

5 minute guide

to **BUDDHISM**

Des McCabe

Contents

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Introduction | 3 |
| History | 3 |
| The Buddha | 3 |
| Theravada and Mahayana | 4 |
| The Four Nobel Truths | 4 |
| Worship | 5 |
| Celebrations | 5 |
| Timeline | 6 |

Introduction

There are 350 million Buddhists worldwide.

Buddhists do not worship gods or deities. Buddhists believe that the pathway to enlightenment is found by personal spiritual development. Buddhism developed from Hinduism, and while there are some fundamental differences between the two there are also some core beliefs which they both share.

According to the 2001 Census, there are approximately 152,000 Buddhists living in Britain today.

History

It is believed that Siddhartha Gautama was born about the year 566B.C.E. He was the son of a wealthy and powerful ruler in a region which we now call southern Nepal. Prior to his birth a sage foretold that he would become a **chakravartin** (turner of the wheel). A **chakravartin** becomes either a great king and turns the wheel of conquest or a religious teacher and turns the wheel of **Dharma** (religious teaching). Siddhartha's father was eager to ensure that his son became a great King rather than a religious leader. In order to ensure his sons future greatness the King kept his son isolated within the Kingdom's walls and gave him a life of supreme luxury. Siddhartha was raised as a prince, married and had a child.

Buddhists believe that in his early 30s he finally made his way outside of the palace walls. He was confronted with old age, illness and death. These human conditions had previously been hidden from him and his revelations upon seeing these things forever changed his life. He renounced his life of luxury and left the palace to become an ascetic.

He vowed to become a holy man and pursued a life of deprivation and asceticism. He followed a path of severe fasting and self-discipline. He found that this method to enlightenment was unproductive and developed a mode of discipline known as the **Middle Path** (avoiding the extremes of self-denial and self-indulgence). Some time after this realisation, he sat under a tree to meditate. Following a period of intense meditation Siddhartha woke up to the truth.

The Buddha

Following this experience he became known as the Buddha (a fully enlightened being). He achieved the state that Buddhists call **nirvana** (which means to extinguish or to blow out). A Buddha is a person who understands the causes of suffering and has "blown them out" and therefore no longer suffers from the ignorance and desire that feed the fire of death and rebirth.

The Buddha got up from the tree of his awakening and walked to a village nearby and began preaching to a small group of his former companions. He spent the rest of his life travelling the countryside to preach and organize a monastic community called the **sangha**.

At about the age of 80, the Buddha lay down between two trees and passed gently from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. This is referred to as the **parinirvana** (complete extinction). His body was cremated.

The Buddha did not appoint a formal successor before he died. Soon after his death, however, a council was created to settle arguments among the Buddhist followers. The first council was led by a monk called Mahakasyapa; this marks the first of many attempts over the centuries to settle the varying doctrinal disputes. Over time, many sects of Buddhism emerged. At one time there were eighteen schools or disciplines that were acknowledged. Today only one of these is still in existence, the **Theravada** (doctrine of the elders) school.

Theravada and Mahayana

There are currently two major schools of Buddhism – **Theravada** and **Mahayana**. **Theravada** Buddhism holds the most sacred text to be the teachings of the Buddha himself. It emphasizes a solitary life of personal religious discipline. The **Theravada** school of Buddhism survives today in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

Mahayana Buddhism emerged around 100 C.E. This view of Buddhism focused more on the importance of compassion and service and the notion of emptiness. This form of Buddhism is mostly likely to be found in Japan, Korea, Mongolia and China.

There are also other forms of Buddhism. Two other forms which are derived from Mahayana Buddhism are **Tibetan** Buddhism and **Zen** Buddhism.

Tibetan Buddhists consider the most important Mahayana teachers to be Bodhisattva (one who deserves Nirvana but who postpones entry to it until all sentient beings are rescued from the cycle of rebirth and suffering). In addition (and outside of the two major schools of Buddhism), **Tibetan** Buddhists use yogic discipline to transcend and redirect desire with the ultimate goal of uniting with the Ultimate Reality. This practice, called **Vajrayana**, ties in with the Hindu tantric practice.

Zen Buddhism's major focus is on the value of personal meditation. The word Zen means "meditation". Zen sprang from the Mahayana school of Buddhism. Zen stresses the importance of discovering one's own "original mind and true nature".

The Four Nobel Truths

The Four Nobel Truths were given by the Buddha during a talk called the Deer Park Sermon. He wished to offer his followers a path which would help them to avoid the obstacles that stop people from understanding their true nature. The Four Nobel Truths are:

1. **Life is Suffering.** Human existence is painful. Death does not bring an end to suffering because of the cycle of death and rebirth.
2. **Suffering has a cause: craving and attachment.** Selfish cravings and attachments are the cause of our suffering. This aspect is what causes our ignorance to true reality.
3. **Craving and attachment can be overcome.** Completely transcending selfish craving ceases suffering and allows one to enter the state of Nirvana.
4. **The path towards the cessation of craving and attachment is an Eightfold Path:**

*Right Understanding
Right Purpose
Right Speech
Right Conduct
Right Livelihood
Right Effort
Right Alertness
Right Concentration*

Other major teachings of the Buddha were that the abiding self is illusory. The tendency of humans to regard themselves as an independent, controlling entity is a significant barrier to spiritual progress.

Worship

It is not a requirement of Buddhism that followers worship in a temple. Typically when worshiping in the home, a Buddhist will have a Buddha statue, candles and an incense burner.

A Buddhist Temple must have a statue of the Buddha. The temples are built to reflect the five elements (fire, air, earth, water, and wisdom). Buddhist Temples, called **Stupa**, are one of the most common structures. A **Stupa** is made of stone and is constructed over Buddhist relics or copies of Buddhist texts.

Actual communal worship practices vary widely among the different types of Buddhism. Some components of worship may be chanting, meditation, readings from religious texts and music.

Celebrations

Because of the wide variety of Buddhists in the world, it is impossible to represent all of the denominations and varying traditions.

- **Nirvana Day** Celebrated on the 15th February, it is the date that Buddhists observe the passing of the Buddha.
- **Buddha Day.** This is the celebration of the Buddha's birth. It occurs on the 8th April.
- **Bodhi Day.** This day marks the day that Siddhartha sat under the tree (a Bodhi tree) and eventually attained enlightenment.

Timeline

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Sixth Century B.C.E. | Suddhartha Gautama is born |
| 486 B.C.E. | Death of the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama |
| c. 486 | The first Buddhist Council |
| 269-238 | Introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka |
| Second Century C.E. | Introduction of Buddhism to China |
| 574-622 | Prince Shotoku establishes Buddhism in Japan |
| c. 609-649 | King Songtsen Gampo introduces Buddhism to Tibet. |
| 1141-1215 | Eisai, founds the Rinzai School of Zen in Japan. |
| c.1200 C.E. | Destruction of Buddhism in India |
| 1391 C.E. | Birth of Gendeun Drubpa, later identified as the first Dalai Lama |
| 1935 C.E. | Birth of Tenzin Gyatso, the 14 th Dali Lama |
| 1951 | Chinese Occupation of Tibet |
| 1989 | Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the Dali Lama |

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Dedication

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