

What is Buddhism

by
Ajahn Brahm

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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, the 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 our 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 Siddhattha Gotama around 2,600 years ago as 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 satisfy the inquiring and philosophic nature of the young man. At the age of 29 he left palace 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 he found it was not enough. He then struggled alone with 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 but 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 upon the hidden meanings of mind, universe and life. Thus he gained the supreme Enlightenment experience and from that time on he was known as the Buddha. His Enlightenment consisted of the most profound and all-embracing insight into the nature of mind and all phenomena. This Enlightenment was not a revelation from some divine being, but a discovery made by Himself and based on the deepest level of meditation and the clearest experience of the mind. It meant that He was no longer subject to craving, ill will and delusion but was free from their shackles, having attained the complete ending of all forms of inner suffering and acquired unshakeable peace.

The Teachings of the Buddha

Having realized the goal of Perfect Enlightenment, the Buddha spent the next 45 years teaching a Path which, when diligently followed, will take anyone regardless of race, class or gender to that same Perfect Enlightenment. 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 of these Teachings but the following 7 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. In one of His best known sermons, the Kalama Sutta, the Buddha pointed out the danger in fashioning one's beliefs merely on the following grounds: on hearsay, on tradition, because many others say it is so, on the authority of ancient scriptures, on 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, of course, applies to the Buddha's own Teachings. They should be considered and inquired into using the clarity of mind born of meditation. Only when one sees these Teachings for oneself in the experience of insight, do these Teachings become one's own Truth and give blissful liberation.

The traveller on the way of inquiry needs the practice of tolerance. Tolerance does not mean that one embraces every idea or view but means one doesn't get angry at what one can't accept.

Further along the journey, what one once disagreed with might later be seen to be true. So in the spirit of tolerant inquiry, here are some more of the basic Teachings as the Buddha gave them.

2. The Four Noble Truths

The main Teaching of the Buddha focuses not on philosophical speculations about a Creator God or the origin of the universe or on 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 call a doctor to treat him, demanded to know first who shot the arrow and where the arrow was made and of what and by whom and

when and where. This foolish man would surely die before his questions could be well answered. In the same way, the Buddha said, the urgent need of our existence is to find lasting relief from recurrent suffering which robs us of happiness and leaves us in strife. Philosophical speculations are of secondary importance and, anyway, they are best left until after one has well trained the mind in meditation to the stage where one has the ability to examine the matter clearly and find the Truth for oneself.

Thus, the central Teaching of the Buddha, around which all other teachings revolve, is the Four Noble Truths:

1. That all forms of being, human and otherwise, are afflicted with suffering.
2. That the cause of this suffering is Craving, born of the illusion of a soul (see below, note 7).
3. That this suffering has a lasting end in the Experience of Enlightenment (Nibbana) which is the complete letting go of the illusion of soul and all consequent desire and aversion.
4. That this peaceful and blissful Enlightenment is achieved through a gradual training, a Path that is 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 centring 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 of the problem of suffering - Nibbana, Enlightenment in this very life! Those who have achieved this ultimate peace are the inspiring examples who demonstrate once and for all that Buddhism is far from pessimistic, but it is a Path to true Happiness.

3. The Middle Way or Eightfold Path

The Way to end all suffering is called the Middle Way because it avoids the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. Only when the body is in reasonable comfort but not over-indulged has the mind 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 is explained in more detail as the Noble Eightfold Path.

1. Right Understanding
2. Right Thought
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood

6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

Right Speech, Action and Livelihood constitute the training in Virtue or Morality. For a practising Buddhist it consists of maintaining the five Buddhist Precepts, which are to refrain from:

1. Deliberately causing the death of any living being
2. Intentionally taking for one's own the property of another
3. Sexual misconduct, in particular adultery
4. Lying, breaking promises and harsh speech
5. Drinking alcohol or taking stupefying drugs which lead to lack of mindfulness

Right Effort, Mindfulness and Concentration refer to the practice of Meditation, which purifies the mind through the experience of blissful states of inner stillness and empowers the mind to penetrate the meaning of life through profound moments of insight.

Right Understanding and Thought are the manifestation 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 Enlightenment Wisdom. Thus the Buddhist Path is a Gradual Path, a Middle Way consisting of Virtue, Meditation and Wisdom as explained in the Noble Eightfold Path leading to happiness and liberation.

4. Kamma

Kamma means 'action'. The Law of Kamma means that there are inescapable results of our actions. There are deeds of body, speech or mind that lead to others' harm, one's own harm, or to the harm of both. Such deeds are called bad (or 'unwholesome') Kamma. They are usually motivated by greed, hatred or delusion. Because they bring painful results, they should not be done.

There are also deeds of body, speech or mind that lead to others' well being, one's own well being, or to the well being of both. Such deeds are called good (or 'wholesome') Kamma. They are usually motivated by generosity, compassion or wisdom. Because they bring happy results, they should be done as often as possible.

Though one cannot escape the results of bad Kamma, one can lessen their effect. A spoon of salt mixed in a glass of pure water makes the whole very salty, whereas the same spoon of salt mixed in a freshwater lake hardly changes the taste of the water. Similarly, the result of a bad Kamma in a person

habitually doing only a small amount of good Kamma is painful indeed, whereas the result of the same bad Kamma in a person habitually doing a great deal of good Kamma is only mildly felt.

This natural Law of Kamma becomes the force behind, and reason for, the practice of morality and compassion in our society.

5. Rebirth

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

The Law of Kamma can only be understood in the framework of many lifetimes, because it sometimes takes this long for Kamma to bear its fruit. Thus Kamma 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 deformed and diseased... The fruits of bad Kamma are not regarded as a punishment for evil deeds but as lessons from which to learn, for example, how much better to learn about the need for generosity than to be reborn among the poor!

Rebirth takes place not only within this 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, realms of the animals and realms of the ghosts. Not only can human beings go to any of these realms in the next life, but also we can come from any of these realms into our present life. This explains a common objection against Rebirth that argues "How can there be Rebirth when there are 10 times as many people alive today than there were 50 years ago?" The answer is that people alive today have come from many different realms.

Understanding that we can come and go between these 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 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 Kamma. Buddhism, therefore, teaches the individual to take full responsibility for

themselves. For example, if you want to be wealthy then be trustworthy, diligent and frugal, or if you want to live in a heaven 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 Kamma.

Do Buddhists believe that a Supreme Being created the universe? Buddhists would first ask which universe do you mean? This present universe, from the moment of the 'big bang' up to now, is but one among countless millions in Buddhist cosmology. The Buddha gave an estimate of the age of a single universe-cycle of around 37,000 million years, which is quite plausible when compared to modern astrophysics. After one universe-cycle ends another begins, again and again, according to impersonal law. A Creator God is redundant in this scheme.

No being is a Supreme Saviour, according to the Buddha, because whether God, human, animal or whatever, all are subject to the Law of Kamma. Even the Buddha had no power to save. He could only point out the Truth so that the wise could see it for themselves. Everyone must take responsibility for their own future well being, and it is dangerous to give that responsibility to another.

7. The Illusion of 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 other, can be seen to be but a temporary coming together of many activities and parts - when complete it is called a 'living being', but after the parts separate and the activities cease it is not called a 'living being' any more. Like an advanced computer assembled of many parts and activities, only when it is complete and performs coherent tasks is it called a 'computer', but after the parts are disconnected and the activities cease it is no longer called a 'computer'. No essential permanent core can be found which we can truly call 'the computer'; just so, no essential permanent core can be found which we can call 'the soul'.

Yet Rebirth still occurs without a soul. Consider this simile: on a Buddhist shrine one candle, burnt low, is about to expire. A monk takes a new candle and lights it from the old. The old candle dies, 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 has gone 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 almost all Egos strive to control what they take to be their own body and mind. Such control manifests as desire and aversion, 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 it experiences discontent. Such deep rooted suffering cannot come to an end until one sees, through deep and powerful meditation, that the idea '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 that were spoken by the Buddha. The original Teachings are found in the 'Pali Canon', the ancient scripture of Theravada Buddhism, which is widely accepted as the oldest reliable record of the Buddha's words. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos.

Between 100 to 200 years after the passing away of the Buddha, the Sangha (the monastic community) split over the political question of 'Who runs the Sangha?' A controversy over some monastic rules was decided by a committee of Arahants (fully Enlightened monks or nuns) against the views of the majority of monks. The disgruntled majority resented what they saw as the excessive influence of the small number of Arahants in monastery affairs. From then on, over a period of several decades, the disaffected majority partially succeeded in lowering the exalted status of the Arahant and raising in its place the ideal of the Bodhisattva (an unenlightened being training to be a Buddha). Previously unknown scriptures, supposedly spoken by the Buddha and hidden in the Dragon World, then appeared giving a philosophical justification for the superiority of the Bodhisattva over the allegedly 'selfish' Arahant.

This group of monks and nuns were first known as the 'Maha Sangha', meaning 'the great (part) of the monastic community'. Later, after impressive development, they called themselves the 'Mahayana', the 'Greater Vehicle' while quite disparagingly calling the older Theravada 'Hinayana', the 'Inferior Vehicle'. Mahayana still retains most of the original teachings of the Buddha (in the Chinese scriptures these are known as the 'Agama' and in the Tibetan version as the 'Kangyur') but these core teachings were mostly overwhelmed by layers of expansive interpretations and wholly new ideas. The Mahayana of

China, still vibrant in Taiwan, reflects an earlier phase of this development, the Mahayana of Vietnam, Korea and Japan (mostly Zen) is a later development, and the Mahayana of Tibet and Mongolia is a much later development still.

Buddhism's Relevance to the World Today

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

The Buddhist Teaching of the Law of Karma offers our society a just and incorruptible foundation and reason for the practice of 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 one's attention to the quality of a lifetime, 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 the proven benefits to both mental and physical well being become 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.

Today's world is too small and vulnerable to live angry and alone, thus the need for tolerance, love and compassion is so very important. These qualities of mind essential for happiness are formally developed in Buddhist meditation and then diligently put into practice in everyday life.

Forgiveness and gentle tolerance, harmlessness and peaceful compassion are well known trademarks of Buddhism, they are given freely and broadly to all kinds of 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 and unshakeable serenity, identified with the Buddhist religion for 25 centuries and sorely needed in today's world. In all its long history, no war has ever been fought in the name of Buddhism. It is this peace and this tolerance, growing out of a profound yet reasonable philosophy, which makes Buddhism so vitally relevant to today's world.