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BUDDHISM

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Cover pictures: Left—from top:

Statue of The Buddha at Bodh Gaya, India; Dhamek Stupa in Sarnath, India; Dharma Wheel; Buddhist monks meditating under prayer flags at Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya, India

Main picture: Serene Buddha with rose petals.



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What is Buddhism?

Siddhartha Gautama was born in Lumbini (624-544 BCE) in Northern India (modern Nepal), where his father, Suddhodana was the ruler. He sheltered his son from the outside world and was surrounded by pleasures and wealth. Despite his father's efforts, Gautama one day encountered an old man, a sick man, a dead man and a mendicant and changed his life forever. Profoundly distressed by the suffering encountered, he then decided to leave the luxury of palace life and began his search to find the answer to the problem of pain, human suffering (dukkha, better translated as unsatisfactoriness) and meaning of life.

Gautama left his household soon after his son Rahula was born. At age 29, he sought after a solution through the traditional methods of observing extreme austerity. However, he was not satisfied and he abandoned this as a methodology to find answers to his questions. While deep in meditation under a Bo tree known as the Bodhi tree (tree of wisdom), Gautama at the age of 35 attained 'enlightenment' (in *Gaya* - modern Bihar). He preached for 45 years and mingled and taught among all categories of people, men & women, kings & peasants, brahmins & outcasts, bankers & beggars, holy men & thieves. He passed away at age 80 in Kusinar (modern Uttara Pradesh) by which time his teaching had become a major force in India. Three centuries later it had spread to all of Asia. Buddha never claimed to be a deity, rather considered him a pointer to reality (akkhataro tathagata). However, 700 years later the followers began to worship him as deity which he himself shunned.

If one understands the Buddha's teaching and if one is convinced that his teaching in the right Path and if one tries to follow, then one is a Buddhist according to an unbroken age-old tradition in Buddhist countries.

One is considered a Buddhist if one takes refuge in the **Buddha**, the **Dhamma** (the teaching) and the **Sangha** (community of monks). It's generally called the Triple Gem (thisarana- three refuges). One's adherence to the Triple Gem is the first step towards a fuller observance of the Five Precepts (panchasil). The Buddha's teaching was ethical in all its aspects and presents a basic moral code for virtuous and wholesome living.



God and Buddhism



The encounter of Buddhism with God and theism has been central since its early days. The concept of a personal or creator God does not fit into the Buddhist scheme of thought. There are many strands within Buddhism and some of them differ with each other on their concept of the divine and Buddha's position within such traditions.

Buddhism maintains a non-theistic ethical discipline, a system of self training, anthropocentric, stressing ethics and mind-culture and therefore must be treated distinctly different to the theistic traditions and their varying theologies. However, the 'godtalk' is very much part of the Buddhist discourses but it would be unfair to say that Buddhism promotes atheism or a negative view of life without really grasping the fundamentals of Buddhist thought and practice.

Some misconceptions are that it is a persuasion suitable for monks and those who wish to live in monasteries and forests in meditation. It demands unwarranted renunciation. It promotes escapism from real world. It's a naval gazing pursuit. That it denies this life and tends to individualistic spiritual and esoteric practices.

Buddhism proposes a path for all and the Five Precepts and the Noble Eight Fold Path are for both monks and lay, men and women who wish to live a wholesome life. The description of the reality and the Buddhist view of unsatisfactoriness of life are part of the human predicament arrived through careful observation, analysis and experience and not a mere Buddhist construction or a dogma expounded.

A challenging Buddhist call for virtuous living whether in solitude or in the hustle and bustle of activity is what makes a person happy, meaningful and productive. A Buddhist is both interested in lofty ideals, high moral and philosophical thought but can never ignore the importance of social and economic well being. The social and economic progress and well being must be based on sound ethical principles. What it disassociates is the complete over emphasis of one over the other.





The Four Noble Truths

1. The truth that there is unsatisfactoriness (dukkha)

Pain and unsatisfactoriness in the world is a reality. The Buddha realised that pain and unsatisfactoriness are omnipresent in all of nature and human life. To exist means that all will encounter unsatisfactoriness. Birth is painful and so is death. Sickness and old age are painful. Throughout life, all living things encounter unsatisfactoriness. It is the most existential predicament in human condition and interaction.

2. The truth that there is a cause to this unsatisfactoriness (dukkha samudaya)

The cause of suffering. Gautama believed the root cause of suffering is desire (tanha). It is the craving for wealth, happiness, and other forms of selfish enjoyment which cause suffering. These cravings can never be satisfied for they are rooted in ignorance.

3. The truth that unsatisfactoriness can cease (dukkha nirodha)

Unsatisfactoriness will cease when a person can rid oneself of all desires.

4. The truth of the way that leads to the cessation of this unsatisfactoriness (dukkha magga)

The eight-fold path is a system of therapy designed to develop habits and behaviour which will release people from the restrictions caused by ignorance (avijja) and craving (tanha). It is in extinguishing of all unwholesome desires by following the eight-fold path that one adopts a Buddhist way of life. Buddha thus expounds the Fourth Truth and calls it the Noble Eight Fold Path (majjhima patipada/middle path).

The Noble Eight Fold Path

1. Right understanding (samma ditthi)
2. Right thought (samma sankappa)
3. Right speech (samma vaca)
4. Right action (samma kammanta)
5. Right livelihood (samma ajiva)
6. Right effort (samma vayama)
7. Right mindfulness (samma sati)
8. Right concentration (samma samadhi)

1 and 2 of the Eight Fold Path is in the pursuit of wisdom (panna)

3, 4 and 5 are in the pursuit of an ethical path (sila)

6, 7 and 8 are in the pursuit of mental Discipline (samadhi)

Training in this spiritual culture leads one to the realisation of ultimate reality, complete freedom, happiness and peace through moral, spiritual and intellectual perfection. It is a path that trains one to defeat the three unwholesome or unskillful roots or defilements; greed (raga), hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha).

This Path can be seen in three aspects of Buddhist training and discipline:

- 4 1. Ethical path (sila)
2. Mental discipline (samadhi)
3. Wisdom (panna)

Karma

Three important notions to understand Buddhism fully are the three most misunderstood ever since its early discussion in history, **Karma**, **Samsara** and **Nirvana**.



Karma refers to the law of cause and effect in all reality or in a person's life, reaping what one has sown. Buddhists accept that every person must go through a process of birth and rebirth until the person reaches the state of Nirvana in which one breaks this cycle. According to the law of karma, "You are what you are and do what you do, as a result of what you were and did in a previous birth, which in turn was the inevitable outcome of what you were and did in still earlier births". For a Buddhist, what one will be in the next life depends on one's actions in this present life. Hence, Buddhism invites people to a virtuous life and wholesome living.

Samsara

The law of **Samsara** is one of the most perplexing and difficult concepts in Buddhism to understand. The law of Samsara holds that everything is in a birth and rebirth cycle. Buddha taught that people do not have individual souls (anatta). The existence of an individual self or ego is an illusion (maya). There is no eternal substance (atta) of a person which goes through the rebirth cycle. What is it then that goes through the cycle if not the individual soul? What goes through the rebirth cycle is only a set of feelings, impressions, present moments, and the karma that is passed on. In other words, as one process leads to another and one's human personality in one existence is the direct cause of the type of individuality which appears in the next. This new individual in the next life will not be exactly the same person, Venerable Nyanatiloka calls this as re-becoming or renewed existence (punarbbhava) as opposed to rebirth (punarutpatti) or re-incarnation (punaravatara).

Nirvana

Nirvana means 'the blowing out' of existence. Nirvana is very different from the Christian concept of heaven or the Hindu view of Moksa. Nirvana is not a place like heaven but rather a state of being. What exactly is it? Nirvana is a perennial state of being. It is the state in which the law of karma, and the rebirth cycle come to an end. It is the end of all feelings of unsatisfactoriness and unwholesome clinging and attachments, a state where there are no desires and the individual consciousness comes to an end. Although to the Western mind this sounds like annihilation, Buddhists would object to such a notion.

The Buddha never gave an exact description of Nirvana, but his closest reply was this. It's a condition, where there is neither earth nor water, neither air nor light, neither limitless space, nor limitless time, neither any kind of being, neither ideation nor non-ideation, neither this world nor that world. There is neither arising nor passing-away, nor dying, neither cause nor effect, neither change nor standstill. Although no Buddhist really understands the condition of Nirvana, it is their perennial pursuit, a state of final emancipation.



Holy Days

There are many special or holy days held throughout the year by the global Buddhist community. Buddhist Festivals are always joyful occasions. There are two aspects to take into consideration regarding Buddhist festivals. Most Buddhists, with the exception of the Japanese, use the lunar calendar and the dates of Buddhist festivals vary from country to country and between Buddhist traditions and other ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Most Mahayana Buddhist schools of thought celebrate the birthdays of Bodhisattvas or other significant dates in the Buddhist calendar.

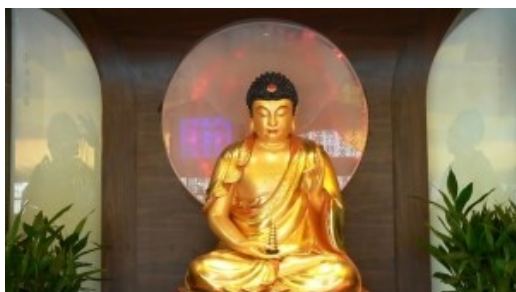
Festival of **Vesak**

The most significant celebration takes place across all Buddhist traditions every May on the night of the full moon. Buddhists all over the world celebrate the Vesak festival when they commemorate the Birth, the Enlightenment and the demise of the Buddha 2,500 years ago. It has also become known as **Buddha Day** among western Buddhists and other global institutions.

Some Buddhists also commemorate the life and practice of the Buddha and his teaching on each of the full moon day of each month of the lunar calendar. Typically on such a festive day, lay people visit the local temple (vihara) or monastery and offer alms (dana) to the monks and observe the Five Precepts (panchasilas) and listen to preaching (dhamma discourse). In the afternoon, they distribute alms (dana) to the needy as a meritorious act in honour of the Buddha. They also take part in a ceremony of circumambulation of a stupa/ pagoda three times as a sign of respect to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. The day will conclude with an evening chanting of the Buddha's teachings and meditation.

Buddhist New Year

In Theravada countries, Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos, the new year is celebrated for three days from the first full moon day in April. In Mahayana countries (China, Japan) the new year starts on the first full moon day in January. However, the Buddhist New Year depends on the country of origin or ethnic background of the people. As for example, Chinese, Koreans and Vietnamese celebrate late January or early February according to the lunar calendar, whilst the Tibetans usually celebrate about one month later.



Five Precepts

The Five Precepts (panchasilas):

1. I undertake the precept to abstain from killing any form of life
2. I undertake the precept to abstain from taking what is not given
3. I undertake the precept to abstain from misbehaviour including adultery
4. I undertake the precept to abstain from lying.
5. I undertake the precept to abstain from taking any kind of intoxicants (that is losing mindfulness).

Buddha's approach was neither pessimistic nor optimistic but realistic. His primary concern was to positively respond to the current predicament which he identified as human unsatisfactoriness (dukkha).

However, his lifetime teaching was based on observable categories that were empirically possible for the human beings to manage if they wish to tread the path. He was of the opinion that his teaching (dhamma) must be mobilised like a raft to crossover and not to make the means the end of the pursuit. Buddhist view is that to be born human is a rare opportunity; therefore it must be lived virtuously to attain ultimate freedom.

The Buddha was of the view that to be born as a human being is as rare as a single eyed turtle, seeing the full moon through the eye of a floating yoke in the ocean. His proposal for people was to understand things as they are. Faith and belief may be important but was seen as a means to this fundamental goal in order to attain ultimate freedom. He expounded that the nature of reality was that human beings are entangled in a rollercoaster of unsatisfactoriness (dukkha). His insight into this reality is called The Four Noble Truths.

Places of Worship

In Buddhism, the place of worship has various names depending on which region it is situated. **Vihara** or the temple is a popular name given to a Buddhist place of worship.

Stupa/Pagoda or Dagaba can also be identified as places of worship where the relics of the Buddha are supposed to have been deposited. The Bo tree is revered as sacred by Buddhist devotees since the Buddha attained enlightenment while being seated under its shade and serenity. The Bo tree is the centre of gravity for devotion, prayer and meditation. There are renowned world shrines like the Temple of the Tooth Relic of the Buddha in Kandy, Sri Lanka. Bodgaya, Lumbini, Saranath and Banares are also known places of pilgrimage in India. There are also Buddhist hermitages (caves and jungle precincts) across all traditions that have become places of meditation and higher spiritual pursuit particularly for monks. Lay Buddhists also take interest in these places to seek advice and guidance for their own spiritual path.