



**What is Buddhism?**



# Introduction

**F**or more than 2,500 years, the religion we know today as Buddhism has been the primary inspiration behind many successful civilizations, a source of great cultural achievements and a profound guide to the very purpose of life for millions of people. Today, large numbers of men and women from diverse backgrounds throughout the world are following the teachings of the Buddha. So who was the Buddha and what are his teachings?



# The Buddha

The man who was to become the Buddha was born Siddhattha Gotama around 2,600 years ago as a prince of a small territory near what is now the Indian-Nepalese border. Though he was raised in splendid comfort, enjoying aristocratic status, no amount of material wealth and sensual pleasure could conceal life's imperfections from the unusually inquisitive young man. So at the age of 29 he left wealth and family behind for the remote forests and mountains of Northeast India to search for a lasting answer to life's problems. He studied under the wisest religious

teachers and philosophers of his time, learning all they had to impart, but they could not provide the answers he was seeking. He then struggled on the path of self-mortification, taking that practice to the extremes of asceticism, but still to no avail.

By the age of 35 he realized that neither self-indulgence nor self-mortification were leading him to the answers that he was looking for. Then, on the full moon night of May, having turned away from these two extremes, he sat beneath the branches of what is now known as the Bodhi Tree in a secluded grove by the banks of a river, and developed his mind in deep, luminous and tranquil states of meditation. With the extraordinary clarity and

sharp penetrative power that is generated by inner stillness, he focused his attention on investigating the nature of existence, its cause and its cessation. Through this contemplation of the essence of reality, he attained the supreme awakening, the experience of enlightenment. From that point on he was known as the Buddha, the Awakened One.

His enlightenment consisted of the most profound and all-embracing insight into the nature of the body, mind and all phenomena. This awakening was not a revelation from a divine being, but a discovery made by himself based on the deepest levels of meditation. It was an insight that liberated his mind from the roots of all suffering: selfish desire, anger

and delusion. This experience eliminated all traces of inner conflict and discontent, revealing unshakeable peace. He had found the ultimate solution to life's problems that he'd sought, and the result was unparalleled, sublime, true happiness.

Having realized the goal of perfect enlightenment, the Buddha spent the next 45 years teaching a path of training and development which, when accurately and diligently followed, will lead anyone regardless of race, class or gender to the same awakening. These teachings are called the *Dhamma*, literally meaning the nature of all things or the underlying truths of existence. The following is a brief overview of the Buddha's teachings.



# The Four Noble Truths

The central teaching of the Buddha, around which all his other teachings revolve, is the Four Noble Truths:

1. Life involves suffering. All beings are subject to old age, sickness and death. They will inevitably experience some disappointment, discomfort, sadness, anxiety or pain.
2. The root cause of suffering is craving for sensual pleasure, for existence, for

non-existence or for things to be different than they are. Craving is fueled by likes and dislikes, driven by the illusion of 'me' and 'mine', which in turn is due to misunderstanding the true nature of reality.

3. Suffering ends with the ending of craving. This is the attainment of enlightenment, *Nibbana* (or *Nirvana*). Enlightenment is the complete letting go of the illusion of a permanent and independent self or soul. An enlightened person is called an *Arahant*.

4. Enlightenment is achieved through a gradual training, a path called the Middle Way, or the Noble Eightfold Path.

Buddhism is a realistic religion in that it faces up to the fact of life's many imperfections, and optimistic in that it offers a practical solution: enlightenment in this very life.

Because all things that arise from a cause are in a constant state of change, they are inherently unable to provide permanent happiness or reliable satisfaction. Grasping and clinging onto any aspect of experience leads to friction, stress or disappointment when those things, people or situations fade and disappear. As long as suffering is seen as something unnatural or abnormal that is to be feared, avoided or rejected, it will be impossible to uproot its causes and live a truly happy life. To the degree that the subtle and all-pervasive nature of suffering is recognized, one

can accept and be free from it. This is why the reflection on suffering is emphasized as the key to ultimate liberation, and those who have realized enlightenment are inspiring examples of profound happiness, loving-kindness and compassion.

## The Middle Way

The path to the ending of all suffering is called the Middle Way because it avoids the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-torment. Such extreme behavior does not lead to peace of mind. This pathway consists of cultivating virtue, meditative serenity and wisdom and is further elaborated as the Noble Eightfold Path:

1. The perfection of understanding: right view of the basic truths of existence.
2. The perfection of intention: thoughts motivated by loving-kindness, compassion and renunciation.
3. The perfection of speech: truthful, harmonious, gentle and meaningful.
4. The perfection of behavior: harmlessness, not stealing and responsible sexual conduct.
5. The perfection of employment: earning a living in a way that does not harm or exploit others or oneself.
6. The perfection of effort: cultivating and maintaining wholesome states of mind

while overcoming unwholesome states and keeping them at bay.

7. The perfection of conscious awareness: mindfulness of one's body, feelings, mind and objects of mind.

8. The perfection of meditative concentration: deep unification, peace and purity of mind.

When all eight factors of the path are brought to maturity, one penetrates the true nature of existence with insight and reaps the fruit of the Buddha's teachings: perfected wisdom and unshakable liberation.

## The Law of *Kamma*

The Buddha said, “Monks, *kamma* is intention.” According to the natural law of *kamma* (or *karma*), there are inescapable results of our intentional actions. Certain acts, things said or thought will lead to hurting others or harming oneself if the intention behind them is unwholesome. This ‘bad *kamma*’ is motivated by selfish desire, anger or delusion. Because the result is unpleasant and painful, wise people don’t follow impure intentions. Similarly there are actions, speech and thoughts which stem from wholesome intentions. This ‘good *kamma*’ leads to the well-being of both oneself and

others. Motivated by generosity, compassion, clarity of understanding and other positive states of mind, wise people cultivate and follow up on their pure intentions.

Much, though not all, of what one experiences is the result of one's previous *kamma*. So when one finds oneself in an unpleasant situation, rather than projecting blame on others one can examine one's own past conduct and take responsibility for the causes that led up to the situation. Likewise when one is feeling happy, instead of taking it for granted one looks to understand the previous causes and conditions that brought it about. Understanding how happiness originates encourages further good *kamma*.



The Buddha pointed out that no being, divine or not, has the power to stop the consequences of good or bad *kamma*. One reaps exactly what one sows. So if you want to be wealthy, then be generous, hard-working and trustworthy. If you want to go to heaven, be virtuous, be kind and meditate. If you want to be enlightened, develop insight based on deep peace of mind.

The only escape from the results of *kamma* is enlightenment. Until then however, it is possible to attenuate the severity of the consequences of bad *kamma* by increasing the good. The Buddha gave the simile of a spoon of salt mixed in a glass of water compared

to a spoon of salt mixed in a large river. The glass of water becomes undrinkable while the taste of the water in the river is hardly affected. Similarly, the results of bad *kamma* for a person only doing a small amount of good *kamma* is very painful, while the result of the same bad *kamma* for a person habitually doing a great deal of good *kamma* is much less severe.

Understanding this natural law of cause and effect leads to an ethical, compassionate and wise life. Furthermore, a wider embracing of the law of *kamma* would lead any country towards a stronger, more caring and virtuous society.

# Rebirth

The Buddha remembered his past lives. Even today there are monks, nuns and others who can remember their previous existences. Such a strong memory is a result of deep meditation and mental training. For those who can recall their past lives, the idea of rebirth becomes an established fact which puts this present life in a meaningful perspective.

The law of *kamma* can only be fully understood in the framework of many lifetimes, because sometimes it takes this long for *kamma* to bear its fruit.

Rebirth is not limited merely to the human realm. The Buddha taught that the realm of human beings is but one among many. In addition there are realms of heavens, hells, animals and ghosts. Depending on the *kamma* one has accumulated, one may be reborn into any of these. Understanding this brings up a sense of empathy and respect for the lives of all beings.

Because no realm is permanent, the repetitive cycle of birth and death and the wandering on from realm to realm is inherently unsatisfying. Eventually one seeks a way out. By following the Noble Eightfold Path to its culmination of enlightenment, the process of rebirth ceases completely.

# Do Buddhists Believe in a God?

**B**uddhism is a non-theistic religion in that one does not worship a God, creator or savior. Progress on the Buddhist path to enlightenment is not dependent on an external force but on one's own effort. Buddhist cosmology does recognize the existence of heavenly realms, and the divine beings living there are very similar to what people would associate with gods or God. Because of the fundamental law of impermanence however, even these beings are subject to passing away and being reborn, still caught in the cycle of birth and death, and therefore not taken as an ultimate refuge.

# The Illusion of a Permanent Self or Soul

The Buddha taught that there is no essential or permanent core to a living being that could be considered one's true self or soul. What appears to be an individual person is actually a changing process of mental and physical qualities combining temporarily in a particular way. Through possessive attachment, the mind identifies with part or all of this process, and this gives rise to the sense of self, 'me' and 'mine'. In fact, all phenomena, animate or inanimate, are

dependently arisen from causes and conditions. In a constant state of flux, all things are empty of independent inherent existence and the entirety of reality is a continuous flow of interconnected, causally conditioned events arising and passing away in the present moment.

Rebirth however, still occurs without a soul. Consider the simile of a candle burning low and about to go out. A new candle is then lit from the old one. Though the old candle goes out, the new candle now burns brightly. What went across from the old candle to the new? There was a causal link, but no 'thing' went across. Similarly, there was a causal link between one's past and present life, but no soul went across.

The Buddha taught that it is precisely this deep misunderstanding, the illusion of a self, that is the root cause of all human suffering. The illusion of self manifests as the ego, and the natural unstoppable function of the ego is to control. Big egos want to control the world, average egos attempt to control their immediate surroundings of home, family and workplace, and all egos strive to control what they assume to be their own bodies and minds. This attempt to control leads to attraction and aversion which consequently proliferates to acquire possessions, manipulate others and exploit the environment.

Although the sense of self seeks its own happiness, its insatiable craving repeatedly produces



discontent. As long as one identifies with something as oneself, the inevitable result is a lack of outer harmony or inner fulfillment. Only through sharp insight based on profound meditation can this mirage be clearly seen for what it truly is. Only then can one know perfect happiness.

## A Path of Inquiry

**T**he Buddha warned against blind faith and encouraged wise inquiry and tolerance. In one of his talks he pointed out the danger in basing one's beliefs merely on the following criteria: hearsay, tradition, because many others say it is so, the authority of ancient scriptures, due to logical deduction, or out of respect

for one's teachers, elders or priests. Instead the traveler on the path of inquiry should maintain an open mind and thoroughly investigate his or her own experience of life. When one sees for oneself that a particular view or belief is both reasonable and in accordance with one's experience, leading to happiness for both oneself and others, only then should that view be adopted. This standard of course applies to the Buddha's own teachings. They should be looked into carefully, and examined with the clarity generated by meditation. As meditation deepens, direct insight into the nature of life grows. Only at this point do the teachings offer the bliss of liberation.

## What is Meditation?

**M**editation refers to the mental activity of sustaining conscious awareness on one thing, perception, concept, process or sensation. This may be for example, the process of breathing, an external object, the concept and emotion of loving-kindness, the mental repetition of a meaningful word, or paying attention to a physical sensation. Meditation can be done in any posture, but the most common ones are sitting cross-legged and walking back and forth. As mindful awareness becomes increasingly continuous, the dispersed and distracted energy of the mind becomes more focused and clear.

The act of sustaining awareness calms and soothes both the body and mind, while the focusing of attention energizes and brightens the mind.

The deeper the meditation becomes, the more quiet, still and blissful one feels. This cleansed and purified awareness, developed through repeated training, yields extraordinary clarity of mind. One begins to see things as they truly are, beyond the limitations of conditioned perceptions and habitual thought patterns. As one sees clearly, wisdom is born, and thus serenity and insight form an inseparable pair that are gradually cultivated through meditation.

# The Buddhist Monastic Order

The Buddhist monastic community, the *Sangha*, was created by the Buddha for those people who wanted to fully dedicate their lives toward the realization of enlightenment. The monastic lifestyle enables one to leave behind the worries and entanglements of lay life and focus almost all one's time and energy on the goal of liberation. It also offers the opportunity to live in solitude, an important factor for the development of deep states of meditation

and wisdom. The Buddha also instituted a detailed and refined code of conduct and discipline to aid monastics in their cultivation of virtue.

Between Buddhist monastics and Buddhist lay people, there is a relationship of inter-dependence. The *Sangha* relies on the lay Buddhists for their material needs, and in return the monks and nuns provide the lay community with spiritual guidance and moral support. As long as the *Sangha* continues to practise in accordance with the code of monastic discipline and strives for the attainment of enlightenment, Buddhism will be a strong and vibrant religion.

## Types of Buddhism

**B**uddhism flourished in India after the passing away of the Buddha and spread peacefully southward as far as Sri Lanka, northward to the Himalayas, westward to what is now Iran and Afghanistan and eastward to China, Sumatra and Java. After 500 years a new sect called Mahayana emerged, distinguishing itself from the lineage presently known as Theravada. Mahayana tended to be more liberal, freely adapting to new cultures, while Theravada was more conservative, attempting to maintain continuity from the time

of the Buddha. With the arrival of new scriptures, some Mahayana schools depicted the Buddha as a god and replaced the goal of attaining *Arahantship* with the ideal of the *Bodhisattva*, a person striving to become a Buddha in order to help as many beings as possible. The Theravada school preserved and looked to the original teachings and lifestyle of the Buddha as its guide.

With the Muslim invasions of the Indian sub-continent in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, Buddhism was violently suppressed and eventually eradicated in its native country. By that time however, Mahayana had taken root in



China and from there spread to Japan, Korea and Vietnam. The most popular of the many different sects of those countries is Zen Buddhism. Mahayana also spread to Tibet, incorporated the local animist religion of Bon, and then spread further to Mongolia and Bhutan. The most well-known Tibetan monk and Nobel Peace Prize laureate is the Dalai Lama. Theravada established itself mainly in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Its scriptures are known as the Pali Canon, the oldest complete Indic record of what the Buddha taught.

# Buddhism In the World Today

**A**t present, Buddhism continues to gain an ever-widening acceptance in countries and societies far beyond its original home. Many people throughout the world, through their own careful choice, are adopting Buddhism's peaceful, compassionate and responsible ways as guiding principles in their lives. Meditation has always been at the very heart of the Buddhist path, and as its proven benefits to both mental and physical well-being are becoming more widely

known, meditation grows increasingly popular. When stress is shown to be such a major cause of human suffering in modern society, the quieting practice of meditation is even more valued.

The world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is too small and vulnerable for us to live in isolation or conflict. In all its long history no war has ever been fought to spread the Buddha's teachings. Tolerance, loving-kindness and forgiveness, essential for world harmony and individual happiness, are generated and developed through virtuous behavior and more deeply through Buddhist meditation. When put into practice in everyday life, the path of the Buddha gradually cultivates the

heart with harmlessness. This is then offered to all beings, especially oneself. There is no place for dwelling in guilt or self-hatred in Buddhism.

The down-to-earth teachings and practices of the Buddha culminate in pure joy, unshakeable serenity and penetrating wisdom, qualities identified with Buddhism for over 2,500 years and sorely needed in today's world. The gentle and sagacious peace of enlightenment is what makes the Buddha's message timeless and always vitally relevant.

## Recommended Reading

Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha

trans. Nanamoli / Bodhi

Food for the Heart

Ajahn Chah

Being Dharma

Ajahn Chah

Mindfulness in Plain English

Bhante Gunaratana

Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness

Bhante Gunaratana

The Noble Eightfold Path

Bhikkhu Bodhi

Introduction to Buddhism

Peter Harvey

Being Nobody, Going Nowhere

Ayya Khema

The Life of the Buddha

Bhikkhu Nanamoli

Ethics for the New Millennium

H.H. the Dalai Lama

Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind

Shunryu Suzuki

The Art of Living

S.N. Goenka / William Hart

The Meditative Path

John Cianciosi

## Recommended Web Sites

[www.accesstoinsight.org](http://www.accesstoinsight.org)

[www.forestsangha.org](http://www.forestsangha.org)

[www.vimutti.org.nz](http://www.vimutti.org.nz)

[www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net)





The International Forest Monastery  
Wat Pah Nanachat  
Bahn Bung Wai  
Warin  
Ubon 34310  
THAILAND