

# Intro to Buddhism in the US

## Week 3: The historical Buddha, the Pali Canon, and contemporary U.S. Theravadan

The Center at Belvedere  
Charlottesville, VA

Link to readings and slides:<https://parusanalytics.com/introbud2025/week-three-2025.html>

## Discussion forum [experiment]

[https://vse-cville.org/discussion-topics/  
intro-to-buddhism-in-the-us-2025/](https://vse-cville.org/discussion-topics/intro-to-buddhism-in-the-us-2025/)



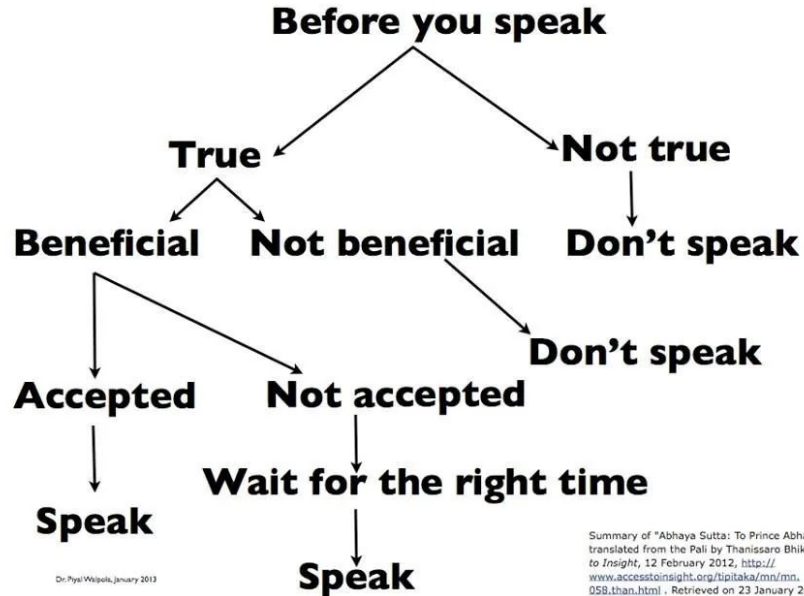
A samurai once asked Zen Master Hakuin where he would go after he died.

Hakuin answered 'How am I supposed to know?'

'How do you not know? You're the greatest Zen master in all of Japan!' exclaimed the samurai.

'Yes, but not a dead one,' Hakuin answered.

# Right speech in action



Also frequently included: am I the right person to speak?

From IMS: "The Buddha divides right speech into four components: abstaining from false speech, abstaining from slanderous speech, abstaining from harsh speech, and abstaining from idle chatter."  
<https://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/right-speech-samma-vaca/>

## Right livelihood

In defining Right Livelihood, the Buddha named five types of businesses that lay people should not engage in. These were:

- Dealing in weapons
- Trade of human beings including slavery and prostitution
- Meat production and butchery
- Business in intoxicants
- Business in poison

<https://www.upaya.org/2017/11/dharma-right-livelihood-maia-zenyu-duerr/>

**Right livelihood:** One should earn a living in a way that is legal, peaceful, and promotes compassion, understanding, and awareness. This includes avoiding occupations that cause harm, such as the arms trade, slave trade, and meat industry. (Google AI Overview, 14-Jan-2025)

# Biographical accounts of the life of the Buddha

- Karen Armstrong. *Buddha*. (2001) A relatively short and very clearly written narrative of the life of the Buddha looking at various textual sources—trying to sort the probable from the mythical—and historical context
- Thich Nhat Hanh. *Old Path, White Clouds*. (1987) A very extended life of the Buddha; one of TNH's first works and you can also see various ways he is developing his modernizing concepts via what is included and excluded from the copious available accounts.

# Higher criticism: criteria for assessing Biblical stories

- multiple attestation (being mentioned in multiple independent sources) [not an option for independent sources, but there is redundancy in the Pali Canon]
- the criterion of dissimilarity (unique teachings not found in surrounding cultures),
- the criterion of embarrassment (stories that might be considered embarrassing to early Christians),
- archaeological evidence that corroborates details [not an option before Ashoka]
- internal consistency within the biblical text;

[summary by Google AI Overview, 20-Jan-2024]

Also see Rita Gross, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/buddhist-history-buddhist-practitioners/>

# Background

- Born in Lumbini (modern Nepal) as **Siddhartha Gautama** in the relatively small Shakya state
- Almost certainly raised in what we would now recognize as the **Kshatriya** caste
- Standard story about pampered childhood apparently actually refers to an earlier incarnation; teachings are consistent with someone raised as a warrior

# Enlightenment [bodhi]

- Left his young family around age 30 to spend six years as a wandering ascetic
- Mastered two intense meditation practices -- jnanas and something else -- without attaining what he wanted
- Went into a severe ascetic mode almost to the point of death until rescued by a young woman who persuaded him to eat
- Upon recovering his strength, sat under the bodhi tree in Bodhgaya fighting the demon Mara who presented the poisons of anger, greed/lust and delusion
  - Mara's final gambit was **doubt**, asking why the Buddha deserved enlightenment. The Buddha touched the ground and said "The earth is my witness" and was enlightened. Note the earth is also generally considered female
- Wandered around in a state of bliss until the god Brahma persuaded him to teach
- Gave his first sermon—on, ahem, the Four Noble Truths—at the Deer Park in Varanasi to five followers who had initially rejected his abandoning asceticism, and they were enlightened...

# Forty years of active teaching

- Walked around a lot then would settle in one place during the annual rainy season, gave a lot of sermons, attracted a lot of followers
- Founded a lot of monasteries with patronage of local elites, with whom he was clearly quite comfortable
- Debated some Brahmins and wandering ascetics; others he ignored
- Definitely rejects the emerging caste system
- Kept meditating (!!)

# Controversies

## Internal schisms:

- Kosambe: Went into seclusion for a year and a half over disagreements within the monastic sangha: "Can't y'all just get along??" [paraphrase...]. See Susan Stone's trilogy
- Devadatta schism: much more serious with multiple assassination attempts, over the issue of how strict monastic rules should be (and by implication, succession), but eventually burned out
  - This issue is very similar to one of the first Christian heresies/controversies, Donatism
  - Also sort of Judas in terms of betrayal: Devadatta was a cousin and one of the most important monks

## Very reluctantly accepted women into as monastics

- This eventually comes to an end due to political instability in the Indian subcontinent ca. 1000 CE
- Bhikkhunī lineage revived in 2011 at Spirit Rock

# Around the time of his death (parinibbana)

- Withdrew from public life. Also had really serious back problems
- Many of his patrons died or were overthrown by their sons (one with the help of Devadatta...)
- Did not designate a successor
  - Note that the Theravadan Three Jewels do not include refuge in a teacher/guru; Vajrayana thoroughly honors the guru; Zen is in between
- Did not want his teachings translated to Sanskrit but instead to be taught in local languages
- Did not systematize monastic rules
- May or may not have been poisoned
- Final words: "All things are impermanent; practice diligently"

# Following the death of the Buddha

- Shortly thereafter, the first Buddhist council assembled to record all of the teaching
- Sangha splits into 18 different schools, though likely these are mostly relatively minor differences in monastic rules (Vinaya): the Theravadan is simply the only surviving version
- The Shakya state was utterly smashed by a neighboring more powerful state within a generation
- Buddhism would eventually virtually die out in India, losing in competition to the more adaptable and lay-friendly Hinduism, and in the instability accompanying the Mughal Moslem conquest (1520s to 1720s), albeit by most accounts it was pretty much done before the Mughals arrived. Theravadan Buddhism continues to thrive in Sri Lanka and southeast Asia
- Partial revival in India the mid-20th century as an anti-caste movement, notably by B.R. Ambedkar (1898-1956)

# Monastics frequently mentioned in suttas

- **Ananda:** first cousin, primary attendant, and often the straight man (asks Buddha a question and Buddha explains why he is wrong) but Buddha also lets him teach periodically. Known for his memory. Critical in the establishment of the order of bhikkhuni (nuns) by persuading the Buddha to ordain the Buddha's foster-mother Mahapajapati Gotami and got a lot of crap for this. Enlightened just in time to be at the First Council
- **Sariputta:** foremost in wisdom and by implication literature/theory
- **Moggallana:** foremost in experience and psychic powers...
- **Khema:** foremost nun, wife of King Bimbisara but exceeds him in spiritual accomplishments. Like Sariputta, excels in wisdom
- **Uppalavanna:** female parallel to Moggaliana; achieved enlightenment two weeks after becoming a nun, but prior to that had a difficult life (in some versions)

# The Pali Canon and other literature

The Tripitaka (ca. 30BCE, established by the 4th Buddhist Council)

- [Vinaya Piṭaka](#) ("Discipline Basket"), dealing with rules or discipline of the monastic [sangha](#);
- [Sutta Piṭaka](#) (Sutra/Sayings Basket), discourses and sermons of Buddha, some religious poetry and is the largest basket; this is subdivided into a number of parts, albeit these are largely based on length, not topic.
- [Abhidhamma Piṭaka](#), treatises that elaborate Buddhist doctrines, particularly about mind, also called the "systematic philosophy" basket.

source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C4%81li\\_Canon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C4%81li_Canon)

***Dhammapada***: relatively short (and readable) collection of 26 chapters of verses, organized by topic, so it is much like Proverbs or the Gospel of Thomas.

***Visuddhimagga***: Core text for the Theravadan approach, compiled by Buddhaghosa around 500CE from existing Sri Lankan knowledge and practice. Far more systematic and philosophically rigorous than the Sutta Pitaka, though also differs quite significantly in some aspects, particularly meditation practices.

# Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy

Book by Jan Westerhoff. Period is about 200 - 500 CE

Nagarjuna: emphasis on emptiness

Visuddhimaga ("Path of Purification")

Development of multiple major philosophical schools, most notably

- **Yogachara** (Sanskrit: योगाचार, IAST: *Yogācāra*) is an influential tradition of Buddhist philosophy and psychology emphasizing the study of cognition, perception, and consciousness through the interior lens of meditation, as well as philosophical reasoning (hetuvidyā). [Google]
- Mādhyamaka focuses on the ultimate nature of phenomena as well as the non-conceptual realization of ultimate reality that is experienced in meditation.<sup>[4]</sup> ; [also Google]. Essentially it is the implementation of Nagarjuna's approach

# Individuals influential in establishing the Insight approach

Burma: Mahasi Sayadaw, lineage of Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923) which established a lay tradition to preserve Buddhism against colonial incursions

Thailand: Ajahn Chah—Thai "forest sangha" rejected the rigid scholarly approach of official Thai Buddhism which dated back to Mongkut/Rama IV and was intended to curb the independence inherent in monastic meditation practice. Ajahn Chah is more than a bit of an anarchist (in a good way...)

India: S.N. Goenka (student of the Burmese approach)

Bengladesh: Dipa Ma

Key: these teachers actively encouraged the Americans to study with multiple teachers, not knowing what approaches would work in the US.

## Ajahn Chah approach

"Just go into the room and put one chair in the center. Take the seat in the center of the room, open the doors and the windows, and see who comes to visit. You will witness all kinds of scenes and actors, all kind of temptations and stories, everything imaginable. Your only job is to say in your seat. You will see it all arise and pass, and out of this, wisdom and understanding will come."

Zen Calendar 21-Jan-2025

[FWIW, that calendar does, in fact, have a lot of quotes relevant to actual Zen]

## Ajahn Chah approach

Try to be mindful, and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool, and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha.

Quote from Ajahn Chah in Spirit Rock Meditation Center "Gratitude Hut"



*teaching authorization ceremony at Insight Meditation Society with Mahashi Sayadaw (back row center). Fr (left to right): Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and Jacqueline Schwartz.*

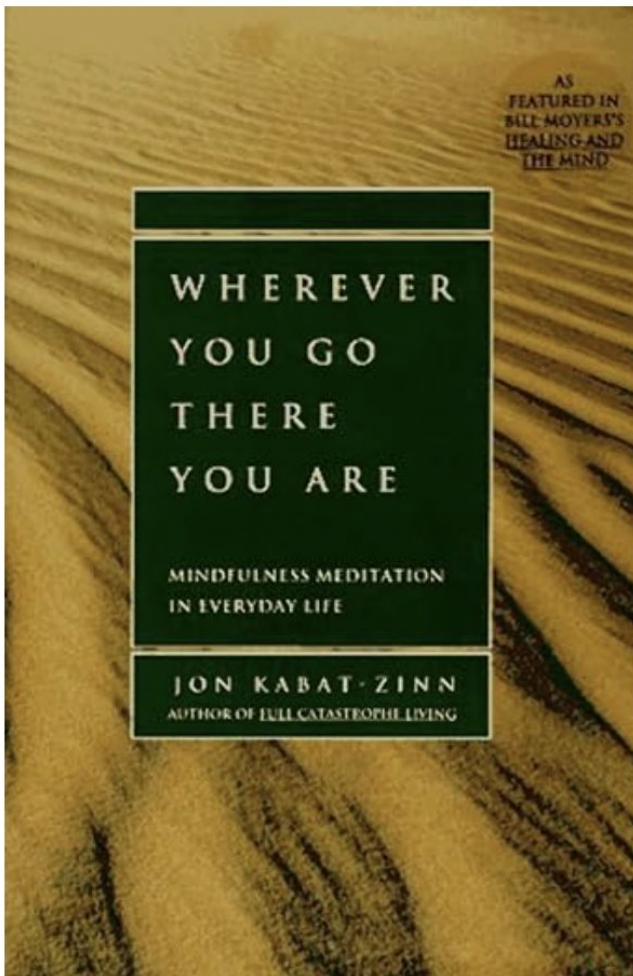


Insight Meditation Society, Barre, MA: <https://www.dharma.org/>

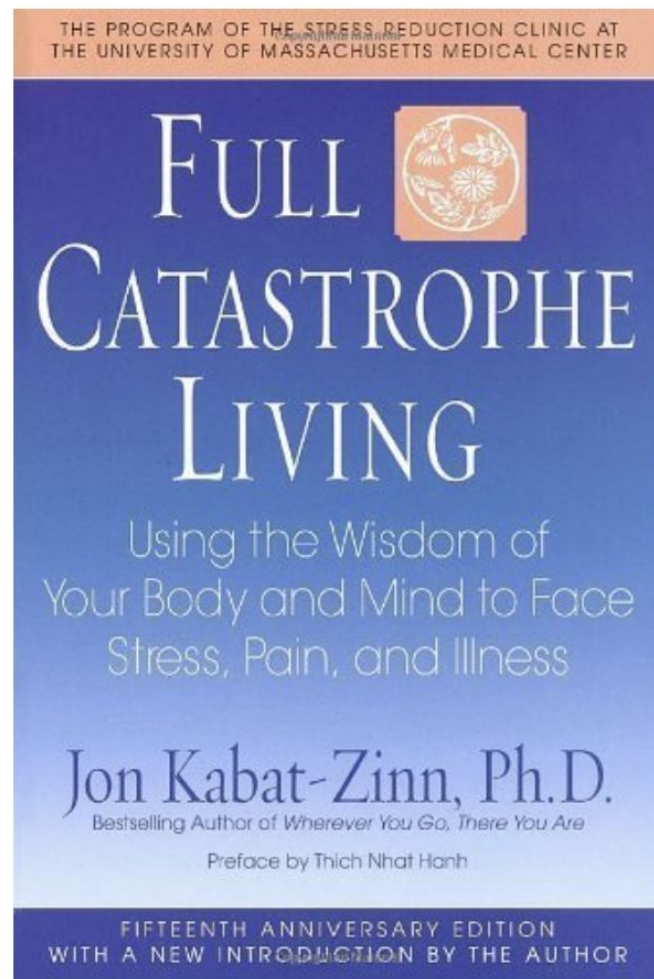


Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Marin County, CA. <https://www.spiritrock.org>



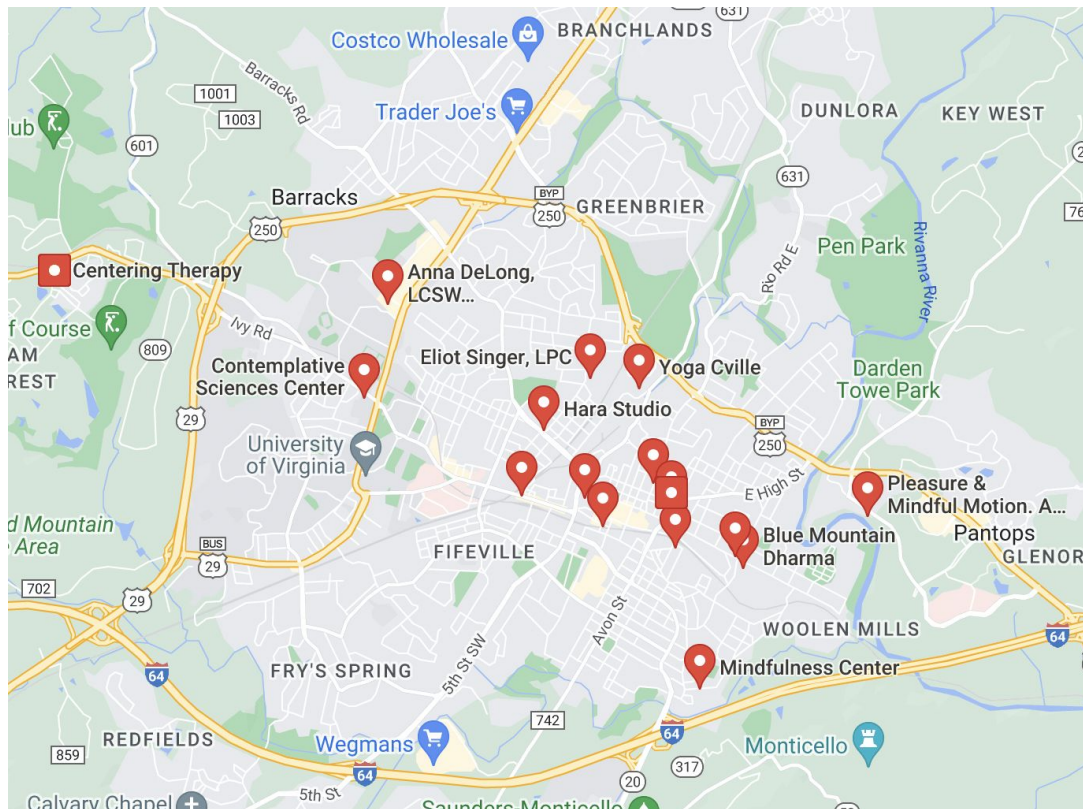


1991



1994

# Google map results for "mindfulness Charlottesville"



*Psychology Today* lists about 250 (!) therapists in Cville who incorporate "mindfulness" in their work.  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/va/charlottesville?category=mindfulness-based-mbct>