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An Introduction to Buddhist Philosophy

In this clear and accessible book, Stephen Laumakis explains the origin and development of Buddhist ideas and concepts, focusing on the philosophical ideas and arguments presented and defended by selected thinkers and sutras from various traditions. He starts with a sketch of the Buddha and the Dharma, and highlights the origins of Buddhism in India. He then considers specific details of the Dharma with special attention to Buddhist metaphysics and epistemology, and examines the development of Buddhism in China, Japan, and Tibet, concluding with the ideas of the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh. In each chapter he includes explanations of key terms and teachings, excerpts from primary source materials, and presentations of the arguments for each position. His book will be an invaluable guide for all who are interested in this rich and vibrant philosophy.

STEPHEN J. LAUMAKIS is Associate Professor in the Philosophy Department at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul.

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For Mary, Maggie, Molly and Stephen

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“We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world.”

– *Dhammapada* (translation by Thomas Byrom)

“This is morality, this is concentration, this is wisdom. Concentration, when imbued with morality, brings great fruit and profit. Wisdom, when imbued with concentration, brings great fruit and profit. The mind imbued with wisdom becomes completely free from the corruptions, that is, from the corruption of sensuality, of becoming, of false views and of ignorance.”

– *Digha Nikaya, Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, 1.12 (translation by Maurice Walshe)

“The mind is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.”

– *Samyutta Nikaya*, IV, 95 (translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi)

“Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reflection on reasons, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think ‘The ascetic is our teacher.’ But when you know for yourselves . . . then you should do or do not.”

– *Anguttara Nikaya*, III, 65 (translation by Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi)

“Both formerly and now what I teach is suffering and the cessation of suffering.”

– *Majjhima Nikaya, Alagaddupama Sutta*, 38 (translation by Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi)

“No other thing do I know, O monks, that is so intractable as an undeveloped mind. An undeveloped mind is truly intractable . . . No other thing do I know, O monks, that brings so much suffering as an undeveloped and uncultivated mind. An undeveloped and uncultivated mind truly brings suffering . . . No other thing do I know, O monks, that brings so much harm as a mind that is untamed, unguarded, unprotected and uncontrolled. Such a mind truly brings much harm . . . No other thing do I know, O monks, that changes so

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quickly as the mind. It is not easy to give a simile for how quickly the mind changes.”

– *Anguttara Nikaya*, I, iii, iv, v (selections) (translation by
Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi)

“Not to do any evil, to cultivate good, to purify one’s mind, this is the Teaching of the Buddhas.”

– *Dhammapada*, 183 (translation by Walpola Rahula)

Preface

These are interesting and exciting times to be studying Buddhism and non-Western philosophy and religion. As we try to make sense of recent and ongoing events in the world, it is evident that many actions are inspired by ideas that are foreign to traditional Western beliefs and practices. Whether these ideas are political, religious, or philosophical in origin and motivation, it is clear that understanding our global world requires more than knowledge of one's own philosophical and cultural heritage.

In response to these needs, universities throughout the world have been working to broaden their curricula by emphasizing the value and necessity of multiculturalism and diversity in all areas of study. In the field of philosophy, for example, there is increasing interest, research, and teaching in both comparative philosophy and "world" philosophy. This growing interest and activity in the realm of comparative and "world" philosophy can be observed in the ever-increasing number of books published on non-Western thought. In fact, there has been a veritable explosion in the number of introductory texts, translations of primary source materials, and even new editions of classic publications. These same activities are happening in the area of Buddhist philosophy and religion.

Nevertheless, it is easy for anyone who is new to the study of Buddhism to feel somewhat overwhelmed by the size of the task at hand. The history of Buddhism spans some 2500 years and its teachings, in one form or another, are found on almost every continent in the world. From their beginnings in India, the teachings of the Buddha spread north (to China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet) and south (through most of South East Asia) and most recently to the West as well. At the same time, there are "liberal" and "conservative" interpretations of "his" teachings, and strict and less strict observers of "his" way – and almost every position in between. In fact, there are some strands of Buddhism that are, or at least appear to be, so far removed from what are

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generally considered to be the earliest teachings and practices of the historical Buddha and his immediate followers, that one cannot help but wonder both how the name “Buddhism” can be accurately applied across such a broad spectrum of beliefs and practices, and whether the name itself refers to any coherent and consistent set of ideas, propositions, beliefs, and practices.

Consider for a moment the quotations at the beginning of this book. Each is supposed to be an accurate rendering of a teaching of the historical Buddha, and each is only a few lines taken from traditional Buddhist texts. Now stop and think about the breadth and complexity of the ideas expressed in each quotation; consider their interrelationships, and realize that there are literally thousands of sayings of the Buddha. One should, I hope, begin to get a sense of the size of the problems involved in an introductory text on Buddhism.

There are at least three possible responses to this situation. First, one might espouse a kind of forlorn skepticism and claim that there is quite literally no hope of getting a grip on “Buddhism.” One could simply decide that “Buddhism” is just too complex and too culturally and historically diverse to be clearly and unambiguously specified and studied. On the other extreme, one might maintain a position of naive and blissful ignorance with respect to these problems and either simply fail to recognize them or uncritically accept everything that claims to be “Buddhist” as authentically Buddhist. Yet neither of these positions seems to be intellectually satisfying. There is, however, a third response, or a “middle way” between these extremes. One could simultaneously be critically aware of the problems, limitations, and difficulties of one’s study, and also work to avoid the charges of naiveté and oversimplification as well. That is the path this book attempts to take. It is also, I think, something like the “Middle Way” the historical Buddha himself is said to have taught.

As far as we know, the man who became “the Buddha” or “the Awakened One” was neither a skeptic nor a fideist (i.e., a blind-faith believer) in religious and philosophical matters. He is said to have urged his followers not to believe something because of who said it or where they heard it or where they read it, but because it accorded with their own experiences. It is precisely this standard that I urge the reader to use when considering the claims and arguments in this book.

It is also important to keep in mind that no single-volume introduction to Buddhism can cover everything in the Buddhist tradition; the historical

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forms are simply too complex and diverse in time, language, culture, geography, and even doctrinal matters to be covered in anything more than a superficial way in one volume. As a result, one must make some difficult and perhaps controversial decisions about what topics, ideas, and figures to cover. And these decisions are further complicated by two important background questions: first, is Buddhism a *philosophy*, or a *religion*, or some kind of combination of both, or neither? And second, assuming one could isolate Buddhist *philosophy* from Buddhist *religion*, what divisions or branches of its *philosophy* ought one to consider?

These are obviously large and complex questions that could be the subjects of books of their own. The subject matter of this book is Buddhist *philosophy* – with a particular focus on its epistemology and metaphysics. In other words, unlike most introductions to Buddhism that focus on it as a *religion*, this book is an introduction to Buddhist *philosophy*. Moreover, this book will be concerned primarily with Buddhist theories of knowledge and reality, and only secondarily or peripherally with its ethical claims.

Given these initial considerations and decisions, the plan of the book is as follows. **Part I** presents a rough “Sketch of the Buddha and the *Dhamma*.” Its four chapters are concerned with “The life of Siddhattha Gotama,” “The contexts for the emergence of Buddhism,” “The basic teachings of the Buddha,” and the theoretical and practical question of whether there is “One Buddhism or many Buddhisms?” **Part II** fills in the “Details of the *Dhamma*.” Its four chapters focus on the metaphysical and epistemological aspects of “*Kamma*, *Samsara*, and rebirth,” “Interdependent arising,” “Impermanence, no-enduring-self, and emptiness,” and “*Moksa* and *Nibbana*.” Finally, **Part III** traces the ongoing “Development of the *Dhamma/Dharma*” in “Bodhidharma’s and Huineng’s Buddhisms,” “Pure Land Buddhism,” “Tibetan Buddhism,” and concludes with “Two contemporary forms of Buddhism” – the Buddhism of the Dalai Lama and the “engaged Buddhism” of Thich Nhat Hanh.

Following the advice of the Buddha himself, I encourage the reader to consider the evidence for the Buddha’s teachings for yourself and to weigh and test it against your own experience. No other effort is requested or necessary – and none will be better repaid.