

INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM

Buddhism arises out of the experiences of a man named Siddhartha Gautama who was born to a king or chieftain in India in the sixth century BCE. He is said to have left his home and family, renouncing his birthright, wife and infant son, to become a wandering ascetic in search of ultimate truth. According to legend, his search was motivated by encounters with suffering, disease, old age and death. Gautama set out to seek the answer to why we suffer in this human life. Through the insight he gained from his search and through deep meditation, he became known as the Buddha, or “Enlightened One.”

BELIEFS

The teachings of the Buddha, which were not written down until nearly three centuries after his death, center on the nature of suffering and how to end it. Although written long after the Buddha lived, there is a great deal of certainty that the basic teachings, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, were his original teachings. Buddhism is often called a “middle path, steering a middle course between asceticism and hedonism”. One formally becomes a Buddhist by “taking refuge” in the three “jewels”: the Buddha, the Enlightened One; the Dharma, or teaching; and the Sangha, or community. As he lay dying, the Buddha exhorted his followers to diligently work out their own salvation, characterizing this path as one of individual emancipation and then of others.

The Four Noble Truths explain the reality of suffering: 1) all of humanity experiences suffering in many forms including the physical, mental and existential (i.e., birth, aging, disease, death, separating from loved ones, meeting up with people one doesn’t like); 2) suffering originates in a desire for or grasping after experiences, pleasure, continued existence, and even annihilation; 3) we can escape suffering by following a path designed to end these attachments; and 4) the path the Buddha taught to escape suffering is the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path is divided into three groupings: cultivating insight, cultivating morality, and cultivating the mind through meditation. The first two steps – *right views* and *right intention* – reflect the cultivation of insight and wisdom. The next three steps – *right speech*, *right action* and *right career* – reflect the cultivation of morality, and the last three – *right effort*, *right mindfulness* and *right concentration* – reflect the cultivation of the mind. As a result of this approach – one of diagnosing humanity’s ailment and providing the cure – adherents often speak of Buddhism more as a philosophy of life than as a religion in the traditional sense.

Although the Buddha incorporated the doctrines of *karma*, *reincarnation* and the existence of some of the deities of Hinduism, he rejected other elements of the religion. He rejected specifically the rituals described in the *Vedas*, as well as the caste system, challenging the very basis of Hindu society.

However, the most revolutionary aspect of the Buddha’s teaching was in his rejection of Hindu ideas pertaining to the Self and Brahman. Hinduism teaches that the Self (not the personality) is the permanent, unchanging life force that is the source of ultimate knowledge for the individual. Brahman is the permanent, unchanging transcendent Supreme Reality in the universe which lies beyond the cosmos, and is its source. Humanity’s goal is to be released from the cycle of birth and death and for the Self to merge with Brahma.

Buddhism, in contrast, teaches that everything in the material and mental realms, including what we call our “self”, is constantly in flux and impermanent. Our suffering therefore arises out of our grasping to hold onto that which is impermanent – an impossible task. We constantly desire things we do not possess, or worry about losing the things we do possess. As the Eightfold Path teaches, meditation is the primary practice that overcomes this human delusion by calming the mind and revealing the nature of things as they truly are. As one gains this insight, the ultimate breakthrough occurs which is called *Nirvana* – the transcendence of all grasping, attachment rooted in desire, greed, hatred, and delusion.

Because these practices are time-consuming and can require a great deal of instruction and guidance, early Buddhism was and Theravada Buddhism (in South and Southeast Asia) still is more of a monastic religion than one of the masses. In these areas, the Sangha (community of monks and nuns) is more expected to attain the goals set forth by the Buddha than the lay community. Western Buddhists, Pure Land and Mahâyâna Buddhists engage in various practices with a broad range of beliefs about death, enlightenment and living out the Eightfold Path.

SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURE

Buddhism’s sacred writings are composed in many languages and are vast in number. Originating in what has become Theravada Buddhism, the Pâli canon is the oldest surviving collection. The earliest compositions in this canon are called *suttas* (*sûtras* in Sanskrit), and are usually based upon the words of the Buddha, but some are from his disciples. The canon was written down in the first century BCE in Sri Lanka, and included a later section added to the *suttas* analyzing the teachings in the earlier compositions.

The Pâli canon is divided into “baskets” (*pitakas*). Rules for monks and nuns are found in the Vinaya Pitaka; the Sutta Pitaka contains the teaching of the Buddha; and the commentaries discuss the *suttas* analytically in the Abhidhamma Pitaka.

Other authoritative and influential texts came from the Mahâyâna and Vajrayâna Buddhist traditions. Known as *sûtras* from the Sanskrit, and believed to be the Buddha’s own words, the first Mahâyâna *sûtras* appeared in the first century BCE, and continued to be written until the

eighth century CE. Some of the most prominent include the Wisdom Sūtras, with longer and shorter versions such as the Diamond and Heart Sūtras, the Lotus Sūtras and the Pure Land Sūtras. The Vajrayāna tradition appeared with new texts dating from the sixth century CE that were known as *tantras* (systems) and esoteric ritual texts.

PRACTICES, RITUALS and FESTIVALS

Although meditation is the principal practice of most Buddhists, it is not universal. The Pure Land School of Buddhism, for example, emphasizes faith as well as the recitation of a formula that will gain practitioners rebirth into the Western Paradise or Pure Land (a temporary extraterrestrial realm with no suffering leading to enlightenment).

Major Buddhist festivals and celebrations include: **Wesak** (Sri Lanka), or **Visakha Puja** (Thailand). A celebration of the birth, death and enlightenment of the Buddha. Observed on the day of the full moon in the fifth lunar month.

Asalha Puja. Held on the full moon day in seventh lunar month, this celebration commemorates the first sermon the Buddha gave to his original five disciples.

The Lantern Festival. This festival commemorates the proof that the Buddhist sūtras were genuine because they did not catch fire when burned like the scriptures of the Taoists did. Chinese and other Asians celebrate on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. Lamps are lit to symbolize the light of Buddhism.

Obon or All Soul's Day. This ceremony, which occurs on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month (July or August) serves to honor and remember ancestors. It is based on the story of the Buddha's awakened disciple (Maudgalyāyana) and his rescue of his mother in hell. Lanterns are usually placed on small boats and set adrift on a body of water. Obon festivals at Japanese Buddhist temples are now a popular event of the entire community in many parts of the U.S.

New Year's Day. Chinese, Vietnamese and some Korean Buddhist communities celebrate this day according to the Chinese lunar calendar, which situates it around February. Sri Lankans, Thais, Laotians, Burmese and Cambodians celebrate the New Year according to a different calendar which places the day on the 13th or 14th of April. It is considered a good day to perform acts of merit.

BRANCHES OF BUDDHISM and WOMEN'S ROLES IN BUDDHISM

It is clear that women were among the Buddha's early followers and supporters. Their roles in the tradition vary according to the branch with which they are associated.

Buddhism is identified today according to three traditions often referred to as "vehicles" (yāna).

Theravāda (the teaching of the elders) practices, the dominant form of Buddhism in South Asia (Sri Lanka) and Southeast Asia (Myanmar [Burma], Thailand, Cambodia and

Laos), focus on monastic life. Lay Buddhists earn "merit" toward future enlightenment through giving gifts of food and other necessities to support monks. Nuns do exist, but are not formally ordained. They are known as "precept holders", and are independent or attached to monasteries.

Mahāyāna (the Greater Vehicle) Buddhism appeared around the first century BCE. The concept of the Bodhisattva (one who, rather than pursuing one's own Nirvana, continues to work for the salvation of all beings) originated in this branch of Buddhism. The emphasis here is on saving others rather than oneself, and more importance is placed on the practice of compassion. Full ordination of women is practiced. In Japan, where Zen Buddhism is one of the main schools along with Pure Land and Nichinan branches, nuns enjoy a higher status and better education, and may become Zen *roshis* (priests). Females Zen priests are relatively common in United States Zen communities.

Vajrayāna (the Diamond Vehicle) Buddhism appeared around 500 CE in India with the introduction of books known as *tantras*. It later spread to Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, China and Japan. It emphasizes ritual and mystical means to enlightenment. Vajrayāna devotees attain enlightenment through the use of *mantras* (sacred language), *mūdras* (hand gestures) and *mandalas* (symbolic models of the cosmos). Novice ordination of women has been generally practiced until recently when full ordination began to be introduced. 🙏

BUDDHISM – Did You Know?

- A wheel with eight spokes, the Dharma Wheel, most often represents Buddhism, signifying the Eightfold Path.
- There are over 300 million Buddhists in the world, and numbers range from 500,000 to 5 million in the United States.
- One third of California's 200 Buddhist Centers are clustered in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Berkeley.
- Buddhism disappeared from its birthplace in India by the end of the 13th century due to repeated waves of various foreign invasions, leading ultimately to the conquest of India by groups unified under Islam.



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.