

Buddhism

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Introduction

Buddhism, founded upon the teaching of Siddhattha Gotama / Siddhartha Gautama who discovered the Dhamma / Dharma, was born about two thousand five hundred years ago in north eastern India. In its various forms, Buddhism is a worldwide religion with over 360 million adherents which is about 6% of the world's population.

The resources contained in the list of subjects to the right are a basic introduction to the facts and beliefs of Buddhism. They are a portal or window into the world Buddhism and by following the websites and bibliographies, an enquirer may discover more and more about this faith.

The six units are based on the QCA non-statutory framework for Religious Education and the Areas of Enquiry. They provide not only a comprehensive guide to the factual and belief structures of Buddhism, but also address the issues that Buddhism encounters as it engages with the 21st century.

Pali is the language of the texts of the Theravada school, whilst Sanskrit is used for general Mahayana. Out of respect for these two traditions, both terms are given: first the Pali and then the Sanskrit.

About the Author

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Beliefs, Teachings, Wisdom, Authority

Interpreting teachings, sources, authorities and ways of life in order to understand religions and beliefs;

Understanding and responding critically to beliefs and attitudes.

Basic Beliefs

The background to the Buddhist belief system is very different from the Hebraic religions. The Buddhist faith begins with the belief in reincarnation – that beings are reborn as animals, humans and even gods. What we are reborn as is defined by our kamma / karma, our good and bad deeds and, more importantly, our good and bad intentions. With these concepts as a background, a Buddhist is best described as someone who takes the Three Refuges: in the Buddha (Gotama / Gautama), the Dhamma / Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha) and the Sangha (the Buddhist community of monks and nuns). Thus the Dhamma / Dharma holds the key beliefs for Buddhists. When discussing the Dhamma / Dharma a good place to start is the Four Noble Truths. These are:

1. The belief that dukkha / duhkha (usually translated as suffering) exists – in negative events such as sickness and death, and also in things that are pleasing, because the pleasure will end.
2. The acceptance that the origin of dukkha / duhkha is craving. This keeps beings in samsara, the eternal cycle of rebirth and hence suffering.
3. The statement that the cessation of dukkha / duhkha does exist. This is normally defined as nibbana / nirvana.
4. A description of the way leading to the cessation of dukkha / duhkha. This is the Noble Eightfold Path.

Buddhist beliefs strongly affect religious practice. While the vinaya acts as a code for the sangha, the Noble Eightfold Path acts as a guide for both lay and monastic Buddhists alike – particularly ‘right speech’, ‘right action’, and ‘right livelihood’. Coupled with this, the belief that kamma / karma affects our rebirth means that Buddhists will try and do things that are kammically / karmically good, such as giving, while avoiding things that are kammically / karmically bad, for example harming other living beings.

The way Buddhist beliefs translate into life, with an attempt to lead a good ethical life being a priority for most Buddhists, is very similar to other religions. Compared with Christianity, for example, many similarities can be seen: respect for life, rejection of violence, emphasis on charity and good deeds. However, it is important to remember that Buddhist beliefs are based on a background of kamma / karma and reincarnation with gods being ‘on this side’ of salvation, and so also subject to death and rebirth.

Claims of religious truth are not often made in Buddhism. Instead, the Buddha taught that followers should investigate all claims for themselves. However, since most people are not far enough advanced on the Path to verify such teachings as Anatta / anatman, kamma / karma et al, initial faith in the authority of the Buddha, his Dhamma / Dharma and the Sangha (for example, the Three Refuges) is necessary.

Buddhism can be divided into 3 main groups: Theravada, Eastern Buddhism and Northern Buddhism. While these groups share certain core beliefs, there are some differences in interpretation. The main difference is between the Mahayana (a kind of Buddhism adopted in Eastern and Northern Buddhism) is the belief that nirvana is not the ultimate goal of Buddhism. Instead everyone should aim to become a Bodhisattva and eventually a Buddha and help with the salvation of all beings. Theravadins, on the other hand, believes that, while the Bodhisattva path is the best possible goal, it is not for everyone, only the noble few. The majority of people should aim for nibbana / nirvana.

Scriptures & Authority

Tradition has it that the teachings of the Buddha were gathered together and agreed upon at the First Buddhist Council, shortly after the death of the Buddha. These agreed teachings were initially transmitted orally, but became texts around 1st century BCE. The Pali Canon is usually thought to represent the earliest stratum of texts. It is divided into three: the Suttas (the discourses of the Buddha), the vinaya (a code by which the Sangha should live by), and the abhidhamma / abhidharma (a systemization of the philosophy, psychology and metaphysics found in the suttas. This was built up gradually over a period of time). Mahayana Sutras appeared later and tend to hold key Mahayana ideas concerning the path of the Bodhisattva and emptiness.

The source for Buddhist doctrines and ideas is the Buddhist texts – the Pali Canon or the Mahayana Sutras. The source of these is the Buddha himself: the ideas encapsulated in the texts come directly from the Buddha and so derive their authority from him. However, the Buddha never claimed to create any doctrines or ideas himself, he simply discovered the way things really are, the knowledge of which leads to nibbana / nirvana. This means that Buddhists do not necessarily have to blindly believe in empty dogmatism since the real source for their ideas is experience. One can experience the way things really are for oneself – in Buddhism emphasis is laid on empirically testing claims when one is able. This is particularly true in the Theravadin tradition.

The authority for leadership arises in different ways for different Buddhist traditions. In the first instance, the Buddha led his sangha due to his spiritual accomplishments. Similarly the arahats / arhats who did a great deal of teaching did so because of their accomplishments. However, the Buddha tried to avoid problems of hierarchy so refused to name a leader after he died. Instead he simply based the order of speaking on seniority, meaning in practice, those who had been monks longer. The Theravadin tradition maintains this idea – so one may see a more spiritually experienced young monk still paying respect to a less experienced one simply because the latter has been in the Sangha longer. However, for the laity, any monk or nun can be viewed as a spiritual leader. Members of the Sangha have the authority to act as leaders to the laity because they are seen as more spiritually accomplished, having laid aside the lay life to become mendicants. They are viewed as more knowledgeable when it comes to the Dhamma / Dharma, so are worthy teachers. In Mahayana traditions leadership may be based on spiritual attainments or because one is believed to be the incarnation of a bodhisattva. The Dalai Lama, for example, is chosen as a child due to certain physical characteristics and information given by his predecessor. He has authority as a leader because he is believed to be the emanation of the bodhisattva / bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. Finally, leaders can be hereditary, as in Japan for example, and so gain authority to lead from their family history.

In practice authority is expressed in a number of ways. The scriptures are treated reverently, with the chanting of certain texts making up a significant part of Buddhist worship. The Buddha is treated with devotion by all Buddhists. Often offerings of incense, water or food are made in front of statues of the Buddha and most Buddhist families have an image of the Buddha, which is usually stored on a high shelf (the elevated position is a mark of respect). Members of the Sangha are treated with respect and supported by devotee lay Buddhists – alms food is donated, monasteries and temples are maintained etc. The Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader for many Tibetan Buddhists, and as such, is always treated respectfully with his teachings followed.

While authority can be evaluated in a number of ways, it is usually based around experience. For example, the Buddha always asked his followers (or those who were able) to meditatively explore his teachings and even use their paranormal powers to psychically investigate him. Thus the Buddha said that everything he taught, including his achievements and attainments, could be experientially evaluated. The same applies to the authority of the arahats / arhats, their colleagues can use psychic powers to investigate their achievements. Authority from textual sources is derived from the beginning phrase “thus have I heard”. This indicates that the teaching came directly from the Buddha and so is stamped with his authority.

Founders & Exemplars

The most important person associated with the foundation of Buddhism is the Buddha – Siddattha / Siddhartha Gotama / Gautama (or Siddhartha Gautama in Sanskrit) also known as Shakyamuni or Sakyamuni (sage of the Shakyas). The precise dates of the Buddha’s life are uncertain. A widespread Buddhist tradition records that he was in his 80th year when he died and the dates for his life are most widely quoted as 566-486 BCE. However, recent scholarly research, using rock edicts and named monks and nuns and their recorded ages, has suggested that the dates should be brought forward, placing the Buddha’s death closer to 400 BCE rather than 500BCE. The Buddha also had important disciples who helped with Buddhism’s foundation: Sariputta / Sariputra was renowned for his wisdom, and the Buddha named him as his chief assistant in turning the Dhamma / Dharma Wheel. Moggallana Maudgalyayana was Sariputta’s friend and was particularly renowned for his psychic abilities; Ananda was the Buddha’s cousin and attendant and is known as the Guardian of the Dhamma / Dharma. Finally King Asoka / Ashoka, living a couple of centuries after the death of the Buddha, was extremely influential in the propagation of the Dhamma / Dharma.

The ancient Indians were more concerned with philosophy rather than chronologies and biographies. We therefore have a clearer idea of the Buddha’s thoughts and ideas than we do of his life. However, accounts of the Buddha’s life were developed after his death. Siddattha / Siddhartha was born a prince in Lumbini, Ancient India, now modern day Nepal. He was examined by Brahmins and it was predicted he would one day be either a great king or a Buddha. His father, preferring his son to be a great king rather than a renouncer, tried to hide all suffering from him and ensured he lived a life of comfort. However, at the age of 29 the Buddha saw an old man, a diseased man, a decaying corpse and an ascetic. Depressed by this, Siddattha / Siddhartha left the palace, his wife and his son to become a mendicant and overcome old age, illness and death. He tried various ascetic practices, taking his austerities and self-mortification to such a point that he nearly starved to death. After collapsing in a river and nearly drowning he reconsidered; having taken some milk and rice from a girl named Sujata he realised a middle way between over indulgence and asceticism was preferable. He sat down underneath a pipal tree, now known as the Bodhi Tree and vowed never to rise until he had found the Truth. After 49 days of meditating, at the age of 35, he attained Enlightenment and became a Buddha. For the remaining 45 years of his life, the Buddha travelled in the Gangetic Plain teaching to an extremely diverse range of people – from nobles to outcastes, from street sweepers to mass murderers and cannibals. He set up the Sangha, the monastic community, which aided his teachings. At the age of 80 the Buddha entered Parinibbana / Parinirvana and told his disciples to follow no leader, but to follow his teachings.

Sariputta / Sariputra and Moggallana / Maudgalyayana were the two principal disciples and arahats / arhats of the Buddha, who both became ascetics on the same day. There are many stories about the two which emphasize Sariputta’s / Sariputra’s wisdom and Moggallana’s / Maudgalyayana’s psychic abilities. For example, a mischievous yaksa decided to irritate Sariputta / Sariputra by striking him on the head. Moggallana / Maudgalyayana saw this occurring with his psychic abilities, and warned his friend, though unsuccessfully. However, due to his great spiritual wisdom, Sariputta / Sariputra perceived the terrible blow that the yaksa delivered as only a light breeze. Moggallana / Maudgalyayana expressed amazement that Sariputta / Sariputra barely noticed the attack, while Sariputta / Sariputra was equally surprised that Moggallana / Maudgalyayana had foreseen all of this.

Ananda, the Buddha’s attendant, was famous for his retentive memory with many of the Suttas / Sutras attributed to him. He famously petitioned the Buddha to allow nuns into the Sangha.

The Buddha represents the paradigm for human behaviour; he achieved as much as one possibly can by becoming a Buddha, all through personal striving. However, in terms of realistic models for modern Buddhists, the Buddha can seem somewhat 'out of reach'. Therefore, the disciples are often easier to identify with. Each one highlights specific values Buddhists hold important; Sariputra's / Sariputra's wisdom is aspired to through studying the Dhamma / Dharma; Moggallana's / Maudgalyayana's psychic abilities are sought through meditation; and Ananda's compassion and dedication to the Buddha is searched for through devotional practices.

The most important and most famous contemporary Buddhist leader is the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, specifically the Gelug sect. Successive Dalai Lamas form a lineage of reborn magistrates which traces back to 1391 – the current one is the 14th. Tibetan Buddhists believe the Dalai Lamas to be the incarnation of the compassionate bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.

The title Dalai Lama was first bestowed by the Mongolian ruler Altan Khan upon Sonam Gyatso in 1578. Gyatso was an abbot at the Drepung monastery and was considered to be the most eminent lama of his time. Since he was the third member of his lineage the title was given posthumously to his predecessors and he became the third Dalai Lama. The 5th Dalai Lama with the support of the Mongol ruler Gushri Khan, united Tibet. The Dalai Lamas then continued to partially rule Tibet until the People's Republic of China invaded the region in 1949 and before taking full control in 1959. The current Dalai Lama was forced to flee to Dharamasala in India, where he, along with a great many Tibetan refugees, currently reside. Upon the death of a Dalai Lama monks initiate a search for the lama's reincarnation – a small child. Familiarity with the possessions of the previous Dalai Lama is considered the main sign of reincarnation. The search usually requires a few years, the child is then trained by other lamas. The current Dalai Lama has insisted that he won't be reborn in any territory occupied by China, and has even suggested that he may be the last Lama.

The current Dalai Lama has been incredibly important as a spiritual leader for the thousands of Tibetan Buddhists living in exile all over the world. Chinese communists in the 1960s attempted to destroy everything to do with religion. However, the Dalai Lama was instrumental in keeping Tibetan Buddhism alive, established the Central Tibetan Administration (the Tibetan Government in Exile), and has been fighting for the freedom of Tibet.

The Buddhist Sangha

For other Buddhists important contemporary leaders are usually members of the Sangha. Monks and nuns provide spiritual leadership through meditation classes and Dhamma / Dharma talks. In some communities they also provide social care for the poor and act as teachers for children. In Thailand, for example, most boys will spend at least a year as a novice monk and be taught by the Sangha. The teachings will range from basic literacy to extended doctrines.

Members of the Sangha represent spiritual and moral values through their undertaking of the vinaya rules and the 10 Precepts. Their appearance identifies them as leaders with saffron robes showing the abandonment of normal lay clothes and all this entails, shaved head illustrating the abandonment of vanity, and begging bowl illustrating their dependence on alms.

Members of the Sangha offer a means by which the laity can live a good life in contemporary society. The Sangha is viewed as a huge field of merit in that giving members alms or food, supporting academic studies and maintaining buildings is a means of generating enormous amounts of merit. Monks and nuns also help as guides to the laity, giving Dhamma / Dharma talks as well as taking meditation classes.

Ways of Living

Exploring the impact of religions and beliefs on how people live their lives;

Understanding and responding critically to beliefs and attitudes.

The Eightfold Path

The Buddha taught that existence has three fundamental characteristics, known as the Three Marks. These are: Dukkha / Duhkha (suffering); Anicca / Anitya (impermanence); and Anatta / Anatman (not-Self). One of the most important teachings in

Buddhism concerns the first of these marks, Dukkha / Duhkha, and is found in the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths follow the traditional Indian methodology that doctors used to analyse and treat diseases: define the disease, establish the cause, define the end result of the cure, then detail what one needs to do to be cured. This is why the Buddha is often seen as a doctor, offering a cure to suffering. Thus, the first of the Four Noble Truths states that pain and suffering exists. The second states that the cause of suffering is craving. The third truth asserts that an end to suffering can be achieved through one's own efforts. Finally, the fourth truth details the way to end suffering – this is the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path is extremely important in Buddhism since it impacts on how people live: Buddhists attempt to propagate right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and meditation. Thus the Buddhist belief in the Noble Eightfold Path means that believers try and live better lives in accordance with the morality encapsulated in it. The same can be said of the Buddhist belief in Kamma / Karma – that Kamma / Karma is not just action based but intention as well, with that good intentions and actions leading to good results and bad intentions and actions leading to bad results. These results can be experienced in this life or the next, to the point of affecting what you will be reborn as. This means that the Buddhist belief in Kamma / Karma leads Buddhists to attempt to lead good, moral lives. This impacts society with members attempting to impart Buddhist values in all their social interactions. Equally, Buddhist leaders attempt to rule or govern according to Buddhist beliefs. King Asoka / Ashoka is a good example of this – building hospitals, helping the poor and promoting animal welfare.

The benefits of Buddhist beliefs on individuals and communities are clear from the above. Beliefs promote social cohesion amongst citizens, with encouragement away from acts of selfishness and towards the general good. If the ruler follows the example of King Asoka then the whole of society benefits. On an individual level, Buddhism can offer meaning to lives and engender a sense of belonging in a community. Meditation can help one overcome life's problems, from exams, to dealing with excruciating pain or the loss of a loved one.

The Scriptures

The sacred text in Theravada Buddhism is the Pali Canon. Preserved in the language of Pali, it was written down from oral tradition onto palm leaves at the Fourth Buddhist Council, 1st century BCE, in Sri Lanka. It was not printed until the 19th century. The Pali Canon contains three categories or pitakas (baskets): the Vinaya Pitaka (dealing with rules for monks and nuns); the Sutta Pitaka (discourse, mostly ascribed to the Buddha, but some to disciples); and the Abhidhamma Pitaka (detailed expansion of the philosophy and psychology found in the suttas). Because of these three baskets the Pali Canon is also known as the Tipitaka – Three baskets. The Vinaya Pitaka deals with rules for the sangha. These rules are preceded by stories explaining how and why the rules were devised as the Buddha encountered behavioural problems and disputes among his followers. The Sutta Pitaka is a collection of tales and discourses of the Buddha. It is divided into five collections or Nikayas: the Digha Nikaya (34 long discourses); the Majjhima Nikaya (152 medium length discourse); the Samyutta Nikaya (thousands of short discourses); the Anguttara Nikaya (thousands of short discourses); Khuddaka Nikaya (a miscellaneous collection of prose and verse). The Abhidhamma Pitaka, literally meaning higher dhamma, is a collection of texts which give a systematic philosophical description of the nature of mind, matter and time. This is generally seen as a systemization of the teaching found in the Suttas.

In Mahayana, there is a different collection of sacred texts. Broadly speaking most of the texts were originally written in Sanskrit, although very old Tibetan and Chinese translations exist. Followers of Mahayana have a large number of additional Sutras to Theravada. Mahayana Buddhists claim that these Sutras were heard by monks through meditation after the Parinirvana of the Buddha. The Mahayana Sutras caused some controversy when they began to appear (around the 1st century BCE) as they claim to be the word of the Buddha. However adherents of Mahayana believe that the Sutras are authentic accounts. While there is no Mahayana Canon, some Sutras, like those contained in the Perfection of Wisdom literature (e.g. the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra) are considered fundamental to most Mahayana traditions. They advocate the Mahayana goal of Buddhahood, the path of the bodhisattva that leads to it, compassion and ideas on emptiness.

As Buddhist texts contain the teachings of the Buddha they are usually studied academically. In the past this tended to be the reserve of the Sangha who would then pass the teachings on to lay Buddhists. However, in the last 200 years the texts have become much more widely available in many more languages. This means that lay Buddhists also now have the opportunity to study these texts. In the context of worship, the texts are often chanted. This not only keeps up the oral tradition, but can aid understanding of the texts through repetition. Listening to the sound of chanting, as well as participating in it, is also an excellent way to still the mind and should therefore be viewed as a form of meditation. Many Mahayana texts are self-glorifying and so are highly revered by Mahayana Buddhists. They are often chanted as ways of generating merit or as ways of warding off evil.

The Pali Canon is preserved in the Pali language while the Mahayana Sutras are preserved in Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan. In all of the texts specialist Buddhist language is used: e.g. kamma / karma, anatta / anitya, bodhisattva etc. However, language in the abhidhamma / abhidharma particularly is sometimes very specialist. Buddhism teaches that there are two levels of truth – conventional and ultimate. For example, when one speaks in terms of “I”, “self” etc, one is speaking conventionally. The abhidhamma / abhidharma attempts to speak ultimately by breaking things down into their constituent parts. Thus instead of speaking of e.g. Jane Smith, the abhidhamma / abhidharma tries to describe the interacting things that make the “continuum” that appears as Jane Smith.

After the emergence of the Mahayana Sutras, Buddhist texts have remained fairly static. However, an important addition to the Pali Canon is the commentaries. These commentaries give the traditional interpretations of the scriptures. The major commentaries were based on earlier ones, now lost, in Old Sinhalese, which were written down at the same time as the Canon, in the last century BCE. Two of the most important commentaries are Buddhagosa’s Visudimagga (5th century CE) and Dharmapala’s commentary (sometime before the 10th century CE).

The Journey of Life

In the Abrahamic religions life and death are believed to be linear: a being is born, lives and then dies, at which point their soul or other part that survives death passes to a domain that is inaccessible to living beings and remains there indefinitely, or until the end of the world. This is not the case in Buddhism. Life is not thought of as a linear journey. Instead it is a cycle of birth and death through samsara going on indefinitely until one can liberate oneself (Nibbana / Nirvana).

Buddhists believe that one can be reborn in any one of Six Realms: the Deva (god) Realm, the Asura (demi-god) Realm, the Human Realm, the Animal Realm, the Preta (Hungry Ghost) Realm, and the Naraka (hell) realm. Where one is reborn depends on one’s Kamma / Karma. This Buddhist idea of reincarnation is difficult to understand since at face value it seems to conflict with the Buddha’s teaching on Anatta / Anitya. Therefore rebirth should be thought of in terms of a constantly changing stream of consciousness. At death the Five Khandhas / Skandhas, which conventionally constitute a person, break up and become one of the contributing causes for the arising of a new group of Khandhas / Skandhas, which again may conventionally be considered a person. The consciousness arising in the new person is neither identical nor different from the old consciousness – it is just part of a causal continuum or stream. Early Buddhist texts often use fire as a useful analogy here – rebirth is like flame passed from one candle to another or fire that spreads from one field to another. In both cases the new flame depends on the original, there is a causal relation between them, but they are not identical, nor are they completely distinct. In this way Buddhist texts emphasize that there is no permanent consciousness that moves from life to life, but at the same time there is a causal link.

Buddhism does not have any specific ceremonies for rites of passage like birth, adolescence, marriage etc. This is because these events are seen as this worldly and consequently not relevant to the Buddhist path. These sorts of rites are practiced by Buddhists, but they are local rites relevant to particular cultures and should not be thought of as Buddhist. Sometimes a Buddhist monk may be present or participate in ceremony, in marriage for example he may offer a blessing to the couple, but the ceremony itself is not Buddhist. However, in some Buddhist countries, Thailand for example, boys aged between 8 and 20 sometimes enter a monastery as a novice for a year or two. This is seen as generating merit for the boys and their parents, while giving them a taste of monastic life to see if they like it – most do not go on to take full ordination. In many countries this period as a novice also is very important to the boy’s education.

Buddhists view death as the dissolution of the Five Khandhas / Skandhas, which inevitably leads to rebirth unless one has become enlightened and achieved nibbana / nirvana (which can be translated as “the Deathless”). Although fear of death is natural, Buddhists attempt to face death with equanimity and fearlessness and place a great deal of importance on being in the right frame of mind when one dies since this will affect where one is reborn. Because of this, drugs which may cloud the mind are often refused by someone dying, although a pragmatic attitude is usually taken since extreme pain will also hinder the right state of mind. Buddhist monks will often be called in (much like chaplains are at Christian hospitals) to assist the dying, comfort them, and help them prepare and achieve the best possible rebirth. In Tibet it is believed that there is a period between dying and being reborn known as the bardo. It is thought that in this period one can achieve a good rebirth or even enlightenment, particularly if one has the right guidance. Therefore lamas recite the Bardo Thodol (traditionally known as the Tibetan Book of the Dead, but literally meaning “liberation through hearing in the intermediate state”) over the dying, the dead, or an effigy of the dead.

Buddhism and science are generally considered to be compatible with each other. This is because Buddhist world views tend not to conflict with scientific ideas like concepts of the universe and evolution. The main reason for this is that the Buddha refused to discuss such questions how the world originated or why there is suffering (questions which cause many problems for Abrahamic religions' relationships with science). However, Buddhists do have ideas of expansion and contraction of world systems, which fits in well with modern ideas of the expanding and contracting universe and the evolution of species.

Holy Days and Celebrations

There are many celebration days in the Buddhist calendar. These festivals are always joyous occasions. Typically lay people will visit the local temple or monastery in the morning and offer food to the monks, take the Five Precepts and listen to a Dhamma / Dharma talk. In the afternoon, people often distribute food to the poor in order to generate merit, and in the evening they might join in a ceremony of circumambulation of a stupa three times as a sign of respect to the Buddha, Dhamma / Dharma and Sangha. The celebrations will usually conclude with evening chanting of the Buddha's teachings as well as meditation.

Some celebrations are specific to a particular Buddhist tradition or ethnic group, for example in the Mahayana tradition many festivals celebrate the birthdays of bodhisattvas. When considering Buddhist festivals it is also important to remember that, with the exception of Japan, most Buddhists use the Lunar Calendar and the dates of festivals vary from country to county and between traditions.

The major Buddhist festivals include the following: Wesak (or Visakah Puja or Buddha Day) is traditionally a celebration of the Buddha's birthday, but his Enlightenment and death are also celebrated. This is the major Buddhist festival of the year and is held on the day of the first full moon in May, except in a leap year when the festival is held in June. Wesak day is usually a public holiday in Buddhist countries and Buddhists assemble at their temple before dawn for the ceremonial hoisting of the Buddhist flag and the singing of hymns in praise of the Triple Gem. Devotees may bring offerings such as flowers, candles and incense. These symbolic offerings remind followers that just as flowers wither and candles and incense burn out, so too is life subject to change, decay and destruction. Buddhists are also encouraged to refrain from eating meat on Wesak day with butchers and places selling alcohol usually closed. Sometimes symbolic acts of liberation are made, where animals or birds are released. Additionally, Buddhists will feed monks and the poor, take the Precepts, listen to Dhamma / Dharma talks, chant, meditate and offer homage to the Triple Gem

Buddhist New Year, in Theravadin countries (Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Lao), is celebrated for three days from the first full moon in April. In some Mahayana countries it starts on the day following the first full moon in January, but dates are very much dependent on ethnic background. For example, Chinese Koreans and Vietnamese Buddhists celebrate in late January or early February (depending on the full moon), while Tibetans usually celebrate a month later.

Asalha Puja Day (or Dhamma / Dharma Day) commemorates the first teaching of the Buddha and the turning of the Dhamma / Dharma Wheel, to his old ascetic colleagues at the Sarnath Deer Park. This festival is usually held on the full moon day of the eighth lunar month (approximately July).

Ullambana (or Ancestor Day) is mainly celebrated in Mahayana countries although some Theravadins also participate. It is held during the first fifteen days of the eighth lunar month. It is believed that ghosts visit the world during these days, so food offerings are left out to relieve their suffering.

Uposatha is mainly observed in Theravada countries and is held on each new moon, full moon and quarter moon days (ie around once a week). For the laity this is a chance to renew vows and take precepts, visit monasteries, make offerings, listen to Dhamma talks and meditate. Monks will confess any violations of the vinaya then chant the Patimokkha (a set of rules for monks). Depending of the speed of the chanting this can take from 30 minutes to an hour. The laity are often allowed to listen and many find it a peaceful experience, settling the mind and aiding meditation.

Ways of Expressing Meaning

Appreciating that individuals and cultures express their beliefs and values through many different forms.

Stories of Faith

The most important stories in Buddhism concern the historical Buddha, Siddattha / Siddhartha Gotama / Gautama and can generally be found in the Suttas. They concern his birth, his going forth into homelessness, his effort to reach Enlightenment, his attainment of nibbana / nirvana, his first sermon, and his parinibbana / parinirvana.

Birth: Gotama / Gautama was born in Lumbini in modern day Nepal. On the night Siddattha / Siddhartha was conceived, Queen Maya (his mother) dreamt that a white elephant with six white tusks entered her right side. Ten months later she gave birth, standing up, under a sal tree. Eight Brahmins then read the baby's future and stated that he had the Thirty-Two Marks of a great man, which meant he would either become a great king or a Buddha.

Going forth: Gotama / Gautama's father wanted him to be a great king so kept him away from unpleasant experiences and ensured he lived in absolute luxury. However, at the age of 29, when out with his chariot driver, Gotama / Gautama was shocked to see an old man, a diseased man, a corpse and finally an ascetic. He decided that he needed to overcome disease, death and suffering so decided to leave his royal life and become a medicant.

Effort: Gotama / Gautama became a wandering ascetic begging for alms food on the street. He then studied under a number of hermits and meditation teachers, surpassing their achievements and moving on. He then joined five ascetics led by Kondanna, who aimed for enlightenment through extreme asceticism and self-mortification. Restricting his daily intake to a leaf or a nut a day, Gotama / Gautama collapsed in a river and nearly drowned. He then remembered a meditative state he had naturally fallen into as a child (jhana) and realised that this might be the best starting place

Enlightenment: having accepted milk and rice pudding from a girl called Sujata, Gotama / Gautama sat down under a pipal tree known as the Bodhi Tree and vowed not to arise until he had discovered the truth. After 49 days of meditating he discovered the Four Noble Truths, the Middle Way and became Enlightened.

First Sermon: the Buddha then journeyed to a deer park in Sarnath and delivered his first sermon expounding the Dhamma / Dharma / Dharma to his five ascetic companions. They then joined the Buddha and became the first members of the Sangha.

Parinibbana / Parinirvana: the Buddha continued to teach for the remaining 45 years of his life and his Sangha continued to grow. Having eaten a meal offered by a blacksmith named Cunda, the Buddha became ill. He asked his monks whether they had any questions or doubts that needed clearing up. They replied that they did not. Then the Buddha entered Parinibbana / Parinirvana. His last words were: "All composite things pass away. Strive for your own liberation with diligence".

These stories are sacred because they concern the Buddha. They are told in the Buddhist texts – in the Suttas of the Pali Canon for example. As such they are preserved unchanged. The stories concerning the Buddha are very important to Buddhism and its followers since they show the struggle that the Buddha went through to achieve Enlightenment. They show that the Buddha started out human and unenlightened like us, but through diligent effort he managed to attain Nibbana / Nirvana. Thus the stories offer a paradigm of religious effort. They offer a model that adherents try and live up to today.

Many Buddhist symbols need to be examined within the culture of adherents. A number of early symbols relate to ancient India and are shared with Hinduism, although usually with a different meaning.

Symbols of Faith

Symbols for the Buddha: early Buddhist art tends to portray the Buddha symbolically using images. These include the Dhamma / Dharma Wheel (the Buddha is known as a Wheel-Turner, one who sets a new cycle of teaching in motion), the Bodhi Tree (the tree under which the Gotama / Gautama achieved Enlightenment), footprints (these often have Dhamma / Dharma Wheels on them, one of the 32 marks of a great man), an empty throne (referring to the Buddha's royal ancestry and rule over the spiritual world), a begging bowl (alluding to the bowl of milk rice offered to him as an ascetic, which made him realize that the middle way

between asceticism and self-indulgence was the right path), and a lion (the Buddha's teachings are sometimes referred to as the 'Lions Roar', indicating their strength and power). Alongside these, Buddhist households may have a statue of the historical Buddha, a Buddha (e.g. Amitaba) or a Bodhisattva (e.g. Avalokatesvara). These statues are usually kept on a high shelf as a mark of respect and are given offerings such as water, incense or food. Statues are usually the focal point in Buddhist Temples and may be used as an aid to Buddha devotions. They are always treated respectfully, with Buddhists removing their shoes, kneeling before them, or even prostrating themselves before them.

The Triple Gem: the Triple Gem is usually represented as three jewels and symbolizes the Buddha, the Dhamma / Dharma and the Sangha – the Three Refuges.

Muddas: muddas are symbolic hand gestures used in Buddhist iconography and meditation. They represent a number of key events in the life of the Buddha, doctrines and values such as fearlessness.

As Buddhism spread, Buddhist symbolism was enriched by the cultures it came into contact with. This is especially true of Buddhism in Tibet, which has developed a rich symbolic tradition. The central representations of Tibetan Buddhism are the eight auspicious symbols:

Parasol (embodying notions of wealth)

Golden Fish

Treasure Vase

Lotus

Conch Shell

Endless Knot

Victory Banner

Dharma Wheel

Mandalas are often used in Tibetan Buddhism, particularly Tantra. It usually consists of a number of concentric circles representing the cosmos. In Tantric meditation practices mandalas act as a 'sacred space' symbolising Buddhafields or purelands and space where the confusion of samsara cannot penetrate. By visualizing purelands, one learns to understand experience itself as pure, and the abode of enlightenment.

The Buddhist Flag is a comparatively modern Buddhist symbol. It was designed by Colonel Henry Steele Olcott in 1880 and is now used worldwide to represent Buddhism and symbolise faith and peace.

Buddhist Art & Imagery

Buddhist symbolism and art originated on the Indian subcontinent following the historical life of Gotama / Gautama Buddha and thereafter evolved through contact with other cultures as it spread throughout Asia and the world. Early Buddhist symbolism followed the aniconic tradition, which avoids direct representation of the human figure. Among the earliest and most common symbols were the stupa, the Dhamma / Dharma Wheel, and the lotus flower. The Dhamma / Dharma Wheel is a particularly important symbol in Buddhism as it implies royalty and there is a great deal of mythology about the "Wheel-turning king". The Dhamma / Dharma Wheel also refers to the historical process of teaching the Dhamma / Dharma – the 8 spokes symbolise the Noble Eightfold Path. Around the 1st century CE anthropomorphic images of the Buddha began to appear, beginning with the representation of the Buddha's footprint, which symbolise the physical presence of the Buddha on earth. The story goes that prior to his death the Buddha left an imprint of his foot on a stone near Kusinara, a reminder of his presence on earth. Representations of this often show Dhamma / Dharma Wheels on them. In the Lakkhana Sutta, the Buddha is described as having the 32 Marks of a great man. These marks are often used in statues and icons of the Buddha to symbolise his greatness. Mahayana and Vajrayana art frequently makes use of the Eight Auspicious Symbols.

Unlike other religions, Buddhist language often attempts to remove symbolism from it. The aim of Buddhism is to see things as they really are, hence Buddhist language usually attempts to express itself clearly rather than cloak the meaning in symbolism. The Abhidhamma / Abidharma is the clearest expression of this idea. However, that is not to say that Buddhist texts are devoid of symbolism. The Suttas / Sutras frequently make use of fire symbolism. This is most famously done in the Fire Sermon. Here the Buddha tells his disciples that "all is burning". This refers to the six internal sense bases (5 senses and the mind), the six external sense bases (visible forms, smells etc), consciousness, contact and feeling. These are all burning with the fires of

passion, aversion and delusion. The idea of fire is very important in Buddhism and can be seen in the word nibbana / nirvana, which literally means 'blowing out' – i.e. extinguishing the Three Fires.

The most obvious piece of Buddhist symbolic architecture is the stupa. Stupas come in all shapes and sizes and have been constructed since the early days. They generally represent the enlightened mind of the Buddha, but can also represent the five elements: the square base represents earth; the round dome represents water; the cone shape is fire; the canopy is air; and the volume of the stupa is space. Stupas are also used to store the relics of important teachers and even relics of the Buddha himself.

In Buddhism, symbols reflect beliefs. The Dhamma / Dharma Wheel, for example, reflects the belief in the Buddha's Dhamma / Dharma – the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Symbols are also used in religious expression such as devotion or meditation. For example, the Buddha is often the subject of meditation and so a Buddha image or statue is a useful focus. Equally, while Buddha images are not thought to actually be or contain the Buddha, (Theravadins believe that when the Buddha died he became inaccessible to us), they are used as the focus of devotional activity, with offerings such as flowers and incense being given as a sign of respect.

Theravada Places of Worship

In Theravadin Buddhism, worship is a difficult word. Theravadins believe that gods are of this world and therefore are equally in need of salvation like everybody else. They also believe that Gotama / Gautama Buddha, when he achieved parinibbana / nirvana, became inaccessible to us. Thus, while the word puja is usually translated as 'worship', and some of the practices encapsulated by puja may look like worship, it should be interpreted as showing respect to a great man, the Buddha. Most puja practices take place in a temple. Modern temples tend to be very bright and colourful. There will be a shrine room, with a main Buddha image and many other statues or paintings showing events from the Buddha's life and his previous lives, other Buddha's or past arahats / arhats. The image of the Buddha is often very large so everyone, even small children, will be aware of his importance.

People make offerings before the Buddha image. These are usually foods, flowers, candles, and incense. On Holy or poya days food is usually offered twice a day and is accompanied by drumming.

As already mentioned, while these offerings may look like worship, they should be seen as signs of respects and should not be viewed as gifts to a supernatural being in the hope of supernatural reward. The gifts themselves help to remind the giver of the Buddha's teaching: flowers wilt and candles and incense go out reminding one that everything is impermanent. The offerings also help to bring about a peaceful mind and generate merit. Furthermore, actions become ritualized and this can act as a form of meditation for the practitioner.

Buddhist temples are traditionally part of monasteries, viharas. This means that they have a very important place in the community. Not only are they huge sources of merit for the laity since they facilitate offerings to the Buddha and donations of food to the monks, they are also viewed as the home of the Buddha's Dhamma / Dharma. The Sangha, one of the Three Jewels, or Refuges, is very important to Buddhism. Monks and nuns are viewed as people who are further down the path to Nibbana / Nirvana than other lay members and so are valuable in giving Dhamma / Dharma talks, teaching, producing books etc. Extensive libraries are usually held in viharas as well.

Pilgrimage

The most important places of pilgrimage for Buddhists are located on the Gangetic Plains in Northern India and Southern Nepal, the area where the Buddha lived and taught. The four most important sites associated with the Buddha are: Lumbini (in Nepal) – the place of the Buddha's birth; Bodh Gaya – the place of the Buddha's Enlightenment; Sarnath – where he delivered his first teaching; Kusinara – where he died. In addition to these, most countries have shrines etc that can be visited on a pilgrimage.

Mahayana Places of Worship

Followers of Mahayana see Shakyamuni Buddha, the Buddha of the scriptures and of our world system, as being available in a glorious heaven or in spiritual form, along with other Buddhas from different world systems and Bodhisattvas. This means that

the Buddha(s) and Bodhisattvas are often petitioned through prayer and offerings. The temples and shrine rooms used for this are much the same as those of Theravadin Buddhists, but the philosophy behind Mahayana worship is slightly different.

The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is an often worshipped figure. He is a saviour figure, a being to imagine and related to, satisfying the emotions, he loves and protects and is loved, treated with devotion and worshiped. The Lotus Sutra states that calling upon him is worth thousands of prayers to any other Buddha or Bodhisattva. The mantra “om mani padme hum” is often used to pray to him.

In Pure Land Buddhism, the Buddha Amitabha (or Amida) is worshipped. Amitabha dwells in a paradisaal, pure Buddhaland called Sukhavati. He used to be the bodhisattva Dharmakara, who out of compassion vowed he would create a pure land for all suffering beings. Adherents of Pure Land Buddhism believe that trusting devotion to Amitabha will mean he will take them to his pure land. Worship of Amitabha involves recitation of his name, often using beads to count, imagining his pure land and “singing his praises”.

Identity, Diversity and Belonging

Understanding how individuals develop a sense of identity and belonging through faith or belief;

Exploring the variety, difference and relationships that exist within and between religions, values and beliefs.

Individuals and Communities

Belonging can mean different things in different Buddhist communities. However, a set of basic values reflecting the Noble Eightfold Path and the Five Precepts are unifying. Similarly faith in the Buddha and the Four Noble Truths gives Buddhist communities an identity. Generally, the action holding people together is taking the Three Refuges: going for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma / Dharma, and the Sangha. This can be done collectively in a ceremony, as part of the daily life of a family or individually. Another action which demonstrates belonging to the Buddhist community is chanting. For Theravadins, parts of the Pali Canon are often chanted collectively, or followers will go and listen to members of the Sangha chant. For devotees of the Mahayana, Mahayana Sutras or Mantras are often chanted. In both cases this can act as a communal act bringing followers closer and instilling a sense of belonging as well as clearing the mind in a form of meditation.

While it is easy to spot members of the Sangha by their clothes and shaved heads, it can be hard to distinguish lay Buddhists from non-lay Buddhists in the community. However, Buddhists try to avoid attachment to material possessions, so will shun wearing excessive amounts of jewellery or expensive clothes.

On Uposatha days or other Buddhist festivals, Wesak for example, Buddhist communities come together. On each Uposatha day devout members of the lay Buddhist community will take three extra precepts and will usually congregate at a local temple or monastery to make offerings, listen to Dhamma / Dharma talks and participate in meditation sessions. This is where there is a real sense of belonging in the community.

It is important to note that the means by which these actions and beliefs can be expressed usually involve the Sangha, particularly for Theravadin communities. For example on special days, the lay community will make an effort to provide alms food for the monks and nuns, as well as listening to Dhamma / Dharma talks given by, or participating in meditation sessions led by, the monks and nuns. For followers of the Mahayana expressions of belonging to a community can be more devotion based (particularly for groups such as Pure Land Buddhists). Therefore, members of the Sangha are not so important for the expression of these beliefs. Theravadans, too, have many devotional practices, but will often go to monasteries where there are a number of beautiful Buddha statues and images on special days.

Religious / Spiritual Identity

As with any religion, belonging can make an important psychological difference to people’s lives. It provides informal support networks, as well as social opportunities. However, it is important to remember that Buddhism teaches that all things are characterised by the Three Marks – impermanence, suffering and not-Self. This means that while a sense of community and belonging has its benefits one shouldn’t become attached to it. The same is taught of the Buddhist religion as a whole. The

Buddha compares the Dhamma / Dharma to a raft that one uses to cross a river. It may be an excellent raft, but when the river has been crossed, the heavy raft should not be carried with one on dry land. Similarly, one should not stay attached to the Dhamma / Dharma once its benefits have been taken. Thus, for Buddhists, belonging has its benefits, but ultimately it must be set aside if one is to progress on the path – initially one might belong to the lay community, then one should renounce this and belong to the community of renunciants, finally one must abandon all belonging to the conditioned world as belonging can act like attachment.

The most basic expectation of a Buddhist is taking the Three Refuges. This involves going for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma / Dharma and the Sangha. Refuge ceremonies may take place in a monastery or temple by a member of the Sangha, but they are more often undertaken in private by aspiring Buddhists. Taking refuge should not be viewed as hiding away from something; rather it is commitment to pay attention to the Buddha's teachings. This commitment may be expressed in daily life by listening to a Dhamma / Dharma talk, visiting a Buddhist centre, temple or monastery, following the Noble Eightfold Path, or simply attempting to be mindful and compassionate in one's every day actions. Experienced Buddhists will practice meditation at both meditation centres and at home. A few devoted Buddhists will ordain as monks or nuns.

Ordained and Lay Buddhists

The easiest way to identify ordained is by their appearance. Monks and nuns usually wear specific kinds of clothes – the saffron robes of the Theravadin sangha are easily identifiable, for example. Monks and nuns will usually shave their heads as well – this helps remove vanity and sets them apart from the laity. Lay commitment can be recognised in a number of ways, for example, by a calm disposition, visiting meditation centres, listening to Dhamma / Dharma talks, supporting the sangha and giving to charity.

Lay Buddhists also take the Five Precepts: to abstain from killing, taking what is not given, misuse of sensual pleasures, false speech, abuse of drugs and alcohol. Pious Buddhists may take an additional Three Precepts, especially on holy days: abstention from a luxurious bed, food after midday and amusements and adornments. Individuals also try to foster positive virtues such as contentment with a simple life, detachment from material concerns, self-discipline, tolerance, love and compassion for all beings. Monks and nuns follow a stricter code outlined in the vinaya. They take ten precepts: in addition to the five above, they abstain from food after midday, luxurious beds, frivolous amusements, personal adornments, and touching money. There are also many rules in the vinaya (227 for Theravadins). Breaking the first four rules lead to expulsion from the order, and are no sexual intercourse, refraining from theft, no murder or subtle forms of murder such as encouraging suicide, and not intentionally making false claims to supernatural powers.

In general, as Buddhism has developed and spread to different countries, the importance of the lay community has risen. Originally the Buddhist monastic community was most important, but as Buddhism's popularity grew, the number of people who believed in the dhamma / dharma but did not feel they were at a stage where they could renounce their families grew. Thus the lay community grew. Its importance is best illustrated by the actions of one man – Anagarika Dharmapala. Dharmapala (1864-1933) was not a full member of the Sangha, but he was instrumental in bringing Buddhism to the West and pioneering a revival of Buddhism in India by reclaiming Bodh Gaya as a Buddhist pilgrimage site. Importantly he printed a handbook on meditation, thus bringing meditation firmly into the realm of both the laity and family life.

The simplest form of expressing belonging to the Buddhist faith tradition is through taking the Three Refuges: going for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma / Dharma, and the Sangha. This act connects all Buddhists together. In the Suttas / Sutras any new disciple of the Buddha always takes the Three Refuges when he or she becomes a follower of the Buddha. Still, belonging to the Buddhist faith tradition can mean many different things in many different cultures.

Family and Community

The interrelationships of individuals to family and community are very important in Buddhism. Buddhists believe in an infinite number of rebirths. Therefore, as the Buddha pointed out, everyone you meet has at some stage been your mother or father and at some stage you have been their parents. Thus everyone should be treated as if they are members of your family. The Buddha advised a man called Sigala (Digha Nikaya 3.185-191) on his responsibilities as a householder, including advice on relationships: you should take care of your family, respecting your parents and looking after your children; treat your partner well and fairly; choose the right sort of friends as friends can have a good or a bad influence on you; have a good relationship with your teachers and pupils, respecting the teacher and trying to give the pupils the best possible education; treat your employees

fairly and your employer with respect by not wasting time and doing your best; and finally, you should make your living in a good way, one which doesn't harm your fellows.

To a certain extent family life in Buddhism is seen as the polar opposite of the holy life. Monks and nuns, Buddhists' spiritual leaders, are in this position because they have renounced family life. In the early Suttas / Sutras there is a lot of negative material concerning family life – children and partners are seen as distractions, for example. However, Buddhism still recognises the importance of the laity – they, after all, make the life of the renunciant possible by supporting his or her lifestyle. Equally, it is from families that the next generation of monks and nuns come. Therefore family life and the life of those who reject it (i.e. the Sangha) should be seen as mutually dependent on each other. Furthermore, in Mahayana, there is an increased emphasis on the importance of the laity. In the Mahayana Sutras, for example, many bodhisattvas appear as laymen or laywomen. Thus, being a Buddhist while having a family or being part of a family is not seen necessarily as a problem. In fact in Japan Buddhist priests are married and do not renounce family life. In Tantrayana as well, there are many lay teachers.

Foundations of Identity

The question of 'who I am' is of vital importance in Buddhism. The Buddha said that the world and everything in it is characterised by Three Marks. These are dukkha / dukkha (suffering), anicca / anitya (impermanence) and anatta / anatman (not-Self). Clearly the third of these is very important when discussing what is meant by 'I'. Buddhists believe that there is no permanent unchanging Self (as is often postulated by other religions – Hinduism's Brahman, for example, or Christianity's soul). The reason for this belief is that empirically and experientially no permanent self can be found. If one investigates what people identify a permanent self with – the mind for example – one discovers that this is subject to change and fluctuation and as such subject to suffering. The Buddha analyses each of the five khandhas / Skandhas that make up a being and argues that no permanent self can be found in any of them. They are not-Self. Thus in Buddhist thought, what is thought of as self is simply an accumulation of constantly changing and interacting physical and mental phenomena. However, Buddhists have two forms of truth: conventional and ultimate. This means that in terms of conventional truth it is appropriate to use the word 'I', in other words there is a conventional self. However, at the ultimate level it must be remembered that the self is not permanent, unchanging or free from dukkha / dukkha.

The teaching on anatta / anitya is of great soteriological importance. It stands in the middle between eternalism (people who assume an eternal unchanging Self) and annihilationism or nihilism (people who claim that there is no self at all, nothing remains after death). In Buddhism the conventional, empirical self constantly changes (as opposed to the Self of the eternalists which is not subject to change). It is this fact that allows people to develop by doing good deeds, studying and meditating; they can become better beings, and eventually achieve nibbana / nirvana. If the self could not change, then there would be no self-development, no self-improvement and one could not reach nibbana / nirvana. Equally, if the self completely ended at death (as argued by annihilationists) there would be no point in developing the self, acting morally or helping people. In fact it is the 'I am conceit' that leads to suffering. For example, if one does not see a permanent self as the owner of pain then it is a lot easier to bear. Thus it is the Middle Way and the perception of self as a continuum of interacting phenomena that allows people to improve themselves and eventually escape from samsara.

To talk about a person therefore is to talk about them on a conventional level, but at the ultimate level we should be thought of in terms of interacting changing phenomena. Buddhists however, do believe in individuality. The stream of phenomena does make up an individual – we are not simply one big stream or one big self; a person's actions are his or her own. Thus, while the self should not be thought of as eternal and unchanging, it should be thought of as individual.

Identity & Belonging in Practice

Buddhist families with religious commitment practice their faith in a number of ways. The most basic way of expressing faith is through showing respect to an image of the Buddha. Most households will have such an image usually in a communal room. The image will normally be stored on a high shelf, showing the relative importance of the Buddha and acting as a sign of respect. Other family practices may include regular chanting of Buddhist Scriptures, taking the Three Refuges together, taking the Five Precepts together, visiting temples together and prostrating oneself before the Buddha. For Mahayana families, people may renew their bodhisattva vows together; this is the promise to strive to become a bodhisattva and eventually a Buddha. Mahayana families may also chant mantras, particularly those who follow the Tantrayana. On Uposatha days Buddhist families may additionally take the Eight Precepts, meditate, listen to Dharma talks and study scriptures together.

In many ways the most important way the Buddhist community as a whole expresses its faith is through supporting the Sangha. This includes giving alms food to monks and financing temples. The Sangha as a community expresses faith through the monks and nuns renunciation of lay life, meditation and study of the Dhamma / Dharma. It also reciprocates the lay community's support by providing them not only with the means of doing good deeds, but also by acting as a source of teaching and through the provision of spiritual guidance.

The most important impact of Buddhist faith on the wider non-Buddhist community is through their belief in pacifism. Most Buddhists are strongly opposed to war as it involves taking life (breaking the First Precept). This means they often play an important role in peace keeping talks and in organisations such as the UN. Buddhists are also involved in 'grass roots' politics and political protests. Buddhist protests can range from the recent non-violent protests of the Sangha in Burma to the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc in 1963 in Vietnam, to the more recent demonstrations led by Buddhist monks in Tibet.

Diversity

There is great diversity within Buddhism. For ease scholars usually differentiate Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. There are many differences between these strands of Buddhism. Theravada can mainly be found in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and parts of Southeast Asia, while Mahayana can be seen in Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Mongolia along with parts of Southeast Asia. The main difference between these two strands of Buddhism is the goal that believers aim for. Theravada Buddhists aspire to become Arahats (enlightened ones), while Mahayana Buddhists strive to become bodhisattvas and eventually Buddhas themselves (someone who rediscovers the dharma and teaches). Western ideas of schism, based on the history of Christianity, have often led to the idea that there is hostility between these two groups. This is not normally the case. Both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhists exist happily side by side, and in the past, both those aiming to become Buddhas and those aiming to become Arahats, shared monasteries with each other.

Given the huge number of countries that Buddhism has spread to, there is obviously a great deal of cultural diversity within the faith tradition. This can be seen mainly in terms of ritual practices. In Tibet for example, there are some shamanistic elements to rituals, while in certain Chinese schools there are more devotional aspects. With increased emigration different cultures join the 'melting pot' of the West, resulting in these new communities incorporating many Western cultural aspects of Buddhism.

Buddhism has successfully extended into countries outside its traditional regions, and has co-existed with religions already present. Buddhists acknowledge the existence of gods, devils, supernatural beings etc and so can quite happily incorporate new ones into its belief system. For example, when Buddhism spread to Tibet a number of deities and demons became Buddhist. The important point that Buddhism teaches is that while these gods may exist and intervene to aid with worldly requests (for example, helping one pass an exam), they cannot help on the Buddhist path – escaping the round of samsara – because all the gods are also subject to it, as they will eventually die themselves. Thus many Buddhists will nominally have two or more religions – in India, for example, a Buddhist may call himself a Hindu when it comes to worshipping Hindu gods for this worldly results, but a Buddhist when it comes to escaping from suffering.

Buddhists usually welcome interfaith dialogue. In fact, the Buddha emphasised the importance of investigating any truth claim and assessing its veracity. When Christian missionaries began working in Sri Lanka in the 18th century, they were initially frustrated by Buddhists acceptance of them and willingness to participate in interfaith dialogue. These same Christian missionaries were further perturbed by their hosts' willingness to please them and worship their God while still following the Buddhist path to escape from samsara.

Meaning, Purpose and Truth

Exploring some of the ultimate questions that confront humanity, and responding imaginatively to them;

The ups, downs and meaning(s) of life's journey.

Religious Experience

Spiritual feelings such as awe, wonder and praise can play a major part in Buddhism. This is particularly true for followers of the Mahayana, where devotional activities aimed at transcendent Buddhas and bodhisattvas are an important part of religious practice. However, although Theravada has a reputation for being slightly colder and more rational, these feelings still have an important role to play. It is true that in the Pali Canon a Sutta criticises the monk Vakkali who, full of devotion and love for the Buddha, wanted to look after his physical needs. To him the Buddha said: "What shall it profit you to see this impure body? He who sees the Dhamma / Dharma, sees me". It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that the Buddha disparaged a reverential and devotional attitude of mind when it is the natural outflow of a true understanding and a deep admiration for what is great and noble. Similarly, "seeing the Dhamma / Dharma" should not be thought of as a mere conceptual grasp of doctrine, but rather a deep-seated heart-felt faith. Thus, Theravadins also take part in devotional activity, trying to avoid doing it out of habit or attachment to the process, but rather as an expression of faith in the teachings of the Buddha.

Feelings of awe and wonder are almost always expressed in devotional activities and are usually directed at the historical Buddha (Gotama / Gautama) or other Buddhas or Bodhisattvas (for members of the Mahayana).

There are several sorts of devotional activities Buddhists participate in, usually in shrines and temples in front of statues or images of the Buddha. The first of these is folding the palms together, and raising them to the level of the chest. This gesture is a general mark of respect in many cultures (for example, Thailand) and expresses deep reverence for the Triple Gem – Buddha, Dhamma / Dharma, and Sangha. The second activity is prostration before a Buddha image. This expresses deep veneration of the Buddha and helps to overcome egoistical feelings making one more receptive to hearing the Dharma with a clear mind. As Buddhists prostrate themselves, they attempt to recall qualities of the Buddha and develop respect for virtues such as loving-kindness, compassion, patience, concentration and wisdom. Finally, offerings can be made to the Buddha. These are not made because the Buddha needs them (as an Enlightened being, he certainly does not need incense sticks to be happy) or to win favour. Instead, offerings are made to show respect, create positive energy and develop qualities such as giving gracefully with a respectful attitude. The type of offerings made also symbolize key Buddhist teachings: lamps and candles symbolize wisdom; the fragrance of incense symbolises pure moral conduct and reminds one to cultivate this; water symbolizes purity, clarity and calmness, and reminds one to cleanse and calm the mind; fruit symbolises enlightenment and acts as a reminder that actions will have effects; and flowers represent impermanence with the lotus flower in particular representing the potential for Enlightenment

As can be seen above the relationship between questions of value and feelings is an intimate one. Blind devotional activity done out of habit and with attachment is criticised. However the correct response to the Buddha and the Dhamma / Dharma is to greet it with faith. This is not blind faith. In the Kalama Sutta the Buddha argues against 'blind faith' based simply on authority tradition or specious reasoning. The appropriate faith response is a quiet, heartfelt trusting in the Buddha and the Dhamma / Dharma (with the proviso that one will firmly penetrate it with one's mind, experiencing its truth when one is able). The importance of faith is often emphasised in the Suttas / Sutras. In the Kasibharadvaja Sutta of the Samyutta Nikaya the relationship of faith practice and wisdom is stressed:

Faith is my seed, practice the rain

And wisdom is my yoke and plough

Modesty's the pole, mind the strap

Mindfulness my ploughshare and goad

Religious experiences in Buddhism are varied with the emphasis on the experience itself. The Buddhist aim is to see things as they really are, usually through empirical investigation – experience. Therefore, to a certain extent every experience has religious connotations, even to the most basic occurrence. For example, if I experience emotional pain through dropping my new laptop, I can apply mindfulness and reflect on the impermanence of all things. Equally, if I am particularly happy when my fixed laptop is returned to me, I should note that this state will not last and that it is caused by attachment to material possessions. Experiences which are more closely related to religion usually occur during meditation, particularly for Theravadins. These experiences can range from having a deep sense of calm or seeing a bright light, to psychic powers as one works through the jhanas. In Mahayana, religious experiences can also have a more mystical element, believers can experience Buddhas and bodhisattvas first hand.

Ultimate Questions

There are a number of questions the Buddha refused to answer, including, is the world eternal, not eternal, both or neither? is the world finite, not finite, both or neither? does the Tathagata exist after death, or not, both, or neither? is the self identical with the body, or is it different from the body? These questions are similar to ultimate questions of other religions, so it is clearly of importance that the Buddha refused to answer them. He described them as 'a net' and refused to be drawn into such a net of theories, speculations and dogmas. Such theories and dogmas usually end in unease, bewilderment and suffering, and it is only by freeing oneself of them that one achieves liberation. It was because the Buddha was free of bondage to all theories and dogmas that he achieved enlightenment. By refusing to be drawn on dogmatic views the Buddha is demonstrating that these questions are simply not an important focus for Buddhists and that they are phrased in, and asked out, of spiritual ignorance. The questions relate to some kind of unchanging permanent Self. Since Buddhists hold that there is no such unchanging permanent Self, then the questions have as much logical sense as asking an innocent man if he has stopped beating his wife – they are unanswerable.

The 'ultimate' is not something often discussed in Buddhism. This is because the Buddha, after much meditation, concluded that everything in both the physical world and the phenomenological world is characterised by three things, the Three Marks: Dukkha / Duhkha (suffering); Anicca / Anitya (impermanence); and Anatta / Anatman (Not-Self). Therefore, if everything is changing and impermanent there is nothing permanent and unchanging like the ultimate 'God' in monotheistic religions, the soul in Christianity, or atman in Brahmanism. Theravadins consider Nibbana to be the opposite of the Three Marks, but Mahayanists view even Nirvana as being empty of Self.

The Anatta teachings have significant implications for the concept of 'me'. Anatta / Anatman means not-self, the absence of limiting self-identity in people and things. Its opposite is the idea of a Soul or Self which survives transmigration – something that the Buddha explicitly rejected. What is normally thought of as 'self' is an agglomeration of constantly changing physical and mental constituents (the Five khandhas / Skandhas). This idea is vital to Buddhist soteriology since it is belief in a separate self that leads to grasping for things as 'mine' and it is this grasping that leads to delusion that hides how things really are. In the Sutta Nipata, the Buddha teaches that losing the delusion of self is equivalent to Enlightenment: "a wise noble disciple becomes dispassionate towards material form, becomes dispassionate towards feeling, becomes dispassionate towards perception, becomes dispassionate towards formations, becomes dispassionate towards consciousness. Becoming dispassionate his lust fades away; with the fading of lust his fear is liberated; when liberated there comes the knowledge. He understands, birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived out, what was to be done is done, there is no more to come". (3:66)

Mahayana Buddhists see Buddhas and many Bodhisattvas as being transcendent. This leads to devotional activities and worship. In Pure Land Buddhism, for example, faith in the Buddha Amitabha (or Amida) is emphasised. Adherents believe that faith and devotion will mean Amitabha will help them be reborn in the Pure Land he created in which Enlightenment is guaranteed.

Buddhism should be viewed as a response to suffering and the human condition. The Buddha taught that by direct experience he had come to understand the human condition and had discovered a means of transcending it – with the human condition being characterised by the Three Marks (Dukkha / Duhkha, Anicca / Anitya and Anatta / Anatman). Where beings are reborn within this samsaric cycle is not based on fate, but on their previous thoughts and actions (kamma); what keeps them in the cycle of rebirths is craving and ignorance of the way things really are. If one can eliminate these things one achieves liberation – Nibbana / Nirvana. The method of eliminating craving and ignorance is through moral behaviour, disciplining the mind through meditation and investigating Buddhist doctrine by reason. Therefore, the Buddhist response to suffering is practical advice on

how to live life in order to escape it. The individual Buddhist's response is to put faith in the teachings of the Buddha; if he follows them, he too will escape from samsara.

Religion and Science

Buddhism can be seen as having a great deal in common with science. Its general neutrality on the subject of the supernatural means that, as a religion, it is open to scientific discovery. With its focus on the nature of mind and its implications for the concept of reality, Buddhism offers explanations for metaphysical issues within psychology and studies of consciousness. Furthermore, there is some common ground between the methodology of scientific investigations and Buddhist thought. The Dalai Lama, for example, listed a "suspicion of absolutes" and a reliance on causality and empiricism as common philosophical principles shared between Buddhism and science. Similarly in the Kalama Sutta there is an insistence on a proper assessment of evidence, rather than a reliance on faith, hearsay or speculation. This is very similar to the Royal Society's motto – "Nullius in verba" (often translated as "take no-one's word for it").

Buddhism has had a significant impact on the world of psychology. During the 1970s several experimental studies suggested that Buddhist meditation could produce insights into a wide range of psychological states. This has recently been revived following the increased availability of such brain-scanning technologies as MRI and SPECT. These experiments are enthusiastically encouraged by the present day Dalai Lama, who has expressed an interest in exploring the connection between Buddhism and science. There is also a great deal of research going into Buddhist meditation techniques, particularly mindfulness, being used therapeutically for depression, anxiety etc. The Oxford Mindfulness Centre the Department of Psychiatry works with the Oxford Buddhist Centre at Oxford in order to undertake this kind of research.

The relationship between science and faith is not such a difficult issue in Buddhism. As seen above there is a strong emphasis in Buddhism on testing all truth claims empirically. However, not everyone will be far enough advanced on the Buddhist path to test all claims, therefore some faith in the Buddha is needed initially to adopt his teachings. Many Buddhists, though, argue that this is no different to placing faith in scientists and scientific theories: when we first start learning science we are not able to empirically check theories on quantum physics etc; instead we must take them on faith and only fully investigate them when we have reached an appropriate level of knowledge and expertise.

There is a great deal of similarity between Buddhism language and empirical language, particularly in Abhidhamma / Abhidharma thought, where the world is broken up into constituent parts illustrating causality. Scientific language has in fact borrowed from Buddhism: the psychologist William James, for example, introduced the term "stream of consciousness", which is a literal English translation of the Sanskrit *vinnana-sota*.

Most Buddhists do not see any problem with being both a scientist and following the Dharma. Science can be seen as 'this worldly' whereas Buddhism is really only concerned with escape from samsara. As long as the study of science does not interfere with an individual's Buddhist practices, there is no problem. Some famous Buddhist scientists are: Niels Bohr, who developed the Bohr Model of the atom; British mathematician and Nobel Prize winner Alfred John Whitehead; and Nobel Prize winner Bertrand Russell.

The pursuit of scientific knowledge can be seen as being soteriologically important. The aim of Buddhism is to see things as they really are to understand the nature of reality. Therefore, scientific discoveries relating to reality can only benefit Buddhism. Knowing about how samsara works is a very important step towards escaping from it.

Values and Commitments

Understanding how moral values and a sense of obligation can come from beliefs and experience;

Evaluating their own and others' values in order to make informed, rational and imaginative choices.

Moral and Spiritual Qualities

In Buddhism, moral virtue is the foundation of the spiritual path. Sila, often translated as 'behavioural discipline', morality or virtue, is one of the three important practices (sila, samatha and panna / prajna). Virtue generates freedom from remorse and this leads, through gladness and joy, to meditative calm, insight and liberation. Ethical action contributes to a good rebirth and thereby towards eventual nibbana / nirvana. If one behaves otherwise then one will suffer in this life and subsequent lives, as a natural result of unwholesome actions (kamma / karma). Particularly important in Buddhism is the value of Compassion, which emphasises empathy and comparing oneself with others. The key basis for ethical action is the reflection that it is inappropriate to inflict on other beings what you find unpleasant yourself.

Rules and Ethical Guidelines

There are no real 'oughts' in Buddhist ethics. Instead, rather than one set of universal obligations, there are different levels of practice suiting different levels of commitment. For example, the undertaking of monks and nuns to abstain from sexual intercourse is not suitable for the laity. There are four levels of sila: basic morality – taking the five precepts; basic morality with asceticism – taking the eight precepts; novice monkhood – taking the ten precepts; and monkhood – following the vinaya. The five precepts are not in the form of commands, such as "though shalt not ...", but are training rules in order to live a better life. They are:

- to refrain from harming living beings;
- to refrain from taking what is not given;
- to refrain from misconduct concerning sense-pleasures;
- to refrain from false speech;
- to refrain from unmindful states due to alcoholic drinks or drugs;

The three additional rules of the eight precepts are:

- to refrain from eating at the wrong time;
- to refrain from dancing, using jewellery, going to shows, etc;
- to refrain from using a high, luxurious bed.

The two additional rules of the ten precepts are:

- to refrain from singing, dancing, playing music, or attending performances;
- to refrain from accepting money.

The vinaya is a specific moral code for monks and nuns and includes the Patimokkha, a set of 227 rules in the Theravadin recension (numbers differ in other recensions).

Aside from undertaking the five precepts, giving is the primary ethical activity for lay Buddhists. The sangha is the primary focus for lay giving, with alms-food, medicine, robes and accommodation being donated. Another fairly common modern practice is to contribute to the cost of printing Buddhist books for free distribution. Generosity is a value which pervades Buddhist society; in fact Fielding Hall, a British official in nineteenth-century Burma, once asked for a bill at what he thought was a village restaurant, but found out he had been fed as a guest in a private house. This generosity is seen as generating merit which is instrumental in achieving a good rebirth.

Ethical Guidelines

Buddhist approaches to contemporary moral and ethical issues can be seen as maintaining traditional values. Buddhism generally asserts that consciousness begins at conception and the Buddha taught that the taking of conscious life causes suffering and so should be avoided (that is why it is one of the precepts). Therefore abortion is generally considered to be equivalent to infanticide. Similarly the Buddhist respect for life usually rules out euthanasia. The issue of whether the death

penalty should be forbidden under Buddhism is highly debated. The sanctity of life is usually quoted, but many Buddhist countries still practice capital punishment (Thailand, for example). Buddhist teachings are usually disdainful towards sexuality and sensual enjoyment, with the third precept specifically condemning sexual misconduct. However, misconduct is not exactly defined. Therefore, modern issues such as homosexuality are not specifically dealt with in the scriptures. Some modern arguments claim that as long as sex is based on compassion and does not cause suffering, whether homosexual or extra-marital, the third precept is not broken.

Buddhist ethics include guidelines for good social relationships, although the practicalities of adopting these vary according to the different cultures in which Buddhism is based. The Sigalovada Sutta in the Pali Canon is an important text in this regard, and offers what has been described as the social vinaya for the laity. It offers advice on proper action towards six types of people so as to produce harmonious relationships. One should 'minister' to one's parents, teachers, wife or husband, friends, servants, employees, monks and Brahmins in a variety of ways; for example, supporting one's parents, respecting and paying due attention to one's teachers, respecting one's wife or husband and treating one's employees fairly. This illustrates Buddhists' strong social ethic and belief in human rights.

Moral Exemplars

One of the great paradigms for Buddhists is the historical Buddha, Gotama / Gautama. His teaching and the way he led his life is very inspirational to Buddhists. However, it is stories of his previous lives that people use as a guide for social behaviour. The Jataka stories, in the Pali Canon, comprise 542 poems in roughly ascending length. They show the Buddha as a bodhisattva in a number of previous lives, in both animal and human forms. Each story has a moral message with the bodhisattva acting wisely and compassionately, sometimes even giving up his life for others. These stories are very important for Buddhists as they show how small acts of kindness, that we are all capable of, can eventually lead to salvation.

Aside from the Buddha, one of the most important historical people who has become a paradigm for good Buddhist behaviour is King Asoka / Ashoka. Asoka / Ashoka (c. 304-232BCE) ruled most of present-day India after a number of bloody military conquests. However, he later dedicated himself to the propagation of Buddhism and, rather than military excursions, went on Dhamma / Dharma conquests. The social ethics propagated by Asoka can be found in Buddhist scriptures and verified by inscriptions of his edicts. He advocated non-violence, not just to humans, but to animals as well (he had no meat at the palace and gave up hunting). Enormous rest houses were built where travellers and pilgrims could stay at free of charge. Asoka / Ashoka also showed mercy to those imprisoned, allowing them outside one day each year. He attempted to raise the professional ambition of the common man by building universities for study and water transit and irrigation systems for trade and agriculture. He treated his subjects as equals regardless of their religion, politics and caste. In the Mauryan empire citizens of all religious and ethnic groups were treated equally and all had the rights of freedom, tolerance and equality. Thus Asoka / Ashoka is particularly important as a model of the perfect Buddhist leader. Many subsequent rulers have attempted to follow this model and advocate the values, rights and responsibilities that he advocated

Rights and Responsibilities

The rights and responsibilities involved in being a Buddhist are best thought of in terms of the positive implications of the Five Precepts: one should live with kindness and compassion to all; one should practice generosity to all; one should aim for contentment with few wishes; one should always be truthful; one should be mindful and aware. These values determine how Buddhists privately live their lives, but also how they interact socially – treating people with compassion and generosity. Therefore these values determine Buddhists' views of human rights and their responsibilities in a global context.

There is a clear link between certain Buddhist beliefs and the modern concept of Human Rights. According to Buddhism, all human beings are equal in that each has the potential to achieve Enlightenment. Therefore, Buddhists recognise the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all human beings. The Buddha pointed out the importance of treating others as if they were members of one's own family, since, due to the infinite number of rebirths, all have at some point been one's parents, siblings and children. The Buddhist respect for human life is very much an ideal inherent in Human Rights ideas.

Social Justice is also an issue which resonates with Buddhists. While on the one hand Buddhists attempt to be mindful of suffering and accept it with a calm mind, the Buddha never taught a message of inaction. One of the most important aspects of being a human (or any sentient being) is freedom to act. This freedom generates both good and bad kamma / karma and allows us to change ourselves and eventually escape samsara. While suffering even in the case of social injustice, can be seen as a

result of bad kamma / karma (although not every occurrence is seen as the result of kamma / karma), this is not a reason for inactivity. For many, removing social injustice is viewed as a kammically / karmically good action. A good example of a Buddhist fight for Social Justice can currently be seen in Burma, where the Sangha engaged in a peaceful protest through the streets of Rangoon. A 20th Century example is Thic Quang Duc who burnt himself to death as a public protest of the persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnam's administration. Equally, the importance of Asoka / Ashoka to Buddhists illustrates how strongly they believe in social justice. King Asoka / Ashoka is viewed as the paradigm of a Buddhist King. He treated all of his subjects as equals, regardless of class or religion, constructed hospitals, built roads and universities, as well as promoted freedom, equality and vegetarianism among other qualities.

The Environment

The Environment is currently an important issue for everyone and so Buddhism's relationship to this issue is equally important. The Triratna Buddhist Community (formerly 'Friends of the Western Buddhist Order') point out that to "live in harmony with nature is a crucial Buddhist practice".

In the traditional Buddhist texts there is little reference to what would these days be called environmental or ecological ideas. However, this is because the culture in which the Buddha lived was in far greater harmony with the environment than ours. In the Buddha's life all of the most significant events occur in the countryside and are associated with trees (his birth, his early meditative experiences, his Enlightenment and his parinibbana / parinivarna). Thus we see a close harmony with nature, which Buddhists should attempt to continue.

Similarly the doctrine of Dependent Origination teaches the inter-relationship of all causes and effects. Thus it is clear that human actions have effects – for example, pollution through acid rain, the hole in the ozone layer and global warming. This clearly has a negative effect on all living beings, even to the point of making some species extinct. For Buddhists, this clearly breaks the first precept (harming living beings).

In Christian thought, there is the idea that man is given ownership of the world, to manage its resources. Buddhists do not have this idea and see the relationship between the world and humans (and all being for that matter) as mutual, each conditions the other and a balance of harmony should be strived for.

Finally, in accordance with Dependent Origination, humans are the principal cause of environmental problems. Therefore, in behaving in a way which has a negative impact on the environment we are causing countless animals to suffer and die, which is breaking the first Precept. Thus to live in accordance with refraining from killing or harming living being, Buddhists try to live in harmony with the environment.

Moral Issues: examples

The means by which Buddhists can take part in action in the world are varied. Obviously, Buddhists avoid any kind of violent action or war as this contravenes the first Precept and goes against Buddhist values of loving kindness and not harming sentient beings. Therefore, Buddhists often work with peacekeeping organisations and political groups for example, the UN. Equally Buddhists participate in inter-faith dialogue as well as taking part in non-violent protests as seen in Burma and Tibet.

Buddhist values of compassion and loving kindness are extremely important in terms of their attitudes to issues such as Health, War, Animal Rights, Wealth, and the Environment.

Health: in Buddhist countries some illnesses and disabilities are viewed as the results of bad kamma / karma. However, this does not mean that ill and disabled people shouldn't be helped. While bad kamma / karma may have placed them in a position of suffering, their inherent freedom means that they should try and extricate themselves. This is in fact the very message of Buddhism: that people should try and alleviate and escape suffering. Not only should the sick try and do all they can to help themselves get better, other people should try and help them as well. This will generate good kamma / karma for those people and fits in with Buddhist ideals of loving kindness. Buddhists also see a human rebirth as being very valuable, as this is the best point to attain nibbana / nirvana from. They therefore do all they can to help people retain this human life.

War: the first Precept (to refrain from taking the life of sentient beings) means that Buddhists are very opposed to war. In fact non-violence is at the heart of Buddhist thinking and behaviour. In the Kamcupama Sutta the Buddha emphasises the need to

love your enemy no matter how cruelly he treats you: “Even if thieves carve you limb from limb with a double-handed saw, if you make your mind hostile you are not following my teaching.” The Dalai Lama has emphasised this teaching saying: “Hatred will not cease by hatred, but by love alone”. Thus many Buddhists have refused to take up arms under any circumstances. However, there are cases where Buddhists have fought. For example, Buddhists developed martial arts (e.g. Shaolin Monks). But most martial arts traditions insist on a responsible and minimalist attitude to violence. Still Buddhists have taken part in wars – e.g. Zen masters supported Japan’s wars of aggression and the civil war in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese Buddhists and the Hindu Tamils has cost many lives.

Animal Rights: Buddhists hold that one should avoid causing harm and suffering to sentient beings, as detailed in the first precept. Therefore the kind treatment of animals has been very important to Buddhists from early on. King Asoka / Ashoka, for example, built hospitals for animals, criticised hunting for sport and advocated vegetarianism. However, while all Buddhists would try and avoid causing suffering to animals and advocate animal rights, not all are vegetarian. The Buddha himself seems to have accepted meat in his begging bowl and he allowed monks to eat meat as long as they had not seen or heard the slaughter of the animal and they did not suspect it was slaughtered particularly for them. Since intention is all important to Buddhists, in most Buddhist societies it is normally acceptable to eat meat as long as someone else has killed it (i.e. someone else intends to cause suffering to the animal). Therefore, most butchers tend to be non-Buddhists. In Southern Buddhism, while only a few are vegetarians, those that are looked up to. The well-being of animals before slaughter is also considered very important – battery farming, for example, is criticised.

Wealth: Buddhist countries are found at many different levels of economic development. Bhutan, at one extreme, is a developing country where the people are poor, but generally contented. In fact the king has said he is more interested in the “Gross National Happiness” than the “Gross National Product”. On the other hand, Japan is at the other extreme, where the Buddhist emphasis on self-detachment and the Confucian emphasis on serving the group have led to rapid modernization, a strong work ethic, and a powerful economy. Overall, Buddhism does not teach against wealth, with many Buddhists viewing it as the natural result of previous good actions (kamma / karma). However, in order to be sure of a pleasant rebirth, the wealthy must use their wealth well – e.g. pay for the publication of Buddhist scriptures, donate land for monasteries etc. Eventually, if one is to progress on the Buddhist path, wealth must be given up as it is a material attachment which can hinder one attaining final enlightenment.

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