Reading Questions

Buddhism 1 (Harvey pp. 9-14)

1) What do you find most intriguing when you comparing Buddhist understandings of the nature of the universe to your own conceptions thereof when you came into this class? Why do you think this interests you (i.e., what do you think does it says about you that you find this thing, in particular, interesting)?

I grew up in a primarily Hindu household, with strong family values and the concept of the "soul" which lives within the self. Specifically with regards to connecting with those around you, the culture I grew up in taught me to value being able to serve and care for those in my life. The family is built of individuals that are like you, enough so that they are willing to share with you unconditional love, just as you would to them. As my Mom has always told me, "You could kill someone, and I'd still find you a shovel."

This idea of familial unconditional love has been qualified by the Buddhist ideal of the not-self in my eyes. It has broken down the barriers between me and those in my family and those outside of my family. As we are all one and the same we are able to share the same love with them that we love ourselves with. Since we are similarly connected to everyone in existence we are able to include everyone we connect with in our family and everyone we do not wish to connect with in our family. This allows us access to a higher form of empathy for those around us as we may be able to share with them the same forgiveness we often give ourselves.

2) How do the ideas of karma and of rebirth imply a conception of personhood/selfhood that is different than that associated with the Western individual? Explain this as best you can (use at least 3-4 sentences, more is great)

Like I said in the previous response, the Buddhist concepts of karma and rebirth present a conception of selfhood that is eternally changing and something that doesn't belong to us. In Western culture, we are given the self, sometimes as a gift from God as stated in Genesis 1. The self is something that we own; we each are distinct, autonomous units with a single lifetime to assert our identity, personhood, and purpose. The Buddhist view dissolves the boundaries of individualism, suggesting a fluid, ever-changing nature of self, deeply intertwined with the actions and experience of future and past lives. This perspective encourages a broader understanding of the self, not as a solitary actor, but as part of a vast interdependent cycle of existence.

Further so, we are offered the opportunity to break down the barriers between us and the Other. This allows access to progressing together as a communal self rather than

each individually for themselves. I feel as though this form of progress is not only more significant, but more inclusive. This form of progress doesn't just seek to include every individual for themselves, but all fabrics of being regardless of form, status, or capacity. This type of empathy could be crucial in the current Western political climate of alienating the "other" side and allow us to move together as a congruent self.

Buddhism 3 (Primary Source Texts)

In "Milinda and the Chariot", you see the monk Milinda demonstrating to the King that people are not actually the selves (atman) that we believe ourselves to be -- that we are actually "anatman" and what we perceive as a unified self is just the effect of the coming together of many, ever-changing constituent parts (aggregates). In "The Man who Lost his Body" we see a traveler realize that "he" is not what he thought he was. And in "Vajira's reply to Mara", the fully enlightened Buddhist nun indicates that hanging on to the incorrect-if-intuitive belief that we are actually what we think we are (i.e., selves) is nothing but a source of unhappiness in the end.

Pretend you had to explain the idea of "not-self" (anatman) to a friend who knew nothing about Buddhism. How would you explain it based on these texts? You may need to write more than usual this week in order to do a good job on this question. Feel free to take as many words as you need.

I think that the metaphor of the chariot was a really strong metaphor presented by Milinda, but the best example was indeed presented by Vajira. Vajira takes no heed to Mara's questioning, as these questions are nonsense in and of themselves. This is the truth of anatta. I think in order to explain this truth even better, I would begin by asking my friend about their own identity. They may begin to answer about physical features, personal information, or state of mind, however, the quick objection to this is how these aspects of their identity changed over time. If they have a "self" now, is that the same "self" that they experienced ten years ago? Quite a significant amount must have changed, from physical appearance to lived experience, so surely the ten-year-old must be a different self. Eventually they ought to come to realize that clinging to a notion of a permanent, unchanging self is a misunderstanding of our nature.

By understanding anatman, one realizes the impermanence and interdependence of all things. This understanding is crucial in Buddhist thought, as it leads to a reduction in clinging and attachment, thereby reducing suffering. This perspective invites a more fluid understanding of existence, where identity is not confined to rigid, self-imposed boundaries but is seen as a dynamic and interconnected process.

An Altruistic Outlook and Way of Life

1) What did you find most interesting or surprising in the Dalai Lama's advice and explanations?

I think for me, it was just how down to Earth the Dalai Lama was with his advice. For me, these great figures in Buddhism are often of unattainable wisdom and distant, however, the Dalai Lama writes in concrete examples when explaining the virtue of true altruism in the eyes of Mahayana Buddhism. It made clear the need for altruism and empathy in order to live well in a clear logical fashion. First with the analogy of the forest, he asserts "that the fulfillment of our aspirations requires dependence upon others." He even ties these ideas back to evidence found from neurobiological research, which I quite admire as many religious texts may tend to abstract teachings past those who require hard evidence as a basis for belief.

I think the other thing that was most striking at the beginning of the text was when the Dalai Lama emphasized reason as more critical than scripture in interpreting Buddhist readings. This approach aligns well with a modern, educated audience that often may value logical reasoning and personal understanding over traditional dogma. It also gives power back to the reader, asking the reader not to accept *his* interpretation of Mahayana scripture, but to come about one's own belief through learning and understanding.

2) Do you find his arguments convincing as a way of thinking about your own life and struggles? Which one(s)? Why or why not?

Definitely. I strongly resonate with the values of altruism and empathy that he presents as a way to expand one's own family and to reconnect with the nature of your own existence through others. In the US, we're raised with notions of self-sufficiency and throughout my entire life, I've always felt like the ability to be independent has been one of the chief virtues and marks of maturity. As I've aged, I've definitely come to realize that one of the true marks of maturity is the ability to admit fault and responsibly ask for help when you need it. This is something that I still see a lot of older adults struggling with today whether it be ego or fear of rejection.

The Dalai Lama argues that this connectedness is essential to living well, and his argumentation falls directly in line with these ideas. His perspective has profound implications for how I view my interactions with others and my role in the broader community. It suggests that by cultivating kindness and empathy towards others, not only do we contribute to their well-being, but we also enrich our own lives.

The Art of Interpretive Analysis—Research Focus
Find a place in the book where Parish describes an event or practice that he suggests has social or religious significance and/or that can help readers to understand how Bhaktapur Newars understand themselves and how a moral person should live life. Re-read the preceding and following pages until you can identify the main argument/idea of the part of the chapter where the description/discussion appears. Then answer the following questions:

For my response, I'm going to consider the concept and practice of consuming "cipa." "Cipa" is the idea of "poullted" food (153). Far beyond this, cipa represents the concept of purity and pollution and how that reflects on the hierarchical nature of Newar society. The separation arises from who is willing to eat or come in contact one anothers' cipa (e.g. food that has been prepared or touched the saliva of another individual). It is often the separating factor between women and men, elder and younger, and while men are expected to eat the cipa of their elders, it's often the fact that women are expected to eat the cipa of their husbands or other men as a show of respect. While small children aren't expected to conform to this standard, it still portrays how it can create separation in these veins.

What is the bigger argument that the event or practice is discussed in order to support?

The concept of "cipa" is not just a reflection of dietary habits, but is a societal expression of a broader hierarchical framework that exists in Newar society. Parish's discussion of "cipa" delves into the different ways Newars address purity and pollution with regards to social standing. Using this concept, he's able to effectively shed light on the intricate and often unspoken rules that govern social interactions by putting on display how these rules manifest. You can tell he did this effectively, because if you remove "cipa" from this section it would seem that he is purely commenting on the reality of society in Bhaktapur, this idea allowed him to ground it in truth.

Furthermore, the hierarchy is not just about who is superior or inferior; it's about who has the authority to impose their 'purity' or 'pollution' onto others. In this context, 'cipa' becomes a tool for maintaining social order, where compliance or non-compliance with these norms reflects and reinforces one's position within the societal structure. By ingraining these practices from a young age, individuals learn to navigate their social world in ways that adhere to and uphold the established hierarchy. This internalization is crucial for the continuity of these practices, ensuring that they remain unchallenged and deeply rooted within the community.

How exactly is the event or practice used to advance this idea? Does Parish describe it in order to provide needed supporting/contextual information for something else he discusses? To help explain an idea he is developing? As concrete illustration of a proposition he makes? Is it used in another way, or a combination of ways? Specify and explain.

Like I said in my previous response, Parish seems to utilize “cipa” as an illustration of the broader proposition that social and gender hierarchy are deeply embedded in everyday practice. I think what makes this tool so effective is that eating habits are fundamental to all people and to have something so elementary affected by these norms shows how core this is to living. The practice of “cipa” is not just a dietary preference, but a ritualized form of social interaction that reinforces the existing social order. By focusing on who eats whose “cipa,” Parish is able to highlight an implicit and expected respect within Newar society.

What does Parish do to help the reader interpret this event or practice as demonstrating what he proposes or expressing what he says it does? Does he introduce the event by stating the meaning he wants to give it? Does he repeat that afterwards? Both? Does he break it down and analyze it systematically, focusing on key words, concepts, outcomes? Does he need to provide additional information along the way in order to allow it to make sense in the way that he says it does? All of the above? Something else?

Parish actually introduces the event through example, and lays out a myriad of rules present with “cipa,” between men and women, elders and younger people, etc. He uses descriptive analysis, breaking down the practice into its different parts — who prepares food, who eats it, who deals with leftovers, etc. — to demonstrate how these actions reflect broader social values and hierarchies. He uses all of these techniques, but leaves the interpretation up to the reader for the most part, he really never states his intentions until the end of the section, but the examples he provides are so illustrative that he really doesn’t need to.

Note at what moment you as a reader come to understand/interpret the event being described/discussed as signifying what he tells you it does. What did he do that helped achieve that understanding? If he failed to convince you, what would you want to see/hear/know--what could he do?--that might help?

As a reader myself, this was a concept I was already somewhat familiar with. We actually use the word “chhi” (छी) to describe poop or food you shouldn’t eat; I’m unsure if these two words are actually related, but they sound the same and describe similar

concepts. I think the moment where I was able to come to a full understanding was when he started to describe household dynamics:

"... cipa has much to do with separating men and women. Within households (...), cipa seems mainly to separate people in terms of gender and age. Men will not accept cipa from their wives or younger household women." (153)

This household hierarchy was definitely something I could envision myself. The clarity with which Parish described the dynamics of "cipa" also helped me grasp its broader implications. The specific example laid out here illuminated the deeply gendered nature of these practices and the way they reinforce traditional gender and power structures.

What Parish did effectively here was to draw a vivid picture of everyday life in a Newar household, showcasing how these ingrained cultural practices are not merely symbolic but have real, tangible impacts on the daily interactions and power dynamics between family members. This specific example helped bridge the gap between abstract cultural concepts and their practical, lived realities.

Select either a quote that you think tells you something significant about your interviewee's beliefs although what you think it reveals is not exactly what the person is saying on the surface in that quote, or an event or practice that your interviewee described That you believe shows something about their beliefs but expresses it in action rather than through words. OR, if you want to maximize the benefit from this assignment, choose one of each.

Ask yourself why you interpret the quote or event in the way that you do? On what basis do you think that it expresses what you think it does about your interviewee? How would you explain what you perceive to someone who doesn't know your interviewee and wasn't there at the interview? What might you need to tell them (that you know but they don't) so that they understand and respect why you interpret it this way?

--If you are pretty sure that the quote or event is meaningful but can't quite say what it shows yet, make note of all the possible interpretations that are in your mind. What makes you lean toward one verses another (even if you aren't fully decided)? What (other quotes, events your interviewee described, etc.) is causing you to doubt that you have it completely figured out?

Here's my quote:

"Well, see in India, love marriage hasn't really found much success. Out of ten love marriages, we would expect two of them to be successful. And so there is no culture or concept for love marriage, it's not something we believe in."

This quote, on the surface, discusses the perceived success rate of love marriages in India. But the way that Jenish expressed this statistic was with confidence and a strong belief behind it which subtly revealed his belief in the superiority of arranged marriage

over love marriage. This statement reflects a deep-rooted cultural belief in the efficacy of these traditional practices; I think that throughout the interview when I was asking Jenish about these topics it was easier to speak more concretely or in hypotheticals in order to get more information out of him. As we spoke more on the subject, you can tell that Jenish acknowledges the changing dynamics of relationships and marriage in modern society, but still finds merit in the traditional approach.