

# What Is Buddhism?



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By  
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Third Edition

May all beings be free  
from all suffering

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## Introduction

For more than 2,500 years, the religion we know today as Buddhism has guided many great civilizations, inspired refined cultural achievements and produced a vast body of profound teachings. Some of the wisest people to have ever walked the planet have been Buddhist monks and nuns. Today, large numbers of men and women from diverse backgrounds throughout the world are following the teachings of the Buddha. So what is Buddhism? Who was the Buddha, and what are his teachings?

## The Buddha

The person who was to become the Buddha was born Siddhattha Gotama roughly 2,600 years ago as a prince of a small kingdom near what is now the Indian-Nepalese border. Although he was raised immersed in the great luxury of his royal status, and he excelled in the arts and education that prepared him for leadership, outside the confines of the palace walls Siddhattha was deeply moved by the suffering bound up with a normal human life. He saw that old age, failing health or death inescapably touches the lives of every living being. On one occasion he also saw a wandering renunciate, a person seeking a true solution to life's pain, and this then motivated Siddhattha to begin a spiritual quest. At age 29 he left the palace and his family behind for the remote forests and mountains of Northeast India. Wandering as a homeless and penniless religious seeker, he was determined to find out if there was a way to experience a lasting security and peace that was free from life's inherent difficulties. Overcoming the fear and hardship of living in the wild, he adopted the pure and moral life of a monk. He trained under the wisest meditation teachers and philosophers of his time, mastering what they had to teach, but they still could not provide the answers he was seeking. He then adopted the path of extreme asceticism—not allowing himself to feel pleasure and fasting to the brink of death—but still to no avail.

By age 35, Siddhattha had realized that neither self-indulgence nor self-

torment would lead to true happiness. He then tried a different tact. Turning away from these two extremes, he applied his mind to developing deep concentration and freedom through wisdom. Sitting beneath the branches of what is now known as the Bodhi Tree, he developed his mind in 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 refined contemplation of the essential characteristics of reality, he attained the transcendent liberation of consciousness known as enlightenment, *Nibbana* (or *Nirvana*). From that point on he was known as the Buddha, the One who had Awakened.

The Buddha's enlightenment consisted of an all-encompassing insight into the nature of the body, mind and phenomena. This awakening was not a revelation from an outside power or deity, but a unique discovery that arose from within based on the deepest levels of meditation. Insight had liberated his mind from the roots of all suffering: selfish desire, anger and deluded perceptions of reality. This experience eliminated all traces of inner dissatisfaction and discontent, revealing unshakeable peace. He had found the ultimate solution to life's problems that he had sought, and the result was unparalleled, sublime, true happiness.

This enlightenment is considered to be the highest human potential possible, far surpassing any heavenly existence. Having experienced it for himself, the Buddha then spent the next 45 years teaching a way of life, a practical path of training and development which, when accurately and diligently followed, would lead others to the same awakening. These teachings are known as the *Dhamma* (or *Dharma*), meaning the nature of all things or the path to understand the truths of existence.

## A Path of Inquiry

There are no fixed beliefs that a person must adopt in order to be a "Buddhist." In fact, the Buddha warned against the dangers of blind faith and encouraged wise

inquiry and tolerance. The traveler on the path of inquiry maintains an open mind and thoroughly investigates 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 and benefit both for oneself and others, only then should that view be adopted. This standard 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. At this point one is in a position to clearly decide what religious or spiritual teachings are in accordance with reality.

## **Meditation**

Meditation refers to the mental activity of sustaining clear awareness on one thing: an object, a perception, a concept, a process or a sensation for the purpose of peace and understanding. For example, one could pay attention to the process of breathing, a physical sensation, an external object, the emotion of loving-kindness, the mental repetition of a meaningful word or the perception of impermanence. 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 the mind, while the focusing of attention energizes and brightens the heart.

The deeper the meditation becomes, the more quiet, still and peaceful one feels. This cleansed and purified awareness, developed through dedicated 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 is gradually cultivated until the realization of full enlightenment.

# The Four Noble Truths

The central teaching of the Buddha, around which all his other teachings revolve, is the Four Noble Truths, formulated as a medical analysis:

1. The diagnosis: Life inevitably involves some mental and physical pain. Everyone at some point experiences disappointment, discomfort, anger, sadness, anxiety or suffering. People don't always get what they want, and they are often separated from whom and what they love. Everyone experiences either the gradual physical degeneration of old age, death, or both. Even the extremely subtle stress that can arise from normal functioning in the world is a burden.
2. The cause: The root of mental pain is craving for sensual pleasure, for existence or for non-existence; or simply wishing that things were different from what they actually are. Craving is fueled by reactions to pleasure and pain and driven by the illusion of 'me' and 'mine', which in turn are due to misunderstanding the true nature of reality.
3. The recovery: It is possible for all mental suffering to completely cease. This is the attainment of enlightenment. Enlightenment is the purification of the heart from any traces of attraction, aversion or delusion. It is the complete letting go of the illusion of an independent self or soul. A fully-enlightened person is called an *Arahant*. The Buddha called this the highest happiness, the full realization of human potential.
4. The treatment: Enlightenment is achieved through a gradual training, a way of life called the Middle Way, or the Noble Eightfold Path.

These Four Noble Truths are realistic in that they face up to life's imperfections, and optimistic in that they offer a practical solution: enlightenment, or at least piece of mind, in this very life. Because all things are in a constant state of change, they are inherently unable to provide lasting happiness or reliable satisfaction. Grasping and clinging to any aspect of experience leads to

friction, stress or disappointment when those things, people or situations fade and disappear. As long as this pain 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. However, to the degree that the subtle and all-pervasive nature of the first noble truth is recognized, one can accept and be free from suffering. 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 happiness of enlightenment 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. The Middle Way consists of cultivating virtue, serenity and wisdom and is further elaborated as the Noble Eightfold Path:

1. The perfection of understanding: views that accord with the natural truths of reality.
2. The perfection of intention: being motivated by loving-kindness, compassion and renunciation.
3. The perfection of speech: words that are honest, harmonious, gentle and meaningful.
4. The perfection of behavior: actions that manifest non-violence, sexual responsibility, and not stealing from others.
5. The perfection of work: earning a living or sustaining one's life 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: being fully mindful of one's body, feelings, mind and phenomena.
8. The perfection of meditative concentration: deep unification, peace and purity of mind.

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

## The Law of Kamma

According to the natural law of *kamma* (or *karma*), one's intentions are causes that lead to experiencing results in the future. The results will be similar to the intentions, and depending on one's state of mind when acting, speaking or even thinking, they will be experienced as either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. If one's intention is tainted by anger, a selfish desire for pleasure, a wish to harm or general confusion, this creates the causes to experience pain, unhappiness and misfortune in the future. This 'bad kamma' is unbeneficial both for oneself and others. Similarly, if one's actions, speech and thoughts originate with motivations of unconditional love and kindness, generosity, a wish to help others, inner peace or wisdom, this creates the causes to experience pleasure, happiness and good fortune in the future. This 'good kamma' leads to the well-being of both oneself and others.

Most, although not all, of what one experiences is the result of one's previous kamma, and how one responds to the present experience will generate new kamma. In this dynamic interplay between experiencing results from the past and responding in the present, we literally create our own future, moment by moment. Kamma is not fate, and the present moment is where there is the possibility of freedom. This is where one has the opportunity to free oneself from the unbeneficial patterns of behavior based on one's past conditioning. This opportunity for freedom, however, is only possible if we are mindful and attentive. This is why clear awareness and understanding things as they truly are in the present is so crucial to the path of liberation taught by the Buddha.

No being, divine or human, has the power to stop the consequences of good or bad kamma. One reaps exactly what one sows. So when one finds

oneself in an unpleasant situation, rather than projecting blame on others one can reflect wisely on 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 can examine the previous causes and conditions that brought it about. Understanding how happiness comes about encourages making further good kamma.

The only escape from the results of kamma is enlightenment. Until that time, however, it is possible to mitigate 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 results of the same bad kamma for a person habitually doing a great deal of good kamma is much less severe.

The Buddha did not invent the law of kamma. It is a natural law that operates whether people are aware of it or not. The Buddha, however, deeply understood this process of interconnected causes, conditions and effects and then taught a way to live within it that led to peace and happiness. Insight into kamma naturally leads to living an ethical, compassionate and wise life. When an entire society embraces these principles, the result is peace and prosperity.

## Rebirth

The concept of past and future lives is intrinsic to the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha however, never praised believing in a doctrine merely out of blind faith. With advanced abilities in meditation it becomes possible to remember past lives, but until then rebirth remains a matter of reasoned reflection. According to Buddhist teachings, when a person who is not fully enlightened dies, although the physical body comes to an end, there is still a mental momentum that then leads to further existence. A fully enlightened person, however, has purified his or her

stream of consciousness to the extent that no rebirth is possible. Since even the most pleasant of existences are considered far inferior to the great happiness, freedom and peace of Nibbana, the goal of Buddhist practice is not to be reborn.

Rebirth is not limited merely to humans. The Buddha taught that the realm of human beings is but one among many, including heavens, hells, animals and ghosts. One may be reborn into any of these, depending on the kamma one has accumulated. The law of kamma can only be fully comprehended in the context of multiple lifetimes, because it sometimes takes this long for the seeds of kamma to bear their fruit.

The repetitive cycle of birth and death and the wandering on from realm to realm is inherently unable to fully satisfy and often produces pain. By following the Noble Eightfold Path to its culmination of enlightenment, the process of rebirth ceases completely.

## **Do Buddhists Believe in God?**

Buddhism is a non-theistic religion in that a Buddhist does not worship a God, creator or savior. Progress on the 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. However, because of the all-encompassing law of impermanence, even these exalted beings are subject to passing away and being reborn. They are still caught in the cycle of birth and death and therefore not taken as an ultimate refuge.

## **The Delusion 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.

The Buddha taught that it is precisely the deeply held deluded understanding of a separate self that is the root cause of all human suffering. Although the perception of self seeks 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 peace. Only through insight based on profound meditation can this mirage be clearly seen for what it truly is. Only then can one know perfect happiness.

## The Buddhist Monastic Order

The Buddhist monastic community, the *Sangha*, was created by the Buddha for those people who wished to fully dedicate their lives toward the realization of enlightenment. The monastic life enables one to leave behind the pressures and entanglements of mainstream society to focus more whole-heartedly on the goal of liberation. Adopting this simple and austere lifestyle directly challenges many deeply held attachments. The Buddha gradually developed a detailed and refined code of conduct and discipline to aid monastics in their cultivation of virtue. This framework supports both living in community and in solitude, each important factors for the development of deep states of meditation and wisdom. Monastic life is an example of a viable non-materialistic, alternative lifestyle dedicated to generating goodness, wisdom and peace in society

Between Buddhist monastics and Buddhist lay people, there is a relationship of nourishing interdependence. The Sangha relies on the lay community for its material needs, and in return the monks and nuns provide the

lay community with spiritual guidance, moral support, and an inspiring example. As long as the Sangha continues to practice in accordance with the Buddhist monastic code of discipline and strives for the attainment of enlightenment, the teachings of awakening will continue to flourish.

## Types of Buddhism

By the time the Buddha passed away his teachings were well established in India. With hundreds of thousands of disciples, including the kings and leaders of his day, and with tens of thousands of monks and nuns, Buddhism was well on its way to becoming a major influence in the world. Buddhism continued with great momentum in India after the Buddha passed away and spread peacefully southward as far as Sri Lanka, northward to the Himalayas, westward to what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan and eastward to China and Indonesia. As it spread and flourished in the new lands, different denominations, or schools of thought, also developed. After 500 years a new sect called Mahayana emerged, distinguishing itself from the lineage currently known as Theravada. The Mahayana schools created new scriptures where the Buddha is presented as divine or semi-divine, and the goal of an Arahant was replaced with the ideal of the *Bodhisattva*, one who vows to become a Buddha in a future life, while in the process helping others as much as possible. Meanwhile the Theravada schools were dedicated to preserving the original teachings and lifestyle of the Buddha as its guide.

The Theravada tradition established itself in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. Mahayana took root in China and from there spread to Japan, Korea and Vietnam. A later school, known as Vajrayana, then spread from India to Tibet, incorporating the local animist religion to create Tibetan Buddhism. This then spread further to Mongolia and Bhutan. The most well-known Tibetan monk and Nobel Peace Prize laureate is the Dalai Lama.

## Buddhism in the World Today

Buddhism continues to gain an ever-widening audience 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, these ancient methods of developing the mind and heart grow 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.

Our 21<sup>st</sup> century world is too small and vulnerable for us to live in isolation or conflict, and in Buddhism's 2,600 year history there has never been a 'holy' war to spread the teachings of the Buddha. The qualities of tolerance, loving-kindness and forgiveness, essential for world harmony and individual happiness, have been hallmarks of Buddhism from the very start. Cultivating virtuous behavior, meditation, and wisdom, the Buddha's path gradually fosters the development of all-embracing acceptance within the heart. As we learn to accept others with love, so too can we accept ourselves.

The down-to-earth teachings and practices of the Buddha culminate in pure joy, unshakeable serenity and penetrating wisdom. These qualities have been identified with Buddhism for thousands of years and are needed more than ever in today's world. The gentle and sagacious peace of enlightenment, growing out of a reflective and practical way of life, is a human potential that every one of us can aspire to. It is the greatest gift we can give to the world.