



## Buddhist Lineages: Which Path is Best?

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### Talk 1 of 2

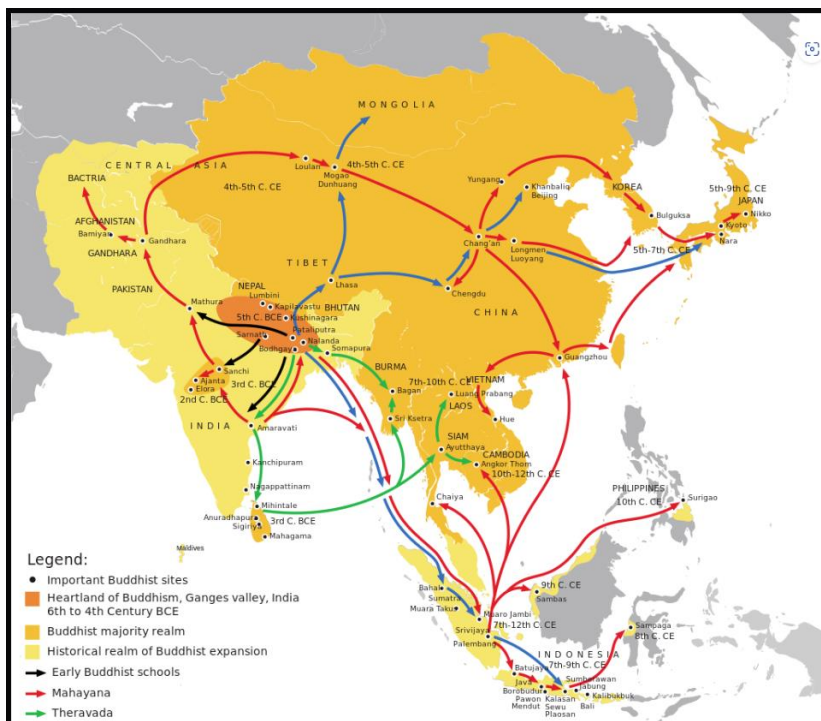
I started attending a sangha (Show Me Dharma) over 20 years ago. This sangha, taught by Ginny Morgan and Phil Jones both trained as Community Dharma Leaders (CDL) at Spirit Rock in California, was based on the Theravada tradition. However, Ginny included in her talks teachings from other traditions including Mahayana, Vajrayana, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

Did this matter? Is it better to stay with one tradition or include others? Is there a downside?

In a sangha, you might hear both points of view being expressed by sangha members.

How do I know if what I follow is correct?

Let's start with the spread of Buddhism. Buddhist history starting from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE when the Buddha was born is long and complicated. Shakyamuni Buddha taught for the last 45 years of his life and by the time of his death at 80, he had thousands of followers in India. Buddhism spread in Asia as noted in the diagram below.



There have been a number of movements, schisms and philosophical schools, among them the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, with contrasting periods of expansion and retreat.<sup>1</sup>

To answer these questions, I am going to start by summarizing (including quoting and paraphrasing) an article by Rita M. Gross<sup>2</sup>, Buddhist History for Buddhist Practitioners: How—and why—to teach Buddhist history to sometimes reluctant Buddhists<sup>3</sup> and also not what the Buddha had to say on correctness.

Gross describes an incident when a student left the sangha as she was teaching. Gross assumed that it was because she had said that “the historical Buddha had not taught the Mahayana during his life; rather, those scriptures had developed, because of causes and conditions, some four hundred years later. For this student, that information meant that Buddhism was no truer than Christianity, and for the same reason: some of its beloved narratives did not hold up to historical scrutiny.”

She notes that “The incident itself, however, indicates how important it is for Buddhist centers and groups to educate their students well and not to continue to teach legends as if they were factual accounts of history. For many, finding out that their teachers have confused legend with history and have not taught them to appreciate that legends are about meaning, not factual accuracy, can bring about a loss of confidence in dharma itself.”

She felt a sense of urgency because of two factors:

1. A growing tendency towards fundamentalism in North American Sangha’s
2. Sectarianism (excessive attachment to a particular sect or party, especially in religion) of many North American Buddhists

Regarding fundamentalism, she notes “Fundamentalism, briefly and broadly defined, is the urge to interpret literally the words of favorite narratives—to assume that those narratives are empirically accurate descriptions of physical occurrences. Literalists dismiss the suggestion that these stories are legends that teach profound dharma that is independent of the narratives’ empirical veracity.”

Regarding sectarianism, she notes “I feel dismay at the sectarianism of many North American Buddhists, who eagerly praise their own lineage yet make disparaging remarks about others. Fundamentalism and sectarianism often combine in highly unpleasant ways. Some Buddhists readily dismiss other forms of Buddhism because, they claim, these other forms developed later and thus are not really the Buddha’s teaching. Other Buddhists claim that the teachings followed by some are not the Buddha’s full and final teachings but were merely provisional teachings intended for those with lower potential.”

### **Historical Consciousness**

Historical consciousness refers to the ways in which people orient themselves in time. More than being just an understanding of or interest in history, historical consciousness comprises basic aspects of human life: the general consciousness that every human individual, every culture, every institution is embedded in time, has a past and future, and is prone to change.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Principles of Historical Consciousness**

Gross delineates five aspects of historical consciousness that are crucial for understanding what modern historical studies contribute to an accurate, nonsectarian history of Buddhism. She also argues that each of these five can deepen one's understanding of the dharma.

### **The first principle: Consider all historical sources equally.**

There is no single source of Buddhist history. No living form of Buddhism possesses all the sources needed for a full and accurate history of Buddhism. Working within a sectarian Buddhist context, one can derive only a partial history of Buddhism, a version of Buddhist history that most scholars would regard as deficient. Some of this is due to various denominations placing different emphasis on historical points.

### **The second principle: The historical consciousness view embodies change being inevitable (impermanence),**

Buddhist resistance to the reality of historical change commonly emerges as the firm conviction that whatever form of Buddhism "we" practice is the best version of teachings of the (historical) Buddha. This is the basis for Mahayana and Vajrayana claims that they were actually taught by the historical Buddha during his lifetime and for Theravada rejection of those forms of Buddhism because they were not. In both cases, it is presupposed that Buddhism cannot and should not ever change from what was established by Shakyamuni Buddha in India in the fifth century B.C.E., that there should be no Buddhist history at all but only the constant presence of the same forms lasting for all time.

Historical consciousness, on the other hand, regards change as inevitable and does not evaluate that reality either positively or negatively. This strongly held view of permanence seems a bit odd in a religion that also teaches that resistance to all-pervasive change is a root cause of misery.

### **The third principle: Given change, diversity is also normative and inevitable.**

Not only do things change, but in a large, geographically and socially varied region such as that covered by Buddhism, they change in different ways and at different rates. Religions, including Buddhism, have long suffered and caused suffering because of their illusion that if people would only behave and think correctly, we'd all practice the same religion. Simple observation of phenomena should convince us that religious diversity is here to stay and that our task is to learn how to live well with it.

The only other option is perpetual sectarianism— the mutual aggression, hostility, and competitiveness— that has long plagued religions. Religious diversity itself is not a problem, but sectarianism is.

At the heart of sectarianism is the tendency to regard difference as deficiency. If difference equals deficiency, then ranking will occur—some different things are better and others are worse.

For example, almost all Mahayana Buddhists regard themselves as practicing a superior form of Buddhism, the "large vehicle" of greater aspirations, higher view, and deeper compassion, which they contrast to a so-called "Hinayana" or smaller, inferior vehicle. Many Theravadins regard themselves as practicing a "pure" or "original" form of Buddhism, rather than degenerate Mahayana.

**The fourth principle: The teachings may be conveyed by stories which in and of themselves might not be factual.**

However, for religions, the most important thing about a story is its message, its meaning, not its empirical verifiability.

For example, the relevance of Mahayana Buddhism does not rise or fall on the empirical accuracy of the Heart Sutra narrative but on whether or not the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism are in accord with the foundational teachings of Buddhism.

**The fifth principle:** One must be comfortable with an open-ended version of how things are rather than needing a final, fixed conclusion.

For historians, the present consensus about historical development is a hypothesis subject to revision as new information and perspectives become available. In other words, historians are eminently flexible and willing to change their conclusions in the light of new evidence. Flexibility of mind, rather than rigidity, is also regarded as a supreme virtue for meditators.

Summary

The teachings should be considered from every historical source. They are constantly changing, there is no fixed end. They are diverse and the story does not need to be factual; it is message that counts.

**Talk 2 of 2**

**What did the Buddha have to say about which path to follow?**

From one of his teachings, the Kalama Sutta:

The Buddha was on a wandering tour and arrived in Kesaputta, a town of the Kaslamas, a local clan. They heard that the Buddha had arrived and, knowing of his reputation and that he was awakened, they went to him and said "Lord, there are some contemplatives & brahmins (teachers) who come to Kesaputta. They expound & glorify their own doctrines, but as for the doctrines of others, they deprecate them, disparage them, show contempt for them, & pull them to pieces. And other contemplatives & brahmins come to Kesaputta and the same thing. All of them leave us absolutely uncertain & in doubt: Which of these venerable contemplatives & brahmins are speaking the truth, and which ones are lying?"

The Buddha replied, "Of course you are uncertain, Kālāmas. Of course you are in doubt. When there are reasons for doubt, uncertainty is born."

He asked them a series of questions:.

When greed arises in a person, does it arise for welfare or for harm?

When aversion arises in a person, does it arise for welfare or for harm?

When delusion arises in a person, does it arise for welfare or for harm?

Are these qualities skillful or unskillful?

When adopted & carried out, do they lead to harm & to suffering, or not?

When lack of greed arises in a person, does it arise for welfare or for harm?"  
When lack of aversion arises in a person, does it arise for welfare or for harm?"  
When lack of delusion arises in a person, does it arise for welfare or for harm?"  
Are these qualities skillful or unskillful?  
When adopted & carried out, do they lead to welfare & to happiness, or not

The Buddha was asking questions using the three poisons, greed, aversion (hatred), and delusion, as a guide to discern whether or not the teacher was tainted by one or more of the poisons when expounding and glorifying their doctrines.

So, then he said "Now, Kālāmas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.'

When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities (of the doctrine) are skillful;; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness'—then you should enter & remain in them.

Thanissaro Bhikku in a preface to this sutta, notes "Although this discourse is often cited as the Buddha's carte blanche for following one's own sense of right and wrong, it actually sets a standard much more rigorous than that. Traditions are not to be followed simply because they are traditions. Reports (such as historical accounts or news) are not to be followed simply because the source seems reliable. One's own preferences are not to be followed simply because they seem logical or resonate with one's feelings.

**Instead, any view or belief must be tested by the results it yields when put into practice; and—to guard against the possibility of any bias or limitations in one's understanding of those results—they must further be checked against the experience of people who are observant and wise.** The ability to question and test one's beliefs in an appropriate way is called appropriate attention."<sup>5</sup>

Appropriate attention is taking a hard look at the teacher and what they propose. Is there any taint of greed, aversion, or delusion?

In paying appropriate attention to the Buddhist lineages, one might consider:  
What is the motivation of the teacher? Is it for self-gain (greed), denigration of another lineage, or delusion (denying impermanence and selfless nature)?

Is the propounded teaching leading to awakening or to further greed, hatred, and delusion?

In summary, we must recognize the diversity of the Buddhist lineages, that they change over time and are open-ended. Choosing a path is based on the qualities of the teacher and the teachings and whether or not you find benefit. If you don't, abandon it.

## **What are some of the differences in Buddhist Lineages?**

First, what all of the lineages have in common is to support every being's awakening, sometimes phrased as reaching nirvana, enlightenment or total equanimity. The differences are in how this might be achieved.

Below is a brief summary of my impression of the different approaches by the lineages of which I am familiar. This is not a detailed description of the lineages.

### **Theravada**

The emphasis is on hearing, reading, and reflecting on the suttas from the Pali Canon (teachings of the Buddha) with a primary focus on the four noble truths and the eightfold path. The eightfold path includes understanding, virtuous behavior, and practice.

Individual awakening (e.g. becoming an arahant) when realized will automatically lead to loving-kindness and compassion for all sentient beings.

Awakening can be gradual or sudden. There is no preference.

### **Mahayana**

In addition to the Pali Canon, Mahayana uses suttas composed after the Buddha's death such as the Heart and Lotus Suttas.

Rather than the individual seeking awakening for oneself, there is more emphasis on becoming a Bodhisattva (serving others) which automatically leads to an individual's awakening.

### **Zen**

Zen is a branch of the Mahayana and practiced mainly in Japan and in China where it is referred to as Chan.

Zen emphasizes that one is already awakened but clouded by the fabrications of the three poisons: greed, hatred, and delusion. Work focuses on eradicating the fabrications.

Sitting quietly and doing nothing (zazen or meditation) is emphasized.

Alan Watts notes: "Yet it should be obvious that action without wisdom, without clear awareness of the world as it really is, can never improve anything. Furthermore, as muddy water is best cleared by leaving it alone, it could be argued that those who sit quietly and do nothing are making one of the best possible contributions to a world in turmoil."<sup>6</sup>

Koan practice "is a story, dialogue, question, or statement from the Chinese Chan-lore, supplemented with commentaries, that is used in Zen practice to provoke the "great doubt" and initial insight of Zen-students. Prolonged koan-study is intended to shatter small-minded pride of, and identification with, this initial insight, and spurs further development of insight and compassion, and integration thereof in daily life and character."<sup>7</sup>

Alan Watts notes: "...passing a series of tests based on the mondo or anecdotes of the old masters... No doubt the answers given were the original replies to the questions, but later the problem becomes both the question and its answer, for the student is expected to see into the relationship between the two, which, to say the least, is none too obvious. For the moment, it is enough to say that every koan has a "point" which is some aspect of Zen experience, that its point is often concealed by being made very much more apparent than one would expect, and

that koans are concerned not only with the primary awakening to the Void but also with its subsequent expression in life and thought.”<sup>8</sup>

A koan example:

*If you meet the Buddha, kill him.*<sup>9</sup>

Sudden awakening emphasized as opposed to gradual awakening

### **Tibetan Buddhism (including Vajrayana)**

Tibetan Buddhism upholds classic Buddhist teachings such as the four noble truths, the five aggregates, karma and rebirth, and dependent arising. They also uphold various other Buddhist doctrines associated with Mahāyāna Buddhism (as well as the tantric Vajrayāna tradition).

Sudden awakening is emphasized.

Pith instructions, also referred to as heart teachings, essential instructions, or direct pointing-out instructions, are a form of concise yet rich teachings that distill the core essence of Buddhist philosophy into clear, experiential guidance. Such instructions aim to bypass intellectual complexities and lead practitioners directly to transformative insights. They cut through complicated doctrines to provide a direct and profound experience of the nature of reality and the mind. They are shortcuts to understanding and experience. It has been said that pith instructions are like a special key that opens the door to our own deeper being.”<sup>10</sup>

An example:

*In this time of tremendous global and personal stress, the path of Joy has never been more important. Experiencing simple joys regularly is vital for our well-being. Simply sitting in the sunshine, or enjoying a cup of tea, are some easy ways to bring joy into our hearts. Do this kindness for yourself, and then offer it out to all beings.*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [History of Buddhism](#) Wikipedia including the diagram above

<sup>2</sup> Rita M Gross (1943-2015) Buddhist feminist scholar, practitioner, and teacher. She retired from the University of Wisconsin Eau-Claire where she was Professor Emerita of Comparative Studies in Religion. She served as president of the Society of Buddhist-Christian Studies and was a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*.

<sup>3</sup> Gross, Rita M [Buddhist History for Buddhist Practitioners: How—and why—to teach Buddhist history to sometimes reluctant Buddhists](#) Tricycle Fall 2010

<sup>4</sup> Robbert-Jan Adriaansen [Historical Consciousness](#)

<sup>5</sup> To the Kālāmas: [Kālāma Sutta](#) (AN 3:66)

<sup>6</sup> Watts, Alan W.. The Way of Zen (p. 155)

<sup>7</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koan>

<sup>8</sup> Watts, Alan W.. The Way of Zen (p. 106).

<sup>9</sup> [10 Buddhist koans, and why understanding them is pointless](#)

<sup>10</sup> <https://tricycle.org/article/the-power-of-pith-instruction/>

<sup>11</sup> Tenphel, Jamyang. The Awakening Heart: 108 Pith Instructions for Buddhist Practice (p. 26). Timeless Awareness Publications. Kindle Edition.