 'mainstream' Christian Churches, but rather a select few breakaway groups, who may have their own distinctive beliefs or practices. Those who speak for traditional Church authorities may at best be seen as neither of greater nor lesser weight than the leaders or spokespersons of the newer Christian groups. Moreover, even those representing the larger Christian Churches are busily attempting to adapt and reinterpret or modernise their practices for the benefit of their new believers, many of whom are entirely convinced that their understandings reflect true Christianity. Under such circumstances, it would be hardly surprising if members of our hypothetical group were to gain ideas about Christianity which would not be very accurate or representative of Christianity as a whole.

CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDINGS OF BUDDHISM

Now, I am not suggesting that this hypothetical scenario is an exact parallel to the fate of knowledge about Buddhism in the West! It

exaggerates certain tendencies within a far more complex picture, in which we also have balanced and sensitive presentations of the Buddhist tradition, serious scholarship on Buddhist texts, and increasing engagement with Buddhist practice traditions. The point is simply that there are bound to be some distortions in portrayals of a religion representing a small minority in the West, which nonetheless has been of long, extensive, and profound influence in Asian societies.

A generation ago, there were very few accurate books in English concerning the Buddhist tradition, and even fewer which were accessible to the educated general public as well as those specialising in what was then seen as Oriental studies. Now, in contrast, there are many excellent books available on a variety of Buddhist studies topics, including useful academic introductions and surveys of Buddhism. Much encouraged by the marvellous work my mentors and colleagues in the subject were producing, from the early 1990s, I designed introductory courses on Buddhism, naively confident that the reading materials I recommended were first class, and that students could hardly go wrong. Why then did I find myself continuing to face essays which reiterated various misconceptions certainly not to be found in any of the books on their reading lists? No doubt some students had failed to attend classes or to read the suggested books, but conscientious students were not exempt from the misleading statements. Many generated colourful mixes of prior 'knowledge' with the new ideas they were meeting in the lectures and textbooks. Finally, I concluded that no matter how good the sources one uses, there is no option but to tackle explicitly the misleading ideas about Buddhism which have somehow permeated popular understandings of Buddhism in the West. Thus, where appropriate in this book, I outline the limitations of certain commonly held ideas I have come across, as well as exploring more nuanced understandings of the material.

EXAMPLES OF BUDDHISM MISCONCEIVED

To give two brief examples: I have mentioned above that Mahāyāna Buddhism is often presented as though it were starkly opposed to Theravāda Buddhism. Presumably, the principal basis for this view is well-meaning school educators or perhaps the

popular media, oversimplifying from an observation that the two are different. Unfortunately, rather than inspiring some understanding of diversity within Buddhism, we may end up with caricatures of selfish Theravāda monks interested only in their own Enlightenment – when in fact, practices generating love and compassion are central in Theravāda training, and the role of the community of monks includes responsibilities towards the laity. Conversely, we may encounter misleading ideas about Mahāyāna practitioners, perhaps focused solely on helping others or on worshipping buddha figures, apparently with no thought of serious spiritual endeavour. Of course, ideals are not always lived up to, yet the main thrust of the principal Mahāyāna teachings concerns the tireless development of both wisdom and compassion, and of these, it is wisdom which alone can make compassion effective and ultimately transcendent.

A rather different example is the notion that Buddhism represents some kind of wonderful vision of spiritual evolution, in which even tragic events may all be somehow intended as teachings to inspire us to ever greater wisdom. In this kind of idea, there is perhaps a blend of Theosophy – a mystical movement which had some impact on early Western presentations of Buddhism – and a certain strand of New Age thinking. But all mainstream Buddhist traditions take the view that it is all too easy to regress and to be reborn with less favourable capacities and conditions. Moreover, the more common Buddhist view is that there is no marvellous divine plan but simply the workings of cause and effect, tending towards unhappy results. Thus, the aim of the spiritual path is to cut the chain of causal links and gain liberation from this sorry state of affairs.

Perhaps some readers may have concerns that they will find here a cold academic approach delighting in disabusing them of any notions they may have of links between Buddhist ideas and practices and contemporary interests such as New Age spirituality or peaceful resolution of conflicts or environmentalism. I will certainly seek to avoid spurious comparisons for which we have little evidence but I rather hope that the presentation will provide food for thought about how the Buddhist heritage might be built on in the future, and which chords of contemporary culture it might chime with (or indeed, is already engaging with). It is not for an academic to dictate what people of the present and future may make of Buddhism and

where they will take it – this is something which is dynamically developing as we move further into the twenty-first century, and the interplay between religious tradition and modern culture is fascinating to observe. But first we must seek to understand what the religious heritage is in its own terms.

A UNIFYING BUDDHIST PRACTICE: GOING FOR REFUGE TO THE THREE JEWELS

The most obvious feature binding Buddhists of different traditions and persuasions is their commitment to the Three Jewels, the *Buddha*, the *Dharma* and the *Sangha*. The main initiation rite into the Buddhist faith is the ritual *Going for Refuge* to the Three Jewels in the presence of a Buddhist monk or teacher. The regular repetition of the Refuge formula, recited three times, is also used on a regular basis as a preliminary for Buddhist practice of various kinds. It may be proceeded by removing the shoes and entering a temple or shrine-room, making three prostrations before a Buddha image, arranging offerings such as flowers and small bowls of water representing the offerings given to a guest in ancient India, and lighting candles and incense. Generally the formula is recited while sitting on the ground, with the hands held up, palms together in respect.

THE REFUGE FORMULA

I go for Refuge to the Buddha,
I go for Refuge to the Dharma,
I go for Refuge to the Sangha.

As one might expect of such a central and ubiquitous religious act, there are many levels of symbolism and meaning embodied in this ritual formula, and we will unpack these meanings as we progress with the book. To begin with the simplest, the *Buddha* is the Enlightened or Awakened One, the Teacher who is considered to have attained the ultimate realisation and liberation from worldly existence. The *Dharma* is the teaching set forth by the Buddha, the path to the ending of suffering and the attainment of the ultimate