

Buddhism

Background

History

Buddhism began as a reformation movement within Hinduism. Its founder was Siddhartha Gautama, who was born about 560 B.C. in the ruling caste of Hinduism. His father was a feudal lord. When Gautama was 16 or 19 (the exact age is a bit uncertain), he married and had a son.

As he grew up, he lived a life of luxury within the walls of his father's palace and was protected from ever seeing the misery that existed out in the world. One day, however, he wanted to see what life was like outside, and he observed what became known as "The Four Passing Sights." For the first time in his life he saw that great suffering exists in the world. He saw an old man, a person suffering from a disease, a dead man, and a shaven monk begging. Because of that experience, at age 29, he left his family and renounced his wealth.

As he tried to find new direction for his life, he first subjected himself to Hindu masters. He didn't find satisfaction there, so he decided to become a complete recluse. For six years he practiced extreme self-denial and almost died from it. Finally, after a period of deep meditation, he realized the futility of asceticism and developed the principle of the "Middle Path." Based on this idea, he kept himself away from the extremes of both self-denial and self-gratification. Instead, he focused on deep meditation, and through that reached a state of "enlightenment." Following his enlightenment, he began his teaching career.

For the next 45 years he built a large core of disciples and proclaimed his message throughout northern India. He finally died of food poisoning at about 80 years of age.

After Buddha's death, the new religion spread all through Asia and divided into hundreds of sects. It ultimately became divided into two large groups – Theravada or Hinayana (The Lesser Vehicle) and the Mahayana (The Greater Vehicle).

Theravada Buddhism (The Lesser Vehicle) is characterized by:

- < Conservative tendencies,
- < An emphasis on following the Buddhist scriptures,
- < A concern for wisdom,
- < Teachings that each man is on his own, and salvation is reached by self-effort,
- < A monastic system with an emphasis on the priests, and
- < Atheism.

Mahayana Buddhism (The Greater Vehicle) is characterized by:

- < Liberal tendencies,
- < An emphasis on meditation,
- < Teachings that a person can achieve salvation by placing one's faith in Gautama,
- < An openness that encourages laymen to practice the faith, and
- < Polytheism and idolatry.

Buddhism claims to have evolved into different forms so that it can be relevant to every culture and to each new generation. There is, actually, very little "pure" Buddhism being practiced in the world today. Instead there is a mixture of Buddhism with Taoism and Confucianism, along with the practice of ancestor worship.

There are currently about 327 million Buddhists worldwide. For centuries, Buddhism has been the dominant religion of the Eastern world and still remains predominant in China, Japan, and Korea, as well as most of southeast Asia.

Basic Beliefs and Practices

Though there are a number of different branches of Buddhism, the four noble truths and the eightfold path are at the heart of its teachings.

The Four Noble Truths

1. Life is full of pain and suffering (these include the body, the senses, thoughts, feelings, and consciousness).
2. Suffering is caused by desire for pleasure, existence and prosperity.
3. Suffering can be overcome by eliminating desire.
4. Elimination of desire is achieved by following the eightfold path.

The Eightfold Path (The goal of these is Nirvana)

Issues of Wisdom

1. Right knowledge - To see and understand things as they really are.
2. Right aspirations (intentions) - Commitment to ethical and mental self-improvement.

Issues of Ethical Conduct

3. Right speech - Abstain from false and slanderous speech, harsh words and idle chatter.
4. Right conduct - Abstain from harming others, taking what is not yours, and sexual misconduct.
5. Right livelihood - Do not deal in weapons, in living beings, in meat production or intoxicants.

Issues of Mental Development

6. Right effort - Don't allow yourself to enter unwholesome states, abandon unwholesome states you already have, don't arouse unwholesome states that have not arisen in you, and maintain wholesome states you already have.
7. Right mindfulness (self-analysis) - Contemplation of the body, feelings, states of mind and phenomena.
8. Right Concentration - Contemplation on wholesome thoughts and actions.

As Buddhism is a spin-off from Hinduism, it is not surprising that there are some common basic beliefs.

1. Nirvana - In Sanskrit, *Nirvana* literally means, "extinction or blowing out" and is the ultimate goal of spiritual practice in Buddhism. It is the complete end of the cycle of births and rebirths by the merging of the individual being with the cosmos.
2. Karma - Buddhism teaches that happiness or suffering in this life is the result of our deeds (karma) in past lives, or past actions in our present lives. The effects of karma may be evident either in the short-term or the long-term. Karma is the Buddhist explanation for unexplained or unexpected suffering. According to the concept of karma, an individual has free will but carries the baggage of deeds done in previous lives.
3. Reincarnation - Reincarnation is the doctrine that all creatures (including animals) have a soul (life force) which reincarnates into a new physical life expression when an individual physical life ends.

Essential Beliefs

God

- C Theravada Buddhism: There is no personal God. There is only an impersonal cosmos which encompasses all of reality.
- C Mahayana Buddhism: There are many gods, one of who is Gautama. Buddhism has an inclusive view of religion and a person may commonly be a combination of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucianist, and may put in other elements as well. The basic structure of reality, though, is still understood as the impersonal cosmos with which humanity is seeking to merge.

Man

Man is seen to be a manifestation of the impersonal cosmos, without individual self or self-worth. He is stuck in nearly endless cycles of rebirth because of wrong desires resulting from not following The Eightfold Path.

Salvation

The goal of salvation is to achieve Nirvana (to get out of the endless cycles of rebirth). Mankind's basic problem is ignorance, not sin. The key to achieving nirvana is to eliminate all desire. In Theravada Buddhism, this is done by gaining wisdom. In Mahayana Buddhism, a person achieves Nirvana by placing one's faith in Gautama and the many Bodhisattvas (those who are actively striving toward enlightenment). This is done by meditation and by repeating and calling on their names.

Faith Foundation

1. What is the most fundamental reality? (Ultimate reality)

Ultimate reality is an undefinable, impersonal and philosophical absolute (cosmos) that is the ultimate manifestation of oneness. Buddhists generally recognize the existence of supernatural, or god-like, beings, but they do not believe in an omnipotent creator God. All Buddhists recognize a transcendent truth and some conceive of this in terms of a “Buddha Nature” which encompasses everything.

2. What is the nature of our material reality? (Material reality)

The world is an illusion and is not as it appears. The nature of material reality is cyclical, having no start and no end. For Buddhists, it is simply a part of the wheel of suffering to which we are attached through rebirth.

3. What is a human being? (Humanity)

A human is simply an impersonal life force working its way to “oneness with the cosmos.”

4. What happens to a person at death? (Death)

At death, each life reincarnates in some other form – human, divine or animal – depending upon one’s behavior in previous lives. The goal of Buddhism is to extinguish the flame of desire, or attachment to the sense of self, so that rebirth does not occur and Nirvana is attained.

5. Why is it possible to know anything at all? (Knowledge)

Knowledge is an illusion. Nothing exists as it appears.

6. How do we know what is right and wrong? (Morality)

The cosmos is perfect at every moment. Good and evil are an illusion and there are no moral absolutes.

7. What is the meaning of human history? (History)

Time is an illusion. The cosmos exists in eternity. What we perceive as time moves in cycles. Each existence continues through death and rebirth so long as the sense of self keeps an individual attached to this world. Even when a particular individual’s desires are finally quenched and an individual achieves nirvana, the world continues on its cyclical pattern.

Authority

- C The basic authority for Theravada Buddhism is The Tripitaka (Three Baskets). This consists of the Vinaya (the law and rules of monastic Buddhism), the Sutra (the sermons and teachings of Buddha), and the Adhidharma (philosophical interpretations of Buddha’s teachings).
- C Mahayana Buddhism includes the three above but have added many more writings.

Evidence for the Authority

Buddhism is ultimately established on the same foundation as Hinduism. To that end, the same problems associated with Hinduism also apply to Buddhism. Specifically, the teaching relies on simple faith in certain Hindu scriptures, along with personal experience. As before, though, material reality is viewed an illusion which contradicts human experience.

In addition to the Hindu connection, there is a reliance on the teachings of Gautama himself. The only evidence that his teaching is correct is from his, and his followers, assertions that this understanding of reality is correct.