



Buddhist Lineages: Which Path is Best?

Robert Hodge

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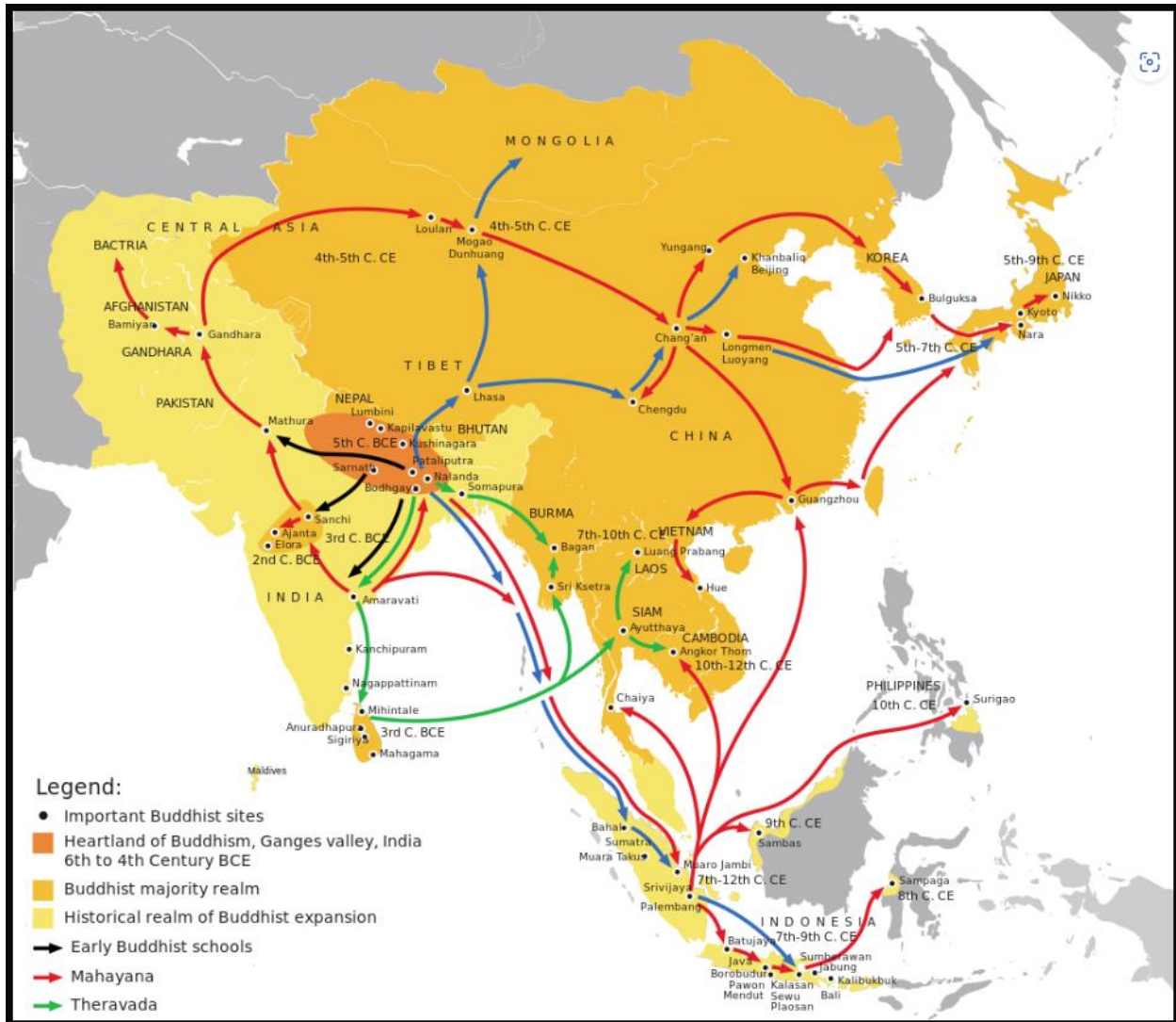
I started attending a sangha (Show Me Dharma) over 20 years ago. This sangha, taught by Ginny Morgan and Phil Jones both trained as Community Dharma Leaders (CDL) at Spirit Rock in California, was based on the Theravada tradition. However, Ginny included in her talks teachings from other traditions including 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 5th 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.¹

To answer these questions, I am going to start by summarizing (including quoting and paraphrasing) an article by Rita M. Gross², Buddhist History for Buddhist Practitioners: How—and why—to teach Buddhist history to sometimes reluctant Buddhists³ 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.⁴

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.

In the next talk, we will explore appropriate attention: the ability to question and test one's beliefs in an appropriate way as taught by the Buddha.

¹ [History of Buddhism](#) Wikipedia including the diagram above

² 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*.

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

⁴ Robbert-Jan Adriaansen [Historical Consciousness](#)