

The sculptures shown on pages 54 to 59 all originate from the ancient region of Gandhara (now parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan), a cultural center and major trade route hub. Under the influence of Indo-Greek rule in the first several centuries both before and during the Common Era, it produced a wealth of distinctive Greco-Buddhist sculptural works.

# A MORE ENLIGHTENED WAY OF BEING

The entrance of Buddhist ethics  
into the modern world

BY SETH ZUIHO SEGALL

Buddhism generously provides us with an embarrassment of ethical riches—the precepts, the *paramitas* and *brahmaviharas*, the Vinaya and *Jatakas*, the Abhidharma, and the path elements of right speech, action, and livelihood. These diverse resources offer various forms of ethical guidance, including rules for ethical behavior along with accompanying commentary, a catalog of wholesome and unwholesome states of mind, lists of virtues along with methods for their cultivation, and narrative illustrations of moral conduct. The underlying conceptual scheme tying these resources together is simple and clear: our thoughts and actions can be deemed either “skillful” or “unskillful” depending on whether they assist or hinder better conditions for the future, especially for future rebirth or, ideally, an awakening that brings release from the wheel of rebirth entirely. This conceptual scheme—whether expressed in terms of the arhat ideal of attaining nirvana or the bodhisattva ideal of achieving buddhahood for the benefit of all—functions as an effective motivation for ethical behavior when rebirth is of genuine existential concern. For many contemporary Buddhists, however, rebirth is not a compelling basis for their spiritual and moral lives. In the West, even those who accept the possibility of rebirth rarely feel that the idea of ending future lives holds deep personal meaning for them in the conduct of their daily living.

It’s not so much that the idea of rebirth has been disproved; no strong empirical evidence can be mustered either for or against it. It’s that the idea of rebirth is swimming against the tide of contemporary materialism and naturalism—metaphysi-

cal propositions that play an important role as core assumptions in science and thus significantly shape our modern cultural worldview. These propositions assert that our best knowledge of the world is achieved by analyzing phenomena as the outcome of processes of physical causation and posit that there’s no world behind or beyond the material world of physics, chemistry, and biology. It follows from this that because consciousness can be fully accounted for by reducing it to material processes, it ceases to exist at death. It’s hard to reconcile rebirth with this outlook, which—regardless of whether one consciously accepts or rejects it—is absorbed by cultural osmosis into one’s modern sense of the world.

Many spiritual seekers—especially in the West, where rebirth has never been widely believed—don’t become Buddhists because they want to end the cycle of rebirth; they’re motivated by some other inner disquiet. As an experiment, take a moment now to check out your own motivation. When was the last time you caught yourself thinking, “I’d really like to end rebirth?” More likely what you’ve been thinking is “I wish I were happier” or “I wish I were a better person” or “What’s the best and most meaningful use I can make of my life?” In other words, you’ve been motivated by concerns about *this* life here and now. While “rebirth” can still play a useful role as a metaphor for how one moment conditions the next, for many contemporary Buddhists it has lost whatever motivational potency it might once have possessed.

As a consequence, many modern Buddhists—especially those shaped by the assumptions of Western culture—find



traditional Buddhist ethics in need of some kind of glue to hold it together. Most recent reinterpreters of Buddhism find that glue in some version of the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing—an idea so pervasive in Western culture that Westerners are often unaware of its source. Aristotle thought that the *telos*, or ultimate purpose of human life, was to live well and flourish, and his conception of human flourishing emphasized developing one's virtues, behaving ethically toward others, and contemplating truth. When transplanted into Buddhism, this Aristotelian ideal shifts the end point of Buddhist practice from ending rebirth to living the best kind of life one possibly can—a best kind of life that combines wisdom, ethics, and contemplation to engender a profound sense of well-being. This is a reinterpretation of the Buddhist enlightenment ideal stripped of any connection to the framework of rebirth. We might label it *eudaimonic enlightenment* to distinguish it from its more traditional cousins.

To be clear, it isn't the whole of Aristotelian *eudaimonia* that gets imported into Buddhism but just its general outlines. The fit between *eudaimonia* in all its specificity and Buddhist philosophy isn't sufficiently harmonious to allow wholesale importation of the former. There are notable differences between Aristotle's list of virtues (for example, wittiness and magnanimity) and the Buddhist list (compassion and lovingkindness). Aristotle's wisdom (*sophia*) is a combination of scientific knowledge and critical reason, while Buddhist wisdom (*prajna*) is insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and the absence of self-nature. Aristotelian happiness is partly contingent on good fortune, whereas Buddhist well-being is largely construed as nonattachment to life's vicissitudes.

Furthermore, Aristotle saw civic engagement as essential to flourishing, while the Buddha, having left his father's palace never to return, encouraged withdrawal from the *agora* (the marketplace) and the *polis* (the "city," the hub of political life). As a consequence, Buddhism has remarkably little to say about fairness and justice. The Buddha preached a gospel of personal virtue rather than one of collective political participation and



social action, and although he treated persons from all castes equably and abjured violence, he never advocated the abolition of the caste system or the disbanding of armies. Early Buddhism took a dim view of quotidian existence, urging us to find surcease in a transcendent nirvana. The world was inevitably a realm of suffering, and our contemporary notion of civic progress, which takes as given

that the world is something to be improved upon, is one the Buddha never would have recognized.

The modern project of constructing a more socially oriented Buddhism requires our importing Western ideas of fairness, liberty, and justice—ideas forged in the American and French revolutions, the Paris Commune, and the abolitionist and suffragette movements—into a religious tradition that, more often than not, historically supported and was supported by the ruling elites of the countries in which it flourished. Our modern idea of justice is part of a lengthy conversation rooted in Greek philosophy and Hebraic law. This conversation is one aspect of the thoroughgoing transformation wrought by modernity, which was initiated in the West but which has profoundly impacted Asia over the past two centuries. It is a conversation that has inspired Gandhi and Nehru, Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, Cory Aquino and Aung San Suu Kyi, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Thich Nhat Hanh. The idea of justice is now so deeply a part of our consciousnesses, East and West, that we're hardly aware we're importing something new into Buddhism and in the process subtly changing what it means to be a bodhisattva—to work toward the liberation of all beings—in the process.

Despite the specific differences between Aristotelian and Buddhist conceptions of virtue, wisdom, and well-being, the more general Aristotelian notion that a life dedicated to the cultivation of virtue and the contemplation of wisdom is the best and happiest kind of human life is one that has been readily transplanted into Buddhism in a way that resonates deeply with modernity. When I attended a public college in the 1960s, its motto was "Let each become all he is capable of being," an Aristotelian sentiment if ever there was one. Modi-





fied versions of Aristotelian *eudaimonia* are so deeply embedded in modern humanistic and positive psychology that they've become part of what passes broadly for common sense.

As different as they are, Aristotelian and traditional Buddhist ethics are in agreement on one thing: the unity of the virtues. Both view each virtue as compatible with all the others. For Buddhists, there is no conflict between wisdom and compassion. All the paramitas reinforce one another, and each virtue requires its companions for complete practice. Similarly, each step of the noble eightfold path reinforces every other step, with ethics, wisdom, and meditation integrating seamlessly together. That's why the Buddhist approach is sometimes described as holographic, with each practice contained in every other. The *dharmachakra* iconography symbolizes this unity—the eight spokes each representing the eight steps of the path, but joined in the middle and radiating outward to form a wheel, or circle of wholeness.

The ancient Greek tragedians, however, did not hold to this unitary vision. In Sophocles's *Antigone*, the eponymous heroine is torn between conflicting moral obligations to her brother and her king. The king orders her brother's body to remain unburied, but Antigone defies him, placing duty to family above duty to king. The tragedians understood that moral dilemmas seldom if ever have perfect solutions. Whichever choice Antigone makes is right in one respect and wrong in another. As polytheists, the Greek tragedians knew that pleasing Zeus risked offending Hera; tragedy was intrinsic to human existence. Zeus implies just that in the *Iliad* when he says, "there is nothing alive more agonized than man of all that breathe and crawl across the earth." Human nobility lay in choosing between conflicting ethical imperatives and facing one's fate with courage and equanimity. While sharing a superficial similarity with the Buddha's first noble truth of suffering, this tragic view differs from it in one fundamental way: Buddhism is, at its core, an optimistic philosophy that posits the fourth noble truth, a path out of suffering. Buddhism claims that it's possible to achieve a state of ultimate well-being and peace. The Greek tragedians envisioned no such off-ramp;

life could be noble, but it was never unreservedly happy.

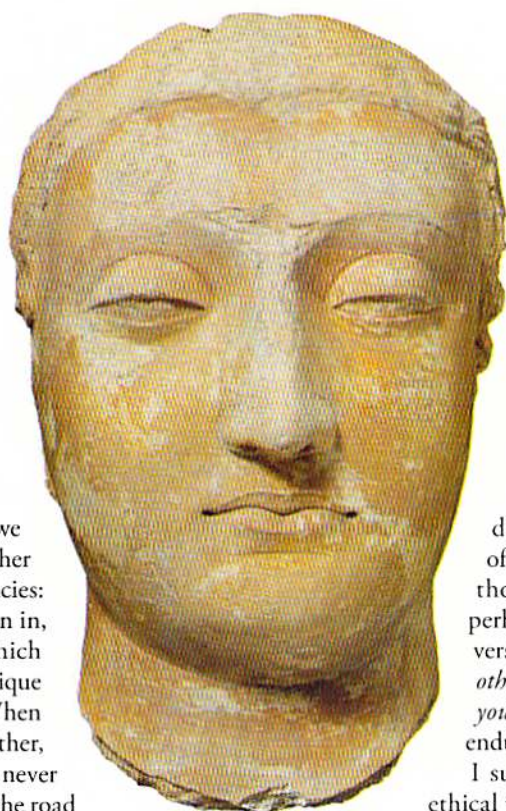
There are ways in which our modern outlook is closer to that of the Greek tragedians than to that of either Aristotle or the Buddha. For one thing, we live in an age when the unity of the good and the virtues seems irretrievably shattered. The long-term Western philosophical project of seeking a logical basis for ethics—the one best exemplified by the philosophies of Spinoza, Kant,

and Mill—came to an unsuccessful conclusion, unable to withstand the scrutiny and objections of Hume, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. At the same time, modernity has put us cheek by jowl with the wisdom traditions of countless cultures past and present, so that we're acutely aware of the historically conditioned nature of our own conception of the good as just one of many possible competing visions. Lastly, since the publication of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, we've become increasingly familiar with the conflicts and disjunctions inherent in our triune nature as mammalian predators, social animals, and rational beings.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the signature ethical dilemmas of our time reflect a conflict and disjunction between differing moral intuitions, often a conflict between opposing "rights" or "goods": a woman's right to control her body versus an embryo's right to life; a gay person's right to marry versus a fundamentalist's right to withhold recognition; a rich person's right to property versus a poor person's right to escape the ills of poverty; a pacifist's conviction that war is never justified versus an interventionist's fear that pacifism abets the triumph of evil.

Each party in these intractable disputes believes that his or her own view trumps the other's; no logical arguments can convince the other that any errors exist. Each party operates from a separate set of fundamental premises and assumptions about the nature of the good and of human flourishing, premises that are nonrational at their core and grounded in some mix of sentiment, preference, tribal belongings, ideology, and religious revelation. We don't choose our side on strictly logical grounds, just as we don't fall in love by making lists of pros





and cons about potential suitors. We owe our allegiances to one camp or another based on a set of historical contingencies: what part of the country we were born in, what religion we were raised in, which social class we belong to, and our unique personal journeys and encounters. When people “convert” from one side to another, the conversion, gradual or sudden, is never solely logical in nature. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, we have a revelation. Or, often enough, it’s not so much that our former beliefs are proved erroneous as that we simply move on, jettisoning older beliefs for newer, more useful ones. The key point is that ethical disputes—the ones that really trouble us—aren’t usually disputes between good and evil; more commonly they are disjunctions between rival “goods,” and ultimately there’s no logical basis for their resolution. Often enough they reflect cultural dialogues that need to run their historical course.

**H**ow do these two themes just outlined—the modernist substitution of eudaimonia for rebirth, and the acknowledgment of the tension between incompatible and often incommensurable goods—affect Buddhist ethics?

Let’s consider the first Buddhist precept—the precept against taking life—as a paradigmatic case. You and I, no doubt, agree that we’re against killing, at least for the most part and as a general principle. We may disagree, however, over particulars and specifics. Are we categorically opposed to all killing, or do we admit to certain exceptions? Can we use antibiotics to kill disease-causing bacteria? Can we use pesticides to kill malaria-carrying *Anopheles* mosquitoes? Can we use lethal force, if necessary, to protect family members from rape or murder? Can we defend our country from invaders? Can we forcefully intervene to prevent genocide in a foreign land? All of these questions pit one good—not acting cruelly—against another—preserving the well-being of ourselves and others.

But let’s set these potential exceptions aside and focus on why we’re against killing, at least in general and for the most part. Are we genuinely fearful of rebirth in an animal, hungry ghost, or hell realm? For most modern Westerners, the answer is “Probably not,” despite the fact that this has been the tra-

ditional Buddhist rationale. Are we afraid of the wrath of a monotheistic God? For those raised in the Abrahamic faiths, perhaps. Is it because we believe in some version of the Golden Rule—*Don’t do unto others what you would not have them do unto you?* Maybe. It’s one of our culture’s more enduring ideas.

I suspect, however, that our moral and ethical judgments are actually based on a multiplicity of contingencies. We’re members of the animal kingdom, and as such we have biologically rooted capacities for attachment, befriending, caring, shame, social group formation, protectiveness, revulsion, and disgust that are the raw materials out of which our moral judgments are formed. Our cultures and traditions then mold these proclivities into more or less widely shared notions of compassion, fairness, loyalty, purity, respect, and autonomy. Our final moral judgments reflect the complex interplay of these biological and social factors with our personal faculties of judgment and reason.

Returning to the first precept, our moral opposition to killing probably reflects a multiplicity of factors: a natural revulsion against the spilling of blood, an empathy for others’ pain, rational calculations about fairness and advantage, hopes that others will not kill us or our loved ones, fears of shame, retribution, and punishment, and decades of familiarity with the teachings of our culture and its ethical traditions. If we also happen to be given to moral reflection, we’ve cobbled these together as best we can into our own personal system, all the while realizing that the result is, at best, a curious mixture of reason, practical judgment, intuition, feeling, and instinct. That’s why we’re against killing, in general and for the most part, and why we give this moral opposition serious weight when considering the circumstances under which we might resort to it.

Does the Buddhist ethical tradition have something important and unique to add to this mélange? This is an especially meaningful question for convert Buddhists who, having been raised in another tradition, come to Buddhism with their moral intuitions already fully formed. Critics like the writer and blogger David Chapman suggest that most convert Buddhists





simply bypass traditional Buddhist ethics altogether, pouring their pre-existing liberal secular humanist ethics into newer bottles bearing, somewhat disingenuously, a “Buddhist” label. The question one might ask is, why bother with Buddhist ethics at all?

The answer to “why bother?” is that Buddhism contains a number of significant ethical ideas that still retain their usefulness even after severance from the framework of rebirth. The first is the idea of *karma*, or moral cause and effect. According to the rule of karma, we are the authors of our future selves, including our future selves in this lifetime: Our thoughts and actions mold the person we’re about to become. Our repeated actions and thoughts become our habits, and our habits become our character. They shape our perceptions, dispositions, and future possibilities. The effects of our actions extend through space and time like ripples on a pond, influencing not only our future selves but also the others we interact with and our surroundings. If we wish to be a certain kind of person and live in a certain kind of world, we need to be heedful about the seeds we cultivate.

Karma and dependent origination constitute Buddhism’s earliest formulations of causality. Later Buddhist thinkers elaborated on these concepts to develop the Mahayana idea of the mutual interdependence of all dharmas, or phenomena, and the Huayan idea of their interpenetration. These elaborations enabled East Asian Buddhists to place a more positive spin on interconnectivity. Initially, the idea that dharmas lacked self-nature was offered as one more reason not to cling to them. Later, the idea that things were mutually interdependent gave phenomena a positive value as indispensable jewels in Indra’s web. This positive version of interconnectivity resonates with both 19th-century Western Romanticism and 20th-century ecological science, and as a consequence is widely endorsed by Buddhist modernists of all stripes. Its view that “we’re all in the stew together,” partners in the seamless fabric of existence, has profound ethical implications. Many of our most intractable ethical dilemmas are the result of our cultural denial of or obliviousness to the reality of interconnectivity, including the terrible damage we’re inflicting on our biosphere

and the schisms that tragically divide ethnicities, social classes, religions, and regions. The Buddhist view of interdependence affects ethical considerations, as we replace considerations of how our actions affect “the other” with a more radical awareness that there is no other. While some moralities distinguish between in-groups to whom we owe duties and out-groups to whom we do not, Buddhist interconnectivity denies the existence of out-groups.

If the law of karma tells us that we must act a certain way if we wish to become a certain kind of person, the Buddhist enlightenment ideal defines that kind of person we wish to become. As Buddhists, we intend to “develop” or “uncover” a more enlightened way of being. Even though differing strands of traditionalist and modernist Buddhism disagree on enlightenment’s precise characterization, there is an unforced consensus concerning some of its key elements: non-clinging, non-harming, non-hatred, non-greed, compassion, lovingkindness, equanimity, sympathetic joy, insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, the absence of self-nature, and a less self-preoccupied, more fluid and interconnected sense of ourselves.

If we combine moral cause and effect with the end goal of eudaimonic enlightened being, we have a motivation for ethical behavior that both is compatible with modernity and adds something to ethics above and beyond the Golden Rule. Returning to our discussion of the first precept, killing moves us away from the kind of person we wish to be. Killing reinforces our greed and hatred and diminishes our compassion. Killing feeds the delusion that we are separate from others. It hardens and coarsens us. Killing triggers recursive spirals of retribution and unintended consequences that diminish the odds of experiencing well-being for ourselves and others. The basic Buddhist injunctions against killing, stealing, lying, sexual misbehavior, and heedless intoxication are all aids to move us further along the path toward enlightenment. They’re vehicles for developing character and planting the seeds of future well-being. The flip side to this understanding is that breaking the precepts is not so much a matter of breaking deontological

*Continued on page 97* →



“rules” as it is a matter of breaking our deepest commitments to being the kind of person we intend to be.

As Buddhists, we also bring to the table a traditional distrust of fixed views, along with an attitude of open inquiry that aims at preventing our thoughts from becoming stuck in stale and rigid categories. We’re always attempting to listen freshly to our own experience and to other voices as well, always willing to learn and change, always interested in discovering what being moral means in *this* particular moment and situation. While we affirm the values of enlightenment, we’ve learned to distrust the conceptions we construct surrounding it. We understand that every specific ethical dilemma, if properly attended to, reveals a greater degree of intricate complexity than any rule can possibly allow for.

We also realize that in setting up any ideal, we introduce certain dangers: the danger that we’ll delude ourselves, pretending that we’re further along the path than we are; the danger that we’ll deny, repress, minimize, project, or otherwise underestimate our persistent natures as predatory, competitive, territorial, dominance-seeking, and sexual animals; the danger that we’ll develop an aversion to those parts of ourselves that fall short of the ideal or disparage or punish others who seem to us to fall short. Every ideal also creates tensions between being and becoming, between moving toward the ideal and realizing that the ideal has been, in some way, manifest all along. It also creates tensions between aspirations to a kind of purity and aspirations toward wholeness and integration. The

dangers are real, but ethics always involves establishing some ideal, whether it’s one of enlightenment, holiness, or simply civility.

To what degree does this modernist Buddhist ethics with its moral cause and effect, interconnectivity, eudaimonic enlightenment, acknowledgment of rival incommensurate goods, and suspicion of rigid, inflexible rules help us—especially convert Buddhists—in resolving our everyday ethical dilemmas? The answer is that it only helps a little. We still have all the biological, cultural, and rational considerations that shaped our everyday moral intuitions before we became Buddhists. Added to those considerations, however, we now also have an ideal we’ve established with the ultimate goal of helping ourselves and others achieve a Buddhist kind of well-being—a virtuous life consistent with Buddhist principles that speak to our modern lived experience—along with the knowledge that if we are ever to approach that goal, our actions need to be concordant with it. It’s one more consideration, a thumb on the scale that informs our decisions.

Let’s return once more to our paradigmatic first precept against killing. Despite our moral objection to killing, it’s still an issue that arises for us again and again, requiring us to make real choices. Should we be vegetarians? Should abortion or assisted suicide be legalized? Should we pay taxes that support the military? Should we put ailing, suffering pets to sleep? Should we slap at the fly that’s annoying us as we sit trying to meditate?

### Great Faith, Great Wisdom: practice and awakening in the Pure Land sutras of Mahayana Buddhism

BY RATNAGUNA AND SRADDHĀPA

*‘In locating these sutras as an aid to developing the imaginative faculty, Ratnaguna shows how their rich imagery evokes expansive mind-states which take us beyond the personal story into the greater realms of spiritual truth.’*

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*‘Unshackled by the binding orthodoxy often found in East Asian Buddhism, the authors offer perspectives that are refreshingly insightful and novel. By stressing the value of “imagination” over “understanding,” the book shows why Pure Land Buddhism has been a dominant stream of Mahayana Buddhism for two millennia. Readers will be fascinated by dimensions and sensibilities beyond the usual doctrines and meditations that the West has come to associate with Buddhism.’* **Professor Kenneth Tanaka**



### Mindfully Facing Disease and Death: compassionate advice from early Buddhist texts

BY BHIKKHU ANĀLAYO

Released in North America, February, 2017

*‘Anālayo’s first-person experience with meditation practice saturates this offering, which is dedicated to explaining in practical detail how various ancient texts, many translated into English by the author for the first time and selected because of their focus on the subjects of ill health and death, present the Buddha’s and his disciples’ explicit teachings on how to wisely and compassionately approach the challenges inherent in these inevitable dimensions of human experience.’* **Jon Kabat-Zinn**

*‘The Buddha’s humanity and compassion jump off the pages as one reads his simple advice to his monks and ordinary people on how to help the sick and dying in practical ways. Anālayo then applies the deep and subtle teachings on mindfulness found in the Satipaṭṭhāna and elsewhere to show how mindfulness in the situation of sickness and death can be liberating.’* **Lama Shenpen Hookham**



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A fixed rule-based approach to the first precept would tell us that killing is categorically wrong in each and every circumstance. On the other hand, a morality based on our desire to move toward a more enlightened way of being would, it seems to me, be more nuanced. An enlightened being's prime concern would be the reduction of another's suffering as best as one could determine how to accomplish it, using all of one's experience, empathy, respect, reason, and judgment, along with an awareness of possible shadow motivations and unintended consequences—in other words, a melding of Aristotelian *practical judgment* with Buddhist *mindfulness* and *discernment*. It requires that when we decide to cause a certain degree of harm in the pursuit of what we discern to be the wisest good, that we do so with full awareness—without minimization or disengagement—of the extent of the suffering we're about to become the cause of. It requires that we listen fully and openly to each moment as it speaks to us in all of its intricate complexity. Like the famed Zen monk who carries the young woman across the stream in violation of the Vinaya rules, it sometimes involves breaking one precept to honor another. It recognizes precepts as koans rather than inviolate rules, and that we must struggle with them as Jacob wrestled with his angel, discerning what each moment calls for as we continue our endless journey toward an enlightenment we only dimly understand.

Some traditionalists might contend that this modernist ethics fails the test of being authentically Buddhist. That is an argument that closes the door on those unable to believe

in rebirth, leaving them out of the fold. I would argue, instead, that the coexistence of a plurality of Buddhisms—both traditionalist and modern—is evidence of Buddhism's vibrant health, offering different dharma doors for people with diverse needs. Just as genetic diversity is healthy for breeding populations, ideological diversity helps Buddhism thrive through the cross-fertilization of ideas.

Let's not forget that many of today's traditional Buddhisms are themselves the product of ongoing dialogues with neighboring traditions: East Asian Buddhism with Confucianism and Daoism; Tibetan Buddhism with Bon; Japanese Buddhism with kami worship; and Indian Mahayana with emerging forms of Hindu and Tantric practice. History teaches us that religions are ever-developing traditions rather than the final, complete, unalterable word of their originators—traditions that endure or wither according to their ability to address the vital concerns of particular times and places. As religions adapt to conditions, some practitioners argue for the continued relevance of venerable ideas, while others reformulate them to meet the exigencies of the moment. Religions that endure successfully manage the tension between these extremes.

The foremost principle of Buddhism is that everything changes. It is a law that governs Buddhism, too. ▼

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# TRANSLATION TRANSMISSION

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