

What Is Buddhism?



Buddhism has its origin in ancient India in 6th century BC after the famous Indian prince Siddhartha renounced his royal life as a prince and chose to live the life of a wandering mendicant.

At age 29 Prince Siddhartha left his royal life and went forth to find the answers as to why we are born, age, get sick and die. He studied meditation under 2 great masters but still the answers eluded him. He then spent 6 years meditating and fasting under extreme conditions. Ultimately though, he broke his fast and meditation, thinking there might be another way to find the truth. This culminated in his attainment of enlightenment under the sacred Bodhi tree. One who attains enlightenment is called Buddha, which means, 'awakened one'. There is still a sacred Bodhi Tree in the exact location where he attained enlightenment at Bodh Gaya in Bihar India. It is one of the most sacred Buddhist pilgrimage sites that Buddhist pilgrims visit.

After Buddha's enlightenment he taught his wisdom through simple discourse, parables and stories. There are over 80,000 discourses that the Buddha gave in his lifetime.

Through self-discipline, meditation and cultivating insight/wisdom, the path the Buddha promoted was one that uprooted the three root causes of all suffering, ignorance, desire/craving and hatred. The Buddha's teaching was known as the Dharma, his disciples were known as the sangha. The sangha consisted of ordained monks and nuns as well as both lay men and women. These three things, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are known as the three Jewels and are considered more precious than any wish fulfilling jewel.

The Buddha

The discourses known as 'Sutras' were recollected by Buddha's elder disciples and were retold word for word by adding a prologue which described who, where, when, why and what promoted the discourse 'Thus I have heard once...' and ending with some concluding remarks. Many of his disciples who attained Arhathood acquired the quality of non-forgetfulness.

Three eminent disciples Mahakashyapa, Ananda and Upali were the compilers of the three collections known as 'Tripitaka' sponsored by King Ajatashatru of Rajgir three months after the Mahaparinirvana of the Buddha. Around 2nd century AD.

The Tripitaka (3 baskets) consisting of ethical codes (vinaya), discourses (sutra) and metaphysical teachings (abhidharma) were committed into writing in Pali, Sanskrit and Prakrit languages. They contain collections of teachings that remedy the three poisons of ignorance, desire and hatred.

Buddha's teachings soon became an established path of spiritual development focussed on self-discipline, compassion and wisdom by leading a non-violent way of life. The unity of the practice of tranquility meditation (Shamatha) and special insight meditation (Vipassana) empowered the mind to realise the true nature of reality. Today in the 21st century, 'Buddhism' is known as spiritual tradition that is non theistic, meaning it does not have a creator god or supreme being at the helm. The Buddha taught a way of being that leads to freedom of suffering, liberation through the cultivation, of ethics, samadhi and wisdom.

Core Buddhist Teachings

The core Buddhist teachings are contained in **The Four Noble Truths**, **The Four Seals**, and the **Eight-fold Noble Path**.

The Four Noble Truths:

1. Truth of Sufferings
2. Truth of Origin
3. Truth of Cessation
4. Truth of Path

In his 45-year career crisscrossing the Ganges Plain in northern India, the Buddha gave a wealth of profound teachings. But underlying them all were the four noble truths:

There is suffering (Dukka) better translated as **dissatisfactory**.

There is a cause of suffering.

There is an end to suffering.

The way out is the eightfold noble path.

The Buddha is said to have realised these fundamental truths on the night of his great awakening. The Buddha tracked down his former meditation companions, the five ascetics, who were residing in the Deer Park near Benares. In what is known as his first sermon, the Buddha taught them the four noble truths. The ascetics are said to have been enlightened on the spot.

The first noble truth—there is suffering (dukkha in Pali)—isn't pessimistic, as is often believed, but realistic, according to the Theravada Buddhist monk and scholar Walpola Rahula. The Buddha didn't mean that ordinary life is nothing but misery—of course there's sukka, or happiness, he said. It's just that even happy moments are ultimately unsatisfying, because everything changes. Good, bad or indifferent, nothing lasts. Impermanence (anicca), like dukka, is one of the three inescapable facts of existence. We all, without exception, are subject to aging, sickness, and death. Even the self isn't fixed or enduring: anatta (no-self) is the third mark of existence. Trying to get what we want and hang onto what we have while avoiding or rejecting what we don't want inevitably leads to disappointment. Ignorance of this reality is the root cause of suffering, the second noble truth tells us.

The third noble truth—that there is an end to suffering—is the saving grace. Pain and dissatisfaction are not all there is. Just as suffering is the human condition, so too is the possibility of an end to suffering. The fourth noble truth—the eightfold path—spells out practical action we can take toward our own awakening and freedom from the suffering of samsaric life. The eightfold path guides us in living ethically, training the mind, and cultivating wisdom.

Why are these truths “noble”? Explanations vary. Some scholars hold that the four noble truths are the teachings that elevated or “ennobled” Siddhartha Gautama by liberating him from samsaric existence. Similarly, they can liberate us.

The Four Seals

The basic tenets of Buddhist teaching are straightforward and practical. They are known as ‘Four Seals’:

- All conditioned phenomena are impermanent (anitya)
- All contaminated emotions are suffering (dukkha)
- There is no autonomous and truly existent self (anatma)
- Nirvana, is peace

The Buddha taught that all phenomena, including thoughts, emotions, and experiences, are marked by three characteristics, or “three marks of existence”: impermanence (anicca), suffering or dissatisfaction (dukkha), and not-self (anatta). These three marks apply to all conditioned things—that is, everything except for nirvana, which is the 4th seal. According to the Buddha, fully understanding and appreciating the three marks of existence is essential to realizing enlightenment. (This is accepted by both Theravada and Mahayana schools, but more emphasised in the former.)

The Buddha taught that everything changes, which may seem obvious, but much of the time we live as if everything including ourselves, is going to last, permanent. Then when we lose things such as jobs, relationships, health and wealth, it brings much suffering (dukkha), but this is the true reality of impermanence. Nothing is permanent, including our lives.

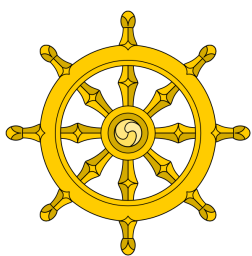
Dukkha, often poorly translated as suffering, is one of the most misunderstood ideas in Buddhism. Life is dukkha, the Buddha said, but he didn’t mean that it is all unhappiness and disappointment. Rather, he meant that ultimately it cannot satisfy. Even when things do satisfy—a pleasant time with friends, a wonderful meal, a new car—the satisfaction doesn’t last because all things are impermanent. This needs to be understood, realised.

Anatta—not-self, or egolessness—is even more difficult to grasp. The Buddha taught that there is no unchanging, permanently existing self that inhabits our bodies. In other words, we do not have a fixed, absolute identity. The experience of “I” continuing through life as a separate, singular being is an illusion, he said. What we call the “self” is a construct of physical, mental, and sensory processes that are interdependent and constantly in flux.

The Buddha said, it is this illusion of a separate, permanent self that gives rise to suffering and dissatisfaction. We put most of our energy into protecting the self, trying to gratify it and clinging to impermanent things we think will make it happy. But this false belief in a separate, permanent existing self leads to the craving that, according to the four noble truths, is the source of our dissatisfaction and suffering.

The Buddha’s teachings, especially the practice of the eightfold path, provide the medicine to cure this illusion so that we become less self-centred and less attached to impermanent things. As we investigate the truth of these marks of existence, we develop factors of enlightenment such as equanimity—the ability not to be pulled around by our likes and dislikes and be able then to cultivate peace, nirvana.

The Wheel Of Dharma – Symbol of the Eightfold Path



- 1.Right View
- 2.Right Intention
- 3.Right Speech
- 4.Right Action
- 5.Right Livelihood
- 6.Right Effort
- 7.Right Mindfulness
- 8.Right Meditation

Though the eightfold path is always listed in this order, it is not strictly sequential, and does not need to be followed in only this order.

The eight steps can be divided into three areas for training:

1. Ethical conduct (sila), Right speech, action, livelihood
2. concentration (samadhi), Right effort, mindfulness and concentration
3. wisdom (prajna.) Right view and right intention are related to the development of wisdom.

The eightfold path may not always be easy to follow, but we make the effort because we know it is the way to liberation and freedom from suffering.

Going For Refuge

Buddhists do not believe in a theistic god or deity but rather follow the way of the Buddha, through understanding the 4 Noble Truths, applying it to the 8 Fold Noble path, and incorporating Meditation and Mindfulness to create a wholesome life.

Those who wish to voluntarily become Buddhists can do so through a simple ceremony called 'Going For Refuge'. This is different in different traditions but basically, one takes the 5 precepts and forgoes the belief in a superior being (God), accepts the laws of Karma, cause and effect and understands the 4 Marks of existence.

I undertake to observe the rule of 5 Precepts:

1. to abstain from taking life
2. to abstain from taking what is not given
3. to abstain from false speech
4. to abstain from sensual misconduct
5. to abstain from intoxicants that cloud the mind



Three Vehicles in Buddhism

Buddhism gradually divided into a number of schools and sub-schools. They were largely known as the **18 Nikaya schools** which were largely differentiated by minor monastic codes of practice.

The two main schools are **Theravada** and **Mahayana**. The **Theravada** Buddhism largely spread south and east from India into what is now Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Bangladesh. Theravada is mainly a monastic system of Buddhism, focusing more on the vinaya or strict observance of the code of conduct.

The **Mahayana** developed around the 1st century B.C.E., mainly in North western and Southern India, which advocated a more liberal way to adapt the Vinaya codes according to time and place especially where Buddhism came into contact with foreign cultures. Both Theravada and Mahayana accept the central tenets of the 'Four Seals of Dharma', 'Eight-fold Noble Paths' and 'Going for Refuge in the Triple Gem. Mahayana monastics take additional Bodhisattva vows of altruism to serve sentient beings until they are all enlightened. Mahayana spread north in the 1st century to the Himalayan region, Central Asia, and China, later to Korea and Japan, and in the 7th century to Tibet. [Nagarjuna](#) is key figure for Mahayana ideology.

Bodhisattvas In Buddhism



Chenrezig

Both Theravada and Mahayana accept the basic tenets of Buddhism, but Theravada stresses the liberation of the individual from the cycle of existence, achieving Nirvana. Their main ideal is the arhat, or fully liberated being who experiences nirvana for himself. Stories of Arhats play a significant part in Theravada ideal and inspiration.

In contrast, Mahayana developed the ideal of everyone becoming a Bodhisattva – an enlightened being who, rather than experiencing complete nirvana, returns to help bring all sentient beings to enlightenment.

A Bodhisattva is a being who, out of compassion, has made a vow to reach enlightenment for the sake of others, and who by definition is on the path to Buddhahood. However, Bodhisattvas exist at various levels of development over many lifetimes; in the Mahayana tradition there are earthly and transcendent bodhisattvas. The former are still ordinary beings, male or female, who have taken Bodhisattva vows and are developing their skills at helping others from the path of accumulation onwards.



Manjushri

Some such Bodhisattvas who have attained high levels may repeatedly return to the world and assume different incarnations either formally recognised or remain incognito to serve all sentient beings. The latter, who can be called 'celestial Bodhisattvas', are possessed of perfect wisdom and are no longer subject to samsara. There are generally many Bodhisattvas but primarily eight Bodhisattvas i.e Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, Vajrapani etc.

Vajrayana Buddhism

Vajrayana Buddhism is branch of Mahayana Buddhism that largely follows more esoteric teachings in which there are pantheon of deities, who are transcendent Bodhisattvas who may manifest in various peaceful, wrathful, male or female form. Each deity is a manifestation of a specific quality of the Buddha and becomes the focus of that specific meditation.

In Vajrayana, in addition to monastic vows and Bodhisattva vows, the practitioner takes part in specific initiations by a qualified Guru, during this time they also receive Tantric vows called 'samayas', which they undertake to observe.

The Secret Vehicle

Vajrayana teachings were practised in secret for many centuries before they were revealed in 200 B.C.E. Recent discovery of old statues of Tara and other deities from excavation in Sri Lanka and many parts of India is evident that Vajrayana was practised in ancient times.

Often known as the secret vehicle, in the early days Vajrayana was taught only to a few chosen disciples and not given to large public gatherings. But when Vajrayana spread to Tibet in 6th

century, it has become its main focus and spread out to neighbouring countries in the Himalaya region and also in Japan, Mongolia and China. The Vajrayana practices are equally available and open to all people. This is a warm and inclusive approach without discrimination between age, gender or ordained/lay person, however it does require everyone to receive the appropriate empowerment from authentic lineage masters.

Ideals of the Vajrayana Buddhists are the Mahasiddhas such as Virupa, Tilopa, Naropa etc. who were all monastics in their youth but later they became wandering ascetic masters known as 'Mahasiddhas'.