



***What is
Buddhism?***

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Introduction

For more than 2,500 years, the religion we know today as Buddhism has been the primary inspiration behind many successful civilizations, a source of great cultural achievements and a lasting and meaningful guide to the very purpose of life for millions of people. Today, large numbers of men and women from diverse backgrounds throughout the world are following the teachings of the Buddha. So who was the Buddha and what are his teachings?

The Buddha

The man who was to become the Buddha was born as Siddhartha Gotama around 2,500 years ago, a prince of a small territory near what is now the Indian-Nepalese border. Though he was raised in splendid comfort, enjoying aristocratic status, no amount of material pleasure could conceal life's imperfections from the unusually inquisitive young man. At the age of 29 he left wealth and family to search for a deeper meaning in the secluded forests and remote mountains of North-East India. He studied under the wisest religious teachers and philosophers of his time, learning all they had to offer, but they could not provide the answers he was seeking. He then struggled on the path of self-mortification, taking that practice to the extremes of asceticism, but still to no avail.

Then at the age of 35, on the full moon night of May, he sat beneath the branches of what is now known as the Bodhi Tree, in a secluded grove by the banks of the river Neranjara, and developed his mind in deep and luminous, tranquil meditation. Using the extraordinary clarity of such a mind, with its sharp penetrative power generated by states of deep inner stillness, he turned his attention to investigate the truth of mind, universe and life. Thus he gained the supreme awakening experience, and from then on he was known as the Buddha, the Awakened One.

His awakening consisted of the most profound and all-embracing insight into the nature of mind and all phenomena. This awakening was not a revelation from some divine being, but a discovery made by himself based on the deepest levels of meditation and the clearest experience of mind. It meant that he was free from the shackles of craving, ill-will and delusion, that

all forms of inner suffering had been eliminated, and that he had acquired unshakeable peace.

The Teachings of the Buddha

Having realised the goal of perfect awakening, the Buddha spent the next 45 years teaching a path which, when diligently followed, will take anyone regardless of race, class or gender to the same perfect awakening. The teachings about this path are called the Dhamma, literally meaning the nature of all things or the truth underlying existence. It is beyond the scope of this pamphlet to present a thorough description of all these teachings, but the following seven topics will give you an overview of what the Buddha taught.

1. The Way of Inquiry

The Buddha warned strongly against blind faith and encouraged the way of truthful inquiry. He pointed out the danger in fashioning one's beliefs merely on the following grounds: hearsay, tradition, because many others say it is so, the authority of ancient scriptures, the word of a supernatural being, or out of trust in one's teachers, elders or priests. Instead one maintains an open mind and thoroughly investigates one's own experience of life. When one sees for oneself that a particular view agrees with both experience and reason and leads to the happiness of one and all, then one should accept that view and live up to it!

This principle also applies to the Buddha's own teachings. They should be considered and inquired into using the mental clarity born of meditation. As one's meditation deepens, one eventually sees these teachings for oneself with insight, and only then do they become one's own truth that give blissful liberation.

The traveller on the way of inquiry needs to be tolerant. Tolerance does not mean that one embraces every idea or view, but that one doesn't get angry at what one can't accept. Further along the journey what one initially disagreed with might be seen to be true. So in the spirit of tolerant inquiry, here are some of the Buddha's basic teachings.

2. The Four Noble Truths

The main teaching of the Buddha focuses not on philosophical speculation about a creator God or the origin of the universe, nor on reaching a heaven world ever after. The teaching instead is centred on the down-to-earth reality of human suffering and the urgent need to find lasting relief from all forms of discontent. The Buddha gave the simile of a man shot by a poison-tipped arrow who, before he would accept a doctor to treat him, first demanded to know who shot the arrow, his social standing, where he was from, what sort of bow he used, what the arrow was made of ... This foolish man would surely die before his questions could be answered. In the same way, the Buddha said, our most urgent need is to find lasting relief from recurrent discontent which robs us of happiness and leaves us in strife. Philosophical speculations are of secondary importance and are best left until after one has trained the mind in meditation to the stage where one has the ability to examine reality clearly and see the truth for oneself.

Thus the central teaching of the Buddha, around which all his other teachings revolve, is the four noble truths:

1. All beings, human and otherwise, are afflicted with all sorts of disappointments, sadness, discomfort, anxiety etc. In short they are subject to suffering.

2. The cause of this suffering is craving, born of the illusion of a 'soul' (see below, topic 7).

3. Suffering has a final end in the experience of awakening (Nirvana) which is the complete letting go of the illusion of 'soul' and the consequent ending of craving and ill will.

4. This peaceful and blissful awakening is achieved through a gradual training, a path called the middle way or the eightfold path.

It would be mistaken to label this teaching as 'pessimistic' on the grounds that it begins by focusing on suffering. Rather, Buddhism is 'realistic' in that it unflinchingly faces up to the truth of life's many sufferings, and it is 'optimistic' in that it shows a final end to the problem: Nirvana, awakening in this very life! Those who have achieved this ultimate peace are inspiring examples who demonstrate once and for all that Buddhism is far from pessimistic, but a path to true happiness.

3. The Middle Way or Eightfold Path

The way to the end of all suffering is called the middle way, because it avoids the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-torment. Only when the body is in reasonable comfort but not overindulged, does the mind have the clarity and strength to meditate deeply and discover the truth. This middle way consists of the diligent cultivation of virtue, meditation and wisdom, which are explained in more detail as 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 Stillness

('Right' in the sense of being conducive to happiness and awakening.)

Right speech, action and livelihood constitute the training in virtue or morality. For a practising lay Buddhist it consists of maintaining the five Buddhist precepts, which are to refrain from:

1. Deliberately killing any living being;
2. Stealing;
3. Sexual misconduct, in particular adultery;
4. Lying;
5. Drinking alcohol and taking non-medicinal drugs which lead to a weakening of mindfulness and moral judgement.

Right effort, mindfulness and stillness refer to the practice of meditation, which purifies the mind through the experience of blissful states of inner tranquillity and empowers the mind to penetrate the meaning of life through profound moments of insight.

Right view and intention are the manifestations of Buddha-wisdom which ends all suffering, transforms the personality, and produces unshakeable serenity and tireless compassion.

According to the Buddha, without perfecting the practice of virtue it is impossible to perfect meditation, and without perfecting meditation it is impossible to arrive at awakening wisdom. Thus the Buddhist path is a gradual one, a middle way

consisting of virtue, meditation and wisdom, explained in the eightfold path and leading to happiness and liberation.

4. Karma

Karma means 'action'. According to the law of karma there are inescapable results of our intentional actions. There are deeds of body, speech and mind that lead to one's own harm, to others' harm, or to the harm of both. Such deeds are called 'bad' or 'unwholesome' karma. They are motivated by craving, ill will or delusion, and because they bring painful results they should not be done.

There are also deeds of body, speech and mind that lead to one's own well-being, to the well-being of others, or to the well-being of both. Such deeds are called 'good' or 'wholesome' karma. They are motivated by generosity, compassion or wisdom, and because they bring pleasant results they should be done as often as possible.

The results of karma can be experienced in the here and now. When you do an act of kindness or even think a kind thought, you will often feel a sense of contentment and happiness as a result. When you do an unkind act, however, you may experience this as a dip in your happiness, a loss of mental energy, and a decline in mindfulness. By carefully observing the effects of our actions on ourselves we begin to understand the workings of karma, and this in turns gives us a powerful incentive to live more wholesome lives.

The Buddha pointed out that no being whatsoever, divine or otherwise, has the power to stop the consequences of good and

bad karma. The fact that one reaps just what one sows gives the Buddhist a powerful incentive to avoid all forms of bad karma and do as much good karma as possible.

Though one cannot escape the results of bad karma one can lessen their severity. A spoon of salt mixed in a glass of water makes the whole glass very salty, whereas the same spoon of salt mixed in a freshwater lake hardly changes the taste of the water at all. Similarly, the results of bad karma in a person habitually doing only a small amount of good karma is painful indeed, whereas the result of the same bad karma in a person habitually doing a great deal of good karma is only felt mildly.

This natural law of karma thus becomes a force behind, and a reason for, the Buddhist practice of morality and compassion in our society.

5. Rebirth

The Buddha clearly remembered many of his past lives. Even today there are Buddhist monks and nuns, and others also, who remember their past lives. Such a strong memory is a result of deep meditation. For those who remember their past lives rebirth becomes an established fact which puts this life in a meaningful perspective.

The law of karma can only be understood in the framework of many lifetimes because it sometimes takes this long for karma to bear its fruit. Thus karma and rebirth offer a plausible explanation to the obvious inequalities of birth—why some are born into great wealth whereas others are born into pathetic poverty; why some children enter this world healthy and full-limbed whereas others enter it deformed and diseased. The painful results of

bad karma should not be regarded as punishment for evil deeds but as a law that unfolds according to natural principles. And by experiencing the effects of karma in this very life, one learns about the power of kindness.

Rebirth takes place not only within the human realm. The Buddha pointed out that the realm of human beings is but one among many. There are many separate heavenly realms and grim lower realms too, including the realm of animals and the realm of ghosts. Not only can we go to any of these realms in our next life, but we may have come from any of these realms into our present life. This explains a common objection against rebirth: "How can there be rebirth when there are 10 times as many people alive today than there were a century ago?" The answer is that people alive today have come from many different realms.

Understanding that we come and go between different realms, gives us more respect and compassion for the beings in these realms. It is unlikely, for example, that one would exploit animals when one has seen the link of rebirth that connects them with us.

6. No Creator God

The Buddha also pointed out that no God or priest nor any other kind of being has the power to interfere in the working out of someone else's karma. Buddhism, therefore, teaches individuals to take full responsibility for themselves. For example, if you want to be wealthy then be generous, trustworthy and diligent, and if you want to live in a heavenly realm then always be kind to others. There is no God to ask favours from, or to put it another way, there is no corruption possible in the workings of the law of karma.

Do Buddhists believe that a supreme being created the universe? Buddhists would first ask which universe you mean. This present universe from the moment of the 'big bang' up to now is but one among a countless number in Buddhist cosmology. When one universe cycle ends another begins, again and again, according to impersonal law and without discoverable beginning. A creator God is redundant in this scheme.

No being is a supreme saviour, because gods, humans, animals and all other beings are subject to the law of karma. Even the Buddha had no power to save—he could only point out the truth for the wise to see for themselves. Everyone must take responsibility for their own future well-being, and it is dangerous to give that responsibility to anyone else.

7. The Illusion of a 'Soul'

The Buddha taught that there is no 'soul', no essential and permanent core to a living being. Instead, that which we call a 'living being', human or otherwise, can be seen to be but a temporary coming-together of many parts and activities—when complete it is called a 'living being', but when the parts have separated and the activities have ceased it is not called a 'living being' anymore. Like a computer assembled of many parts and activities, only when it is complete and performs coherent tasks is it called a 'computer', but when the computer is taken apart and the activities cease it is no longer called a 'computer'. No essential and permanent core can be found which we can truly call the 'computer', and just so no essential and permanent core can be found in a living being which we can call the 'soul'.

Yet rebirth still occurs without a 'soul'. Consider this simile: on a Buddhist shrine a candle is burnt low and is about to go

out. A monk takes a new candle and lights it from the old one. The old candle goes out but the new candle burns bright. What went across from the old candle to the new? There was a causal link, but no 'thing' went across! In the same way, there was a causal link between your previous life and your present life, but no 'soul' went across.

Indeed, the illusion of a 'soul' is said by the Buddha to be the root cause of all human suffering. The illusion of 'soul' manifests as the 'ego'. The natural unstoppable function of the ego is to control. Big egos want to control the world, average egos try to control their immediate surroundings of home, family and workplace, and all egos strive to control what they take to be their own body and mind. Such control manifests as desire and aversion, and it results in a lack of both inner peace and outer harmony. It is this ego that seeks to acquire possessions, manipulate others and exploit the environment. Its aim is its own happiness, but it invariably produces suffering. It craves for satisfaction but experiences discontent. Such deep-rooted suffering cannot come to an end until one sees, through insight based on deep and powerful meditation, that the idea of 'me and mine' is no more than a mirage.

These seven topics are a sample of what the Buddha taught. Now, to complete this brief sketch of Buddhism, let's look at how these teachings are practised today.

Types of Buddhism

One could say that there is only one type of Buddhism and that is the huge collection of teachings originally given by the Buddha. These teachings are found in the Pali Canon, the ancient scriptures of Theravada Buddhism, widely accepted as the

oldest and most reliable record of the Buddha's word. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion in Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos.

A few centuries after the Buddha's passing away, the monastic community started to divide into separate schools. This was the result both of doctrinal differences and of geographic separation. One of these schools was Theravada Buddhism, initially based mainly in Sri Lanka. Another was Sarvastivada, whose stronghold was Kashmir. Significant parts of the Sarvastivada scriptures were translated into Chinese, and they are still available in that language to the present day. Altogether around 20 early schools existed in various parts of India in the early centuries after the Buddha.

Around the beginning of the Common Era, previously unknown scriptures appeared, attempting to justify the superiority of the Bodhisattva over the Arahant. This new movement called itself the Mahayana. The Mahayanists retained the original teachings of the Buddha (known as Agamas or Nikayas), but came to regard them as secondary compared to the new interpretations and ideas contained in the Mahayana scriptures.

The Buddhism which established itself in China, and which is still vibrant in Taiwan, reflects the early development of Mahayana. From China Mahayana spread to Vietnam, Korea and Japan, one result of which was the emergence of Zen. The Buddhism in Tibet and Mongolia is a still later development, usually referred to as 'Vajrayana'.

Buddhism's Relevance in the World Today

Today, Buddhism continues to gain ever wider acceptance in many lands far beyond its original home. People throughout the world, through their own careful choice, are adopting Buddhism's peaceful, compassionate and responsible ways.

The Buddhist teaching of the law of karma offers people a just, incorruptible foundation and reason for living a moral life. It is easy to see how a wider embracing of the law of karma would lead any country towards a stronger, more caring and virtuous society.

The teaching of rebirth places this present short lifetime of ours in a broader perspective, giving more meaning to the vital events of birth and death. The understanding of rebirth removes so much of the tragedy and grief surrounding death and turns our attention to the quality of a life, rather than its mere length.

From the very beginning the practice of meditation has been at the very heart of the Buddhist way. Today, meditation grows increasingly popular as its proven benefits to both mental and physical well-being are becoming more widely known. When stress is shown to be such a major cause of human suffering, the quieting practice of meditation becomes ever more valued.

Our world is too small and vulnerable for us to live angrily and alone, and thus tolerance, love and compassion are so very important. These qualities of mind, essential for happiness, are developed in Buddhist meditation and then diligently put into practice in everyday life.

Forgiveness, gentleness, harmlessness and peaceful compassion are the well-known 'trademarks' of Buddhism, and they are given freely and broadly to all beings, including animals of course, and also, most importantly, to oneself. There is no place for dwelling in guilt or self-hatred in Buddhism, not even a place for feeling guilty about feeling guilty!

Teachings and practices such as these are what bring about qualities of gentle kindness, unshakeable serenity and wisdom, identified with the Buddhist religion for over 25 centuries and sorely needed in today's world. It is this peace and tolerance, growing out of a profound yet reasonable philosophy, that makes the Buddha's message timeless and always vitally relevant.

Not to do any evil,
To cultivate goodness,
And to purify the mind.
This is the
Teaching of the Buddhas.
- The Buddha.