

WHAT IS BUDDHISM? A SIMPLE EXPLANATION FOR STUDENTS NEW TO BUDDHISM

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Who is the Buddha? To explain Buddhism, we start with the Buddha. He was a prince who lived in India about 2600 years ago. Feeling deep compassion for others, he was determined to find a way to end suffering in the world. So, he left his home, family, and all his wealth and belongings and searched for teachers who could show him how to attain ultimate wisdom, enlightenment. But he found that even the best teachers weren't enlightened yet. He went into the forest alone to meditate and try to become enlightened on his own. He spent six years in the forest meditating, almost starving himself to death. Finally, after he ate some rice, sat under a tree and made an intense determination to become enlightened that night, he meditated and then it finally happened—he became enlightened. That meant that his mind was completely purified and totally at peace and he had perfect wisdom—he knew everything that he wanted to know.

And he suddenly knew the Four Noble Truths: First, that we—all beings—suffer, which means we feel discomfort, disappointment, stress, worry, anger, illness, sadness, pain and so forth, over and over, and we're never totally content. Second, that there is a cause of suffering, which is all of our constant desires—wanting things and frustration when we don't get them. Third, that there is an end to suffering, which is enlightenment. Fourth, he knew the way to enlightenment.

Buddha was not his name, but when he became enlightened, he was called “the Buddha,” which means “The Awakened One.” What did he awaken from? From the ordinary human mind which suffers, he awakened to total peace and perfect wisdom.

Then he spent the rest of his life teaching others how to become enlightened. Many people wanted to spend the rest of their lives focused on becoming enlightened, so they became his student monks and nuns. Other people followed his teachings while remaining with their families.

What is the ultimate goal of a Buddhist? To fully purify our mind—which means to eliminate all traces of negative qualities—including anger, hatred, jealousy, greed, arrogance and selfishness—so that we become enlightened, which is called attaining nirvana. If we become enlightened—if we attain nirvana—then after our body dies, there is only total peace and happiness.

What about heaven? The Buddha taught that there are many heaven-worlds, but the beings in heaven-worlds are not enlightened yet, and they don't stay in heaven forever. They have to be born again into a new body on earth or another world so they can fully purify their mind.

What happens after we die? We can be born into a heaven-world, or we can be born as a new human baby, or as an animal, or as a ghost, or we can be born into a hell-world. None of those last forever. They are just a rebirth, sometimes called reincarnation, into another life.

According to the Buddha, all beings are reborn over and over again for countless lifetimes until they become enlightened.

What causes us to be born in those different worlds after we die? If we do many helpful and kind actions, called good karmas, then after we die, we're born in a heaven-world or into a human life with fortunate circumstances such as good health, a loving family, and a comfortable environment. Doing many harmful, hateful actions, called negative karmas, can result in being born into a hell-world or as a human with unfortunate circumstances. Being very greedy can result in being born as a ghost or a human who is extremely poor.

Karma is one of the most important teachings of the Buddha. It means our actions cause certain effects or results. Every act we do out of kindness—every good karma—is the cause of a good, pleasant result at some point in this life or a future life, and every harmful act we do (every bad karma) is the cause of an unpleasant or painful result in this life or a future life. So, our own actions, our karmas, are what make our lives pleasant or painful. Karma applies to everyone, not just to Buddhists. It can take a long time for the karma to have a result, so there are many good, kind people who now seem to be unlucky, and many harmful people who now seem to be lucky. But the more good karmas we do, the easier it is to cope with difficulties and the better our future will be. So, we try to do more good karmas and avoid doing bad karmas.

How does a person become a Buddhist? Anyone can become a Buddhist, simply by choosing to learn and practice the Buddha's teachings, which are called the Dharma. This is done by saying, with sincere intention, "I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma (his teachings), and the Sangha." The Sangha means the monks, nuns and other Buddhist practitioners. "Taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha" means we seek relief and protection from the stress and suffering in the world by following the Buddha, his teachings, and his teachers and practitioners.

How does a person practice Buddhism? Developing virtues; for example, being generous, kind, compassionate, tolerant, patient, truthful, helpful, and peaceful with others. Remembering not to be selfish or self-centered, but to care about all beings, as we are all dependent on one another. Remembering that everything in the world is impermanent, it doesn't last forever, so we don't get too upset when something changes or is lost. And, remembering that every being is suffering. Buddhists strive to have compassion for every living being, including people who do evil actions, because we want them to heal from their suffering, confusion and ignorance that leads them to do evil, and instead to become a kind and loving person.

A very important practice for Buddhists is mindfulness, which means being fully aware, moment by moment, of what we're sensing and feeling, and what we're doing, saying and thinking.

Another important practice for Buddhists is meditation, which is a way of deeply calming and focusing the mind. It helps us to be more peaceful, resilient and able to cope with difficulties in our daily life, and to understand our mind and how it works, so we can better control it. Instead of our emotions controlling us—anger, hatred, jealousy, selfishness, anxiety, depression and so forth—meditation helps us direct our mind to more constructive thoughts.

What might we see in a Buddhist temple? All temples usually have a shrine (altar) with a statue or picture of the Buddha, which is a reminder of the Buddha's great qualities, like his wisdom, compassion, love, and tranquility. It's just a statue or picture, so Buddhists don't worship or pray to it, but they often bow or place offerings in front of it, to remember to be humble, generous, and grateful for the Buddha's teachings. The offerings often include flowers, incense and candles. The offerings are symbols, to remind us of virtues such as purity and peace. Some temples also have pictures or statues of great Buddhist teachers.

In most temples, you will see monks or nuns who conduct the activities of the temple. They have chosen not to have families but instead to dedicate their whole life to Buddhism. In other temples, there are Buddhist teachers or priests who may marry and have families, who conduct the activities of the temple. Following traditions in Asia, we greet them by placing our palms together, or sometimes we bow to them, to show our respect and appreciation for teaching us the Dharma, the Buddha's teachings.

The main seating area in Buddhist temples often has cushions on the floor to sit on, suitable for meditation, as well as chairs.

There are three main types of Buddhism, and the architecture and items inside temples of each type differ from those of the other types, and often reflect the style of temples in the homeland countries of the monks, nuns or priests.

The three types of Buddhism are:

- (1) Theravada, practiced in southern Asia (Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos)
- (2) Mahayana, practiced mostly in far eastern Asia (China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam), and
- (3) Vajrayana, practiced mostly in northern Asia (Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, Mongolia)

Items in a Theravada temple often include a bodhi tree, which is the type of tree the Buddha sat under when he became enlightened, and a stupa, a dome-shaped object with a pointy top which represents the Buddha's mind, or enlightenment. Some Sri Lankan style temples have elephant tusks near the shrine, and some Thai temples have large snake statues on the staircase rails, that represent protectors of Buddhism.

Mahayana temples often have statues or pictures of powerful, kind beings in heaven-worlds, including bodhisattvas, who are future buddhas—beings on the path to becoming a buddha.

Vajrayana temples have paintings or statues of very interesting looking beings, some of which have fangs, a third eye on their forehead, several arms, and crowns and necklaces of skulls. They are holding items in their hands such as a flower, bell, knife or axe. Some are paintings of male and female figures hugging each other. All these beings, called deities or dharma protectors, are for meditation. Every feature of the deity, pose, item in the hands, piece of jewelry, and so forth is a symbol for a certain virtue or quality (such as overcoming ego, ignorance, and worldly desires) or Buddhist concept (for example, hugging figures represent the unity of compassion and wisdom) that are meditated on.

What activities do people do at a Buddhist temple? If you walk into a Buddhist temple, you often hear people chanting, occasionally in English but more likely in the language in which the Buddhist teachings were taught to the monks, nuns and priests through the ages. Chanting is like prayer in that it relaxes the mind, focuses it on the meaning of the words being chanted, and generates blessings. But, rather than just praying for oneself and one's family and friends, Buddhist chanting is for the benefit and blessing of all beings. The chanting may be part of a regular prayer service for a large group, or may be more informal, for individuals or small groups.

The other most common activity is a Dharma talk, in which a monk, nun or teacher presents teachings of the Buddha or of a great Buddhist master, or has an informal discussion about a teaching with the people in attendance. Chanting and a Dharma talk is often part of a ceremony of an offering of lunch for the monks or nuns.

There are other ceremonies and celebrations held at the temple, such as a celebration in the springtime of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing into nirvana, and New Year celebrations.

Temples usually have group meditation sessions and/or study groups, and many temples have retreats for one or more days, to practice meditation and/or study the Dharma.

Many temples also are used as cultural centers, where they have classes in language, music, dance, or other arts from the homeland of the monks, nuns or priests of the temple.

Is there a Buddhist holy book? There are several volumes of books of the Buddha's teachings. They are called the "Tripitaka," meaning the "Three Baskets." In Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, there are also many other books of teachings by enlightened Buddhist masters.

When did Buddhism begin? Buddhism began with the Buddha, about 2,600 years ago. But, he taught that there were many other buddhas who lived long before him, and buddhas from previous world cycles. A new buddha appears on the Earth sometime after the previous buddha's teachings have been forgotten.

Q & A:

Is there a God in Buddhism? That is a complex question to answer. Most Buddhists would say no, because the Buddha did not mention an all-powerful God who created the world. There are many kind and powerful beings sometimes called gods that are in heaven-worlds, but they didn't create us or create the world. They include our kind relatives who have passed away, and powerful beings that are similar to angels in other religions, but who have to be born and live different lives again and again until they become enlightened.

In Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, there are non-physical buddhas which are various forms of the Dharmakaya, the ultimate formless state of all buddhas. These buddhas and the Dharmakaya have similarities to some descriptions of God in other religions.

If God didn't create the world, then how was it created? The world appears and disappears in cycles of time that are too long for us to imagine. A world cycle begins, the world comes into being, and then after a very long time, the world ends and then a new one begins. There is no particular being who created the world; it just appears and disappears.

According to Buddhism, do we have a soul? The word "soul" usually means our personality, our self without a body. Buddha taught that when we die, there is no such self or personality that goes on to heaven or to another body. However, our karmas, virtues and wisdom, and some strong habits, tendencies, and talents do get transmitted to our next lives. According to Vajrayana and Mahayana Buddhism, all living beings, even a tiny insect, have a "buddha nature," meaning the seed or potential to become enlightened like the Buddha.

Is there a concept of evil or sin in Buddhism? According to Buddhism, people do evil actions because of ignorance; they are confused and deluded by their experience in this world, and are afflicted with negative emotions (anger, hatred, greed, jealousy, and so forth).

Do people receive grace or blessings in Buddhism? In Buddhism, we create the causes for good results by our good actions, words and thoughts. For example, Buddhist chanting is a good action that creates good results for ourselves and others. An intention that our action produce a particular good result should be unselfish, such as wishing for the good health of our families, or ourselves as well as all beings. Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhists sometimes pray to a particular buddha or bodhisattva (a future buddha) for their blessings. But we must experience results of our bad karmas; there is no expectation of any divine being taking away our sins, so we try to be careful to avoid doing wrong actions or talking in a harmful way.

Why is the Buddha called Shakyamuni Buddha or Gautama Buddha? To distinguish the Buddha of the current era from other buddhas, we call him Gautama Buddha in Theravada Buddhism (Gautama was his family's name), and we call him Shakyamuni Buddha in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, which means holy one from the Shakya clan (his family's clan).

Why are there differences among Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism? Theravada Buddhism is based on the earliest version of the Tripitaka, from the Pali language. Mahayana Buddhism is based on the Tripitaka from other languages, and includes many additional teachings of the Buddha not contained in the Theravada version. Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism also include teachings from other enlightened Buddhist masters. Vajrayana Buddhism includes special practices of meditation on deities.

Are there any rules that all Buddhists must follow, such as prohibited foods? For people who are not monks or nuns, there are no absolute rules. Instead, the Buddha gave us guidelines such as refraining from killing and stealing, which means we should avoid killing even the tiniest

insect, and we should avoid taking anything from others that isn't offered to us. There are no rules about food, but there are many Buddhist groups and individuals who choose to be vegetarian as a way of practicing compassion.

Are there any rules for visitors at Buddhist temples? We take our shoes off at the door, to maintain the purity of the temple. We keep our voices down so we don't disturb the peaceful atmosphere. We don't touch items on the shrine (altar) unless invited to do so. Many Theravada monks and nuns don't touch people of opposite gender or touch money, so we should avoid shaking hands, hugging or offering money that isn't enclosed in an envelope. Simply putting the palms together is an appropriate greeting for all monks and nuns.