

# BUDDHA'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY



Nagarjuna, a second century CE Buddhist sage, said to an Indian king: “Do not build fifty palaces, your highness. After all, you can only be in one room at a time.”

Nagarjuna’s suggestion, combining wisdom and wit, exhibits the essence of Buddha’s political philosophy: simplicity, humility, compassion.

To open a vista onto Buddha’s vision of a just society, this essay takes a brief look at Siddhartha Gautama’s life story; sketches the evolution of Buddhism; shows the intertwine of Buddhist psychology and ethics; pauses for an interlude called “Fable and Fate;” and concludes with an outline of Buddha’s political philosophy.

Along the way, we’ll meet Plato and Meister Eckhart, and reference the embrace of Buddhist ideals by modern and postmodern peace makers.

Here’s a quote from Thomas Merton:

*“What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it, all the rest are not only useless, but disastrous. ... Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance. ... We have what we seek, it is there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us.”*

## *I     Buddha's Life Story*

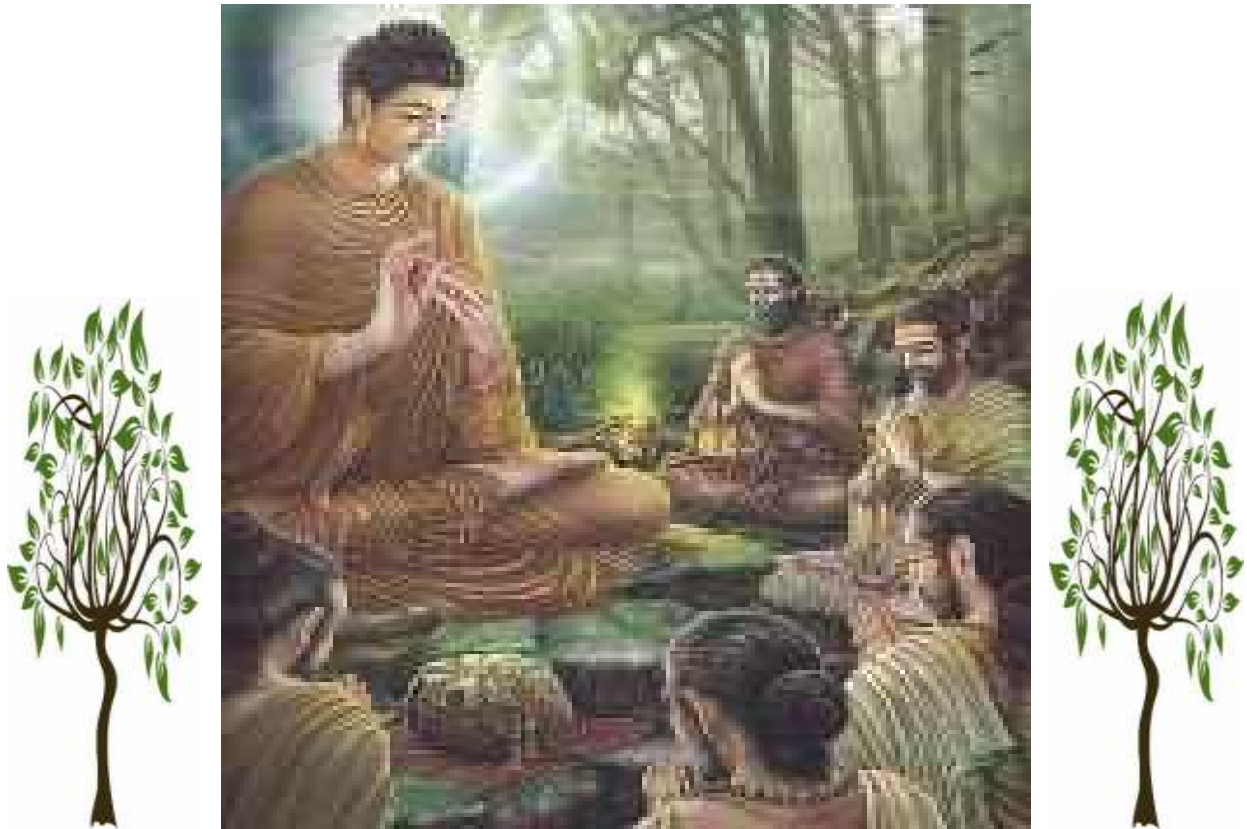
Siddhartha Gautama was born a Hindu prince around 567 BCE, in the Nepalese foothills of the Himalayas. He died at the age of 80, around 487.

After a sheltered and princely upbringing, Siddhartha was shocked by a sudden encounter with old age, sickness, and death. He also encountered a wandering mendicant radiating equipoise, whom Siddhartha took as his model. Leaving palace and family at the age of 29, Siddhartha spent the next six years as a forest ascetic.

Finally realizing that self-denial was no better than self-indulgence, he chose a Middle Way. He bathed, ate, and sat beneath a rose-apple tree, meditating all night. Enlightenment occurred with the rise of the morning star.



A few weeks later, Siddhartha Gautama – now a *Buddha* (“awake”), and called *Shakyamuni*: Sage of the Shakya Clan – delivered his first sermon. In a deer garden overlapping the ancient Indian city of Sarnath, Shakyamuni, seated comfortably beneath a tree, taught his first five disciples *The Four Noble Truths*: suffering, the cause of suffering, the possibility of freedom from suffering, and the Eightfold Path to freedom. The Fourth Noble Truth: The Eightfold Path, is a Way – a *Dharma*, a *Tao* – to awakening; to nirvana *in* samsara; to The Peaceable Kingdom within and without. The Four Noble Truths are the foundation of all forms of Buddhism; a path, individually and collectively, from suffering to freedom.



Shakyamuni was more teacher than preacher; more psychologist than metaphysician. The Four Noble Truths make no reference to the gods. Our fate is in our own hands. Buddha's philosophy is existential and self-empowering.

The eight steps on The Path are: Righting thinking, speaking, intention, action, vocation, effort, concentration, meditation. The Eightfold Path is implicit in the eight spokes of a *dharma-chakra* – “teaching wheel” ...



Like Platonism, Buddhism has often been misinterpreted as an other-

worldly philosophy. In fact, however, Plato and Buddha share a passion for *virtue*: the translation of wisdom into ethics.

The Sanskrit word for ethics is *shila*. *Shila* also means virtue.

The essence of virtue is kindness (*metta*). Kindness is the essence of compassion (*karuna*).

*Prajna* and *karuna* – wisdom and compassion – are the heartbeat of Buddhism. The wise society – the just and noble society – is kind, compassionate, egalitarian, peaceful, and evolving.

Buddhism is profoundly pragmatic and this-worldly. After his enlightenment, Buddha taught for 45 years, founding the revolutionary institution of monasticism, and showing inner peace as the only sure guide to world peace.

Over the course of the next 1500 years, Buddhist influence transformed India into what was, perhaps, the most gentle and creative culture the world has ever seen – “noble mother” of Tibetan Buddhism and Zen.

Some stories offer a glimpse into the secret of Buddha’s smile ...

### **Dharma Goddess**

A group of thirty Indian men, along with their women, went for a picnic in the forest. Spreading a blanket, they drank, ate, talked, and laughed; then took a nap. During the nap, a concubine rose, stole some jewelry, and ran away through the woods.

Soon, others awoke and discovered the crime. The thirty men went chasing after the thief. Running through the forest, they came upon the Buddha seated in quiet meditation beneath the shade of a tree. One of the men shouted, “Hey, monk! Have you seen a woman?!” Buddha replied, “Why are you chasing her?” The man said, “She stole some jewels!”

Buddha said, “Which is better, that you chase after women and jewels, or that you discover truth and equanimity?” The men approached the Buddha, sat in a semicircle in front of the tree, and received the blessings of the dharma.





### *The River*

Two monks are on a pilgrimage. They come to a river. A well-dressed lady wants to cross but doesn't know how. The first monk picks her up, carries her across, and sets her down on the other shore. The lady is dry, happy, grateful. The

monks continue on their way.

That night, the second monk asks the first: “How could you do that?! You know we are not allowed to touch females!”

The first monk replies: “I left the lady at the river. Are you still carrying her?”

### **Empty Cup**

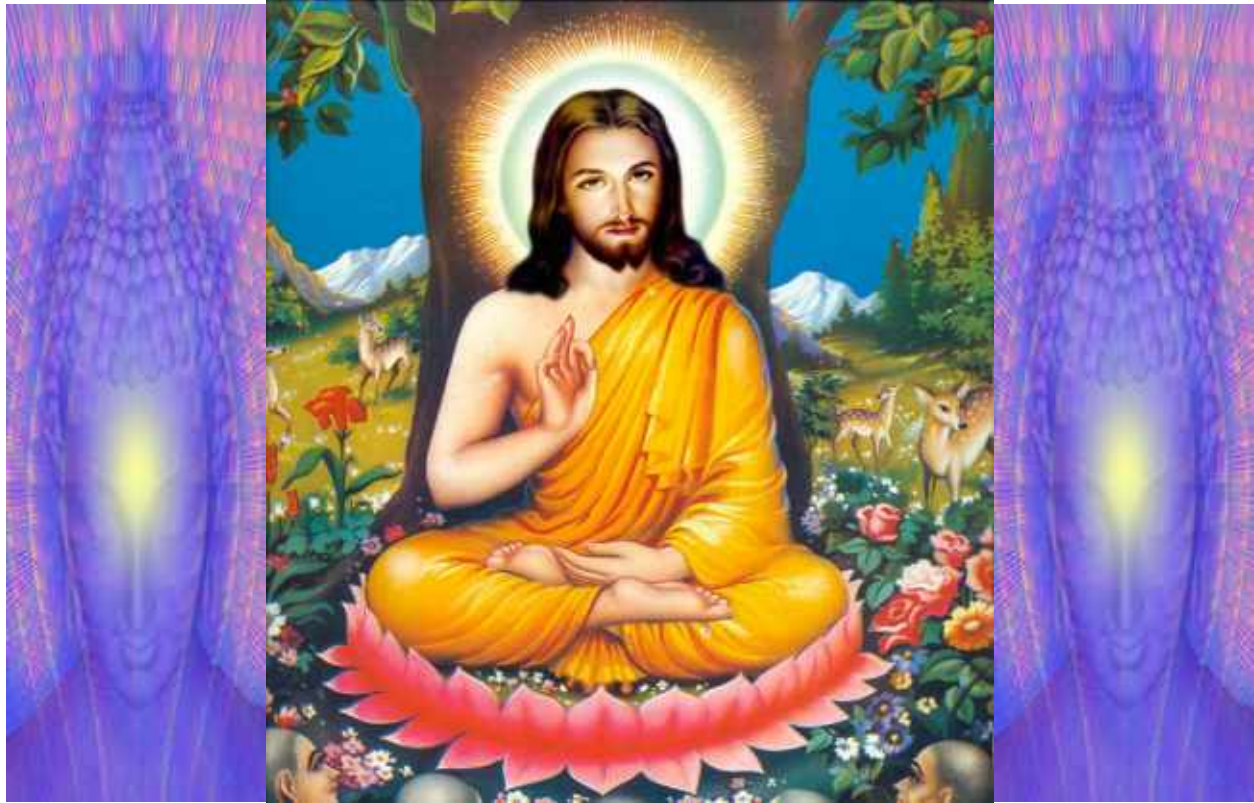
A Western philosophy professor visits a Buddhist temple in Kyoto. He is graciously received, then escorted to the Zen master’s simple office. After a short dialogue, tea is served. The professor holds out his cup. The master fills it, then keeps pouring. The cup overflows.

The professor exclaims: “No more will go in!” The master says: “This cup is like your mind. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your mind?”

### **Jeshu Bodhi**

A university student, visiting a Zen master, read aloud some passages from the Gospel of St. Matthew. Included in the reading was, “See the lilies of the field, how they grow.” “Knock, and the door shall be opened.”

The Zen master nodded, whispering: “Whoever said these words is not far from Buddhahood.”



### **Death as Season**

When a future Zen master was still a child, he often helped clean the room of his teacher. In this room was an old, delicate, priceless cup. Holding the cup, inspecting it, admiring it, the child accidentally dropped it. The cup fell to the floor and broke into pieces. Then he heard his teacher approaching.

Intercepting his teacher at the door, the child asked: “Why do people have to die?” The teacher replied: “Nothing is permanent. All things pass. It is the way of nature.” The child held up a piece of the cup and said: “It was time for your cup to die.”

## ***II The Evolution of Buddhism***

“Are you a god?” asked a Hindu sage.

“No,” replied the Buddha.

“Are you a man?”

“No,” replied the Buddha.

“Then, what are you?”

“Awake,” replied the Buddha.

The word *Buddha* means “awake.” *Budh* is a Sanskrit verb. It means “to know.” *Budh* is also root of the word *bodhi* – “wisdom.”

A *bodhi-sattva* is a “wise-being.” *Sattva* is the attribute – the *guna*, the “middle way” – that stimulates “recollection.” A bodhisattva fuses wisdom and compassion in equanimity.

In the Mahayana tradition, a bodhisattva is the awakening ideal. Mahayana Buddhism includes Tibetan Buddhism and Zen. In Mahayana, Nagarjuna is revered as “a second Buddha.”

Nagarjuna was an early abbot of Nalanda Monastic University. Nalanda was several hundred times larger than Plato’s Academy.

Nagarjuna was a scholar yogi. He founded *Madhyamaka* – “Middle Way” Buddhism. *Madhyamaka* is the jewel at the heart of the Mahayana Renaissance in Indian Buddhism, blooming in the first thousand years CE.

Theravada, the “elder tradition,” emphasizes individual enlightenment; nirvana’s *achievement* by an *arhat*. Mahayana, the “larger vehicle,” emphasizes *compassion* as the path to wisdom. Nirvana *in* samsara, now. The way of the *bodhisattva*.

Wisdom and compassion – *prajna* and *karuna* – are “the two wings of Buddhism.”

*Prajna* and *karuna* are the Buddhist parallel to the Greek roots of “philosophy.” *Philos-Sophos*: Love-Wisdom.

Socrates embodies a Buddhist vision: Life is a *pedagogical* adventure.

For Socrates and Buddha, *philosophy* – awakening – is a *raja yoga*: a “royal way.” A *journey* from the love of wisdom to the wisdom of love.

For a *bodhisattva*, the meaning of life is learning and service.

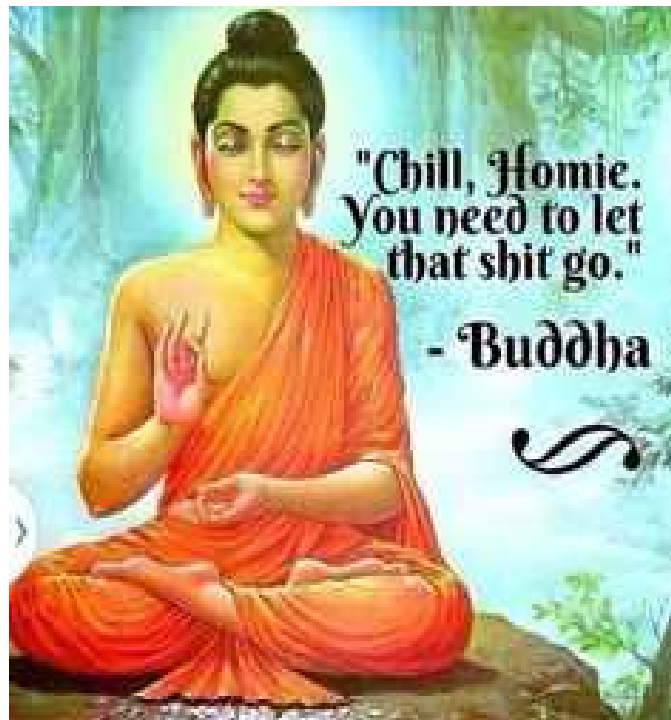
The voyage to *satori* is stormy. Though it leads to peace (*samadhi*) – even bliss (*ananda*) – alas, being out of Plato’s cave is still to be surrounded by The Samsaric Absurd.



To be a bodhisattva hero is to endure feeling all too often Sisyphean. Yet, says Camus, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

Shakyamuni, too, smiles.

The first step on The Eightfold Path is “right thinking,” which, in Nietzsche, becomes, “There is nothing more necessary than cheerfulness.”





Buddha said compassion is the *path* to wisdom. He said compassion is the *fruit* of wisdom.

A Tibetan sage said: “The reward for service is increased opportunity to serve.”

After 500 years of Theravada Buddhist influence, India, at the turn to the Common Era, evolved into a peaceful, prosperous, and creative culture for about a thousand years, becoming The Jewel of Asia with the rise of Mahayana Buddhism and the socially interacting *bodhisattva* ideal. Around the year 500, the Mahayana Buddhist lotus bloomed into the thunderbolt *Tantric* path to enlightenment, called *Vajrayana* – the “diamond vehicle.”



In sum, we have *Theravada* monastic Buddhism, from around 500 BCE to the turn to the Common Era. Then, *Mahayana* Buddhism's majestic imagination fertilizes India to about the year 500 CE. Then, for the next 500 years, *Vajrayana* Buddhism shows the *diamond-lightning* path to metamorphosis, into compassionate magus. Siddhartha turned "the teaching wheel" (*dharma-chakra*) three times: toward Theravada, Mahayana, and Tantra. Many scholars describe The Third Turning as toward Yogachara Chittamatra, the (idealist) "Mind Only" branch of Madhyamaka.

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### Qualifying Note:

There are several ways of interpreting Buddha's "Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel." One example is the version I have offered here: from Theravada through Mahayana to Vajrayana. A second and equally popular example asserts the evolution of Buddhism from Theravada through Mahayana to Yogachara Chittamatra.

Yogachara Chittamatra is the "Mind Only" or "Consciousness Only" idealist school of Buddhism, founded in the fourth century CE by the Mahayana adept Asanga and his younger half-brother Vasubandhu.

I would like to emphasize the importance and popularity of this alternative interpretation of "the third turn." Now, two more examples illustrate the

complexity of Buddhist hermeneutics.

First: A more advanced and esoteric interpretation of “the three turns” says that they refer to the three ways of understanding each of the Four Noble Truths. Each “noble truth” has three dimensions or depth-levels, which might be described as surface, secondary, and deep. (Or, if you will: normal, hidden, and secret; or common, deeper, and profound.)

Second: The “three turns” may be, and often are, approached in a fashion we might call logico-linguistic. The “first turn” is Buddha’s articulation of the distinction between samsara and nirvana, and the path from the former to the latter, as embodied in the Four Noble Truths. The “second turn,” associated with Mahayana’s *prajnaparamita* (“highest wisdom”) sutras – including the *Heart Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra* – collapses that distinction, and says that ultimate truth is beyond logic and beyond language, thus acting as a warning not to trust concepts and words. But many Buddhist practitioners found this too confusing. So, the “third turn” returns to the first, but informed by the second. It resurrects language and logic as a viable but *provisional* approach to the Four Noble Truths, declaring their provisional profundity as *pointing to* ultimate ineffability.

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Shakyamuni’s *first* turning of the Dharma Wheel provides a foundation for Theravada monasticism and the ideal of the meditative *arhat*, based on a provisional distinction between samsara and nirvana – a distinction implied in The Four Noble Truths. Buddha’s *second* turning of the Dharma Wheel collapses that distinction, in what might be called the Mahayana revolution. New texts emerge, mostly in Sanskrit. Texts like the *Heart Sutra*, *Diamond Sutra*, *Lotus Sutra*, *Vimalakirti Sutra*, *Lankavatara Sutra*, and *Avatamsaka* (“Flower Garland”) *Sutra*. Grounded in *bodhichitta* – the *bodhisattva* ideal of socially engaged compassion – Mahayana Buddhism divinizes Buddha; introduces a majestic pantheon of Buddhas and celestial Bodhisattvas; expands the universe into a multiverse; and says that we are *already* enlightened. Nirvana’s delight is the essence of our being and becoming. Wisdom is compassion with a smile.

Buddha’s *third* turning of the Dharma Wheel shows that to be a Buddha is to be a shaman. The fully *awake* human being is “transpersonal” – more than merely “human,” and better than being a god.

Tantra is the yogic alchemy of metamorphosis – into a *mahasiddha*. A *mahasiddha* is a Vajrayana Magus. *Hermes Trismegistus*. Shaman, healer, sage.



Actualizing Blake's dictum that "the paranormal is normal," a Tantric adept, fusing Zen meditation with shamanic imagination, becomes a "magical being" with exponential energy for a life of service.

Recalling the Zen of Buddha beneath the bodhi tree, we envision Shakyamuni deciding on three seeds at the heart of his teachings. These seeds blossom into Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.

The "Three Turnings" of the Dharma Wheel show The Tripartite Path to Awakening: from meditative *arhat* to compassionate *bodhisattva* to magical *mahasiddha*.







From 500 BCE to 1000 CE, in successive waves, each lasting about 500 years, the three epochs of Buddhist evolution in India – from Theravada through Mahayana to Vajrayana– exhibit a version of what Hegel calls *Geist* (Mind or Spirit) evolving in and through human history.

Vajrayana – Tantra – flourished from about 500 CE until the Muslim invasions beginning in the year 1000. For Buddhist monastic universities – the greatest gardens of learning the world has ever seen – those invasions were catastrophic. The genocidal nightmare saw the burning of Nalanda, and the smoldering smoke of its libraries darkened the skies for months. By the year 1200, Buddhism had virtually vanished in the land of its birth. Buddhism had, however, already spread throughout Southeast Asia. Also into Kashmir, Afghanistan, Bhutan. Across Central Asia west; and across the Silk Route east, into Mongolia and China.

Around 500 CE, the legendary Bodhidharma sailed from Sri Lanka and brought *meditative* Buddhism (*dhyana*) to China. By the year 600, *dhyana* Buddhism in China was merging with Taoism to give birth to *Ch'an* Buddhism, which, crossing to Japan around the year 1200, became *Zen*. Beginning in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism crossed the Himalayas into Tibet, where the Tantric tradition in particular, built on a solid practice of Theravada and Mahayana, survived and

grew. Tibetan Buddhism now nourishes the postmodern soul with treasures therapeutic and global. Said the voice in the bell: “Aim for Beauty, and all will be well.”



### ***III The Buddhist Worldview – Heart-Centered Rationality***

Gautama’s life reflects the three archetypal stages in what Joseph Campbell calls “The Hero’s Journey” – Departure, Initiation, Return. Siddhartha departs the palace; achieves enlightenment; returns to community to begin his career as a teacher. He teaches the Four Noble Truths.





Siddhartha's inaugurating political act was almost covert. He taught his first sermon – The Four Noble Truths – to his first five disciples. This small group was the beginning of the *sangha* – the Buddhist Community. In the *tanka* (painting) above, Siddhartha is flanked by two of his later, principal disciples (Maudgalyayana and Shariputra). Note the *dharmachakra*-fan (lower center) with eight petals.

The *sangha* would grow; slowly for a while, then exponentially. In 250 BCE, Emperor Ashoka turned his vast kingdom into a Dharma Nation, based on Buddha's teachings.

Siddhartha's second political act was revolutionary and counter-cultural. He created monasticism.

Individuals could drop out of their assigned roles – their *dharma*, “duty” – in a militaristic and class and caste structured Hindu society, shave their hair, put on a robe, and devote themselves to the enlightenment adventure.

Monastic life included meditation, cleaning, chanting, chores, study, debate, and the art of medicine. *Bhikshus* and *bhikshunis* – monks and nuns – walked once a day to a nearby village or metropolis in humble pilgrimage for alms.

Hindu tradition honored the opportunity to be of service to those on the spiritual path. “Householders” gained “merit” in providing monks with food. A *bhikshu* or *bhikshuni* might, in return, offer a short dharma talk.

When Buddhism spread to China, there was, at first, a Confucian ethic of self-reliance quite the opposite of Indian generosity. No “begging” allowed.

Buddhist monks were forced to innovate. Zen – called *Ch’an* in Chinese – expanded life to include gardening, thus beginning a monastic work ethic of enduring aesthetics.

Buddhism spread throughout India and Asia largely because its practitioners were healers. People referred to wandering Buddhists as “medicine monks.”

People were impressed and grateful. They inquired about therapeutic skill. Where did the monk learn it? Who was the Buddha? What did he teach?

When people heard Siddhartha’s life story, they learned that he was shocked into the enlightenment quest by a sudden encounter with old age, sickness, and death. Healing, then, would be his mission.

*Bhaishajyaraja* – Medicine Buddha – holding a nectar bowl and the stem of a myrobalan plant ...





In the Mahayana pantheon, Shakyamuni is one of eight Medicine Buddhas.

Shakyamuni's therapy is pedagogical, psychological, social. It is summed up in *The Three Jewels* of Buddhism: *Buddha, Dharma Sangha* – Teacher, Teaching, Community.

*Dharma* has many meanings, including truth, reality, vitality, pattern, doctrine, duty, law, teaching, being, society, and holding. *Dharma* is roughly equivalent to the Chinese *Tao*.

Buddha's *dharma*-teaching changed the conventional meaning of "duty." One's highest *dharma*, Buddha taught, was the actualization of one's spiritual potential; the enlightenment adventure; what Socrates would later call "care and perfection of the soul."

Buddhist use of the term *maya* does not mean the world is illusion. It means that one who *thinks* what appears is all there is is in a state of illusion.

Nagarjuna said: "One who thinks the world is real is dumb as a cow. One who thinks the world is not real is even dumber."

Says a postmodern poet: "All the world's a stage; but the bullets are real."

Nagarjuna's *Madhyamaka* – “middle way” – provokes a distinction between “provisional” and “ultimate” truth, approximating the difference between samsara and nirvana; or, if you will: being in Plato's cave and being out of it.

The journey from *avidya* to *vidya* – from ignorance to wisdom, from folly to freedom, from sleepwalking to awakening – is the journey from samsara to nirvana, then back again to be of service, skillfully showing ultimate truth permeating provisional truth. In Plato's *Symposium*: Up and down the stairway to heaven, giving birth to beauty in time.

Awakening is, existentially, nirvana *in* samsara. This is because, *metaphysically*, samsara is *in* nirvana.

This is a Buddhist version of the holographic *Hermetic Dictum*: “Microcosm mirrors macrocosm.”

Asked on his death-bed to summarize his dharma, Buddha said: “Do your best, be detached, and be a lamp unto yourself.”

Buddha was known to say: “Don't believe *in* me. In fact, don't even *believe* me. Find out for yourself.”



Buddha offers a set of guidelines for what the Greeks called *gnothi seauton* – “self-knowledge.” Shakyamuni begins with The Four Noble Truths. First, he

offers a diagnosis. Then, he offers a therapy.

Psychologist and doctor, Siddhartha ...

- 1) perceives the problem (way too much suffering going on)
- 2) identifies the primary cause of suffering (ignorance, manifesting as greed, hatred, and delusion)
- 3) announces a possible cure (nirvana)
- 4) provides a healing prescription – The Eightfold Path.

The eight steps on The Path are: Right thinking, speaking, intention, action, vocation, effort, concentration, and meditation.

Note that “right action” is re-emphasized in “right vocation.” All livelihood is to be “a path with heart,” guided by The Healer’s maxim, “Above all, do no harm.”

Buddha’s *Dharmachakra* – Teaching Wheel

8 spokes = Eightfold Path



Buddha also offers The Six Paramitas – six “perfections” or “virtues.” Generosity, kindness, patience, vigor, meditation, and wisdom. *Dana, shila, kshanti, virya, dhyana, prajna.*



Buddha offers The Five Ethical Prohibitions. Don't lie; don't kill; don't steal; don't abuse sex; don't abuse intoxicants.

He offers the *brahmaviharas* – The Four “Sublime Attitudes.” Kindness, compassion, empathic joy, and equanimity. *Metta, karuna, mudita, upeksha*.

Buddha cautions against The Five Temptations: greed, lust, sloth, worry, and doubt.

Buddha offers A Declaration of Human Rights. Everyone is entitled to 1) adequate food, shelter, and clothing; 2) adequate medicine; 3) work, education, and play; 4) friendship and community, spiced by Socratic debate.



Consider Buddha's Second Noble Truth: the *ignorance* that causes *so much* suffering. Let's first provide context:

The *First* Noble Truth is *dukkha*: too much suffering exists; it is mostly unnecessary; it is counter-evolutionary; it is mostly human caused. The *Third* Noble Truth is Buddha's *Good News*: *nirvana*. It is possible to achieve joyful equipoise, heal the world, and unleash our angelic potential.

The *Second* Noble Truth asserts that the primary cause of suffering is ignorance (*avidya*). *Avidya* gives rise to the three passions that keep suffering (*dukkha*) in motion: greed, hatred, and delusion. In short, ignorance unleashes *tanha*, thirst. (In Sanskrit: *trishna*.)

At the center of the Tibetan Wheel of Life, a pig, a rooster and a snake bite tails in an endless round of *thirsting* for samsaric satisfactions:

1. The apparent satisfactions of self-preoccupation and greed.
2. Of hostility, hatred, and scapegoating, to justify the grasping frenzy.
3. Of delusion, to sustain a worldview that breaks the heart.



Rooster, pig and snake also signify “the three temptations” offered by Mara, The Tempter, to Siddhartha, during the long night of Shakyamuni’s vigil beneath the bodhi tree. Mara sent monsters. Buddha was not afraid. Mara sent maidens.



Buddha was not seduced.

Mara accused the Buddha of pride. Mother Earth responded: “Siddhartha is selfless, and a well deserving son.”

The “three temptations” – fear, lust, and pride – stand in our way. So do greed, hatred, and delusion. This is Buddha’s simple psychology. He faced obstacles; he overcame them; he shows The Way to do the same.

Buddha’s Way – his Dharma - exhibits two wings; four *brahmaviharas*; six *paramitas*; an eightfold path. It is mirrored in Eckhart’s Fourfold.

Meister Eckhart’s “Four Ways” reflect Buddha’s Four Noble Truths.

Eckhart first invents the term *Gelassenheit*, to signify letting go, releasement, harmony, equipoise, going with the flow. *Gelassenheit* embodies the paradox, the dance, the dialectic of *detached action*. *Detached action* signifies the *equanimity* of Socratic *sophrosyne*; Buddhist *upeksha*; Taoist *wu-wei*. Athletes call it “being in the zone,” where effort is effortless.



Eckhart then elaborates The Four Ways:

1. *Via Positiva* – what Buddha calls “cheerfulness of right thinking”

2. *Via Negativa* – facing sorrow; and finding peace in “releasement”
3. *Via Creativa* – birthing our divine (*ananda*) in creative play (*karma*)
4. *Via Transformativa* – peace-creating, “in body, speech, and mind.”

“Body, speech, and mind” are Buddhism’s holistic trinity of *thought, word, and deed*. Changing the world by example.



#### ***IV Interlude: Fable and Fate***

In Herman Hesse’s vision-quest novel *The Glass Bead Game* – structured in twelve chapters like a zodiac, hence a mandala – the protagonist, late in middle age, is tossed on a turbulent sea. He longs for peace and equipoise. He wonders what has become of his life. He meets an old friend, his mentor. The mentor says, “You have stopped meditating.”

The mentor models Siddhartha. Calm yang’s storm by sinking into yin’s silence. Become empty enough to hear the sustaining bell of truth, called by Buddha the *Dharma*, and by Lao Tzu the *Tao*.

Having had tea with Lao Tzu, Confucius told his students, “Today I met a dragon.” The Buddhist version of that dragon is Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom ...



Manjushri's *vajra* sword – diamond lightning – shines in Mahayana Buddhism's pantheon of archangelic allies and guides.

Manjushri's soul-brother is Lokeshvara, the lotus-holding Bodhisattva of Compassion ...



Wisdom and compassion – *prajna* and *karuna*. The two wings of Buddhism. The sword and the lotus. Hesse writes with both in mind.

Hesse had a nervous breakdown between the two world wars. The shattered pieces of his psyche were patched together by a Swiss alchemist named C. G. Jung. Jung would later write a manifesto entitled *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, warning that prevention of nuclear nightmare hangs by a very slim psychic thread. Hesse finished *Demian*, then wrote his masterpiece – a Western version of a Buddhist diagnosis of the sickness of culture: *The Glass Bead Game*, also known as *Magister Ludi*.

Philosophers and scientists, busy in different dimensions of the puzzle palace – the ivory towers of university – sought to become masters of the glass bead game. Speaking mostly to each other; writing mostly for each other;



entranced by the rapture of the glass beads.



Meanwhile, society around them slowly crumbled; until at last the puzzle palace fell, and “teachers” too were tossed into history’s hell. Their isolation killed them. Scholarship, instead of serving and supporting peace and virtue, had become a passion for the self-defeating and superfluous.

“Whoever builds a ladder to the stars while neglecting the earth beneath, ends by losing both stars and earth.” George Allan

‘All is sacred. The only ‘profane’ is not to know that.’ Shakyamuni.

Buddha’s political philosophy is therapeutic, because Buddha’s entire philosophy is pedagogy. This finds echo in Plato. Two-thirds of Plato’s *Republic* is devoted to education. A “just” education is a pilgrimage of centering; nourished



by dialogue and debate; manifest in creative talent, “giving birth to beauty in time.”



A just society emerges from schools that are gardens of learning. Buddha says: Society’s *main function* is to nourish those gardens, whose fruits are future citizens.

In the 1920s, Alfred North Whitehead noted danger in *The Aims of Education*: “Boring teachers should be brought to trial for the murder of young souls.”

Whitehead’s howl is reminiscent of George Bernard Shaw’s lament: “The only time my education was interrupted was when I was in school.”

John Lennon said: “They torture and scare you for twenty odd years, then they expect you to pick a career.”

Socrates set a more vibrant tone for Plato’s Academy: the “Socratic turn,” inward, toward psyche, as ethical tether to the yangful virtue necessary for being-in-the-world-with-others. Making room for *enthusiasmos*.

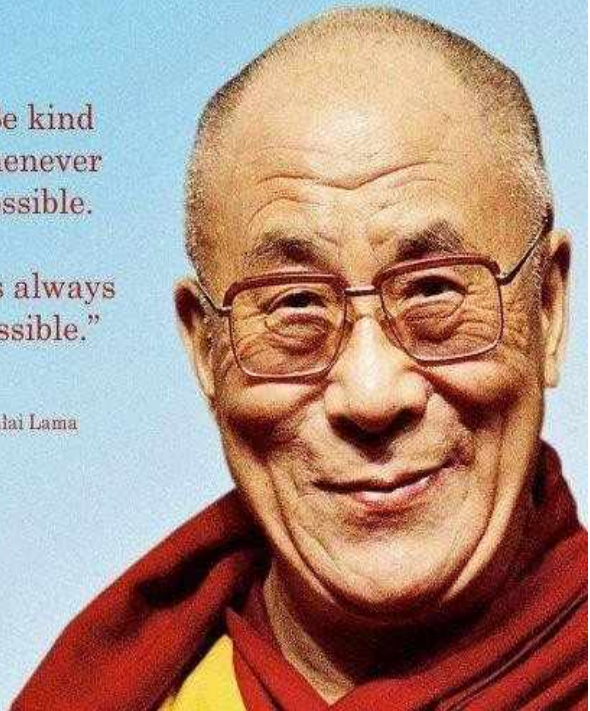
“Care and perfection of the soul” is the alchemical formula for a cheerful and creative society.



"Be kind  
whenever  
possible."

It is always  
possible."

- Dalai Lama



The "Socratic turn" is thrust toward virtue – *arête*, "excellence." The *bodhisattva* challenge of impeccability "in body, speech, and mind." Three steps on Buddha's *Eightfold Path*: "Right thinking, right speaking, right acting."

Beware: The path of knowledge is fraught with peril, because knowledge is power. Abuse of power, abuse of language, cultivation of inequality and deceit – can tear the heart out of civilization, and frequently do.

The master of a Zen monastery was getting very old, yet he worked in the garden every day. The monks felt sorry for their teacher. So they hid his tools. When they brought food to the master that evening, he refused to eat. The same thing happened the next night, and the night after that. The following day they returned his tools. The master said: "No work, no food."

Two monks were sitting in a courtyard watching a flag blowing in the wind. The first monk said: "Flag is moving." The second monk said: "Wind is moving."



Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch of Zen, was silently passing behind them. He whacked the monks with his cedar stick and said: “Not flag; not wind. Mind is moving!”

Manjushri’s sword is called *Chanda Hasa* – Dreadful Laugh.



Its lightning flash cuts through what Erich Fromm calls “chains of illusion.”

Its message: Beware what Kant calls “the glitter” of what Hesse calls “glass

beads.”

Compassion is the essence of Buddha’s political philosophy.

In Kantian terms: Wisdom without compassion is like concepts without percepts.

Kant articulates the Buddhist challenge: The task – individual and collective – is to move “from an age of enlightenment to a more enlightened age.”



## ***V Buddha’s Political Philosophy***

*“The demand to abandon illusions about our condition  
is a demand to abandon the conditions which require illusion.”*

Karl Marx





Reporter: “Mr. Gandhi, what do you think of Western civilization?”  
Gandhi: “I think it would be a good idea.”

Reporter: “Mr. Toynbee, what will future historians say was the most important event of the twentieth century?” Toynbee: “The introduction of Buddhism to the West.”

These remarks occurred around the time that Thomas Merton – the first public intellectual to speak out against America’s Indochina Holocaust (euphemistically called “The Vietnam War”) – discovered the profundity of Tibetan Buddhism and Zen.

Meanwhile, Einstein was observing that “of all the world’s religions, Buddhism offers the best hope for world peace.”

Informed by a tragic sense of our apocalyptic trajectory, Buckminster Fuller said, “There are no passengers on spaceship earth; we are all members of the crew.”

E. F. Schumacher wrote a book of Buddhist economics: *Small is Beautiful*.

Each honored the Buddhist worldview, because it is pedagogical, egalitarian, liberating, and fosters what the Dalai Lama calls “a common religion of kindness.”

At the core of Buddha’s political philosophy is the notion that “all human life is precious, endowed with freedom and opportunity.”

The preciousness of life is Kantian “dignity,” manifest in what Martin Buber calls “I-Thou” relations.

As a social virtue, *cooperation* takes primacy over competition. Instead of, “How can I use you to maximize personal gain?” – one bows and thinks, “How can I best be of service?”

Buddhism has been called “the rational religion” because it balances meditative depth and equanimity with Socratic gusto of scrutiny and debate.

Buddhism has been called “religion without God” because it is, at heart, more existential than theological.

While Buddhist practitioners “take refuge” in The Three Jewels – Buddha, Dharma, Sangha – “refuge” is understood not so much as a place of comfort as a rigorous, vigorous adventure in self-discovery and selfless service.

Buddhism asserts (with echoes in Rousseau, Blake, Emerson, and Wordsworth) that joy and compassion constitute our “natural attitude;” that unity has primacy over separation; that interbeing – universal brother-sisterhood – is the quantum field sustaining the dance of diversity.



Buddha's famous declaration of no-self – *anatman* – is not a denial of individuality or soul. It is a way of showing “soul” as *window* to the universe.

Buddha gave advice to many kings. He recommended universal health care, anticipating Jesus: “Feed the poor; heal the sick.”

He was an ecological and animal rights activist. He championed a thriving merchant class for stimulating a progressive marketplace of ideas.

Buddha undercut Hindu class, caste, and misogynous prejudice by allowing anyone, including women, into the Sangha.

Sangha members owned no more than a bowl and robe; perhaps also a blanket and staff.

To eat, they took their alms bowls and silently walked the streets of a nearby village.

Sangha members were obliged to meditate, study, and debate. They had to learn the alchemy of medicine, and the art of healing. They were tested by the sage in sudden and subtle ways. They achieved a communal balance of stability and change by democratic consensus. They were told to leave the community; go forth as ambassadors of the Dharma; learn by doing; serve the greater good of the greater whole.



Buddha, like Aristotle, was less concerned with the form of government than its consequence. Monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, or any combination thereof – its measure is benevolence: the *social virtue* it serves. The highest social virtue is awakening (*prajna*) – in body, speech, and mind (*karuna*).

The ethical heart of the Torah; the peace-making message of Jesus; the Tao as Path to individual and social harmony – each is reflected in Buddhist sutras.

I think Buddha would agree that we cannot have an empire abroad and sustain freedom at home.

I know he would agree with Justice Brandeis: “We can have great concentrations of wealth in the hands of a few; or, we can have democracy. We cannot have both.”

With echoes of Plato’s cave, Howard Zinn observed: “The truth is so often the opposite of what we are told that we can no longer turn our heads around far enough to see it.”

Noam Chomsky adds the Zen twist: “The problem is not that people don’t know; it’s that people *don’t know* they don’t know.”



Buddha's political philosophy begins with pedagogy. Society should exist for the sake of schools; not the other way around.

Buddha's culture-vision is romantic and pragmatic: The primary function of society is to act as pedagogical playground for evolving beings. The "golden flower" – the tempered yin of Asian wisdom – has political meaning because *modernity needs interiority*. Without the inward anchor, endless craving for outward satisfaction mangles humans into schizophrenics, inner frenzy manifesting as social violence. Buddha's message for today? 'Beware The Samsaric Uroborus. The profit-driven *Zeitgeist* consumes itself.'

Buddha's "enlightenment project" helps steer the body politic back from the vortex; to the shores of sanity and simplicity; to a Renaissance of The Renaissance, with a new and much needed Global Enlightenment.

We might say, in sum:

- 1) Buddha does not say life is suffering. He says the *unenlightened* life is suffering.
- 2) Buddhism is not an other-worldly escape from life, but a joyful embrace of life as profound and precious opportunity for learning, exploring, sharing, evolving, caring, and creating.
- 3) Buddha proposes the *education* of desire, not its elimination.
- 4) Buddhism as a whole proposes that the meaning of life is learning and service.
- 5) The Buddhist concept of emptiness is best understood as interbeing.

Dualistic thinking is the fatal flaw of Western culture. Buddhism offers a pragmatic, refreshing, holistic alternative. It partakes of Kierkegaard: "Paradox is the passion of thought." It partakes of Einstein: "Separation is optical delusion."

Buddhism is famous for being a philosophy of The Middle Way. As such, it mirrors Taoism, which emphasizes the S-curving River between yin and yang in the always revolving Tao sign.



The Taoist name for detached action is *wu-wei*. *Wu-wei*, literally “not-doing,” signifies equanimity, going with the flow, non-interfering.



Yet Lao Tzu, like Jesus, Buddha and Bodhidharma, was first and foremost a pacifist; and the doing of not-doing (*wei-wu-wei*) in no way implies indifference to injustice and suffering. Indeed, the *Tao Te Ching* – like The Gospels and the *Dhammapada* (“Sayings of the Buddha”) – articulates a path to peace.

Zen is relevant to justice, because no person should be allowed to a position of political authority without first showing that they can sit in quiet meditation for at least thirty minutes. After all, if they cannot control themselves, why should

they be given power to control our collective destiny?

A platoon of Japanese soldiers on the march stayed one evening at a Zen temple. They were served the same humble meal the monks ate.

The platoon commander complained to the master of the temple, saying: “We are soldiers, ready to sacrifice our lives for our country!” The master replied: “We are monks, sacrificing our lives for the sake of all humanity.”

A samurai approached a Zen master and asked: “Is there really a heaven and a hell?” The master asked: “Who are you?” The man said haughtily: “I am samurai!” The master said: “You? You’re no samurai. You couldn’t even cut off my head with that dull sword of yours.” The man drew his sword and was about to strike when the master held up a finger and said: “Here open the gates of hell.” The samurai froze in mid-motion, then sheathed his sword. The master said: “Here open the gates of heaven.”

A teacher would sometimes fall asleep during class. When he awoke, the students asked: “Where have you been?” The teacher said: “In my dreams, I go to visit the old masters.” One day the teacher had to leave the class to perform an errand. When he returned, the students were sleeping. He woke them with a shout. Then he asked: “Where have you been?” The students replied: “In our dreams, we went to visit the old masters, and they said they had never seen you.”

A monk asked: “What is Zen?” Dogen said: “Zen is everyday life.”

The body is the bell. The bell rings. It sings the song of interbeing.



## Stefan Schindler

A graduate of Dickinson College, Stefan Schindler taught philosophy, psychology and religion for 40 years at multiple institutions of higher learning, including The University of Pennsylvania, La Salle University, Berklee College of Music, The Boston Conservatory of Music, Dance and Theater, and the Boston and Brookline Centers for Adult Education. For six years, he also taught language and computer skills in a state-sponsored program for the unemployed in Philadelphia, PA. Co-founder of The National Registry for Conscientious Objection, a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, a recipient of The Boston Baha'i Peace Award, and a Trustee of The Life Experience School and Peace Abbey Foundation, Dr. Schindler received his Ph.D. in Philosophy from Boston College, worked one summer in a nature preserve, lived in a Zen temple for a year, did the pilot's voice in a claymation video of St. Exupery's *The Little Prince*, acted in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," and performed as a musical poet in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City. He is now retired and living in Salem, MA.

Best known for his essay "The Tao of Teaching" and his YouTube lecture on "A Reawakening of Bicameral Mind," he conducts occasional guest lectures, and currently devotes himself to writing, conducting seminars on transpersonal psychology, and transforming his poetry into YouTube musical videos (for example: "Ox Herding Searching" – an innovative take on the Zen-famous Ox Herding pictographs, also called The Ten Bulls – and "Butterfly Dream Buffalo Thunder", which combines Pre-Socratic Philosophy with Buddhism, Taoism, and Native American spirituality). His books include *The Tao of Socrates*, *America's Indochina Holocaust*, *Discoursing With The Gods*, and *Space is Grace*. His next book, *Buddha's Political Philosophy*, will appear in 2018 (published by Political Animal Press). He currently teaches a course on Buddhism at Salem State University's Lifelong Learning Institute.

Dr. Schindler writes for the web journal Political Animal, in which four of his essays have appeared: "Buddha's Political Philosophy," "Heart Mind Cosmos: Panentheism in Mahayana Buddhism and Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century German Idealism," "Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties," and "The Politics of Bob Dylan's Art."



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