**Seminar #2 on Buddhism A+ Answers**

**These essays would also receive a "7" on the IBSL Exam.**

**Notice how these essays contain all of the following:**

1. **A strong introduction and THESIS with analysis**
2. **Organized support paragraphs that support the thesis**
3. **The use of specific terminology and vocabulary specific to this religion**
4. **The use of many specific sacred texts for this religion- with specific details and analysis of each sacred text!**
5. **The use of many specific examples, practices, rituals, holidays,etc.- with specific details and analysis of each example or ritual!**
6. **Discussion of the differences in geography and how the religion is practiced differently in specific different places and countries**
7. **A strong and thoughtful conclusion with ANALYSIS**

**QUESTION #1: How would Buddhism answer Big Question #1: What is the meaning of life?**

**A+ ESSAY EXAMPLE ONE:**

As seen in the **8-Fold Paths**, **6 Paramitas**, and **4 Noble Truths**, the meaning of life is to achieve **Para nirvana**, whether it be through a “single raft” or a “big raft.” However, one must experience it rather than learn it through explanations as Buddhists believe it is impossible to elaborate through words. Therefore, Buddhists achieve this through various types of meditations, chanting of **sutras** and **mantras**, usage of **upaya**, visualization methods, rituals, and festivals. These acts encourage the Buddhist philosophy of **Puja, Ahimsa,** and **Karuna.** The importance of these philosophies is to embody the concept of **Annica** in order to put an end to the **dukkha.**

A **Theravada** practitioner mainly follows the “way of the Elders” to achieve nirvana by following the 8-Fold Path.According to the **eight virtues**, one must always adopt the right view, thought, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. The goals are to end one’s suffering in life through good intentions. These virtues relate to one another and guide one to balance their **karuna** (compassion) and **panna** (wisdom) equally. Particularly, right mindfulness and right concentration are further enhanced through mantra meditation.

As **Siddhartha** once said in the **Pali Canon**, "The non-doing of any evil, the performance of what's skillful, the cleansing of one's own mind: this is the teaching of the Awakened.” This calms the mind to focus on oneself and control distractions risen from thoughts. Many chants are used before meditation such as the Buddhabhivadana, which starts off prayers with, “Namô Tassa Bhagavatô Arahatô Sammâ-Sambuddhassa,” meaning, “Homage to the **Tiratana (Triple Gems)**, Homage to Him, the Blessed One, the Exalted One, the Fully Enlightened One.” Other chant is the **Pancasila** (five percepts)**,** in which Buddhists chant, “I observe refraining from killing any living beings…taking what does the owner not give…committing sexual misconduct…telling lies…taking any intoxicant or drugs.” During meditation, **samatha and vipassana** are practiced by focusing on the breath to achieve insight and tranquility when meditating. With the correct meditation and mindset, a Buddhist can attain nirvana naturally.

For Theravada Buddhism, the meaning of life is to also aid monks in their quest for enlightenment. For instance, in the **Kathina Ceremony,** people donate new robes to monks while requesting for spiritual guidance. In Tibet, **Lhabap** is celebrated through feasting ceremonies and visiting temples. As for monks, they celebrate **Vesak** by decorating local shrines and lamp lighting to symbolize and spread Buddha’s enlightenment.

However, **Mahayana** Buddhists utilize the **6 Perfections** to bring others toward nirvana together. They must have generosity, morality, patience, energy, meditation, and wisdom. Furthermore, the **3 bodhisattva vows** enact the perfections. The vows include, “I will allow Buddha’s wisdom to guide me. May I be a raft that embraces the world from sorrow. I will penetrate through the barriers of trouble through anonymous passion.” In fact, these can be explained in the **Heart Sutra.** According to the text, they must “Hav[e] no obstacles [and] overcome fear, liberating themselves from illusion and realizing perfect Nirvana” because “Everything is *inter-are* and related.” Another example can be seen in the **Tzu Chi** **Foundation.** Everyday volunteers display all 6 paramitas through selfless acts of kindness to help others. In doing so, they plant the “seeds” of kindness which expand and spread across the world. **Master Chen Yen**, the founder of the organization, explained that in working with others, one can learn how to activate the Dharma. Another example is the **Sand Mandalas** created by the monks. A monk must spend weeks to visualize and create mandalas out of scratch. Once finished, they then sweep away the sand to symbolize no attachments and cast it away to the ocean to spread their good energy everywhere.

As seen in **Vajrayana Buddhism**, there are also lightning-fast ways to achieve enlightenment. Some include starring at **Shyama Tara (Green Tara),** while chanting, “Om Tare Tuttare Ture Soha.” In doing so, the goddess is believed to come and take over the body of the chanter to help them in their struggles. Another chant is “Om mani padme hum” for the goddess **Shadakshari,** a variant form of Avalokiteshvara. The purpose of these chants is to invoke a bodhisattva and allow them to take over to aid one’s troubles.

All variants of Buddhism such as Therevada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana seek to attain parinirvana. Regardless of the method, they are all encompass the **4 Noble Truths.** The first and second truths that “Suffering is inherent in life” and “The cause of Suffering is desire” are both agreed upon by all Buddhists. However, the third truth, “There is a way to put an end to desire and suffering” varies among Buddhists. For Theravada monks, they meditate and chant the Pali Canon to abstain themselves from it. Mahayana believers use karuna to learn to let go of desire and help others for satisfaction instead of pleasure. Vajrayana practitioners call upon various deities to help speed the process of overcoming desire. In other words, life is a way to train oneself to deal with it.

The beauty of Buddhism is that it ties in different **IB Ways of Knowing**, depending on the type of Buddhism. For Theravada Buddhism, the most essential Way of Knowing is **Faith.** Faith in oneself is the most important as the mantras chanted and meditations practiced help the monks from the **sangha** reach enlightenment perfectly. For Mahayana Buddhism, the Way of Knowing is **Experience and Intuition**. The more one helps others, the more information they have on how to solve harder obstacles. Compassion also opens one’s heart and enhances their good energy inside them. For Vajrayana Buddhism, the Way of Knowing is **Imagination and Art.** Imagining the different visual images of the deities helps guide them to embody the necessary ideals to solve their problems. Regardless of the methods, Buddhism focuses on the path toward achieving enlightenment rather than explaining the benefits of it since nothing is permanent.

**A+ ESSAY EXAMPLE 2**

1. What is the meaning of life

Buddhism stems from the lessons of Siddharta Gautama, the prince who became the Buddha, after he attained Nirvana and decided to share his knowledge with the five ascetics he previously trained with. As a result, the sangha was created and Gautama, now Buddha, traveled across India to spread his teachings. Similar to Hinduism, Buddhists believe in samsara and the idea of attaining liberation from it. However, while the liberation from samsara is a common goal, not all Buddhists believe enlightenment to be the ultimate goal. Mahayana Buddhists instead believe that Samyaksambuddha is the meaning of life, while Theravada Buddhists believe in arhatship to be the meaning of life. The contrasting beliefs between the two types of Buddhism lead to different actions Buddhists carry out.

For Mahayana Buddhism, the major branches are Pureland, Vajrayana, and Zen Buddhism. For each one, there is a slightly different meaning to life. In regular Mahayana Buddhism, the goal is to achieve buddhahood through prajna and karuna while helping others in their community. Mahayana Buddhists are not supposed fear death either; as Samsara is a repeating cycle of life, death is just a stage in it and does not mean the end in one’s pursuit of buddhahood. However, Mahayana Buddhists have different practices compared to Theravada Buddhists. Instead of simply laying out a path to follow in monasteries, Mahayana Buddhism has more rituals and practices surrounding death, as Buddhism places great significance on death. As the Dalai Lama once said, everything in our lives should be done in preparation of our death. One of which is the preparation by using the Tibetan book of the dead. When the person is alive, they prepare themselves for death by imagining the forty nine illusions and experiences they will face. The creation of such a long winded process after death demonstrates how Mahayana Buddhism was more mystical and believed in the cosmologies and the divine. Another part of the Tibetan book of the dead was after death. Family members or a lama whispered in the ear of deceased for forty nine days after death so as to guide the soul safely to reincarnation. The phenomena of this existence after death is Bardo which is a liminal space between life and death. For Mahayana Buddhists, Bardo provides a great learning opportunity to  learn about liberation since transcendental insight is offered. The goal of life for Pure Land Buddhism is to reach enlightenment easily without the long meditations and rituals. They try to do so by chanting the name of Amitaha with full trust and sincerity so that they will be reborn in the Pure Land, Sukhavati, where it is easier to train to enlightenment. To them, death is not a bad thing as they have called upon Amitabha multiple times during Nembutsu in their lives which would grant them access to rebirth in the Pure Lands amongst the bodhisattvas. At this stage, it is easier for people to reach Nirvana from the closer realm of Amitabha and a Pure Land buddhist’s goal is almost complete. However, a further development of Pure Lands by a man named Shin made rebirth in the Pure Lands the entire meaning of life for Pure Land Buddhists as he believed that the Pure Land was Nirvana. Then there is Zen Buddhism, which meaning of life is a philosophical questioning of it to understand the very meaning of life it questioned. The true goal being to understand it without being misled by thoughts. In Zen Buddhism, the goal cannot be known through words but it has to be understood through experience. Zen Buddhists also believe that the answers lie within themselves, and that scriptures and worship have little impact on their search for true understanding. In this sense, though Zen is a branch of Mahayana Buddhism, it functions more like Theravada Buddhism. For Pure Land Buddhism, another branch of Mahayana Buddhism. Finally we have Vajrayana Buddhism where the goal is for the liberation of self in a single lifetime. For that, Vajrayana Buddhists have tantric practices and radical methods of reaching their goal. For Vajrayana Buddhist, they wield negative factors such as greed, desire, ego, and hate to service liberation, tackling the path to enlightenment with a use poison to deal with poison approach.  Examples are the use of taboo substances like blood, urine or semen as offerings in rituals during Vajrayana feasts. Then Vajrayana Buddhists also have different texts called tantras which are passed down from guru to student. Some rituals in theses texts include visualizing a connection with buddha and liberation during sex. The practice is called sex yoga and to Vajrayana Buddhists, sex is not just for pleasure, as it offers understanding of enlightenment because they are visualizing a mental image as opposed to a tangible one. Other practices include deity yoga, where one visualizes themselves as a deity itself as well as dream yoga, where practitioners offer up their physical vessels to be consumed but deities.

However, Theravada Buddhism differs greatly in these aspects. Only through prajna and enlightenment regarding the illusions that life throws at us in our physical state will we be able to gain full understanding and achieve the purpose of our life. Afterwards, one would be able to escape samsara and be liberated from the cycle. But, gaining Prajna is not easy at all and most Theravadans have to dedicate their entire life to follow the path to gaining Prajna as monks or nuns. Since they are named the Way of the Elders, Theravadans only recognize the original Pali Canon as the one and only sacred Buddhist text. Inside the Pali Text, there is the Sutta Pitaka which traces the four stages of enlightenment in which it is stipulated that the meaning of life for a Theravada Buddhist would be to complete this path and become an arhat. First, Sotapanna is the initial stage, meaning stream-enterer. This is the stage where one realizes the dharma and drops Sakkaya ditthi - selfish ego, Silabbata paramasa ditthi - reliance on rites and rituals, and Vicikiccha - indecisiveness. After the first stage, the Buddhist enters the second stage, called once-returning. Here, the Sakadagami where desire towards Kamaraga - sensual craving, Byapada, and ill will disappear. Upon approaching the third stage, the become an Anagami, a non-returner because Anagamis are reborn into the Pure Abodes instead of the human world, hence the name. It is within the Pure Abodes where Anagamis attain arhatship when they reject the ten fetters: Aruparaga, auddhatya, Mana, Avidya, and Ruparaga. These become the full ten fetters after they are included with the previously mentioned five. Yet, there is still a ways to go for a Theravada Buddhist on this path. Only when the Anagami’s pure mind is empty of the ten fetters completely can they become a true arhat. Upon this entering into Nirvana, the arhat has completed their life mission and does not fear death as there are no longer obstacles in their way and they have been liberated from Samsara. Furthermore, for an Arhat, death brings about Parinirvana and is something to look forward to as their physical connection to this realm is then completely destroyed. Therefore, the only way that a Theravada Buddhist fulfills their meaning in life to become an arhat through the four stages.

Each school of Buddhism maintains their own belief of what the meaning of life is and what opportunities death can hold.

(NOTE: THIS ESSAY WOULD NOT GET a perfect 7 on IB because it needs a better conclusion with final analysis!)

**QUESTION #2: Compare & Contrast at least 2 Different 'Types' of Buddhism?**

Note: You may define "types" of Buddhism any way you like (such as Theravada vs. Mahayana…or Taiwan vs. Tibet…, etc.)

Note: you may use more than 2 types of Buddhism if you want (such as compare Theravada vs. Mahayana vs. Tibetan vs. Zen)

The two most distinct types of Buddhism include Theravada, “the way of the Elders,” and Mahayana, “big raft.” Theravada Buddhism focuses on the **arhat** belief that only the **sanghas** can achieve **nirvana** through meditationand concentration on the mind while Mahayana Buddhism flexibility utilizes the **Dharma** to form compassion through **bodhisattvas** and believes anyone can achieve it. In other words, Theravada Buddhism focuses on achieving Nirvana individually while Mahayana Buddhism focuses on achieving it together with others. Nevertheless, both forms of Buddhism interpret the Dharma **didactically**, in their own unique way.

In Theravada Buddhism, one essentially focuses on the **Tipitaka** (**Pali Canon)**. It contains a collection of teachings recorded from the disciples of the first Buddha. The main goal is to acquire nirvana individually. The "three baskets" from the Pali Canon include the **Vinaya Pitaka**, which entitles the rules and discipline of the Buddhist order. Monks must follow the **Mahavibhanga** and nuns must follow the **Bhikkhunvibhanga**. Furthermore, the **Khandhaka** and **Parivara** provide the stories of Siddhartha "The Blessed One" and analysis of the rules from the Vinaya Pitaka. For instance, in the third verse of the First Khandahaka Section One, it has written in it "Then the Blessed One during the middle watch of the night fixed His mind upon the chain of causation, in direct and reverse order: `From ignorance spring, the saïkharas, and such is the origination of this whole mass of suffering, and etc. such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.'" This quote encompasses the Theravada belief that to end suffering, one must embody the "three baskets" of the Pali Canon.

The second basket includes the **Sutta Pitaka,** where religious poetry and sutras are chanted. In countries like Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, monks study daily about the **Digha, Maijhama, Samyutta, Anguttara, and Khuddaka Nikayas.** Each one depends on the length of the topics. The third basket includes the **Abhidhamma Pitaka**, a collection of written books about the ideals and philosophy of the Buddha. An example includes the **Dhammasangani**, which summarizes the Dharma. It covers the states of mind and classifies material form. With this, the monks and nuns can better understand how to secure their "raft" to the path of enlightenment by controlling their mind.

Some Theravada practices include meditation techniques such as **prostration**. In prostration, one must clasp his or her hands above their head and lower their body with their forehead touching the floor. Theravada Buddhists do these three times in front of the altar when entering a shrine. While doing so, they show their respect in the Three Refugees: the **Buddha, Dharma,** and **Sangha**. Another form of practice is **Vipassana Meditation** taught in meditation centers where one practices **mindful walking** and mindful **eating**. The purpose is to connect the gaps between the mind and the body.

Some Theravada festivals includes the **Magha Puja**, where Buddhists commemorate the gathering of the Buddha and his first disciples. This is also known as the **Sangha Day**, where candles are lit and temples would be filled with people. In the temples, Buddhist sermons are given, meditation is practiced, Buddhist chants are recited, and donations are given to the monks. Aside from the festivals, monks will also hold a bowl out and line up single file in the morning to accept donations from the people. The idea is to help generate good energy for the next life by helping the monks.

On the other hand, Mahayana Buddhism focuses on compassion to others to attain nirvana. Thus, **bodhisattvas** are manifestations upon the ideal of reincarnation to assist others. They take forms in celestial bliss bodies such as **Sambhogakaya**, the "subtle body of limitless form." They are created for the benefit of others. In Tibet Buddhism, they are referred to be in a separate celestial realm known as the **Pure Land.** In East Asia, these traditions emphasize on **Buddha Amitabha**. Mahayana Buddhists believe that chanting Amitabha's name allows him to come and aid one in their endeavors. Another bodhisattva is **Vairocana**, who also sought to reborn to help others after nirvana. These examples of selfless actions constitute Mahayana Buddhism's ideal of karuna.

**Bodhissatva vows** are the focus of Mahayana Buddhists. It is a vow taken to liberate all beings to enlightenment together. One becomes in service to the world. This belief is past on multiple lifetimes. In the **Avatamsaka Sutra,** it has written on it, "So will I, too, for the sake of all beings, Generate the mind of enlightenment And accomplish all stages Of the Bodhisattva training." This shows that a Bodhisattva never stops serving the people with good intentions and good deeds. This also reflects the Buddhist belief of respecting and loving all life.

Finally, the **dharmakaya**, is believed to be the truth body of Mahayana Buddhism. It is where all the energy of the universe exists. It is the highest level where "emptiness" and absolute truth surrounds the realm. It shields from ignorance and illusion and is where Mahayana Buddhists strive to be.

Mahayana practices include chanting of bodhisattva names. For example, in Fo Guang Shan, Buddhists chant, "Na Mo Ah Mi To Fu" to better focus their energy as well as seek guidance from Amitabha. Other songs about Avalokitesvara have "Om Mani Padme Hum" in them to also seek help. In the morning, nuns chant to Guanyin, "Na Mo Guan Shi Yin Pu Sa" to help them in their meditations.

Mahayana festivals include the **Higan-e Ceremony** in Japanwhere people practice good deeds during the day. They also show their gratitude to their parents and ancestors by making offerings to **Gohonzon,** create memorial **tobas** to ancestors, and have memorial services. The point of this holiday is to honor and remember impermanence as nothing is eternal. Another example is the "**Festival of the Hungry Ghosts**" in China where ancestors are offered food while monks recite sutras to bless the dead with favorable rebirths.

Both forms of Buddhism interpret Buddha's teachings didactically. Some interpret the Buddha's story as a reference to balance in the **Middle Way** through chanting, meditations, and sutras. However, some take a more active role in helping others to activate their way of nirvana. The essence is not nirvana itself but more the experience, wisdom, and path toward it that matters the most to a Buddhist.

This ties in primarily to the **faith** aspect in the IB Ways of Knowing. Faith in oneself is equally important as faith in others to achieve enlightenment. Theravada monks rely on donations from others while Mahayana practitioners must also have confidence in themselves for the Bodhisattvas to help them. It is the sense of collaboration of a community and confidence in everyone that reveals Buddhism's true potential.