

An Introduction to Buddhism and Its Concepts
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Buddhism is a philosophy espoused by Prince Siddhartha approximately 500 BCE, which focused on understanding the path to salvation in a world of constant suffering. Siddhartha was given the name Buddha, which means "enlightened one," by his followers.

There are two main branches of Buddhism with different practices, but they all have some fundamental similarities. They believe that Siddhartha was the son of a powerful king, and that his father brought him up surrounded by all the pleasures of the world, isolated in the palace, so that Siddhartha would never know sorrow. The prince grew up, married, and had a child, always surrounded by luxury.

But one day, the prince rode through the city outside the palace, and he witnessed suffering for the first time. He saw an elderly man, a diseased man, a corpse and a hermit. The first three sights filled him with dread and despair, while the last sight filled him with peace. For the first time he experienced unhappiness and he wondered why.

Siddhartha slipped out of his palace in the middle of the night, leaving behind his wife and son, and became a hermit determined to find the cause of suffering. He met sages and yogis, meditated and contemplated for six years. He performed great austerities in order to understand the path to enlightenment.

After six years of searching, Siddhartha came to the understanding that "unhappiness is the result of desire and attachment to material items." That is when he became known as the Buddha.

The Buddha taught that everything changes in the world, yet desire makes us crave for eternal material pleasures. When the pleasures wither away, we are unhappy. True happiness arrives when one accepts that change is the ultimate reality of the material world, and that nothing lasts forever.

The Buddha taught that understanding this led to enlightenment, and that enlightenment is the path to breaking free from 'samsara' or material existence. This breaking free is called 'nirvana'.

The teachings of the Buddha are often referred to as the Dharma, but this is also often translated as the Truth or the Wheel of the Law.

Basic Precepts in Buddhism:

The Buddha did not try to explain whether there was an ultimate God or not, or what the proper rituals and sacrifices were to achieve oneness with God. Instead, he taught that we must strive through our own efforts to achieve liberation from anguish and suffering. The Buddha espoused an easily understood philosophy, based on the Four Noble Truths:

The first is that all impermanent objects and beings are subject to suffering.

The second truth is that the arising of suffering comes from our own ignorance and attachment to impermanence.

The third truth is the realization that there is an end to this suffering and anguish, and that end is the knowledge of the ultimate reality.

The fourth truth is that the Eightfold Path is the way to achieving this ultimate reality. The Eightfold Path consists of the following:

- 1) Developing Right View or Right Understanding. This means knowing and understanding the Four Noble Truths.
- 2) Right Thinking or Right Aim, meaning to strive for Perfect Wisdom, or the understanding of ultimate reality. The goal should be to overcome delusion and achieve freedom of mind.
- 3) Adhering to Right Speech, meaning to refrain from lying, slander, perjury, or hurtful speech.
- 4) Right Action. To avoid taking the life of or killing any living creature. To abstain from stealing and sensual or sexual misconduct. To abstain from all hurtful or vengeful acts.
- 5) The fifth part is Right Living, which means to abstain from all evil ways of living; to abstain from all evil methods of livelihood.
- 6) Right Effort, which means to conquer all hurtful, vengeful or evil states of mind they may have already arisen, and to develop and maintain good states of mind. Such states of mind would include loving kindness for all beings, compassion and pity for all creatures, sympathetic joy and equanimity.
- 7) Right Mindfulness. This means to cultivate dispassion, detachment, calm, tranquility, and indifference to all that is impermanent and, thus, not of the ultimate reality. To disregard all that is perceived, remaining dispassionate from both the pleasures as well as the pains arising from the creation of senses and sensuality.
- 8) The eighth part is right concentration, which means to develop focus of mind through intense meditation and reflection.

Karma

Karma is usually translated as the law of cause and effect. That we suffer at present because of past harmful or spiteful actions. Karma underlines the importance of all individuals being responsible for their past and present actions. When taking actions, it is best to look at what effect this will have on others, and why is it that we are taking these actions.

Wisdom

In Buddhism, wisdom is the experience and understanding of the impermanence of material things and that those that are impermanent are not a part of the ultimate reality. Buddhism strives to balance both wisdom and compassion.

Compassion

In Buddhism, Compassion means to strive for an understanding that all beings are in a situation similar to ours, and that we should thus be ready to sympathize and provide caring. By using wisdom to understand the true nature of ourselves, we can better use compassion to understand the true nature of others.

The Two Main Branches of Buddhism:

As mentioned above, both of the major branches of Buddhism believe in the above story of prince Siddhartha reaching enlightenment. However, they vary in the role of this in the grand Buddhist cosmos. The two major branches are Theravada (meaning "Path of the Elders"), and Mahayana (meaning "Great Vehicle").

Theravada Buddhism is practiced in Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and other parts of South East Asia. This system remains true to the original teachings of Prince Siddhartha, (also known as Sakyamuni Gautama Buddha), that are found in the Pali scriptures. The Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path are the main focus of the school.

They believe that the Buddha was a man who liberated himself through meditation and contemplation. They look upon him as a teacher as opposed to a deity, and so images of the Buddha in these lands are revered or venerated, not worshipped. In this system, each individual must strive to liberate oneself through enlightened actions. Neither gods nor magic spells can assist the process.

The Mahayana school is known as the Greater Vehicle because it incorporates many of the concepts found in Hinduism and in the original Tibetan religious beliefs. It is practiced in East Asia, especially in Tibet, China and Japan. It reached these lands via Central Asia.

This system introduced new metaphysical concepts such as the notion of "nothingness" or "sunya" through Sanskrit scriptures written by scholars such as Nagarjuna, Asanga, Vasubandhu and Asvaghosha. Hsuan-tsang of China visited India in search of these texts which were then translated into Chinese and Japanese.

This system also introduced the concept of Bodhisattva and the goddess called Tara. People no longer had to take up difficult vows to attain 'nirvana'; they could simply earn merits and liberate themselves by worshipping Bodhisattvas who, in their infinite compassion, worked for human welfare.

Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism:

The Vajrayana system is a sect of Mahayana Buddhism, and represents the occult branch of Buddhism that is today practiced mainly in Tibet and some parts of Bhutan and Nepal.

Also known as Tantric Buddhism, it owes its origin to the scholar Padmasambhava who went to Tibet from Bengal. He assimilated Hinayana and Mahayana doctrines of Buddhism with the pagan Bon religion of Tibet and the occult practices of Tantric Hinduism.

Thus beside meditation and contemplation, Vajrayana also prescribes the visualization of Buddhas passionately embracing their shaktis and the use of ritual diagrams (mandalas), special chants (mantras), specific postures (mudras) and sexual practices (maithuna) to attain enlightenment and liberation.

The idea of these practices is not to indulge the senses. The aim is to experience and understand the fleeting nature of the material world. A true adept or siddha thus becomes fully aware that material existence or 'samsara' is no different from spiritual release or 'nirvana'.

One does not have to run away from the world to be free - one can embrace the material world and still be spiritually free.