

## **Buddhism**

Buddhism was founded by Siddharta Gautama in the sixth century BC in what was then north-eastern India.

Having grown up in the sheltered environment of his father's palace, Siddharta Gautama first witnessed suffering when he ventured outside the palace walls at the age of 29. Overcome with grief at what he saw, he set out to find an answer to the problem of suffering. First he explored the Hindu traditions with which he had been brought up but still not being satisfied he committed himself to ponder the problem day and night until he would find an answer.

Eventually, in a moment of enlightenment, the answer came to him. From that time on he would be known by his followers as the Buddha, or enlightened one.

Following Gautama's death various traditions developed within Buddhism. Two main groups emerged and still exist today. Theravada or classical Buddhism emphasises the earliest teachings of the Buddha. Mahayana Buddhism is the name given to a collection of other branches of Buddhism that add later revelations given to monks by the Buddha during meditation or in dreams.

It is estimated that there are 350 million Buddhists today, making Buddhism the world's fourth largest religion.

### **God**

Buddhism does not reject the idea of an eternal deity but considers it to be irrelevant to everyday life. God, when spoken of, is described as a void without personality or desire.

### **Creation**

Buddhism does not refer to the creation of the universe. Instead it teaches that "reality" has always existed, endlessly passing through a cycle of formation and destruction.

### **Man**

Central to Buddhist thought is the belief that each person is no more than a series of ever-changing physical and mental activities. Each of those activities is born of the one that preceded it. The belief that there is such a thing as "self" is an illusion born of ignorance.

All our physical and mental activities have consequences: good actions and thoughts have good consequences; bad actions and thoughts have bad ones. Those consequences, in turn, have further consequences and so the endless, pointless chain continues. Even good consequences only continue the futile chain of cause and effect and even death cannot end it: everyone is caught in a continuous cycle of birth, death and re-birth.<sup>1</sup> — this is the Buddhist understanding of karma.

There is no concept of sin or right and wrong within Buddhism

### **Man's Problem**

Suffering or "dukkha" is defined in its broadest sense so as to include just about everything that happens: even good things are tragic because they are fleeting and illusory.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not reincarnation, as the Hindu understands it, for to the Buddhist there is no such thing as "atman" or an eternal soul. Rather, the final sensation, perception or thought of one life determines the first of the next.

Buddha taught that all suffering arises because of desire. If you crave riches, poverty will be painful; if you desire comfort, discomfort will trouble you; if you desire nothing, there will be no suffering.

Ultimately all desire can be traced back to the individual's false belief that he or she matters: self is at the root of man's problem.

## **The Solution To The Problem**

Almost all of the Buddha's teaching is summarised in four truths — the Four Noble Truths — and eight habits which comprise the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment. These are agreed by all Buddhists.

The Four Noble Truths teach that:

1. Existence is marred by suffering.
2. Suffering arises from desire.
3. The elimination of desire brings release from suffering.
4. The elimination of desire comes by following the Eightfold Path to enlightenment:
  - i. Right understanding: this comes through study of the Buddhist Scriptures.
  - ii. Right aim: directing the mind toward detachment from the world.
  - iii. Right speech: to speak in a way consistent with the absence of desire.
  - iv. Right action: to act in a way consistent with the absence of desire.
  - v. Right livelihood: to pursue employment that does no harm to any other creature.<sup>2</sup>
  - vi. Right effort: to be diligent to pursue the path of enlightenment.
  - vii. Right mindfulness: to be aware of everything that goes on around and within in an effort to appreciate the true nature of self.
  - viii. Right meditation: deep concentration: thinking about all sensations and thoughts in terms of their fleeting character

Each man and woman must attain his or her own enlightenment.

## **The Final Outcome**

The goal of Buddhism is Nirvana but Nirvana is neither a place nor a peaceful state of mind. It is the extinguishing of all desire. The person who achieves it escapes the futile chain of cause and effect and is free from the cycle of birth, death and re-birth. Nirvana is fully realised when one who has conquered desire — the enlightened one — dies.

In the Mahayana tradition an enlightened one qualified to attain Nirvana may choose to be reborn for the sake of others: to lead them to enlightenment. Those who choose this path are called Bhodisattvas (Buddhas to be) — the Dalai Lama is considered to be a shining example.

## **How Do We Know These Things Are True?**

The teachings of Sidharta Gautama were committed to writing in the Tripitaka in the first century BC, 300 to 400 years after his death.

Theravada Buddhists take these as the full canon of sacred writings. Mahayana Buddhists consider these writings to be incomplete and have added a vast array of sacred texts containing revelations given to monks by the Buddha during meditation or in dreams.

## **Distinctive Practices**

Theravada or classical Buddhism does not involve religious practices for it recognises no gods and therefore there is no worship. Instead it follows mental and moral practices that aim to

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<sup>2</sup> Concrete expression of right speech, action and livelihood is found in the Five Precepts  
Abstain from taking life.  
Refrain from stealing.  
Avoid sexual immorality.  
Refrain from lying.  
Abstain from all intoxicants.

remove desire. Shrines that house images of the Buddha or representations of his teachings are intended merely to assist reflection.

Two types of meditation are practiced. The first involves focussing ones thoughts on the act of breathing. Its purpose is to enhance the powers of concentration. The second involves concentrated awareness of all daily conduct focussing on the fleeting character of all sensations and thoughts with the aim of losing the sense of self.

Mahayana Buddhists believe in a celestial Buddha — of whom Siddharta Gautama was an incarnation — who is able to help the faithful and whose image is to be worshipped. They also believe in the existence of many other divine beings.

### **Questions For Discussion**

1. Buddhism has been described as the world's most fashionable religion. Why do you think it has that reputation?
2. What difficulties might you encounter when you try to explain Christianity to a Buddhist?
3. How might you present the gospel to a Buddhist?