

Buddhism: An Overview

With about 365 million followers (920,000 in the United States), Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world (after Christianity, Islam and Hinduism). Buddhism was founded in northern India by the first known Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, a prince who lived about 563-483 B.C.

Siddhartha Gautama

Traditional belief is that he was born a prince. His father, Suddhodana, was king of the Sakyas clan; his mother was named Maya. Miraculous stories are associated with his birth, including reports that he emerged from his mother's side without causing her any pain, and that at birth he stood up, took seven steps, and announced that he would be the "chief of the world." He was given the name Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha means "one who has achieved his aim."

Prophecy said he would be a great king if he stayed home, but a savior of mankind if he left. His father wanted his son to succeed him as king so he kept him confined to the palace. But the son wanted to see the world. His father ordered the streets cleared and cleansed, but Siddhartha Gautama saw the "Four Passing Sights," which were experienced either while on chariot rides or through visions:

- A frail old man
- An emaciated, diseased and depressed man
- A funeral procession with grieving family members
- A monk begging for food (but serene)

The passing sights so impressed the prince that he left his wife, child, luxurious lifestyle, and future role as leader of his people in order to seek truth. He became a pauper and wandered from place to place seeking wisdom. He tried meditation, then breath control and intense fasting. He realized that neither the extremes of hedonism nor mortification of the flesh would lead to enlightenment. He determined that a better path to achieve the state of *nirvana* – a state of liberation from suffering – was to pursue the "Middle Way" through moderation and meditation.

One night, at age 35, he was in deep meditation beneath a large tree when he began to experience spiritual breakthroughs. He developed the ability to recall the events of previous lives in detail. He was able to see how the good and bad deeds of one lifetime bore consequences in the next life. Finally, he learned that he had progressed beyond the "spiritual defilements" of craving, desire, hatred, hunger, thirst, exhaustion, fear, doubt and delusions. "With this experience, he became a Buddha, someone who has 'awakened' from the dream of ignorance and whose wisdom has 'blossomed' like a flower," writes Boston University's Malcolm David Eckel in the *Course Guidebook to The Teaching Company's Great World Religions: Buddhism*. "He also achieved the state or the goal that Buddhists call *nirvana*, which means 'to extinguish' or 'to blow out.' A Buddha is someone who has understood the causes of suffering and has 'blown them out,' meaning that he no longer suffers from the ignorance and desire that feed the fire of death and rebirth" (pp. 8-9).

He spent the rest of his life sharing what he had learned. He was no longer Siddhartha Gautama but the Buddha, or enlightened one. He wandered around northeast India for decades, teaching all who would listen, and died at the age of 80. He left no successor, believing that the *Dharma* (his teachings), plus the *Vinaya* (his code of rules for monks and nuns) would be adequate guides. More than 200 years later, a council of Buddhist monks collected his teachings and the oral traditions of the faith into written form, called the *Tripitaka*.

Basic Description of Buddhism

From the time of Gautama to the present day, Buddhism has grown from a tiny religious community in northern India into a movement that now spans the globe. According to Boston University's Eckel, "Although Buddhism plays the role of a 'religion' in many cultures, it challenges some of our most basic assumptions about religion. Buddhists do not worship a God who created and sustains the world. They revere the memory of a human being, Siddhartha Gautama, who found a way to be free from suffering and bring the cycle of rebirth to an end. For Buddhists, this release from suffering constitutes the ultimate goal of human life" (p. 3).

"Buddhism was founded as a form of atheism that rejected more ancient beliefs in a permanent, personal, creator God (Ishvara) who controlled the eternal destiny of human souls," according to the North American Mission Board's belief bulletin on Buddhism. "Buddhism is an impersonal religion of self-perfection, the end of which is death (extinction) – not life." The essential elements of the Buddhist belief system are summarized in the **Four Noble Truths**:

1. Life is full of suffering (*dukkha*).
2. Suffering is caused by craving (*samudaya*).
3. Suffering will cease only when craving ceases (*nirodha*).
4. Following the Eightfold Path will end suffering (*magga*).

The **Eightfold Path** consists of:

1. Right understanding of the Four Noble Truths.
2. Right thinking; following the right path in life.
3. Right speech – no lying, criticism, condemnation, gossip, etc.
4. Right conduct by following the Five Precepts (do not kill; do not steal; do not lie; do not misuse sex; do not consume alcohol or drugs).
5. Right livelihood; support yourself without harming others.
6. Right effort; promote good thoughts, conquer evil thoughts.
7. Right mindfulness; become aware of your body, mind, and feelings.
8. Right contemplation; meditate to achieve a higher state of consciousness.

Types of Buddhism

After Gautama's death, Buddhism eventually died out in India but became established in Sri Lanka. From there, it expanded across Asia and evolved into three main forms:

Theravada Buddhism. Also called Southern Buddhism, it began in the 3rd century B.C. as Buddhist missionaries left India for Sri Lanka. In the Pali language the word "Theravada" means

“the Doctrine of the Elders” or the “Ancient Doctrine.” The Theravada school bases its practices and doctrines exclusively on the Pali canon. Theravada Buddhism now dominates all the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia except Vietnam.

Mahayana Buddhism. The word means “Great Vehicle.” It emerged as a reform movement in the Indian Buddhist community around the beginning of the Common Era and eventually spread to China, Tibet, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. Mahayana texts claim to be the teaching of the Buddha himself, delivered to a special assembly of *bodhisattvas*, or “future Buddhas,” from which other Buddhist practitioners were excluded. A *bodhisattva* does not attempt to go straight to *nirvana* but returns to this world to help others along the path.

Vajrayana (Tantra) Buddhism. The word means “Diamond Vehicle.” This form of Buddhism shares the basic concepts of Mahayana, and is thought by some to be a part of Mahayana, but also includes a vast array of spiritual techniques designed to enhance the Buddhist practice. Two major subschools are Tibetan Buddhism and Shingon Buddhism. By harnessing certain psycho-physical energy, the practitioner may achieve Buddhahood in one lifetime.

One other form of Buddhism that should not escape our attention is **Zen Buddhism**, a branch of Mahayana Buddhism that has become widely known in the west. There are no sacred scriptures. The teachings of Buddhism are transmitted from mind to mind and do not need to be explained in words. Zen actually developed 1,000 years after the death of the Buddha. “Look within, you are the Buddha,” it teaches, stressing finding your own way through self effort. Central to Zen is the practice of *Zazen* – sitting in Zen meditation under the guiding hand of a master (*roshi*).

Key Beliefs

Doctrines of Buddhism include:

- Nothing in life is permanent (*anicca*)
- Individual selves do not truly exist (*anatta*)
- All is determined by an impersonal law of moral causation (*karma*)
- Reincarnation is an endless cycle of continuous suffering, and the goal of life is to break out of this cycle by finally extinguishing the flame of life and entering a permanent state of pure nonexistence (*nirvana*).

The Buddha taught that there are five ways people attach themselves to the world and to self:

- Matter (*rupa*). Physical matter, sights, odors, sounds, etc. – our physical existence – make up the illusion of You.
- Sensation (*vedana*). When material elements in the world bump into each other in the human body, sensations arise. Happiness and sadness are in this category because they are the effects of material causes.
- Perception (*samjna*). The Buddha said perception is recognizing physical or mental functions – e.g. recognizing a certain sound as the sound of music. A person has no control over their perceptions; they are reflexes resulting from “matter” and “sensations.”

- Formation of mind (*samskara*). When you direct your mind towards a particular thought/action, you experience a “mental formation.” For example, when you hear music you may decide to turn up the volume. Mental formations also include concentration, desire, hate, jealousy, etc. There is no You controlling these mental formations; there are just the formations themselves.
- Consciousness (*viññana*). This is simply an “awareness” (not “perception”) of the presence and characteristics of a thing. Consciousness is the awareness of sound, whereas perception identifies the sound as the sound of music.

The Buddha taught that the sum of these five parts does not make up a greater whole called the Self. All that exists are the parts. The Buddha wanted to remove the notion of Self because he believed the idea of the Self is the root of all suffering. Since there is no soul or You, there is no reincarnation. Buddha instead taught rebirth. Rebirth does not involve getting a new body for an old soul (as in Hinduism). Instead it is the continuation of the Five Aggregates in a long chain of cause and effect.

Professor Eckel explains it this way: “What do Buddhists mean when they say that there is ‘no self?’ In traditional Buddhism, ‘no self’ means that there is no permanent identity to continue from one moment to the next. If there is no permanent identity, what makes up the human personality? The answer to this question is: five ‘aggregates,’ from material form (*rupa*) to consciousness (*viññana*). These five aggregates are only momentary, but they group together to give the illusion of permanence, like the flow of a river or the flame of a candle” (p. 13).

Buddhism does not share most of the core beliefs of historical Christianity, including:

- Creation of mankind in innocence and the subsequent fall of humanity into sin.
- A worldwide flood in the days of Noah.
- A God-man Savior who was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died a sacrificial death, was raised physically from the dead and ascended into heaven.
- Salvation achieved by grace through faith – or even through works or sacraments.
- Everlasting life in heaven or hell after death.
- The future return of a Savior to the earth.
- The future end of the world as we know it.

Comparing Christianity and Buddhism

What the Bible says about God:

There is one true and living God, who exists as three distinct, co-equal, co-eternal persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Deut. 6:4; John 20:28; Acts 5:3-4; 2 Cor. 13:13; 1 Peter 1:2). God is personal and is to be the only object of worship (Ex. 20:2-3; Isa. 43:10, 44:6; Matt. 4:10).

What Buddhism says about God:

Buddhists do not worship a God who created and sustains the world. Theravada Buddhism considers the concept of God irrelevant; it is basically atheistic. Mahayana Buddhism worships the Buddha as a god, along with other gods. Other forms of Buddhism add shamanism and elements of the occult.

What the Bible says about Jesus:

He is the virgin-born Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:18-23; Luke 1:35). He is the eternal God, the Creator, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and Holy Spirit (John 1:1-14; Col. 1:15-20; Phil. 2:5-11; Heb. 1:1-13). Jesus died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3), rose physically from the dead (Matt. 12:38-40; Rom. 1:4; 1 Cor. 15:4-8; 1 Peter 1:18-21) and is coming back physically and visibly one day (Matt. 24:29-31; John 14:3; Titus 2:13; Rev. 19:11-16).

What Buddhism says about Jesus:

Jesus was a great religious teacher who may have achieved enlightenment. Even so, he was one among many and therefore not unique.

What the Bible says about salvation:

Christ's death at Calvary completely paid our sin debt so that salvation comes by grace alone through faith in the person and work of Jesus (John 3:16, 5:24; Rom. 4:4-5; 1 Cor. 15:1-4; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5).

What Buddhism says about salvation:

The goal of life is to achieve *nirvana*, or the cessation of suffering.

What the Bible says about the Bible:

The Bible is the inerrant, infallible, inspired Word of God, and is His sole written authority for all people (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21).

What Buddhism says about the Bible:

The authoritative writings for Buddhists are the *Sutras* and the *Tripitaka* (The Three Baskets). The Bible contains good teaching but is not authoritative.

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What the Bible says about man:

God created man in His image – with a human spirit, personality and will. A person’s life begins at conception and is everlasting, but not eternal; that is, our lives have no end, but they did have a distinct beginning (Gen. 1:26-28; Ps. 139:13-16).

What Buddhism says about man:

Buddhists embrace the concept of *anatta* (no self). In traditional Buddhism, “no self” means there is no permanent identity to continue from one moment to the next. The human personality is made up of five *skanda* (parts), which are only momentary, but they group together to give the illusion of permanence, like the flow of a river or the flame of a candle.

What the Bible says about sin:

Sin is a violation of God’s perfect and holy standards. All humans are sinners (Rom. 3:10) and are under the curse of sin – spiritual and physical death (Gen. 2:17, 3:17-19; Rom. 3:23). Only faith in Christ and His work on our behalf frees us from sin and its consequences (John 3:16, 5:24; Eph. 2:8-9).

What Buddhism says about sin:

There is no such thing as sin against a supreme being. The human condition is suffering, caused by attachment to things and the cravings / desires accompanying the attachment.

What the Bible says about death and the afterlife:

Physical and spiritual deaths come upon all people as a consequence of their sin (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 3:23; Eph. 2:1). A person becomes spiritually alive when he or she is “born again” by the Spirit of God (John 3:3-6; Eph. 2:4-5). At physical death, our souls and spirits separate from our bodies [which go into the grave to await resurrection and final judgment] and enter an everlasting state of blessedness [for those born again] or torment [for those who die in their sins] (Luke 16:19-31; 2 Cor. 5:8).

Hell is a place of everlasting conscious existence, where the unbeliever is forever separated from God (Matt. 25:46; Luke 16:19-31; Rev. 14:9-11, 20:10). As for Heaven, all believers have God’s promise of a home in Heaven, will go there instantly upon physical death, and will return with Christ from Heaven to earth one day (Luke 16:19-31; John 14:1-3; 2 Cor. 5:8; Rev. 19:14).

What Buddhism says about death and the afterlife:

Buddhists believe the cycle of death and rebirth, known as *samsara*, has been going on since time without beginning. Their goal is to end this cycle by attaining *nirvana*, a state of being that is realized through eliminating desire. *Nirvana* comes at two moments: at awakening or enlightenment, and at *parinirvana*, when the fire of personality finally flickers out (final death).

The path to *nirvana* is divided into eight categories of disciplines that are meant to avoid bad *karma* that leads to difficult and dangerous forms of rebirth.

There is no heaven or hell as understood by Christians.