

BUDDHISM

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Statistics

Worldwide: 357,000,000
United States: 780,000
Major concentrations: Myanmar (Burma), Bhutan, Thailand, Viet Nam, Cambodia, Japan, Mongolia, China, Laos and Hawaii

Founder

Siddhartha Gautama (or Gotama) was born in what is now Nepal. He was the son of an Indian chieftain, a member of the warrior caste.

It is almost impossible to distinguish historical fact from legendary material concerning the life of Gautama (c. 563-483B.C.). While pregnant, his mother dreamed a white elephant entered her womb through her side. Hindu priests predicted the birth of a son who would be a great ruler or teacher. He married at age 16 (or 19) and had a son.

A turning point came at age 29. Brought up in luxury and comfort, he saw four sights which caused a religious crisis in his life: a decrepit old man walking with a cane; a sick man in pain; a human corpse; and a calm, ascetic monk wearing a yellow robe. From these sights, Gautama concluded all humans are subject to suffering. For six years, he searched for the answer to human suffering.

One day as he sat under a tree (now known as a *bodhi* tree, or tree of knowledge), the tempter Mara attempted to confound and frustrate Gautama's search with three temptations: family, sex, and fear. Gautama resisted Mara, meditated deeply, experienced visions, attained enlightenment and became the Buddha, or the enlightened one.

He found his first disciples in Benares (modern Varanasi) and sent them out to spread his message of peace, truth, and compassion.

Buddha's Teachings

He wrote nothing, but challenged fundamental Hindu teachings and belief in gods and goddesses. He taught that a person gains enlightenment by following the "Middle Path" between self-indulgence and self-mortification.

Buddha summed up his teachings in the Four Noble Truths:

- Life consists of *dukkha*, which encompasses suffering, anxiety, dissatisfaction, frustration, pain, and misery. All of life is subject to change and decay.
- *Dukkha* is caused by a desire or craving (*tanha*) for material possessions or intellectual gratification, which does not last and is ultimately unsatisfactory.
- Escape from *tanha* (desire or craving) is essential for inner peace and tranquillity. By eliminating *tanha*, one eliminates *dukkha* (suffering, etc.)
- The path or way to escape from *tanha* is the Noble Eight-fold Path. These are not successive stages or steps to be followed in sequence, but should be practiced and realized simultaneously. The Noble Eight-fold Path consists of the following eight points:
 - Right Understanding: Believing the Four Noble Truths.
 - Right Intention: Renouncing worldly life.
 - Right Speech: Abstaining from lies, slander, abuse, and idle talk.
 - Right Conduct: Abstaining from killing, stealing, lying, committing adultery, and using intoxicants.
 - Right Occupation: Avoiding questionable occupations.
 - Right Endeavor: Striving for good and avoiding all that is evil or wicked.
 - Right Contemplation: Controlling one's mind so that emotions, including joy and sorrow, do not disturb one's calm.

- Right Concentration: Developing the mind to heights beyond reason.

The goal of the Noble Eight-fold Path is *nirvana*, a term that is difficult, if not impossible, to define. The term literally means "extinction," as the flame of a candle is said to be extinguished. However, *nirvana* is not a state of total annihilation, except as an annihilation of *tanha* (desire or craving) and *dukkha* (suffering). *Nirvana* is not an intellectual concept referring to a place or state of existence.

Nirvana is enlightenment, an awareness beyond that which can be reached with the mind, senses and reason. It is the final, peaceful bliss.

Death does *not* mark the end of existence because nothing is permanent. Nothing is unchanging, eternal, or immortal, according to Buddhism.

The wheel is a well-known Buddhist symbol. As the wheel turns, so do the cycles of change. If anything is permanent in Buddhist thought, it is change.

A fundamental point of Buddhist thought is the *anatman*, or "no self." The Buddha rejected the Hindu teaching that the individual self or soul is really identical with Brahman, the impersonal Oversoul out of which all that exists has come. Buddhism rejects the Hindu idea that a soul is trapped in a body, but teaches that a person is made up of a "bundle" of five particles or "waves" which temporarily come together to form a "body." They are: form (the physical body), feelings, perceptions (transmitted by the sense organs), impulses, and consciousness. This bundle causes a person to falsely think of himself or herself as a separate individual self.

Since all of life is change, these waves eventually move apart and the "self" disappears. Buddhists talk of reincarnation, by which they mean these waves will eventually join together to form another "self." One can be reincarnated, if enlightenment is not achieved, in six *lokas* or places as non-human beings, humans, sub-deities, animals, hungry ghosts, or sent to hell, depending upon one's actions (*karma*) in this lifetime. The well-known book, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, speaks of events between death and reincarnation for all who do not achieve enlightenment. Still, Buddhists insist no "soul" or "self" is reincarnated into another body as in Hinduism. While rejecting Hinduism, popular Buddhism borrows ideas from Hinduism which causes an outsider to find inconsistencies within Buddhism.

Buddhism does not require an orthodox belief; a systematic theology such as is found in Christianity is absent in Buddhism.

Buddhists reject belief in a personal God, although Buddhists may borrow Hindu deities. In Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha is deified and seen as a savior.

Scriptures

There is no closed canon of sacred writings in Buddhism. Various works have attained the status of scripture through the centuries and different groups emphasize one or more of these hundreds of works.

The most basic and important Buddhist scripture is the *Tripitaka* (the *Three Baskets*). They include the rules of the Buddhist order; the Buddha's teachings given to his disciples, and metaphysical instructions.

Birth tales relating beliefs about the 550 previous births of Buddha are popular in Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism.

Buddhist Groups

Buddhists are divided into three main groups: Theravada, with 38 percent of all Buddhists; Mahayana, with 56 percent; and Tantrism, with 6 percent of Buddhists. American Buddhists may not consider themselves part of any of the three groups.

► **Theravada Buddhism:** Theravada Buddhism is considered to be the “orthodox” group within Buddhism. The central figure is the monk; the monastic lifestyle brings merit which moves the individual towards enlightenment. To attain *nirvana*, every individual must renounce worldly pursuits and become a monk. The alternative is an eternal cycle of rebirths. Theravada Buddhists regard Buddha as the great enlightened man – but still, only a man. The key virtue in Theravada Buddhism is wisdom.

► **Mahayana Buddhism:** Mahayana Buddhism is regarded as the “liberal” group within Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhists regard the Buddha as an incarnation of an eternal Buddha essence who came to earth out of compassion for others. Some Mahayana Buddhists worship Buddha. He is said to have postponed his entrance into *nirvana* in order to help others attain it too. The idea of a *bodhisattva* (one who delays his entry into *nirvana*) has led to belief in a large number of “saviors” or Celestial Beings who became objects of faith and worship. The key virtue in Mahayana Buddhism is compassion.

Several subgroups exist within Mahayana Buddhism. One of these subgroups is the **Pure Land** sect, which is popular in China, Japan, and Hawaii. It speaks of a Pure and Happy Land presided over by Amida or *Amitabha* (the Buddha of Infinite Light) who responds with grace to everyone who chants *sutras* (scriptures), worships images, and meditates on and sings praises to him. Vivid images of heaven and hell (with torture and violence) are found in the Pure Land sect.

Another important subgroup is **Zen** (Ch’an in China). Zen emphasizes inner enlightenment, to the exclusion of words, images, temples, good works, or scriptures. Zen Buddhists reject the deity of the Buddha. A well-known Zen phrase states, “If you meet the Buddha, kill him,” because he was just a man who never wished to be worshipped. In Zen, in order to achieve *satori* (enlightenment), one must practice *zazen* (sitting in meditation). To emphasize that reason has no place in enlightenment, a *koan* or riddle is employed which cannot be solved by the intellect. Hundreds of *koans* exist. A famous *koan* is, “If clapping two hands produces a sound, what is the sound of one hand clapping?”

Tibetan Buddhism, sometimes called “Lamaism,” is unique because of its belief in “reincarnating lamas,” or *tulkus*. While lama may refer to any respected monk or priest, some lamas are considered reincarnations of their predecessors. The 14th Dalai Lama (b. 1935), who until his exile in 1959, was the temporal head of Tibet. The Dalai Lama, considered a *bodhisattva*, won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1989.

► **Tantric Buddhism:** Tantric Buddhism is often identified with Tibetan Buddhism because tantrism is widespread within Tibetan Buddhism.

Borrowing more from Hinduism, this group of Buddhists emphasize numerous yoga stages, including prostrations, breathing exercises, repeating sacred formulas (*mantras*), preparing symbolic sacrifices, magic, and performing elaborate rituals accompanied by music, before one can achieve enlightenment. Tantric Buddhists believe this path is the quickest way to enlightenment.

Buddhist Observances

Relics of the Buddha’s body (teeth, hair, collar bone, etc.) have been enshrined in *stupas*, also called *pagodas* (domed shrines) in some countries. Worshipping at a *stupa* is believed to bring great merit.

Images of the Buddha occupy a central place in Buddhism. Most temples and private homes possess images of the Buddha; he is shown

standing, seated, or reclining. Worshippers offer flowers, incense, food and drink and prayers to the images while reciting homage, declaring their refuge in the Buddha, *Dharma* (Law, Doctrine), and the *Sangha* (Monks). They make resolutions to abstain from destroying life, taking things not given, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants.

Pilgrimages to sacred places are considered meritorious.

Buddhists have altars in their homes and may attend services at temples only occasionally. Shoes are removed upon entering temples. Temples generally have a number of statues of Buddha. A typical Buddhist may go to a temple to ask the Buddha for help with a question. Communal services, led by a monk, are usually held weekly, often on Sunday afternoons.

Many festivals are observed. Vesak (or Wesak), April 8, celebrates the birthday of the Buddha. Bodhi Day, December 8, celebrates the Buddha’s enlightenment. Nirvana Day, February 15, commemorates the Buddha’s death and entry into *nirvana*. Some Buddhists observe the equinoxes and solstices; others the full moon. The lunar New Year (“Tet”) is celebrated on January 30 by Asians, including Buddhists.

American Buddhism

The first Buddhists in the United States arrived in California in the 1840s. The first Buddhist temple was built in 1853; a second temple the next year. Buddhism began a slow, but steady growth in the U.S. There was an upsurge of interest in Buddhism after World War II as American servicemen stationed in Japan developed an interest in Buddhism.

The Buddhist Churches of America traces its American history to July 1898 with the formation of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association in San Francisco. The BCA has adopted many Christian and Western practices, including Sunday worship services, robed priests who deliver sermons, VBS (Vacation Buddhist Schools) and Dharma Schools, patterned after Protestant Sunday Schools, “to educate the children of good Buddhists who believe in Amida Buddha, learn the teachings of Buddha, and live according to these teachings.”

The Buddhist Churches of America was recognized as “an endorsing agency” to endorse military chaplains in 1987.

Nichiren Shoshu, an “evangelistic” Japanese sect of Buddhism, arrived in 1960; most of its converts in the U.S. have been non-Asians.

Tibetan Buddhism became active in the United States after the Chinese Communists invaded Tibet in the late 1960s. The Dalai Lama, the religious and exiled political leader of Tibet, has made many trips to the U.S. seeking assistance to “Free Tibet.” A major Tibetan Buddhism center, the Naropa University, is a non-profit school founded in Boulder, Colorado, in 1974. Naropa, a four-year undergraduate college and graduate programs in the arts, education, environmental leadership, psychology and religious studies, is fully accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. It offers B.A., B.F.A., M.A., M.F.A. and M.Div. degrees, as well as professional development training and classes for the community.

Buddhist retreat centers are found across the United States, with the greatest concentration in California. Centers are found in most major Southern cities.

American Buddhism is adapting to its American setting, as is seen in the Buddhist Churches of America. The monastic lifestyle is not a major focus in the U.S. Asian Buddhism has traditionally discounted the value of women in the faith, but American Buddhism has shown a willingness to abandon Asian tradition. For example, a 40-ish Poolesville, Md., housewife, Catherine Burroughs, has been recognized as a reincarnated lama in Tibetan Buddhism.

While second-generation Asians often drop their Buddhist faith, a growing number of Anglo-Americans are adopting Buddhism as their chosen faith. Buddhism has been widely promoted in recent Hollywood movies and by public figures such as Richard Gere.

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