

Cosmic Buddhism

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Religion, as we understand it today, is a **cultural system** of prescribed conduct and practices, morality, worldviews, texts, holy places, prophecies or organizations, that relate humanity to spiritual, supernatural, or transcendental elements. This is only a general summary. Beyond this, the details will depend on the biases, experiences and visions of religionists, scholars, teachers and individuals who show an interest in “religion.”

Early Buddhism

Early Buddhism contains a rich variety of elements that we would regard as **divine** (devas or gods, spirits, and demons), **sacred** (the Buddha and his saints), and **faith** (acceptance of Buddhism in our lives). Early Buddhism even has “some sort of ultimacy and transcendence that will provide norms and power for the rest of life”¹—that is, nirvana, the unconditioned.

The main strength and efficacy of early Buddhism lie in its “2 teachings” of the **implicit** (*neyy’attha*) and the **explicit** (*nī’t’attha*). The implicit teaching is most common: narratives, stories, metaphors, figures of speech, symbols and rituals. The meaning of such a teaching needs “to be drawn out,” so that its purpose is properly understood (a right-brain activity). The explicit teaching is one of personal experience where what is verbal or scribal (heard or written or read) is understood as originally intended by the Buddha that accords with true reality (a left-brain activity). In important ways, this is what sets the Buddha’s teaching apart from other religions and from religion itself.

Very brief history of religion

The earliest known religion may be said to be reflected in the human awareness of death and how they dealt with it. The earliest known human burial occurred in the Middle East in about 100,000 BCE. The first human cremation was probably in 40,000 BCE, remains of which were discovered near Lake Mungo, western New South Wales, Australia.²

The Rigvedas, the oldest of the brahminical Vedas (hymns to ancient gods) were composed around 1700-1100 BCE. The “forest meditations” of the Upanishads, based on human teachers arose around 1250-600 BCE, that is, just before the Buddha’s time. The earliest Jewish scriptures, the first 5 books of the Torah, were probably compiled around 6th-5th centuries BCE. The Buddha lived from 480-400 BCE, teaching for the last 45 years of his life. Christianity arose about 600 years later in the Middle East; and Islam after about another 600 years.

¹ Paul James & Peter Mandaville, *Globalization and Culture, Vol. 2: Globalizing Religions*. London: Sage Publications, 2010.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_religion.

Traditional religions

Judaism, Christianity and Islam share common roots in tracing their religious ancestry to the 1st Hebrew patriarch Abraham (around 2000 BCE). Hence, these religions tend to be ethnic and tribal in nature.

The Chinese have 2 well known systems: Daoism and Confucianism. The roots of Daoism go back to at least to the 4th century BCE. It was originally a mystical system which basically stresses on being one with nature, its ideal being seeking longevity, even immortality. Then there is philosophical Daoism (its interpretations depending on individual teachers and schools).

Race-based religious systems

Confucianism is a secular system valuing the family and social system, rituals and ritual behaviour, hierarchy and the scholarly class. Hence, it was often used by the ruling class to gain a greater control of society by centralizing power at the top. Hence, strictly speaking, they are not “religions,” a space filled later by Chinese Buddhism.

Buddhism itself started as a path of awakening through self-effort. After the Buddha, there “evolved” philosophical Buddhism (most of Mahāyāna), magical and ritual Buddhism (most of Vajrayāna), Daoism-based Buddhism (most of Chan and Zen), various forms of ethnic Buddhisms, theistic Buddhisms (the Amitabha sects) and the new Buddhisms, worshipping new Buddhas or holy figures from their own culture or sect.

Back to the Buddha

With the availability today of **the early Buddhist texts**, good translations and easy access to them, there is now a new awareness of “authentic” Buddhism, teachings that go back to the Buddha himself. This is boosted by the contemporary discovery of meditation or “mindfulness” by modern psychology and the corporate world. One interesting development of this is the rise of Buddhism as a business enterprise.

In our own time, we see Buddhism rapidly evolving into successful **business systems** marketing especially Buddhist education and meditation as popular means of worldly and commercial success. Many Buddhist clergy members of both the urban as well as some of the forest tradition, drawn to such success, have taken up academic studies to gain salaried employment, or preach populist Buddhism of the crowd, very much like premodern Christianity in the west. These modern clergy live more affluent and elite lives than the laity, as part of a social phenomenon known as the **secularization** of the “sangha.”

Dhamma undercurrent

Running quietly, like a deep subterranean freshwater stream, is the Buddha-centred, sutta-based Buddhism that upholds the path of awakening running back to the historical Buddha himself. This is known as **the tradition of the breath**, after the means by which the Buddha gained awakening. This is a spiritual system of personal development that is beyond race and religion; indeed, it is a method that sees the true nature of things as being **impermanent**,

and hence unsatisfactory, meaning that we need to better ourselves beyond our frail physical bodies for a higher and freer mental being (meditation). Ultimately, this leads to deconstructing our mindset, freeing us into the unconditioned, known as nirvana (Pali, *nibbana*).

Cosmic Buddhism

What kind of religion will **the future** be drawn to, especially when we have made contact and are living with alien species from other quadrants of the universe? What religion, if any, will these races find meaningful?

The logical Vulcans, the profiteering Ferengi, the imperial Romulans, the antennaed Andorrans, the bickering Cardassians, the warlike Klingons, the oppressed Bajorans, cybernetic Borgs (when they can think for themselves for a moment) and the beings of the Alpha Quadrant (such as the Delphic Expanse) of the Star Trek universe.

Or the insectoid Geonosians, the water-loving Tusken, the moth-like Talz, the semi-sentient Rancor, the red-skinned Devaronians, the teddy-bear-like Ewoks, the horned and head-tailed Togrutas, the combative Zabrak, the mysterious Yoda, the technologically advanced Gungans, the blobby Hutt, the tactical Mon Calamari, the hairy Wookiees, the shape-shifting Clawdites and the serene Kaminoans.

Yes, these species are from the realms of science-fiction. Well, our gods and non-humans form the realms of religious fiction, or better, religious **mythology** (they are more real than the reality we can only imagine). Would any of our earth-based tribal or ethnic systems attract them? Of course, the question remains: **What** would attract them? Would they be interested in **mental evolution** to become even more highly beings no matter what their species?

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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