

BBC Religion Packet: Buddhism

Buddhism at a glance

Buddhism is a spiritual tradition that focuses on personal spiritual development and the attainment of a deep insight into the true nature of life. There are 376 million followers worldwide.

Buddhists seek to reach a state of *nirvana*, following the path of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who went on a quest for Enlightenment around the sixth century BC. There is no belief in a personal god. Buddhists believe that nothing is fixed or permanent and that change is always possible. The path to Enlightenment is through the practice and development of morality, meditation and wisdom. Buddhists believe that life is both endless and subject to impermanence, suffering and uncertainty. These states are called the *tilakhana*, or the three signs of existence. Existence is endless because individuals are reincarnated over and over again, experiencing suffering throughout many lives.

It is impermanent because no state, good or bad, lasts forever. Our mistaken belief that things can last is a chief cause of suffering.

The history of Buddhism is the story of one man's spiritual journey to enlightenment, and of the teachings and ways of living that developed from it.

The Buddha

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was born into a royal family in present-day Nepal over 2500 years ago. He lived a life of privilege and luxury until one day he left the royal enclosure and encountered for the first time, an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. Disturbed by this he became a monk before adopting the harsh poverty of Indian asceticism. Neither path satisfied him and he decided to pursue the 'Middle Way' - a life without luxury but also without poverty.

Buddhists believe that one day, seated beneath the Bodhi tree (the tree of awakening), Siddhartha became deeply absorbed in meditation and reflected on his experience of life until he became enlightened.

By finding the path to enlightenment, Siddhartha was led from the pain of suffering and rebirth towards the path of enlightenment and became known as the Buddha or 'awakened one'.

Schools of Buddhism

There are numerous different schools or sects of Buddhism. The two largest are **Theravada Buddhism**, which is most popular in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Burma (Myanmar), and **Mahayana Buddhism**, which is strongest in Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Mongolia.

The majority of Buddhist sects do not seek to proselytise (preach and convert), with the notable exception of **Nichiren Buddhism**.

All schools of Buddhism seek to aid followers on a path of enlightenment.

Key facts

- Buddhism is **2,500 years old**
- There are currently 376 million followers worldwide
- There are over 150,000 **Buddhists in Britain**
- Buddhism arose as a result of **Siddhartha Gautama's** quest for Enlightenment in around the 6th Century BC
- There is no belief in a personal God. It is not centred on the relationship between humanity and God
- Buddhists believe that nothing is fixed or permanent - change is always possible
- The two main Buddhist sects are **Theravada** Buddhism and **Mahayana** Buddhism, but there are many more
- Buddhists can **worship** both at home or at a temple
- The path to Enlightenment is through the practice and development of morality, **meditation** and wisdom.



The Four Noble Truths

"I teach suffering, its origin, cessation and path. That's all I teach", declared the Buddha 2500 years ago.

The Four Noble Truths contain the essence of the Buddha's teachings. It was these four principles that the Buddha came to understand during his meditation under the bodhi tree.

1. The truth of suffering (Dukkha)
2. The truth of the origin of suffering (Samudāya)
3. The truth of the cessation of suffering (Nirodha)
4. The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering (Magga)

The Buddha is often compared to a physician. In the first two Noble Truths he diagnosed the problem (suffering) and identified its cause. The third Noble Truth is the realisation that there is a cure.

The fourth Noble Truth, in which the Buddha set out the Eightfold Path, is the prescription, the way to achieve a release from suffering.



The First Noble Truth Suffering (Dukkha)

Suffering comes in many forms. Three obvious kinds of suffering correspond to the first three sights the Buddha saw on his first journey outside his palace: old age, sickness and death.

But according to the Buddha, the problem of suffering goes much deeper. Life is not ideal: it frequently fails to live up to our expectations.

Human beings are subject to desires and cravings, but even when we are able to satisfy these desires, the satisfaction is only temporary. Pleasure does not last; or if it does, it becomes monotonous.

Even when we are not suffering from outward causes like illness or bereavement, we are unfulfilled, unsatisfied. This is the truth of suffering.

Some people who encounter this teaching may find it pessimistic. Buddhists find it neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but realistic. Fortunately the Buddha's teachings do not end with suffering; rather, they go on to tell us what we can do about it and how to end it.

The Second Noble Truth Origin of suffering (Samudāya)

Our day-to-day troubles may seem to have easily identifiable causes: thirst, pain from an injury, sadness from the loss of a loved one. In the second of his Noble Truths, though, the Buddha claimed to have found the cause of all suffering - and it is much more deeply rooted than our immediate worries.

The Buddha taught that the root of all suffering is desire, *tanhā*. This comes in three forms, which he described as the Three Roots of Evil, or the Three Fires, or the Three Poisons.



The three roots of evil

These are the three ultimate causes of suffering:

- Greed and desire, represented in art by a rooster
- Ignorance or delusion, represented by a pig
- Hatred and destructive urges, represented by a snake

Language note: *Tanhā* is a term in Pali, the language of the Buddhist scriptures, that specifically means craving or misplaced desire. Buddhists recognise that there can be positive desires, such as desire for enlightenment and good wishes for others. A neutral term for such desires is *chanda*.

The Fire Sermon

The Buddha taught more about suffering in the Fire Sermon, delivered to a thousand bhikkus (Buddhist monks).

Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what is the all that is burning?

The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant that arises with eye-contact for its indispensable condition, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion. I say it is burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs.

The Fire Sermon (SN 35:28), translation by Nānamoli Thera. © 1981 Buddhist Publication Society, used with permission

The Buddha went on to say the same of the other four senses, and the mind, showing that attachment to positive, negative and neutral sensations and thoughts is the cause of suffering.

The Third Noble Truth

Cessation of suffering (Nirodha)

The Buddha taught that the way to extinguish desire, which causes suffering, is to liberate oneself from attachment.

This is the third Noble Truth - the possibility of liberation.

The Buddha was a living example that this is possible in a human lifetime.

Bhikkhus, when a noble follower who has heard (the truth) sees thus, he finds estrangement in the eye, finds estrangement in forms, finds estrangement in eye-consciousness, finds estrangement in eye-contact, and whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful- nor-pleasant that arises with eye-contact for its indispensable condition, in that too he finds estrangement.

The Fire Sermon (SN 35:28), translation by Nānamoli Thera. © 1981 Buddhist Publication Society, used with permission

"Estrangement" here means disenchantment: a Buddhist aims to know sense conditions clearly as they are without becoming enchanted or misled by them.



Nirvana

Nirvana means extinguishing. Attaining nirvana - reaching enlightenment - means extinguishing the three fires of greed, delusion and hatred.

Someone who reaches nirvana does not immediately disappear to a heavenly realm. Nirvana is better understood as a state of mind that humans can reach. It is a state of profound spiritual joy, without negative emotions and fears.

Someone who has attained enlightenment is filled with compassion for all living things.

When he finds estrangement, passion fades out. With the fading of passion, he is liberated.

When liberated, there is knowledge that he is liberated. He understands: 'Birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived out, what can be done is done, of this there is no more beyond.'

The Fire Sermon (SN 35:28), translation by Nānamoli Thera. © 1981 Buddhist Publication Society, used with permission

After death an enlightened person is liberated from the cycle of rebirth, but Buddhism gives no definite answers as to what happens next.

The Buddha discouraged his followers from asking too many questions about nirvana. He wanted them to concentrate on the task at hand, which was freeing themselves from the cycle of suffering. Asking questions is like quibbling with the doctor who is trying to save your life.

The Fourth Noble Truth

Path to the cessation of suffering (Magga)

The final Noble Truth is the Buddha's prescription for the end of suffering. This is a set of principles called the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path is also called the Middle Way: it avoids both indulgence and severe asceticism, neither of which the Buddha had found helpful in his search for enlightenment.

The eight divisions

The eight stages are not to be taken in order, but rather support and reinforce each other:

1. Right Understanding - *Sammā ditthi*
 - Accepting Buddhist teachings. (The Buddha never intended his followers to believe his teachings blindly, but to practise them and judge for themselves whether they were true.)
2. Right Intention - *Sammā sanḥkappa*
 - A commitment to cultivate the right attitudes.
3. Right Speech - *Sammā vācā*
 - Speaking truthfully, avoiding slander, gossip and abusive speech.
4. Right Action - *Sammā kammanta*



- Behaving peacefully and harmoniously; refraining from stealing, killing and overindulgence in sensual pleasure.
- 5. Right Livelihood - *Sammā ājīva*
 - Avoiding making a living in ways that cause harm, such as exploiting people or killing animals, or trading in intoxicants or weapons.
- 6. Right Effort - *Sammā vāyāma*
 - Cultivating positive states of mind; freeing oneself from evil and unwholesome states and preventing them arising in future.
- 7. Right Mindfulness - *Sammā sati*
 - Developing awareness of the body, sensations, feelings and states of mind.
- 8. Right Concentration - *Sammā samādhi*
 - Developing the mental focus necessary for this awareness.

The eight stages can be grouped into Wisdom (right understanding and intention), Ethical Conduct (right speech, action and livelihood) and Meditation (right effort, mindfulness and concentration).

The Buddha described the Eightfold Path as a means to enlightenment, like a raft for crossing a river. Once one has reached the opposite shore, one no longer needs the raft and can leave it behind.

Karma

Karma is a concept encountered in several Eastern religions, although having different meanings.

Teachings about karma explain that our past actions affect us, either positively or negatively, and that our present actions will affect us in the future.

Buddhism uses an agricultural metaphor to explain how sowing good or bad deeds will result in good or bad fruit (*phala*; or *vipāka*, meaning 'ripening').

Solely through our actions?

Early Buddhist writings (particularly SN 36.21: see related links for an annotated translation) suggest that not all that we experience is the result of past action; it may be due to natural events of one sort or another. This is one point on which early Buddhism appears to differ somewhat from later Tibetan teachings, which suggest that all the good and bad things that happen to us are the results of past actions.



Whilst there might be doubt, or different opinions, about why we are experiencing some sort of misfortune, there is no doubt that we can resolve any suffering in the present moment through the Buddhist teachings of mindfulness and action based upon good motives.

Beyond this life

For Buddhists, karma has implications beyond this life. Bad actions in a previous life can follow a person into their next life and cause bad effects (which Westerners are more likely to interpret as 'bad luck').

Even an Enlightened One is not exempt from the effects of past karma. One story tells that the Buddha's cousin tried to kill him by dropping a boulder on him.

Although the attempt failed, the Buddha's foot was injured. He explained that this was karmic retribution for trying to kill his step-brother in a previous life.

On a larger scale, karma determines where a person will be reborn and their status in their next life. Good karma can result in being born in one of the heavenly realms.

Bad karma can cause rebirth as an animal, or torment in a hell realm.

Buddhists try to cultivate good karma and avoid bad. However, the aim of Buddhism

is to escape the cycle of rebirth altogether, not simply to acquire good karma and so to be born into a more pleasant state. These states, while preferable to human life, are impermanent: even gods eventually die.

Self-determined

The word karma means 'action', and this indicates something important about the concept of karma: it is determined by our own actions, in particular by the motives behind intentional actions.

Skilful actions that lead to good karmic outcomes are based upon motives of generosity; compassion, kindness and sympathy, and clear mindfulness or wisdom. The opposite motives of greed, aversion (hatred) and delusion, when acted upon, lead to bad karmic results.

Karma is not an external force, not a system of punishment or reward dealt out by a god. The concept is more accurately understood as a natural law similar to gravity.



Buddhists believe we are in control of our ultimate fates. The problem is that most of us are ignorant of this, which causes suffering. The purpose of Buddhism is to take conscious control of our behaviour.

Moral habits

The Buddha taught about karmic 'conditioning', which is a process by which a person's nature is shaped by their moral actions.

Every action we take molds our characters for the future. Both positive and negative traits can become magnified over time as we fall into habits. All of these cause us to acquire karma.

This shows why Buddhists place such importance on being mindful of every action they take.

Getting rid of karmic conditioning

Acting on karmic habits increases their strength. Buddhists gradually weaken any negative thoughts and impulses that they experience, through allowing them to arise and depart naturally without acting on them.

In this way karmic habits can be broken.

Rebirth and disability

This view of the world can raise a particularly charged question. Do Buddhists believe that disabled people are suffering for misdeeds in a past life?

The subject is more complicated than it appears, says the Venerable Robina Courtin, a Tibetan Buddhist nun, in this radio discussion on religious attitudes to disability.

The realms of the universe

The great tragedy of existence, from a Buddhist point of view, is that it is both endless and subject to impermanence, suffering and uncertainty. These three are called the *tilakhana* or three signs of existence.

Existence is endless because individuals are reincarnated over and over again, experiencing suffering throughout many lives.

It is impermanent because no state, good or bad, lasts forever. Our mistaken belief that things can last is a chief cause of suffering.

It is uncertain because when we examine our experience, no knower can be defined and no enduring essence of experience can be located.

Only achieving liberation, or *nirvana*, can free a being from the cycle of life, death and rebirth.

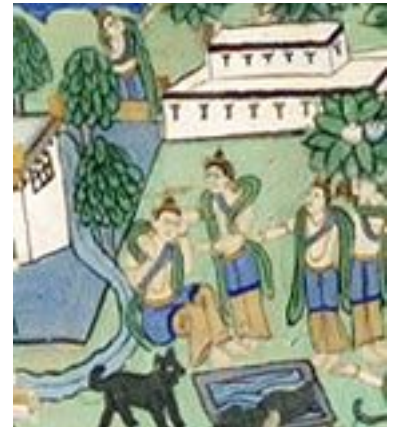
The realms

Buddhism has six realms into which a soul can be reborn. From most to least pleasant, these are:

- Heaven, the home of the gods (*devas*): this is a realm of enjoyment inhabited by blissful, long-lived beings. It is subdivided by later sources into 26 levels of increasing happiness
- The realm of humanity: although humans suffer, this is considered the most fortunate state because humans have the greatest chance of enlightenment
- The realm of the Titans or angry gods (*asuras*): these are warlike beings who are at the mercy of angry impulses
- The realm of the hungry ghosts (*pretas*): these unhappy beings are bound to the fringes of human existence, unable to leave because of particularly strong attachments. They are unable to satisfy their craving, symbolised by their depiction with huge bellies and tiny mouths
- The animal realm: this is undesirable because animals are exploited by human beings, and do not have the necessary self-awareness to achieve liberation
- Hell realms: people here are horribly tortured in many creative ways, but not for ever - only until their bad karma is worked off

(Early sources listed five realms, excluding the Titans.)

The first two levels are good places to be born. The inhabitants of the next three levels all have a particular defect (hatred, greed, ignorance), and hell is obviously the worst of the lot.



The Wheel of Life

The realms, or states of reincarnation, of the Buddhist universe are depicted in a diagram known as the *Bhavachakra*, the Wheel of Life or Wheel of Becoming.

The wheel itself is a circle, symbolising the endless cycle of existence and suffering.

In the middle of the Wheel are the Three Fires of greed, ignorance and hatred, represented by a rooster, a pig and a snake. These are the cause of all suffering and are shown linked together, biting each other's tails, reinforcing each other.

In the next circle out, souls are shown ascending and descending according to their karma.

The next ring out is composed of six segments showing the six realms: gods, humans and Titans above and hungry ghosts, animals and those tortured in hell below.

The outer ring shows twelve segments called *nidanas*, illustrating the Buddhist teaching of dependent origination, the chain of causes of suffering (explained in the following section).

The wheel is held by Yama, the Lord of Death, who symbolises the impermanence of everything. The beings he holds are trapped in eternal suffering by their ignorance of the nature of the universe.

Origin of the universe

Buddhism has no creator god to explain the origin of the universe. Instead, it teaches that everything depends on everything else: present events are caused by past events and become the cause of future events.

Indian religions often see space and time as cyclical, such that world-systems come into being, survive for a time, are destroyed and then are remade. In Buddhism this happens naturally without the intervention of gods.

One tale told by the Buddha in the *Aggan̄n̄a Sutta* describes the process of recreation on this grand scale. An old world-system has just been destroyed, and its inhabitants are reborn in a new system. To begin with they are spirits, floating happily above the earth, luminescent and without form, name or sex.

The world in these early stages is without light or land, only water.

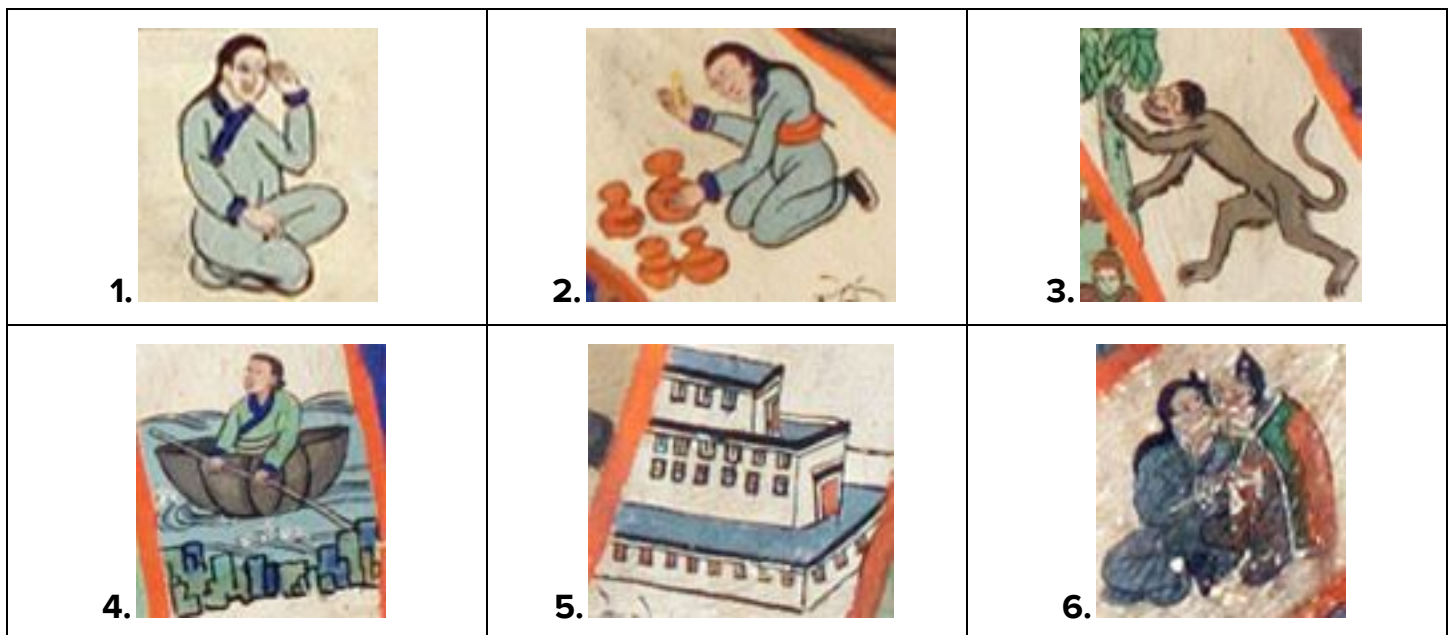
Eventually earth appears and the spirits come to taste and enjoy it. Their greed causes their ethereal bodies to become solid and coarse and differentiate into male and female, good-looking and ugly. As they lose their luminescence the sun and moon come into being.

Gradually the beings fall into further wicked habits, causing themselves - and the earth itself - to become less pleasant. In this way, the Buddha seems to be saying, desire, greed and attachment not only cause suffering for people but also cause the world to be as it is.

The physical world as we know it, with all its imperfections and suffering, is the product of what the Buddha called *dependent origination*.

Dependent origination

The Buddha taught that this was a 12-stage process - a circular chain, not a straight line. Each stage gives rise to the one directly after it.





1. **Ignorance:** inability to see the truth, depicted by a blind man
2. **Willed action:** actions that shape our emerging consciousness, depicted by a potter moulding clay
3. **Conditioned consciousness:** the development of habits, blindly responding to the impulses of karmic conditioning, represented by a monkey swinging about aimlessly
4. **Form and existence:** a body comes into being to carry our karmic inheritance, represented by a boat carrying men
5. **The six sense-organs:** eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body (touch) and mind, the way sensory information passes into us, represented by the doors and windows of a house
6. **Sense-impressions:** the combination of sense-organ and sensory information, represented by two lovers
7. **Sensation:** the feelings we get from sense-impressions, which are so vivid that they blind us, represented by a man shot in the eye with an arrow
8. **Craving (*tanhā*):** negative desires that can never be sated, represented by a man drinking
9. **Attachment:** grasping at things we think will satisfy our craving, represented by someone reaching out for fruit from a tree
10. **Becoming:** worldly existence, being trapped in the cycle of life, represented by a pregnant woman
11. **Birth:** represented by a woman giving birth
12. **Old age and death:** grief, suffering and despair, the direct consequences of birth, represented by an old man

Buddhist customs

Venerating the Buddha

The Buddhist tradition has developed many different customs and practices in different parts of the world. This may take the form of meditating on the qualities of Buddha, and honouring the Buddha or Buddha-figure.

A person could honour the Buddha by making offerings to relics or images of the Buddha.



The exchange of gifts

In the Theravada tradition, Buddhist laypersons often give gifts to Buddhist monks but giving is also encouraged more generally, to one another and to good causes.

In Theravada Buddhism, monks are considered to embody the fruits of Buddhist practice. Monks' responsibility is to share these with lay Buddhists through their example and teaching.

Giving to monks is also thought to benefit lay people and to win them merit.

Pilgrimage

Four main centres of pilgrimage sprung up within the first couple of hundred years after Buddha's death which marked key locations in the Buddha's life.

Since then other centres have emerged in virtually every area where Buddhism has been established, each with its own practices and customs.

The purpose of pilgrimage is to foster a spiritual discipline, to fulfil a vow or simply to travel. It is an important Buddhist practice.

Pilgrimage also helps to express feelings of devotion and creates a relationship with the historical figures associated with the pilgrimage site.

Ordination

Admission to the monastic sangha involves two rites of passage:

- Renunciation of the secular life
- Acceptance of monasticism as a novice

Since in many cases, acceptance as a monk could not be made before the age of 20, the two rites could be separated by many years.

Ordination is an important ceremony in all traditions. In the Theravada, for example, ordination means becoming a monk. To become a Theravadin monk a postulant shaves his head and beard and adopts the yellow robes of the monk.

Various vows are exchanged, including the repetition of the Ten Precepts.

Then the postulant is questioned about past behaviour and their suitability for the position. If satisfied, the officiating abbot admits the postulant.

Meditation

Meditation is a mental and physical course of action that a person uses to separate themselves from their thoughts and feelings in order to become fully aware.

It plays a part in virtually all religions although some don't use the word 'meditation' to describe their particular meditative or contemplative practice.

Meditation does not always have a religious element. It is a natural part of the human experience and is increasingly used as a therapy for promoting good health and boosting the immune system.

Anyone who has looked at a sunset or a beautiful painting and felt calm and inner joy, while their mind becomes clear and their perception sharpens, has had a taste of the realm of meditation.

Successful meditation means simply being - not judging, not thinking, just being aware, at peace and living each moment as it unfolds.

Home and temple

Buddhist worship

Buddhists can worship both at home or at a temple. It is not considered essential to go to a temple to worship with others.

At home

Buddhists will often set aside a room or a part of a room as a shrine. There will be a statue of Buddha, candles, and an incense burner.

Temples

Buddhist temples come in many shapes. Perhaps the best known are the pagodas of China and Japan.

Another typical Buddhist building is the Stupa, which is a stone structure built over what are thought to be relics of the Buddha, or over copies of the Buddha's teachings.

Buddhist temples are designed to symbolise the five elements:

- Fire
- Air
- Earth, symbolised by the square base
- Water
- Wisdom, symbolised by the pinnacle at the top

All Buddhist temples contain an image or a statue of Buddha.

Worship

There are as many forms of Buddhist worship as there are schools of Buddhism - and there are many of those.

Worship in Mahayana tradition takes the form of devotion to Buddha and to Bodhisattvas.

Worshippers may sit on the floor barefoot facing an image of Buddha and chanting. They will listen to monks chanting from religious texts, perhaps accompanied by instruments, and take part in prayers.



Mantras and prayer

A mantra is a word, a syllable, a phrase or a short prayer that is spoken once or repeated over and over again (either aloud or in a person's head) and that is thought to have a profound spiritual effect on the person.

A very well known mantra is the mantra of Avalokiteshvara: *om mani padme hum*. This is sometimes said to mean "Behold! The jewel in the lotus!", but this translation isn't much help - the phrase isn't really translatable because of the richness of meaning and symbolism it contains.

Physical prayer aids



It's common to use prayer beads to mark the number of repetitions of a mantra.

Mantras may also be displayed on a prayer wheel and repeated by spinning the wheel, or written on a prayer flag - in which case the prayer is repeated each time the flag moves in the wind.

Prayer wheels can be tiny things that a Buddhist carries with them or enormous objects up to nine feet high found in monasteries.

These physical prayer devices are very common in Tibetan Buddhist communities.

The Buddha

The history of Buddhism is the story of one man's spiritual journey to Enlightenment, and of the teachings and ways of living that developed from it.

Siddhartha Gautama - The Buddha

By finding the path to Enlightenment, Siddhartha was led from the pain of suffering and rebirth towards the path of Enlightenment and became known as the *Buddha* or 'awakened

one'.

A life of luxury

Opinions differ as to the dates of Siddhartha Gautama's life. Historians have dated his birth and death as circa 566-486 BCE but more recent research suggests that he lived later than this, from around 490 BCE until circa 410 BCE.

He was born into a royal family in the village of Lumbini in present-day Nepal, and his privileged life insulated him from the sufferings of life; sufferings such as sickness, age and death.

Discovering cruel reality

One day, after growing up, marrying and having a child, Siddhartha went outside the royal enclosure where he lived. When he went outside he saw, each for the first time, an old man, a sick man, and a corpse.

This greatly disturbed him, and he learned that sickness, age, and death were the inevitable fate of human beings - a fate no-one could avoid.

Becoming a holy man

Siddhartha had also seen a monk, and he decided this was a sign that he should leave his protected royal life and live as a homeless holy man.

Siddhartha's travels showed him much more of the suffering of the world. He searched for a way to escape the inevitability of death, old age and pain first by studying with religious men. This didn't provide him with an answer.

A life of self-denial

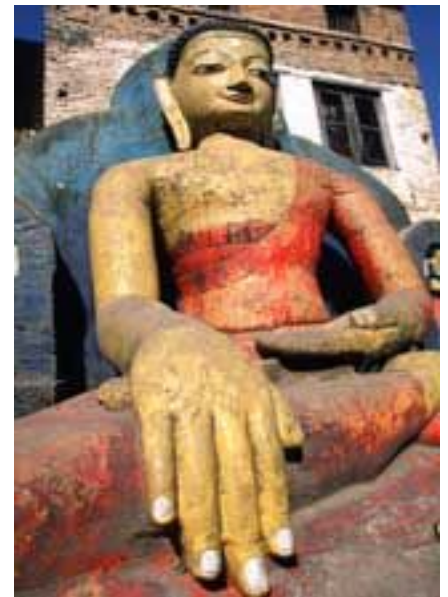
Siddhartha encountered an Indian ascetic who encouraged him to follow a life of extreme self-denial and discipline.

The Buddha also practised meditation but concluded that in themselves, the highest meditative states were not enough.

Siddhartha followed this life of extreme asceticism for six years, but this did not satisfy him either; he still had not escaped from the world of suffering.

The middle way

He abandoned the strict lifestyle of self-denial and asceticism, but did not return to the pampered luxury of his early life. Instead, he pursued the Middle Way, which is just what it sounds like; neither luxury nor poverty.



Enlightenment



One day, seated beneath the Bodhi tree (the tree of awakening) Siddhartha became deeply absorbed in meditation, and reflected on his experience of life, determined to penetrate its truth.

He finally achieved Enlightenment and became the Buddha. The Mahabodhi Temple at the site of Buddha's enlightenment, is now a pilgrimage site.

Buddhist legend tells that at first the Buddha was happy to dwell within this state, but Brahma, king of the gods, asked, on behalf of the whole world, that he should share his understanding with others.

The Teacher

Buddha set in motion the *wheel of teaching*: rather than worshipping one god or gods, Buddhism centres around the timeless importance of the teaching, or the *dharma*.

For the next 45 years of his life the Buddha taught many disciples, who became *Arahants* or 'noble ones', who had attained Enlightenment for themselves.

Wesak

This most important Buddhist festival is known as either Vesak, Wesak or Buddha Day, and is celebrated annually on the full moon of the ancient lunar month of Vesakha, which

usually falls in May, or in early June.

At Vesak Buddhists commemorate the birth of the Buddha-to-be, Siddhattha Gotama, his Enlightenment at the age of 35 when he became the Buddha and his final 'passing' into Nirvana at the age of 80, no more to be reborn. Buddhist scriptures relate that each of these three significant events occurred on a full moon of the Indian lunar month of Vesakha.

Traditionally, his birth is supposed to have been in 623 BC but the Buddhist calendar is counted from his final passing, eighty years later. The older tradition of Vesak is to celebrate all three events but there are some more recent Buddhist schools and groups that celebrate just the birth and others only the Enlightenment.

In Buddhism, death is not the end of life; it teaches rebirth and differentiates it from reincarnation because Buddhism does not recognise a self or soul that is continually reappearing in a new form. Death for the unenlightened, whose minds are still infected with desire, is followed by yet another life. But for the Enlightened who have extinguished all desire, including the desire to be born again, there is no more rebirth. So Buddhists don't usually refer to the Buddha's death but to his passing, into Nibbana or Nirvana.

Only by passing into Nirvana can a person end the cycle of death and re-birth.

'The Buddha' is not a personal name but a title, and can be translated as 'the Enlightened One' or 'the One Who Knows'. He was not born the Buddha but became the Buddha through his realisation of full and perfect Enlightenment. This state is also known as Nirvana (Sanskrit) or Nibbana (Pali) and occurs when a person sees and understands the true nature of all things.

As a result, all their greed, hatred and delusion is extinguished, which in turn means that there will be no more re-birth. The Buddha achieved the state of nirvana and this is celebrated on Vesak.

There are some cultural and local differences in how the various Buddhist groups and nations celebrate Vesak, but broadly speaking devout Buddhists will try to attend their local temple for at least part of the day, while some remain there throughout the day and night of the full moon. The celebration will include the practices of Giving, Virtue and Cultivation and the doing of good and meritorious deeds.

Giving usually involves bringing food to offer and share, as well as supplies for the temple and symbolic offerings for the shrine. Virtue is observed by reaffirming commitment to the moral precepts. Cultivation can include chanting, meditation and listening to sermons.

Sangha Day

This festival is also known as Fourfold Assembly or Magha Puja Day.

Sangha Day is the second most important Buddhist festival. It is a celebration in honour of the Sangha, or the Buddhist community. For some Buddhists Sangha refers only to monks and nuns. It is a chance for people to reaffirm their commitment to Buddhist practices and traditions.

Sangha Day commemorates the spontaneous gathering of 1,250 enlightened monks (*arahants*) to hear the Buddha preach at Veluvana Vihara.

At this gathering, the Buddha gave his first sermon, or recitation of the Patimokkha (the rules and regulations of the monastic order).

Sangha is the term used for the Buddhist spiritual community. On Sangha Day Buddhists celebrate both the ideal of creating a spiritual community, and also the actual spiritual community which they are trying to create.

The Sangha is precious in Buddhism as without those in the community to look up to or share aspirations with, the spiritual life would be very challenging.

Sangha Day is a traditional time for exchange of gifts; it has become a prominent festival among Western Buddhists even though it is less well known in the East.

Celebrations vary, but can include chanting, meditation, the lighting of oil lamps, and the reaffirmation of people's commitment to Buddhist practice.

Kathina

The Kathina festival, which originated 2,500 years ago, celebrates the largest alms-giving ceremony of the Buddhist year. It occurs at the end of the *Vassa*, or monsoon, period, in October and November. During the Vassa period, normally nomadic Buddhist monks will have remained in one place for three months, and the Kathina celebration marks the time for them to move on. The festival also celebrates the offerings of cloth that are given to the monks upon their leaving by the lay people.

The offering can take place up to one month following the end of the Vassa period, from 19th October to 16 November, and is celebrated by buddhists of the **Theravada tradition**.

History

According to the scriptures, a group of thirty monks were journeying together with the intention of spending the Vassa period with the Lord Buddha, but the Vassa began before they reached their destination and so they had to stop.

The monks were upset that they were unable to be with Buddha, who later heard of their plight. As a reward Buddha gave some cloth, which he had acquired as a gift from one of the lay community, to the monks and told them to sew a robe and then bestow it upon one of their company. The Buddha said that there was nothing as uplifting as generosity and sharing, and so the monks set about sewing a new set of robes. They used a frame, called a Kathina, on which to spread the cloth as they were making it.



The Festival

Lay supporters now continue this tradition at the end of the Vassa. The cloth giving is a gift of the followers of Buddhism, and therefore no monk is allowed to request or organise the festival.

The cloth, according to Buddha, must be offered to the whole Sangha community, who will then decide among themselves who receives the gift.

Buddhist families take joy in offering cloth to their teachers. About three metres of cloth is all that is needed, but very often other items are offered as well. On the day of the festival, people begin to arrive at the monastery and begin by sharing a meal. At about 1 o'clock, they will formally offer the cloth and other gifts.

Two monks will be presented with the cloth on behalf of the whole Sangha community. These monks will then formally announce the member of the community who will receive the cloth once it has been made up. The monks will spend much of the night preparing and cutting the cloth, and finally sewing it together to form a robe. The formal Sangha act (Sangha Kamma) of presenting the cloth to the chosen monk may take place much later in the evening, when it is ceremonially presented to the nominated monk.

The Dalai Lama

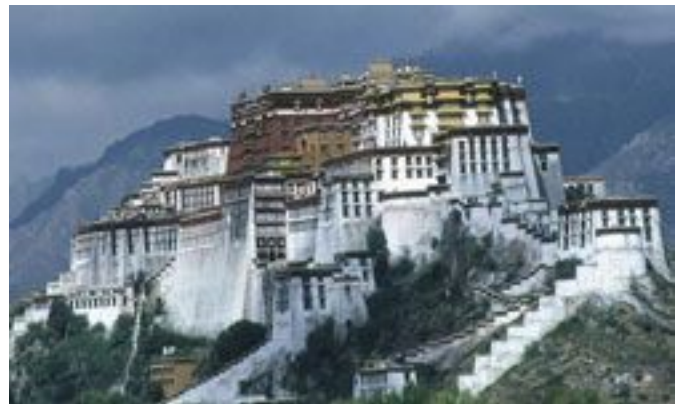
The rôle of the Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama is the head monk of Tibetan Buddhism and traditionally has been responsible for the governing of Tibet, until the Chinese government took control in 1959. Before 1959, his official residence was Potala Palace in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet.

The Dalai Lama belongs to the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which is the largest and most influential tradition in Tibet.

The institution of the Dalai Lama is a relatively recent one. There have been only 14 Dalai Lamas in the history of Buddhism, and the first and second Dalai Lamas were given the title posthumously.

According to Buddhist belief, the current Dalai Lama is a reincarnation of a past lama who decided to be reborn again to continue his important work, instead of moving on from the wheel of life. A person who decides to be continually reborn is known as *tulku*.



Buddhists believe that the first tulku in this reincarnation was Gedun Drub, who lived from 1391-1474 and the second was Gendun Gyatso.

However, the name Dalai Lama, meaning Ocean of Wisdom, was not conferred until the third reincarnation in the form of Sonam Gyatso in 1578.

The current Dalai Lama is Tenzin Gyatso.

Choosing a Dalai Lama

After the death of a Dalai Lama it has traditionally been the responsibility of the High Lamas of the Gelugpa Tradition and the Tibetan government to find his reincarnation.

The High Lamas search for a boy who was born around the same time as the death of the Dalai Lama.

It can take around two or three years to identify the Dalai Lama, and for the current, 14th Dalai Lama, it was four years before he was found.

There are several ways in which the High Lamas might find out where the next reincarnation will be found.

- Dream
 - One of the High Lamas may dream about some mark or location that will identify the boy.
- Smoke
 - If the previous Dalai Lama was cremated, High Lamas will watch the direction of the smoke and search accordingly.
- Oracle Lake
 - High Lamas go to a holy lake, called Lhamo Lhatso, in central Tibet and watch for a sign from the lake itself. This may be either a vision or some indication of the direction in which to search. The home and village of Tenzin Gyatso was identified in a vision from this lake.



Once the High Lamas have located the home and the boy, they present a number of artefacts which they have brought with them in preparation, to the child.

Amongst these artefacts are a number of items that belonged to the deceased Dalai Lama. If the boy chooses the items that belonged to the previous Dalai Lama, this is seen as a sign, in conjunction with all of the other indications, that the boy is a reincarnation.

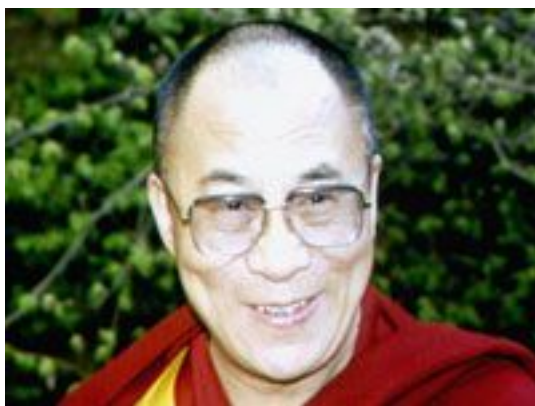
This procedure, however, as Tenzin Gyatso has said himself, is not set in stone; if two thirds of the Tibetan people wish to change the method of identifying the next reincarnation, this would be just as valid.

The search for the Dalai Lama has usually been limited to Tibet, although the third *tulku* was born in Mongolia. However, as Tibet has been taken by the Chinese government, Tenzin Gyatso says that if he is reborn it will not be in a country run by the People's Republic of China, or any other country which is not free.

Interestingly, Tenzin Gyatso has also expressed doubts over whether he will be reborn at all, suggesting the function of the Dalai Lama may be over. However, until Tibet is reunited with its spiritual leader, it seems likely that there will continue to be a Dalai Lama.

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama

Tenzin Gyatso is the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibetan Buddhism. He was born in 1935 and recognised as the reincarnation of Thubten Gyatso at a young age.



His Holiness, Tenzin Gyatso, was born Lhamo Dhondrub on July 6 1935 to a peasant family in the province of Amdo, in a village called Takster in northeastern Tibet.

The High Lamas of the Gelugpa tradition had been searching for many years for the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, but according to reports, there were incidents which marked out Lhamo as the correct child.

The face of the embalmed thirteenth Dalai Lama is reported to have mysteriously turned north east. This, combined with a vision a High Lama had when looking in the sacred lake Lhamo Lhatso, indicated that Amdo was the village they should search. Furthermore, the vision also clearly indicated a three storey monastery with a gold and turquoise roof, and another vision of a small house with odd guttering.

A monastery at Kumbum in Amdo fitted the description given by the High Lama and, after a careful search of the neighbouring villages, the house of

Lhamo Dhondrub was identified. Lhamo was around three years old at the time.

The search party went to his home and observed him without revealing their reasons. They came back a few days later with the formal intention of performing the final test.

They presented some items to the child, including a mala, or rosary, and a bell that belonged to the deceased Dalai Lama. Lhamo instantly identified the items shouting "It's mine, it's mine!"

At just over five years old, he was enrolled in the local monastery and began his training. He was also trained by the highest monks in the land at Lhasa, Tibet's capital city, at that time his official residence. He was enthroned at the age of 15 in 1950 amidst the start of troubles with China, but continued to study until the age of 25, receiving the highest honours available. The young Lhamo Dhondrub, who was renamed Jamphel Ngawang Lobsang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso, took leadership of a country that was, according to traditional maps, still a Chinese province.

Around 1950, the political landscape of China was changing. Plans were made to bring Tibet officially under Chinese control. But in March 1959, Tibetans took to the streets demanding an end to Chinese rule. Chinese People's Republic troops crushed the revolt and thousands were killed.

Fearing that the Chinese government would kill him, the Dalai Lama fled from Tibet to India with thousands of followers, where he was welcomed by Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

Nehru gave him permission to form The Tibetan Government in Exile in Dharamsala in India. The Dalai Lama, and the refugees who followed him, created a society in which Tibetan language, culture, arts and religion are promoted.

He is the first Dalai Lama to travel to the West, and his charismatic manner has helped to draw much support for Buddhism and the Tibetan resistance movement.

In 1989 he received the Nobel Peace Prize for maintaining a policy of non violence with the Chinese government, despite the knowledge that many Tibetans would be happy to take up armed resistance to return him to his position as their leader.