

What is Buddhism?

General Information

Buddhism is a path of practice and spiritual development leading to Insight into the true nature of life. Buddhist practices such as meditation are means of changing oneself in order to develop the qualities of awareness, kindness, and wisdom. The experience developed within the Buddhist tradition over thousands of years has created an incomparable resource for all those who wish to follow a path - a path which ultimately culminates in Enlightenment or Buddhahood.

Because Buddhism does not include the idea of worshipping a creator God, some people do not see it as a religion in the normal, Western sense. The basic tenets of Buddhist teaching are straightforward and practical: nothing is fixed or permanent; actions have consequences; change is possible. Thus Buddhism addresses itself to all people irrespective of race, nationality, or gender. It teaches practical methods (such as meditation) which enable people to realise and utilise its teachings in order to transform their experience, to be fully responsible for their lives and to develop the qualities of Wisdom and Compassion.

There are around 350 million Buddhists and a growing number of them are Westerners. They follow many different forms of Buddhism, but all traditions are characterised by non-violence, lack of dogma, tolerance of differences, and, usually, by the practice of meditation.

Who was the Buddha?

Buddhism started with the Buddha.

The word 'Buddha' is a title and not a name. It means 'one who is awake' in the sense of having 'woken up to reality'. It was first given to a man who was born as Siddhartha Gautama in Nepal 2,500 years ago. Scholars now place the date of his birth around 480BCE (BC). He did not claim to be a God and he has never been regarded as such by Buddhists. He was a human being who became Enlightened, understanding life in the deepest way possible.

Siddhartha was born into the royal family of a small kingdom on the Indian-Nepalese border. According to the traditional story he had a cloistered upbringing, but was jolted out of complacency on understanding that life includes the harsh facts of old age, sickness, and death.

He left home to follow the traditional Indian path of the wandering holy man, a seeker after Truth. He practised meditation under various teachers and then took to asceticism. Eventually he practised austerities so severe that he was on the point of death - but true understanding seemed as far away as ever. He decided to abandon this path and to look into his own heart and mind. He sat down beneath the pipal tree and vowed that 'flesh may wither, blood may dry up, but I shall not rise from this spot until Enlightenment has been won.' After forty days, the Buddha finally attained Enlightenment.

Buddhists believe he attained a state of being that goes beyond anything else in the world. If normal experience is based on conditions - upbringing, psychology, opinions, perceptions, and so on - Enlightenment is Unconditioned. It was a state in which the Buddha gained Insight into the deepest workings of life and therefore into the cause of human suffering, the problem that had set him on his spiritual quest in the first place.

During the remaining 45 years of his life he travelled through much of northern India, spreading his teaching of the way to Enlightenment. The teaching is known in the East as the Buddha-dharma - 'the

teaching of the Enlightened One'. Travelling from place to place, the Buddha taught numerous disciples, many of whom gained Enlightenment in their own right. They, in turn, taught others and in this way an unbroken chain of teaching has continued, right down to the present day.

The Buddha was not a God and he made no claim to divinity. He was a human being who, through tremendous efforts, transformed himself. Buddhists see him as an ideal and a guide who can lead one to Enlightenment oneself.

What happened after the Buddha's Death?

Buddhism died out in India a thousand years ago (though it has recently revived). It spread south to Sri Lanka and South East Asia, where the Theravadin form of Buddhism continues to flourish, and north to Tibet, China, Mongolia, and Japan. The Mahayana forms of Buddhism are still practiced in these countries, although in the last century they have suffered greatly from the effects of communism and consumerism. In the last century Buddhism has emphatically arrived in the West, and hundreds of thousands of westerners have become Buddhists.

What does Buddhism Teach?

Soon after his Enlightenment the Buddha had a vision in which he saw the human race as a bed of lotus flowers. Some of the lotuses were still enmired in the mud, others were just emerging from it, and others again were on the point of blooming. In other words, all people had the ability to unfold their potential and some needed just a little help to do so. So the Buddha decided to teach, and all of the teachings of Buddhism may be seen as attempts to fulfil this vision - to help people grow towards Enlightenment.

Buddhism sees life as a process of constant change, and its practices aim to take advantage of this fact. It means that one can change for the better. The decisive factor in changing oneself is the mind, and Buddhism has developed many methods for working on the mind. Most importantly, Buddhists practise meditation, which is a way of developing more positive states of mind that are characterised by calm, concentration, awareness, and emotions such as friendliness. Using the awareness developed in meditation it is possible to have a fuller understanding of oneself, other people, and of life itself. Buddhists do not seek to 'evangelise' or coerce other people to adopt their religion, but they do seek to make its teachings available to whoever is interested, and people are free to take as much or as little as they feel ready for.

The Four Noble Truths

The Four Aryan (or Noble) Truths are perhaps the most basic formulation of the Buddha's teaching. They are expressed as follows:

1. All existence is *dukkha*. This word has been variously translated as 'suffering', 'anguish', 'pain', or 'unsatisfactoriness'. The Buddha's insight was that our lives are a struggle, and we do not find ultimate happiness or satisfaction in anything we experience. This is the problem of existence.
2. The cause of *dukkha* is craving. The natural human tendency is to blame our difficulties on things outside ourselves. But the Buddha says that their actual root is to be found in the mind itself. In particular our tendency to grasp at things (or

alternatively to push them away) places us fundamentally at odds with the way life really is.

3. The cessation of *dukkha* comes with the cessation of craving. As we are the ultimate cause of our difficulties, we are also the solution. We cannot change the things that happen to us, but we can change our responses.
4. There is a path that leads from *dukkha*. Although the Buddha throws responsibility back on to the individual he also taught methods through which we can change ourselves. One formulation of these methods is known as the Noble Eight-fold Path of right view, aspiration, action, speech, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and meditation.

The Threefold Way

Another formulation of the path is the Threefold Way of ethics, meditation, and wisdom. This is a progressive path, as ethics and a clear conscience provides an indispensable basis for meditation, and meditation is the ground on which wisdom can develop.

Ethics

To live is to act, and our actions can have either harmful or beneficial consequences for ourselves and others. Buddhist ethics is concerned with the principles and practices that help one to act in ways that help rather than harm.

The core ethical code is known as the five precepts. These are not rules or commandments, but 'principles of training', which are undertaken freely and put into practice with intelligence and sensitivity. The Buddhist tradition acknowledges that life is complex and throws up many difficulties, and it does not suggest that there is a single course of action that will be right in all circumstances. Indeed, rather than speaking of actions being right or wrong, Buddhism speaks of the being skilful (*kusala*) or unskilful (*akusala*). The Five Precepts are as follows:

1. Not killing or causing harm to other living beings. This is the fundamental ethical principle for Buddhism, and all the other precepts are elaborations of this. The precept implies acting non-violently wherever possible, and many Buddhists are vegetarian for this reason. The positive counterpart of this precept is love.
2. Not taking the not-given. Stealing is an obvious way in which one can harm others. One can also take advantage of people, exploit them or manipulate them - all these can be seen as ways of taking the not-given. The positive counterpart of this precept is generosity.
3. Avoiding sexual misconduct. This precept has been interpreted in many ways over time, but essentially it means not causing harm to oneself or others in the area of sexual activity. The positive counterpart of this precept is contentment.
4. Avoiding false speech. Speech is the crucial element in our relations with others, and yet language is a slippery medium, and we often deceive ourselves or others without even realising that this is what we are doing. Truthfulness, the positive counterpart of this precept, is therefore essential in an ethical life. But truthfulness is not enough, and in another list of precepts (the ten precepts or the ten *kusala dharmas*) no fewer

than four speech precepts are mentioned, the others enjoining that our speech should be kindly, helpful, and harmonious.

5. Abstaining from drink and drugs that cloud the mind. The positive counterpart of this precept is mindfulness, or awareness. Mindfulness is a fundamental quality to be developed the Buddha's path, and experience shows that taking intoxicating drink or drugs tends to run directly counter to this.

Many Buddhists around the world recite the five precepts every day, and try to put them into practice in their lives.

Meditation

There are many things in life that are beyond our control. However, it is possible to take responsibility for and to change one's state of mind. According to Buddhism this is the most important thing we can do, and Buddhism teaches that it is the only real antidote to the anxiety, hatred, discontentedness, sleepiness, and confusion that beset the human condition.

Meditation is a means of transforming the mind. Buddhist meditation practices are techniques that encourage and develop concentration, clarity, and emotional positivity. By engaging with a particular meditation practice one learns the patterns and habits of the mind, and the practice offers a means to cultivate new, more positive ways of being. With discipline and patience these calm and focused states of mind can deepen into profoundly tranquil and energised states of mind. Such experiences can have a transformative effect and can lead to a new understanding of life.

Over the millennia countless meditation practices have been developed in the Buddhist tradition. All of them may be described as 'mind-trainings', but they take many different approaches. The foundation of all of them, however, is the cultivation of a calm and positive state of mind.

Wisdom

The aim of all Buddhist practices, including meditation, is prajna, or wisdom. The Buddha taught that the fundamental cause of human difficulties is our existential ignorance - our failure to understand the true nature of reality and wisdom is the opposite of this.

To start with, we simply need to hear the teachings that indicate the Buddhist vision of life. Then we need to reflect on them and make sense of them in relation to our own experience. But prajna proper means developing our own direct understanding of the truth. It is not enough to know the Buddha's philosophy, or even to have a good understanding of it. The ultimate aim is to realise the truth for oneself and to be transformed by that realisation.

The Buddha taught that life - everything we experience - has three characteristics. He called these the three marks of conditioned existence. Firstly he said that all life is dukkha, or unsatisfactory. He also said that it is impermanent. Everything in the universe, including ourselves and the thoughts that make up our minds, is in a constant process of change. And yet we act as if the world around us is predictable and stable, and we live our lives as if death were not a certainty. Buddhists reflect on the fact of impermanence, and try to live with this understanding. Thirdly, wherever we may look in life for something something solid and unchanging, we only find flux. So he said that all existence is *anatta* or insubstantial. There is no fixed, abiding essence to things, and no eternal soul within human beings.

A person who is wise in the Buddhist sense will naturally see life in terms of these qualities or marks, and prajna means setting aside the pleasing illusions that we adopt to make life comfortable, and to live more and more on the basis of these truths. A full comprehension that nothing lasts, or has any fixed substance, has an utterly transformative effect. This also means that everything in life is interconnected: no individual is entirely separate from other individuals, and humanity is not separate from the world it inhabits. From this naturally arises compassion, or universal loving-kindness, which is the counterpart of wisdom.

The Three Jewels

The ideals at the heart of Buddhism are collectively known as the Three Jewels, or the Three Treasures. These are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. It is by making these the central principles of one's life that one becomes a Buddhist.

The Buddha

The Buddha refers both to the historical Buddha and to the ideal of Buddhahood which is open to all.

The Dharma

The Dharma primarily means the teachings of the Buddha, or the truth he understood. Dharma has many meanings but most importantly it means the unmediated Truth (as experienced by the Enlightened mind) and Buddhist Teachings, the Truth as mediated by language and concepts. In the second sense Dharma is the teaching that was born when the Buddha first put his realisation into words and communicated it to others at Sarnath in Northern India. The occasion is traditionally referred to as 'the first turning of the wheel of the Dharma' and the eight-spoked Dharma wheel is a common emblem of Buddhism.

As well as this Dharma, refers to the entire corpus of scriptures which are regarded as constituting the Buddhist canon. These include records of the Buddha's life (known as the Pali Canon), scriptures from a later date, and the written teachings of those people who have attained Enlightenment over the centuries. The whole canon is many hundred times as long as the Bible and it represents a literature of unparalleled riches. It includes works such as The Dhammapada, The Diamond Sutra, and The Tibetan Book of the Dead.

Another meaning of Dharma is the practices which are outlined within the scriptures. Despite the wealth of its literature the essence of Buddhism is very simple: it is finding ways to transform oneself. It could be summed up as 'learning to do good; ceasing to do evil; purifying the heart' (as the Dhammapada says).

The Sangha

The third of the 'Three Jewels' is the Sangha or the spiritual community. Buddhism is not an abstract philosophy or creed; it is a way of approaching life and therefore it only has any meaning when it is embodied in people. So Buddhists place great value on the fellowship of others who are treading the same path, and those who embody its goal. In the broadest sense the Sangha means all of the Buddhists in the world and all those of the past and of the future. In practice it particularly refers to other Buddhists with whom one is in effective contact.

Buddhism being a path, some people are further advanced along it than others, and particular respect is paid to the lineage of great teachers down the millennia. Beyond this, the ideals of Buddhism find their embodiment in archetypal figures known as Bodhisattvas. For example, Avalokitesvara is the embodiment of Compassion, and he is depicted with four, eight, or a thousand arms with which he seeks to help sentient beings; Manjusri is the embodiment of Wisdom and he is depicted carrying a sword with which he cuts through ignorance. Together the Bodhisattvas and the other Enlightened teachers are known as the Arya Sangha or community of the Noble Ones.

