

Buddhism: Basic Beliefs

How did Buddhism begin?

About 2500 years ago, a prince named Siddhartha Gautama began to question his sheltered, luxurious life in the palace. He left the palace and saw four sights: a sick man, an old man, a dead man and a monk. These sights are said to have shown him that even a prince cannot escape illness, suffering and death. The sight of the monk told Siddhartha to leave his life as a prince and become a wandering holy man, seeking the answers to questions like "Why must people suffer?" "What is the cause of suffering?" Siddhartha spent many years doing many religious practices such as praying, meditating, and fasting until he finally understood the basic truths of life. This realization occurred after sitting under a Poplar-figtree in Bodh Gaya, India for many days, in deep meditation. He gained enlightenment, or nirvana, and was given the title of Buddha, which means Enlightened One.

What did Buddha teach?

Buddha discovered Three Universal Truths and Four Noble Truths, which he then taught to the people for the next 45 years.

Three Universal Truths

Everything in life is impermanent and always changing.

Because nothing is permanent, a life based on possessing things or persons doesn't make you happy.

There is no eternal, unchanging soul and "self" is just a collection of changing characteristics or attributes.

Four Noble Truths

Human life has a lot of suffering.

The cause of suffering is greed.

There is an end to suffering.

The way to end suffering is to follow the Middle Path.

Buddha then taught people not to worship him as a god. He said they should take responsibility for their own lives and actions. He taught that the Middle Way was the way to nirvana. The Middle Way meant not leading a life of luxury and indulgence but also not one of too much fasting and hardship. There are eight guides for following the Middle path.

The Eightfold Path

Right understanding and viewpoint (based on the Four Noble Truths).

Right values and attitude (compassion rather than selfishness).

Right speech (don't tell lies, avoid harsh, abusive speech, avoid gossip).

Right action (help others, live honestly, don't harm living things, take care of the environment).

Right work (do something useful, avoid jobs which harm others).

Right effort (encourage good, helpful thoughts, discourage unwholesome destructive thoughts).

Right mindfulness (be aware of what you feel, think and do).

Right meditation (calm mind, practice meditation which leads to nirvana).

What is meditation?

Meditation is an essential practice to most Buddhists. Buddhists look within themselves for the truth and understanding of Buddha's teachings. They seek enlightenment, or nirvana, this way. Nirvana is freedom from needless suffering and being fully alive and present in one's life. It is not a state that can really be described in words -- it goes beyond words.

Meditation means focusing the mind to achieve an inner stillness that leads to a state of enlightenment. Meditation takes many forms.

It can be sitting quietly beside a beautiful arrangement of rocks, contemplating beauty.

It can be practicing a martial art such as karate or aikido since they require mental and physical control and strong concentration.

It can mean focusing on a riddle such as "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

It can be contemplating a haiku or short poem that captures a moment in time.

It can be in a meditation room of a monastery.

It can involve chanting.

It can involve the use of a mandala to focus attention to the invisible point at the center of interlocking triangles.

It can involve quietly noticing one's breath as it goes in and out

It can happen anywhere at any time.

Where are Buddha's words written down?

After Buddha died, his teachings were gradually written down from what people remembered. The Tripitaka, or The Three Baskets, is a collection of Buddha's sayings, his thoughts about them, and rules for Buddhist monks. The Tripitaka was first written on palm leaves which were collected together in baskets.

If Buddhism began in India, why is it all over some many eastern countries?

There are over 500 million Buddhists today. After Buddha's death, some of his followers had some differences of opinion which eventually led to their breaking away and forming separate kinds of Buddhism. There are two main types, Theravada, which spread to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, and Mahayana which spread to Nepal, Viet Nam, China, Korea and Japan. Mahayana took on aspects of the cultures where it was practiced and became three distinct branches: Vajrayana Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism and Zen Buddhism.

Even though each form of Buddhism took on its own identity, all Buddhists follow a set of guidelines for daily life called the Five Precepts. These are:

Do not harm or kill living things.

Do not take things unless they are freely given.

Lead a decent life.

Do not speak unkindly or tell lies.

Do not abuse drugs or drink alcohol.

Buddhism: Sacred Places and Spaces

Sacred Spaces

Although worshipping in a temple is not essential for worship, Buddhists do visit shrines and temples to pay their respects to Buddha and to meditate with other Buddhists. Going to a worship space is not essential because Buddhism is a way of life, a way to act all of the time. Some Buddhists also have shrines in their homes, allowing practitioners to pray at the most convenient times for them.

Buddhist shrines and temples take many different forms depending on where they are built. The first Buddhist shrines were ten dome-shaped mounds, or stupas, which were built to hold Buddha's ashes. Then more stupas were built to hold sacred items. Some stupas are bell-shaped. Visitors walk around the stupas as a way of paying their respects to the Buddha. In Japan and China, Buddhists built pagodas as sacred temples. These are towers with various numbers of tiers, usually five. The five tiers represent the five basic elements of the Universe -- earth, water, fire, wind, and emptiness. The height represents reaching out of the physical world towards wisdom.

Sacred Places

Buddhists go on pilgrimages to places associated with Buddha's life. These places include his birthplace, Lumbini Grove, the place of enlightenment, Bodh Gaya, the place of his first sermon, Sarnath, and the place he died, Kusinara. In addition there are other sacred places, special to the various branches of Buddhism. For example, since the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, was exiled from Tibet when the Chinese army invaded in 1959, he has been living in Dharamsala, India.

Some Buddhists want to practice Buddhism more strictly and with less distraction. These monks and nuns form communities and live in monasteries. A religious community of Buddhists is called a Sangha. In some countries, young boys and girls spend part of their education living as monks. Buddhists use monasteries as places of refuge for meditation and to refocus on a simpler, less worldly life. Monasteries are important places to Buddhists.

Buddhism: Worship Traditions, Celebrations and Festivals

Wesak

This is the celebration of Buddha's birth. For Theravada Buddhists, it is also the celebration of Buddha's enlightenment and death. During this celebration, statues of Buddha are decorated. Offerings are taken to monasteries, and sometimes there are fireworks.

Vassa

This is a time to meditate and study. In Buddha's time, it was during the rainy season which meant it was hard to travel and teach so it was a good time for meditation and study. During Vassa, a meditation retreat, all Buddhists are supposed to set aside some time for study and meditation. At the end of Vassa, people bring new robes to monks.

Other Festivals

Different countries have different Buddhist celebrations. For example in Japan, Buddhists celebrate the flower festival, or Hana Matsuri, to honor Buddha's birthday. Temples are decorated with cherry blossoms and children pour scented tea over statues of the baby Buddha. In India, Buddhists celebrate the Festival of the Sacred Tooth in honor of Buddha's first teaching. One of Buddha's teeth is paraded around in the streets as an expression of this celebration.

