**The life of the Buddha**

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The Buddha was the founder of Buddhism but is not seen as a God. The Buddha was an actual person who lived approximately 2,500 years ago (563-483 BCE)

It is difficult to separate myth and legend from fact, and the story of **Siddhattha Gotama (Pali- Theravada)** **Siddhartha Gautama (Sanskrit – Mahayana)** is no exception. There is a lot of symbolism in this story that leads to a greater understanding of Buddhist beliefs and practices.

**The dream, conception and birth**

King Suddhodana ruled a land near the Himalaya Mountains. One day during a midsummer festival, his wife Queen Mya rested. Once asleep she dreamed a vivid dream. Four angels carried her high into white mountain peaks and clothed her in flowers. A magnificent white elephant bearing a white lotus in its trunk approached Maya and walked around her three times. Then the elephant struck her on the right side with its trunk and vanished into her.

When Maya awoke, she told her husband about the dream. The king summoned many Brahmans/Priests to come and interpret it. His future destiny was foretold at his birth by an old Brahmin sage called Asita, he said Queen Maya would give birth to a son and if the son did not leave the palace he would become a great ruler. However, if he were to leave the palace he would become a Buddha (religious teacher).

When the time came for the birth of Prince Siddhartha, Queen Maya travelled from the capital to her childhood home to give birth. With the king’s blessings she left on a palanquin carried by a thousand courtiers.

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On the way, the procession passed Lumbini Grove, which was full of blossoming trees. Entranced, the Queen asked her courtiers to stop, and she left the palanquin and entered the grove. As she reached up to touch the blossoms, she gave birth, standing up with no pain.

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Then the Queen and her son were showered with perfumed blossoms, and two streams of sparkling water poured from the sky to bathe them. And the infant stood, and took seven steps, and proclaimed “I alone am the world-Honored One!”

The Queen and Prince Siddhartha returned to the palace and the queen died seven days later.

Symbolism in the story

* The white elephant – sacred animal represents fertility and wisdom
* The lotus – Common symbol for enlightenment in Buddhist art can also represent mental and spiritual purity which is needed for the practice of meditation
* The 7 steps – directions (north, south, east, west, up, down, and here)
* Buddha’s birthday is a festive celebration with parades, flowers, floats of elephants, figures of baby Buddha pointing up and down are placed in bowls, sweet tea is poured over the figures to ‘wash’ the baby.
* In Mahayana Buddhism they talk about the Buddha-nature in the story and the eternal nature of all beings.
* The Queens death – The impermanence of all things (**Anicca**)

The four sights

The King decided that he would protect Siddhartha from the outside world as he wanted him to become a great ruler and not a religious leader. Any time the prince wanted to leave the palace the king would order servants to ride ahead and clear the road of any suffering that he may see. The king surrounded his son with every luxury and pleasure imaginable and not once did he see poverty, old age or sickness. Siddhartha married in his thirties and had a son and eventually wanted to know what was really outside the palace walls. He persuaded his servant Chana to take him into the town without his father’s knowledge. On these visits Gautama saw four sights that shocked and disappointed him.

* Old age – He seen an old man leaning on a stick and realised that people do not stay young forever.
* Sickness – He came across a beggar, covered in cuts and sores, lying on the ground and realised that people get sick and do not always stay healthy.
* Death – He passed two men carrying a dead man and learned the most frightening thing of all. People do not live forever.
* ‘Sadhu’ (holy man) – He passed a monk who was searching for the answer to all his suffering and wondered how the Sadhu could be so peaceful and happy surrounded by so much suffering.

The prince couldn’t get these 4 sights from out of his mind and he was so deeply troubled that his life of wealth and luxury could not stop him getting old, sick, and dying in order for the cycle to begin all over again. He asked the question “why is there so much suffering?” and wondered if it was at all possible to find happiness.

Siddhartha decided to leave his home and family behind and follow the Sadhu’s example. He cut off his long hair, removed his silk clothes and Jewels and put on the sort of basic robe worn by holy men. He renounced all earthly pleasures to follow the life of a wandering holy man. This event is known as the **Pravrajya** (‘Going Forth’). He studied the philosophies of two religious teachers and in the company of five monks he practiced asceticism. He hoped that by denying his physical needs and punishing his body through severe fasting he would release spiritual energy which would help him in this search for inner peace.

After six years of asceticism the prince concluded that this route to Enlightenment was not working so he accepted a bowl of rice from a young woman. He also concluded that both extremes (luxury – self-indulgence and asceticism – self-denial) were no path for enlightenment so he began to look for a ‘middle way’.

Ways to think about the ‘Middle Way’

**1 The Parable of the Lute**

A monk named Sona loved comforts and luxury and was really struggling with monastic life (life as a monk) He thought about returning to his family and asked The Buddha what he thought. The Buddha replied:

If a lute (Asian guitar) has its strings pulled too tight then they break but if they are too loose then they can’t be played but if they are in the middle, neither to tight or too loose then the lute makes a perfect sound. This is the Middle Way.

**2 A tightrope**

You can only go one path on a tightrope and that is forward. The other paths (left and right) lead to suffering and pain. Enlightenment is on the end of the tightrope.

**3 Cooking an egg**

If you don’t cook an egg enough it is raw, if you cook an egg too much it will burn but if you cook it in the medium way it will be perfect.

Achieving Enlightenment

The prince began to look for the ‘middle way’ his 5 fellow ascetics were disgusted that Siddhartha had begun to eat so he left them behind and travelled to a village called Uravela where he sat under a Bodhi Tree or ‘**Tree of Awakening**’ and meditated. While meditating he had visions involving **Mara,** the Evil One. According to tradition, Mara tempted him with all the delights of earthly things which he had renounced. Mara sent his daughters, Mara taunted him with words, Mara sent monsters to scare him. Each of these attempts was without success and Gautama attained his goal of **enlightenment –** A feeling of total peace**.** From that time on, Gautama was known as Buddha – The enlightened one.

Siddhartha had concluded that life was full of suffering and that suffering was caused by people’s selfishness and greed. The way to be happy was to stop wanting things, stop believing things last forever and stop being selfish.

Deer Park Sermon

After reaching enlightenment The Buddha spent some time thinking about his experience in great bliss and meditation. He then made his way to Deer Park in Benares (Varanasi) to seek out his five ascetic companions. At first they ignored him but were impressed by what he had to say. Here he taught his first sermon, which was knows as the Deer Park Sermon and he formed the first **‘Sangha’** (Community of Buddhists). The Buddha dedicated his final years preaching the **Dhamma** (truths) and expanding the Sangha to include monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen.

Death

He died in approximately 483 BCE at the age of eighty. By this time he left a considerable amount of followers, including hundreds, if not thousands of enlightened people. He criticised his follower Ananda for being upset that he was dying. He said that this showed he had not been listening all these years to his teaching that all things are impermanent. He told his followers that the **Dharma** should now be their teacher and reminded them that **‘Subject to decay are all compounded things, so be mindful and vigilant in working out your own salvation.’** After having had many re-births before he reached enlightenment it is believed that this time after death he finally achieved **‘parinibbana’** – Perfect enlightenment, never to be reborn.

[](http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=parinibbana&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&docid=UeHijI1ePwEAMM&tbnid=KcvgPuMXxZzufM:&ved=0CAUQjRw&url=http://anakbuddhis.blogspot.com/2013/04/perkembangan-agama-buddha-setelah-sang.html&ei=3D57U-jWJurW7QaIpICQDQ&bvm=bv.67229260,d.ZGU&psig=AFQjCNGzezUKS4vTV-6-P4ZiUdB_XaHGpA&ust=1400672154514312)

**Beliefs – The Buddha’s teachings (Dhamma)**

**The Four Noble Truths**

At the **Deer Park Sermon** the Buddha explained what he had discovered in terms of Four Truths, which function as a kind of doctor’s diagnosis of the human condition i.e. what wrong with the world? The Buddha likened himself to a doctor and the Dhamma was the medicine needed to cure the illness of the nature of existence/human beings. The Deer park sermon is a key event and the Dhamma was memorised at first and passed on by spoken word. The teachings were later written down to form the Dhammapada.

1. What is wrong with my life? – Dukkha/unsatisfactoriness
2. What is causing it? – Tanha/craving
3. Good news is it can be overcome – Can be stopped to achieve Nibbana (Enlightenment)
4. The prescription/cure – Noble Eightfold Path – Magga

1 Everything is unsatisfactory

2 Unsatisfactoriness stems from craving

3 To get rid of the unsatisfactoriness you must get rid of the craving

4 To get rid of the craving you should follow the eightfold path

1 Dukkha

There is no English word to adequately translate this term. It is usually translated as suffering but **unsatisfactoriness** is better. The Buddha taught that life is suffering, in the sense that life is unsatisfactory at its deepest level. You only have to pick up a newspaper to see that people suffer through injury, sickness, old age, and death. Some might object and say that some human experiences such as love and happiness could not be seen as suffering, however, they are impermanent **(Anicca)** so even the knowledge of this leads to suffering as we cannot control them and they do not last. For Buddhists, suffering is built into the system. It’s difficult to avoid.

2 Tanha – Desire

Tanha is desire or craving and this results from greed, selfishness and hatred **(The three root poisons)**. The Buddha taught that suffering/unsatisfactoriness is caused by desire. This craving becomes a source of suffering. This desire is also pointless because it can never be fulfilled. Every time one desire is over we desire something else. Tanha can include wanting to possess objects as well as the pursuit of perfection and fame.

3 Nibbana

By eliminating anger, desire and ignorance you can achieve Nibbana (Enlightenment). Nibbhana is when all cravings stop and a state of non-attachment is achieved. This is the goal of all Buddhists.

4 Magga – The Noble Eighfold Path

The way to stop the three root poisons is to accept and follow the Noble Eightfold Path. Accepting this and following the teachings of The Buddha (Dhamma) properly will lead to the end of suffering and you will have reached Nibbana.

**The Three marks of Existence/ The Three Universal Truths**

The Buddha taught everyone to be aware of the true reality of life. Buddhists refer to these teachings as the Three Marks of Existence or the Three Universal Truths. Everything else he said is based on these. They are:

1. Anicca (Impermanence – Everything is always changing)
2. Anatta (no soul or no self)
3. Dukkha (unsatisfactoriness or suffering)

1 Anicca

This is the central concept of Buddhism. It states that life is a constant process of change from birth through growth to decay and death. Nothing remains the same. Nothing is permanent. Human beings find this concept difficult to understand and so have a false sense of permanence, which only leads to suffering. Everything we know changes. This process of change is happening all the time. We may not notice the changes if we see people or animals every day. The fact that we do not notice the change does not mean that the change is not taking place. Some things change slowly such as mountains and rocks but others change quickly.

Accepting Anicca diminishes craving and lessens suffering. If you do not accept Anicca this leads to the illusion that things and people are permanent which causes craving and attachment which leads to suffering. This then leads to bad **kamma** in the form of the three root poisons which are at the centre of the wheel of **Samsara** (the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth). You cannot reach Nibbana until you accept Anicca.

Anicca in The Buddha’s life

* Prince Siddhatta’s mother died shortly after giving birth and he is brought up by his father and aunt who becomes his stepmother.
* His father attempts to cheat impermanence by sheltering the prince from suffering but this attempt fails because the Prince craves more knowledge about life.
* When he leaves the palace and sees the four sights he becomes aware of impermanence for the first time through old age, illness and death.
* Through asceticism the prince realises that although he has disciplined the body he has not disciplined the mind he has only changed what he craves.
* He is tempted by Mara with all the attractions of impermanence. He overcame this and realised the nature of impermanence and became enlightened.
* He chose to become a wandering holy man rather than remaining in one place and by dying at the age of 80 and criticising Ananda for questioning his death showed that all life is impermanent and you must accept that.

Anicca in The Buddha’s teaching

* The sermon at Benares: In his first sermon the Buddha preached that everything that has a beginning has an end. This is known as the ‘eye of the doctrine’ as it is central to the whole sermon.
* **The Story of Kisagotami** is told by the Buddha to demonstrate the concept of Anicca and how refusing to accept it leads to Dukkha.
* The Dhammapada teaches that Anicca is central to human life: **“Consider the body! A painted puppet with jointed limbs, sometimes suffering and covered with ulcers, full of imaginings, never permanent, for ever changing.” *The Dhamapada 148***
* Understanding this truth is the way to get rid of suffering and attachment to life. **“When a man considers this world as a bubble of froth, and as the illusion of an appearance, then the king of death has no power over him” *The Dhamapada 170***

Anicca in Buddhist practice

* Meditation – Meditation on impermanence is a central aspect of Buddhist practice. Buddhists believe they can gain better awareness of Anicca through practising meditation. The ‘lotus’ position is one of the most recognisable images of Buddhism. This helps the Buddhist to detach himself from his senses and attachment to the world. In order to fully appreciate the impermanence of the body, Buddhists often meditate on breathing. As breathing goes in and out it helps the meditator to realise that everything is constantly changing.

2 Anatta

Anatta is the idea that, because everything is continually changing, there is no soul **(Atman)** or no permanent you. This is basically the belief of Anicca when it is applied to the human person. This belief really separates Buddhism from other religions because they all believe that there is soul which survives after death. According to Buddhism, we are not fixed individuals at all. We have no fixed identity and that means we have no need to be selfish. Belief in Anatta would therefore help Buddhists to cultivate peace and wellbeing within themselves. This belief should also encourage compassion for others.

What we normally think of as the self is actually a collection of constantly changing parts. Human beings are made up of 5 **skandhas**. It is important to understand that the five budles of us are not things we possess, they actually are us.

The 5 skandhas

* The physical body (rupa skandha)
* Sensations and feelings (vedana skandha)
* Perception (samjina skandha)
* Will – intention (samskara skandha)
* Consciousness (vijnana skandha)

The parable of Nagasena and The Chariot is a good source for explaining Anatta. It is important to understand that the five budles of us are not things we possess, they actually are us. We are simply a process of change.

A bicycle is made up of a number of parts: the frame, the wheels, the handlebars, mudguards, chain and so on. When one of the parts or components wears out we replace it with another. We can still recognise it as the same bicycle even though it is slightly different. Eventually, all the original parts might be replaced so that nothing of the original bicycle remains. However, because the change in parts has happened over a period of time we tend to think of it as the same bicycle. In some ways it is. But it is also true that it isn’t. For Buddhists people are a bit like bicycles. They are made of parts. When some parts, such as cells wear out they are replaced. The continuity of the person, like the continuity of the bicycle, can be experienced even though most of its parts have been changed.

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Another way of looking at the Buddhist way of understanding a person is to think about a bicycle.

Anatta in The Buddha’s life

* There are few explicit references to the doctrine of Anatta in the stories of Buddha’s life but there is an emphases on the transience of human life within the eternal cycle of **Samsara** (rebirth)
* During the fourth watch of Siddhatta Gotama’s meditation under the Bodhi tree he understood the concept of Anatta: **“He thought: ‘Here I have found freedom’, and he knew that the longings of his heart had at last come to fulfilment. Now that he had grasped the principle of causation, and finally convinced himself of the lack of self in all that is, he roused himself again from his deep trance, and in his great compassion he surveyed the world with the Buddha – eye, intent on giving it peace.” *Buddhist Scriptures (p52)***
* Buddha was concerned to show that he was not important as an individual but that his life was interconnected with all sentient (thinking) beings. Understanding the Dhamma, including the doctrine of Anatta, is more important than the character of the Buddha.
* Buddha’s death shows the insignificance of the self and the importance of selflessness. He died of a stomach-ache at the age of eighty in Kusinara, a place of no real significance. He also criticised Ananda for being upset when he should have realised that everything is impermanent.
* Theravada Buddhists refer to the Buddha as ‘tathagata’ (thus gone). After the Buddha’s death he was no longer available to ordinary Buddhists for any help. Enlightenment, therefore, can only be gained through personal effort, not through faith in the Buddha.
* The Mahayana Buddhists’ view of Sakyamuni (historical) Buddha extends the belief of Anatta as, in this view, the Buddha is seen as merely one example of many Buddhas that have appeared to teach people the Dhamma. There is no real distinction between Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and other beings, as all should be aiming towards the enlightenment of everyone and the understanding of the truth that there is no-self.

Anatta in Buddhist teachings

* The five skandhas – The earliest reference to Anatta in Buddhist teachings comes in the Sermon at Benares where the Buddha explains how attachment to the five skandhas leads to suffering.
* The Questions of King Milinda, Nagasena explains the concept of Anatta by using the metaphor of a chariot to explain.
* Buddhists do accept that there are two levels of truth when it comes to accepting Anatta. On an everyday level it is convenient to talk about by ‘self’ and your ‘self’ as the human brain needs categories in order to make sense of what is being experienced. However, on an ultimate level, there is no such thing as ‘self’ as everything is interconnected with everything else.
* Buddhists view of Anatta affects the way they act in everyday life. By seeing no difference between ‘self’ and ‘others’ Buddhists learn to become dispassionate about things. Selfish feelings such as jealousy, lust, depression are discouraged but those which encourage connections between people such as caring, listening and helping others are developed.
* **The eightfold path** could be said to encourage the understanding of Anatta. Each step on this path enables the Buddhist to reflect on the way in which people are impermanent and interconnected.

Anatta in Buddhist practice

* Meditation – this is a practice within the eightfold path that directly draws upon the concept of Anatta in a number of ways.
  + Samatha meditation – Meditation begins with the development of mindfulness where the meditator becomes mindful of the current state of the skandhas. For example, in mindful breathing the meditator concentrates on the action of breathing in and out so that he or she is able to detach from the everyday concerns of the world and concentreate on the impermanence of existence. Samatha meditation is intended to bring about calmness of mind and body and can include zen walking, the Japanese Tea Ceremony, Martial arts, meditation on loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy.
  + Vipassana meditation – aims at producing insight and enables the Buddhist to analyse the attachments to the world and see things as they really are. The ultimate goal of Vipassana meditation is enlightenment.

3 Dukkha

Dukkha is the idea that life is unsatisfactory because there is so much suffering which is caused by craving, clinging, attachment and delusion. It is caused by not accepting Anicca and Anatta. If everything is always changing, can there be anything which will make us happy for ever? Suffering can be physical, mental or emotional and includes all things which make life less than perfect.

Buddhists say that if all the things which make us happy, and even the happy feelings we have, are impermanent then our lives or our experience is very unsatisfactory. Our life is essentially one of suffering. Everything that is transient is, therefore, unsatisfactory. So this teaching is that lasting happiness will never be found if our happiness is based on or comes from anything which is impermanent.

Because of this teaching Buddhists are sometimes called pessimists. They do not, however, see themselves as pessimists. They think of themselves as realists. They think that there way of looking at things is honest. They think that people should not hide from the truth as it does not good pretending that things are different from the way they actually are. They also believe that they have found a way of discovering how to be rid of the feeling of unsatisfactorines – **The Noble Eightfold Path.**

In Buddhism, The Three Marks of Existence/The Three Noble Truths must be understood together to understand the nature of existence (what life is like). If you don’t understand Anicca or Anatta then it will lead to Dukkha. Anicca, Anatta and Dukkha are experienced by all living things.

**Samsara – The endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth ‘endless wandering’**

Most Buddhists believe in rebirth but one question that arises when we begin to talk about Samsara/re-birth is what is reborn if there is no soul? The answer to this question is: It is not the person that is reborn but the energy pattern that they produced during their lifetime.

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Think about it like a candle flame being used to light another candle. The second flame could not have existed without the first but it is not the first flame itself.

Buddhists believe that there are six realms in which sentient beings can be reborn – animals, humans, gods, demi-gods or asuras, hungry ghosts or hells. The realm in which a being is born depends on the accumulation of **Kamma**/actions in previous lives. Buddhists think that it is the energy of our previous actions which keeps us being born in one body after another. The principle, that all voluntary acts have consequences which will have an effect at some time in the future is known as **The Law of** Kamma. Buddhists believe Samsara is a state of recurring misery and dissatisfaction in which humans are trapped. This unsatisfactory state is the result of attachment to impermanent things.

Samsara continues until the individual becomes enlightened. The goal of Buddhism is to achieve better rebirths to get closer to the ultimate goal of Enlightenment and escape Samsara.

To show how difficult it would be for a human birth the Buddha told the story of the Giant Turtle. He lives on the bottom of the ocean. The turtle comes to the surface every hundred years for air. There is a yoke (a kind of wooden life-belt) floating around on top of the ocean. The chances of being reborn as a human are roughly the same as the chances that the turtle has of putting its head through the yoke when it comes up for air.

[](http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&docid=9HHikHmnsGneLM&tbnid=jeA5u9QTvMrdgM:&ved=0CAUQjRw&url=http://www.ebay.co.uk/itm/Life-Belt-Mirror-/261464848377&ei=_r19U5_CFZKu7Aa-mIDgCQ&bvm=bv.67229260,d.ZGU&psig=AFQjCNFNSLiHZJX0fvfOfR8QV4-Dpt9Bxw&ust=1400835932876693)

Attaining Nibbana is when Samsara is brought to an end. This is the ultimate goal for Buddhists and a person who attains Nabbana (Enlightenment) will not be born again.

Samsara in Buddha’s life

* In Theravada Buddhism the Buddha was an historical figure who gained enlightenment after many lifetimes of achieving good Kamma. During these previous lives he is referred to as a Bodhisattva and in some lives he is born as an animal whilst in others he is reborn in the heavens or as a human being.
* During the meditation under the Bodhi tree Siddhatta remembered the series of his former births and thought with compassion of the suffering that the cycle of rebirth enevitably encourages: **“Again and again they must leave the people they regard as their own, and must go on elsewhere, and that without ever stopping. Surely this world is unprotected and helpless, and life a wheel it turns round and round.” *Buddhist Scriptures (p49)***
* Once he became enlightened his father acknowledged that the Buddha had fulfilled Asita’s prophecy and in doing so is not longer subject to Kamma and has escaped Samsara.
* The Mahayana view of Samsara differs from the Theravada view. Samsara is seen almost as an attitude of mind rather than a reality. There is essentially no difference between Samsara and Nibbana since Samsara is simply an illusion and Nibbana is the only thing that is ‘real’.
* In relation to the Buddha’s life Mahayana Buddhists believe that Sakyamuni Buddha is in fact only one manifestation of the Buddha ideal. This was because they believed a historical Buddha would not just die leaving the world without a Buddha figure. Sakyamuni is just a magical transformation of the Buddha nature in everyone. Other Buddhas like Amithaba or Maitreya, the future Buddha, are all at work in history for the welfare of human beings.

Samsara in Buddhist Teaching

* It is through good kamma that we can leave the wheel of Samsara behind. **“What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind. If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows him as the wheel of the cart follows the beast that draws the cart.” *The Dhammapada 1:1***
* The cycle of Samsara is seen as having no beginning and as long as ignorance continues it has no end. **“Oh Bhikkus, this cycle of continuity (Samsara) is without visible end, and the first beginning of beings wandering and running around, enveloped in ignorance (avija) and bound by the fetters of thirst (desire, tanha) is not to be perceived.” *What the Buddha Taught (p27)***
* For Theravada Buddhists, the highest ideal that any Buddhist can attain is that of the **Arahat** (worthy one). The Arahat is a monk, who by his own efforts has achieved enlightenment. At his death he will attain Parinibbana and will therefore be outside the influence of Samsara. His is therefore in no position to help other Buddhists on the path to enlightenment, except by his example.
* In Mahayana Buddhism there is a strong belief in many schools that the concept of Samsara is not as important as the belief that anyone can achieve Nibbana. To Mahayana Buddhists the path of the Arahat is seen as limited because it only concentrates on the individual’s search for enlightenment. Often the Arahat is seen as a cold figure because he has concentrated on his own path without apparent awareness of the needs of others.
* The concept of the **Bodhisattva** has developed in Mahayana Buddhism. The Bodhisattva (literally – enlightened being) is one who, on the way to enlightenment makes the vow that he will save all beings. These Bodhisattvas are considered as saviours who help others to achieve a better rebirth through transfer of merit (good deeds produce merit and these can be transferred to others). People can attain merit (good kamma) by supporting monks (donating food or robes), listening to lectures or providing funds for monasteries. There are many examples of Bodhisattvas in the Mahayana tradition and they are freely represented in Mahayana art. One signigicant Bodhisattva is Avalokiteshvara (or Cheenrezig). The Dalai Lama is believed by Tibetan Buddhists to be Cheenrezig in human form. Tibetian Buddhism has a strong artistic tradition, which the monks of Samye Ling are trying to keep alive.

Samsara in Buddhist practice

* The Sangha or monastic order – The belief in the cycle of rebirth has a daily effect on how Buddhists live their lives. The importance of following the Dhamma in order to gain good Kamma is an important part of most Buddhists’ daily life.
* In Theravada Buddhism the difference between the monastic lives and the lives of the lay community are clearly spelled out. It is not thought impossible for a lay person to achieve Nibbana but it is seen as highly unlikely as their attachment to the material world is great. Therefore the actions of the lay people are primarily done with the goal of achieving good Kamma for a better rebirth. Lay people have duties towards the monastic community whom they support with material goods, finance and manual labour. Mahayana Buddhists have a similar idea and an example of this at Samye Ling is to help with gardening and to cook and clean for the monks and Nuns. In return the monks teach them which helps them on their first step towards Nibbana and act as role models for the lay community.
* Good Kamma can be gained by taking part in Buddhist worship whether through festivals and pilgrimage or daily Puja. The major rites of passage celebrated in Buddhism are initiation and death which both mark the imprtance of the cycle of Samsara.
* In the initiation or ordination ceremony the novice gives up his life of attachment to become a monk, which itself produces good Kamma.
* The monk and nun’s goal is really Nibbana rather than Samsara. However it is difficult even for monks, so the secondary goal of a good rebirth is not totally neglected.

Kamma/Actions

In Buddhism Kamma is the process by which thoughts, actions and choices shape lives. What people do, what they think and what they say will have an imact on their present an future lives. All intentional actions have consequences. This is the natural law of cause and effect (One thing leads to another). Thoughts lead to actions which lead to consequences. Overall, the sort of rebirth achieved is dependant on previous behaviour and this is called the **Law of Kamma.**

Good and bad Kamma is dependent on

* Skillful actions
  + These help achieve the goal of Nibbana and freedom from Samsara.
* Unskilful actions
  + These bind the individual more closely to the cycle of Samsara.

The type of action is determined by:

* The intentions
* The foreseen consequences
* The appropriateness of the act to the person doing the act.



The Buddha explained that kammic choices were like seeds. The seeds would grow and produce fruit according to the type of seed sown. The moral choices we make result in the development of certain outcomes. Again it is simple cause and effect. If you sow an apple seed you can only reasonably expect to produce an apple tree. Obviously moral choices aren’t really seeds and we can’t always predict the outcomes of certain choices. However, according to the Buddha, what we have to do is act for the right reasons or intentions and think through what are the most likely consequences of our actions.

Three forms of bad root (Akusala) when it comes to intentions:

* Choices based on greed
* Choices based on delusion
* Choices based on hatred

Three forms of good root (Kusala) when it comes to intentions:

* Choices based on non-attachment
* Choices based on understanding
* Choices based on kindness

Kamma comes fom actions containing choices. For example if you accidently stepped on a spider you would accrue very little if any negative kamma but if you intended to kill the spider then you would accrue a much higher level of negative kamma. Many actions have consequences which can be forseen and actions are also linked to the person who carries them out.

Buddhists believe they are masters of their own lives and that everything that happens to them is the result of kamma brought upon themselved during one rebirth or another. Kamma keeps them in Samsara.

**Nibbana**

Nibbana is very difficult to define or describe. It literally means ‘blowing out’ as in a candle flame and is often described in a negative way as ‘not this’ or ‘not that’. However, Nibbana is anything but negative. It is the first of all cessation. It is the complete stopping of the cycle of life, death and rebirth (Samsara). It is an end of all misery. Nibbana is ease and is like cool water removing the heat and thirst of our desires. Like the wind you cannot point out or grasp hold of it, but it can be known from its effects.

Nibbana is all about experience according to Buddha’s teachings. Nibbana cannot be fully or adequately explained. It can only be known by experience. The story of the turtle and the fish is a good way to illustrate this…



When a person achieves nibbana they still feel physical pain like anyone else (as the nerves are still present) but they are free from all mental pain and confusion and can more easily deal with the pain. A person who has achieved Nibbana can still enjoy physical pleasures like good food, but they do this without any attachments or cravings. They will look after their body and give it what it needs, but not out of greed for pleasure but simply to stay alive and healthy in order that the body should function as it should.

The question has been asked ‘if there is no self then what is it that obtains nibbana? The Buddha would not answer such questions (story of the arrow). He did not give answers to puzzling questions because he did not want people to be distracted from the more important task of getting rid of suffering. He also said that these types of questions were only asked by those who were confused in their understanding of themselves and life.

Nibbana in Buddha’s life

* Sidhatta became the Buddha after concentrated meditation for 49 days. He had been reborn man times gaining good Kamma and the meditation itself gave him the opportunity to overcome the cravings of this world and deepen his understanding.
* After he became enlightened he continued to live as a travelling holy man, teaching others the Dhamma so that they could also achieve Nibbana.
* The Theravada view of Nibbana seen in the Buddha’s life develops a further strand with his death. The Buddha’s body dies but the Buddha is described as entering **Parinibbana** which means completed Nibbana or enlightenment without left over Kama. Parinibbana essentially means the death of a Buddha.

Nibbana in Buddhist teachings

* The concept of Nibbana is often referred to in the Dhamma with an explanation of what it is not, rather than what it is. **“As no seed can grow on a mountain peak, so the seeds of all the passions cannot grow in Nirvana. And finally, as a mountain peak is free fom all desire to please or displease so is Nirvana.” *Buddhist Scriptures (p157)***
* In the Questions of King Milinda, Nagasena explains to the king that Nibbana can only be understood by experiencing the state yourself. Nagasena compares Nibbana to the wind which cannot be seen or touched but can be experienced.
* To the Theravada Buddhist the path to Nibbana is difficult, but straightforward. The Buddhist is entirely on his own on his journey to enlightenment and can expect no help from the Buddha who is considered ‘tathagata’ (thus gone) except as a guide and example.
* In Mahayana Buddhism the path to Nibbana is less individually strenuous as it is connected to the concept of the Bodhisattva – enlightened beings who have so much compassion that they want all thinking beings to achieve enlightenment. Although the Theravada school of Buddhism also believe in Bodhisattvas, they only believe in two – Sakyamuni Buddha (The historical Buddha) and Maitreya Buddha (The future Buddha). Since there is more help available to aspiring Buddhas in Mahayana Buddhism it is believed that Nibbana is something that everyone should achieve.
* Since Mahayana Buddhists believe that everyone can achiebe Nibbana their beliefs about the Buddha have been extended. Mahayana Buddhism teaches the concept of the Buddha is not limited to the earthly life of Siddhatta Gautama. The **Trikaya** Doctrine teaches that there are three different ways of looking at the Buddha, which are referred to as the Three Bodies:
  + **The Nirmanakaya** (transformation body) refers to the earthly appearances of the Buddha.
  + **The Sambhogakaya** (glorious body) refers to the heavenly Buddhas who have many powers and whose purpose is the salvation of all beings. They are the focus of Mahayana worship.
  + **The Dharmakaya** (Ultimate body) refers to the underlying truth about the universe, the emptiness of all things and the truth of enlightened purified consciousness.

People need great teachers to guide them and gods to pray to ask for help in their lives. Consequently, since most people have trouble grasping ultimate truth for themselves, other forms of the Buddha have developed over time in order to help all beings come to enlightenment. It could be argued that Mahayana Buddhists do not really believe that all these Buddhas and Bodhisattvas exist They are simply ways of looking at ultimate reality.

* Theravada Buddhists believe that we are tied to the cycle of Samsara and after many lifetimes may be reborn as a monk. As a monk our goal is to rid ourselves of all attachments and achieve Nibbana. Mahayana Buddhists, however, believe that we are all in Nibbana now, we simply have to see the illusion of Samsara and realise our own Buddha nature.

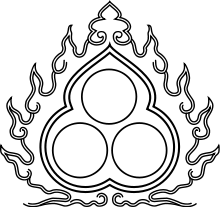
Nibbana in Buddhist practice

* As Theravada Buddhists believe that Nibbana is achievable by following the Dhamma and through individual effort, the practice of Buddhism is centred on the striving towards enlightenment. Monks and nuns are more likely to gain enlightenment than lay people because they are less affected by the cravings of the wold. The discipline of monastic life is more conducive to following the spiritual path.
* The Mahayana belief in Nibbana for everyone affects the role of the Sangha. There is less of a difference between lay people and monks and nuns than in the Theravada tradition and in some schools the monks are more like priests and are able to marry. Monks are often asked to recite parts of the Dhama in order to transfer merit to a relative who has died so that they may gain a better rebirth.

**Buddhist practices**

**The Three Jewels**

The Buddha, the Dhamma (the Buddha’s teachings) and the Sangha (the community of Buddhists) are the three Jewels and are also known as **The three refuges.** Refuge meaning something which provides comfort and safety and which can be trusted. The three jewels are the focus for all Buddhist practice. The three Jewels help Buddhists cope with suffering and leads them in the right direction towards Nibbana. The three Jewels are the basis of Buddhism and are required for Buddhism to make sense. Without the Buddha there would be no Dhamma. You need the Buddha as an example to follow the Dhamma and without the Sangha there would be no-one to keep following the Dhamma to keep Buddhism alive.



The Buddha

The Buddha was a prince, ascetic, son, husband, father, monk and teacher. The Buddha is a role model for Buddhists who want to live compassionate and contented lives. It was the Buddha who recognised the nature of existence and the nature of human beings. He realised that life is full of suffering and concluded that the cause of suffering was desire and that there was a way of escaping suffering. Buddhists have a great respect for the Buddha and the sacrifices he made to live a better life and to escape from the cycle of Samsara. The Buddha was a man and not a God. Once he had reached enlightenment he taught other people what he had learned so that they could follow his example.

The Dhamma

Dhamma is the term given to Buddhist teaching. This can refer to a particular teaching such as the **Four Noble Truths,** a collection of scripture like the **Pali Canon** (this contains the teaching of the Buddha when they were finally written down), or the whole of Buddhist teaching. Dhamma also includes the entire collection of Buddhist scriptures including traditional teachings such as the Dhammapada and modern teachings. Today the Dhamma includes written texts, spoken words, books, CD’s and DVD’s. Dhamma is sometimes translated as ‘the way’ as it shows what Buddhists should do in order to gain enlightenment. Buddhists actually refer to their religion as the Dhamma. The Dhamma is seen as a guide which indicates the way to Enlightenment and not the source of Enlightenment itself.

Scriptures

Buddhist scriptures are part of the Dhamma. When the Buddha died his teachings were passed on by word of mouth for about 300 years. When they were finally written down on palm leaves and stored in three baskets they were known as the **Tipitaka** which means ‘three baskets’.

The first section is called ‘discipline’ and contains rules for Buddhist monks to follow. The second section contains the key teachings of the Buddha including the **Four Noble Truths** and the **Noble Eightfold Path** (This is where The Dhammapada section can be found). The third section explains the Buddha’s teachings.

The Tipitaka was originally written in the Pali language and is known as the **Pali Canon**. Many monks learn the Pali language so that they can read the Tipitaka in its original form. Other sacred writings include the thousands of teachings called the **‘Suttas’**. These are mainly teachings of the Buddha. The most famous of the Suttas are the Lotus and Heart Suttas of Mahayana Buddhism.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| The Tipitaka | | |
| Vinaya-pitaka | Sutta-pitaka | Abhidhamma-pitaka |
| These writings are concered with monastic discipline, and practice. They include instructions on peaceful living, caring for the sick, giving to the poor and teaching the lay community. | These writings include the eachings of the Buddha as told by his disciple Ananda. They are divided into five parts and include dialogues, illustrations and parables linked by common moral and spiritual themes. | These writings provide an analysis of key Buddhist ideas with a special emphasis on different mental states and help with meditation. |
| The **Dhammapada** is the most famous section of the **Sutta-Pitaka**. Its 423 verses provide practical advice on a person’s path to Enlightenment and provide a useful summary of many of the Buddha’s most important teachings. | | |

The Dhamma in Buddha’s life

* After Buddha became enlightened he was able to help others towards enlightenment by teaching the Dhamma. He decided to teach the five ascetics that he had lived with first. His first sermon is known as **Sermon of Benares** or **Deer Park Sermon** because it was given at the Deer Park at Sarnath by the Varanasi (once called Benares).
* The Buddha returned to his childhood home where he preached the Dhamma to his father who accepted his rejection of inheritance. His preaching of the Dhamma continued throughout his lifetime as he travelled around India.
* On his deathbed Buddha explained the necessity of following the Dhamma as a way to Nibbana (enlightenment)
* After Buddha’s death a gathering of Arahats (worthy ones) agreed on one version of the Dhamma. Ananda, as one of Buddha’s closest disciples, recited every teaching the Buddha had taught. These sayings of the Buddha were eventually written down and became the Sutta Pitaka section of the Pali Canon.

The Dhamma in Buddha’s teachings

* **The Sermon at Benares** – It appears to be an over emphasis to talk of the Dhamma in Buddhist teaching but the concept is often referred to by name. It takes a central place as one of **the three jewels** or refuges, the focus for Buddhist practice. **“To the Buddha for refuge I go; to the Dharma for refuge I go; to the Sangha for refuge I go.” *Buddhist Scriptures (p182)***
* The sermon also talks of setting the wheel of Dhamma in motion. This means that the basic Buddhist teachings are explained in the Sermon and any later teaching simply elaborates them. The Sermon at Benares explains the Middle Way between indulgence and asceticism. Its central teaching is the **four noble truths** and the **eightfold path**.
* All schools of Buddhism see the teachings on the four noble truths and the eightfold path as central to the Dhamma, however their interpretation of how the Dhamma should be understood varies.
  + Theravada – ‘teachings of the elders’ concentrates on the Dhamma first taught by the Buddha and then passed on to the Sangha. It is important for Theravada Buddhists that the Dhamma is what the Buddha actually taught his disciples. The Pali Canon (Tipitaka/Three baskets) contains the Buddha’s philosophy and ethics and it is this that the Theravada must follow to the letter if they wish to gain enlightenment.
  + Mahayana Buddhism includes additional references to later scriptures inspired by the Buddha’s teaching but not actually his words. Examples of this are the **Lotus** and **Diamond Sutra**. These later teachings are written in many of the native languages of the countries where Mahayana Buddhism spread e.g. Japanese, Tibetan. The Lotus Sutra emphasises the point that Buddha wanted everyone to understand the Dhamma and so later teachings emerged to enable more people to understand.
* The parable of the burning house explains how the three different ways of explaining the Dhamma are in fact a skilful device for getting more people to realise its truth. In other words, there are more ways of understanding Buddhism than simply the actual words of the Buddha.

The Dhamma in Buddhist practice

* The importance of the Dhamma in Buddhists’ lives cannot be over-emphasised. The religion is based around the development of understanding and most schools of Buddhism concentrate on developing understanding through hearing the Dhamma.
* Theravada Buddhists still use recitation of the Dhamma as an important way to gain knowledge and insight into the meaning of the Dhamma. The monks recite the 227 rules of the Vinaya Pitaka every fortnight and many of the sayings of the Buddha are told again and again to emphasise the point. It is regarded good Kamma to learn sections by heart and sections are chanted both morning and evening.
* Through the Dhamma the Buddhist can gain wisdom.
* The Dhamma of Mahayana Buddhism develops the teachings of the Pali Canon and emphasises the way to Nibbana is possible for everyone. Different schools within Mahayana use the Dhamma in a variety of ways. Collecting scriptures is important in many Mahayana traditions and the written texts are often wrapped and stored in places of honour around the shrine. The number of scriptures that exist makes it unlikely that many Buddhists could learn them all so the emphasis on memorisation and reciting the scriptures is seen as less important. Most Mahayana schools concentrate on teachers explaining the meanings of the Dhamma to their students.
* Zen teaches that scriptures are only a tool rather than the Dhamma itself. They use riddles to try to awaken the understanding of the impermanence of existence. These are known as Koans. Other ways to gain enlightenment can come through experiences such as flower arranging, archery or the Japanese tea ceremony. These appear not to be connected to the Dhamma but the practices do relate to the teaching of mindfulness which is an important part of the eightfold path and so central to the Dhamma.

The Sangha/Arya Sangha

The community of Buddhists is called the Sangha. The Sangha has two groups: the ordained (monks and nuns in monasteries and retreats) and the laity (Buddhists who work and live ordinary lives).

At first, the Buddha wondered whether it was possible to teach others about the things which he had come to understand. Then he had a vision and knew that he had to teach the doctrine of existence. He remembered the five ascetics who had looked after him after he had left the palace and with his Buddha-vision he learnt that they were staying in a deer park at Benares. When the ascetics saw him in the distance they planned to have nothing to do with him because they believed that he had taken up a life of comfort. However, the five men listened to what he had to say. The Buddha told them that he had arrived at the truth and found an end to suffering. The Buddha shared his knowledge with the five and soon they all became enlightened, they became **arhats** (worthy ones). Soon sixty people had become enlightened and the Buddha sent them out to spread his teaching. This was the first Sangha.

Taking refuge as a monk or nun in a monastery or retreat helps Buddhists overcome selfish cravings by being cut off from worldly temptations. In the monastery monks have the opportunity, free from distractions, to learn the wisdom of senior monks and have time to meditate without distractions.

The **Arya Sangha** is a special group of Buddhists who have achieved Enlightenment. In Mahayana Buddhism they are called **Bodhisattvas** and in Theravada they are called **arhats.**

Some say that it is wrong to include lay Buddhists in the sangha as they weaken the strength of Buddhism. They may also say a monastic setting provides the best environment for those who want to reach enlightenment. Other Buddhists would reject this view they would say that it is not realistic to expect all Buddhists to become monks and nuns. They would also say that lay Buddhists bring a lot to the community.

In Scotland there is a Tibetan centre and monastery – Samye Ling. Near Eskdalemuir in Dumfriesshire.

**Magga /The Noble Eightfold Path ‘The middle way’**

The Noble Eightfold path is a summary of the Buddha’s teachings on how to end suffering and attain Enlightenment. It is the Buddha’s fourth and final Noble Truth. The path towards Nibbana is known as the Middle Way and is followed in one way or another by all Buddhists. The teachings of the Noble Eightfold Path can be separated into three divisions: Wisdom, morality and meditation. This threefold division of the Eightfold Path is called the **threefold way.**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Right understanding/viewpoint | Understanding and accepting the Four Noble Truths and the true nature of the self. Understanding that you can be freed from the consequences of past actions and that you can achieve release and enlightenment. | Wisdom  ‘prajna’ |
| Right Thought | Trying to be unselfish and caring for people rather than concentrating on yourself. Non-harming and good will are important thoughts. |  |
| Right Speech | No lies, slander or boasts but being kind, thoughtful and helpful when you talk to people. | Morality  ‘sila’ |
| Right Action | Acting morally by being kind, considerate to all people and creatures, this is why Buddhists are vegetarians. Not killing, stealing or drinking alcohol. |  |
| Right Livelihood/living | Doing a useful job which doesn’t involve killing, hurting others, selling alcohol or trafficking slaves or women. |  |
| Right Effort | Pursuing the Eightfold Path at your own pace, seeking the truth and the good, rejecting lies and avoiding things which are evil. Get rid of the idea of the self. | Meditation/mental discipline  ‘Samadhi’ |
| Right mindfulness/awareness | Bringing experiences to come to mind and developing an awareness of things which go on around you. Becoming aware that there is nothing permanent about the body’s activities (breathing), sensations or feeling. Getting rid of the five hindrances: Covetousness, malevolence, sloth, restlessness and doubts. |  |
| Right concentration | Training your mind so that you concentrate completely on the achievement of Nibbana without your mind wandering. |  |

The Middle way is interpreted differently by Theravada and Mahayana traditions. For the Theravada Buddhists the path to enlightenment is the one of the Arahat and therefore only monks can follow the Eighfold Path to Enlightenment. By following the path of the Arahat an individual can learn how to get rid of the craving that leads to dissatisfaction and become enlightened. For the Mahayna Buddhists the path of the Arahat is seen as too narrow and individualistic. Instead the path is the one of the Bodhisattva. Beings of enlightenment can then dedicate themselves to obtaining enlightenment not for themselves but in order to help others.

Magga in Buddha’s life

* The Sangha – The Buddha became enlightened through his own efforts. After he left the palace he tried many ways and sought a lot of advice before eventually sitting under the Bo tree meditating for 49 days. This is seen as the model for the way of the Arahat.
* After becoming enlightened, The Buddha taught others the Middle Way. Many people who listened to the Dhamma became enlightened themselves whilst others formed a group of followers who spent their time wandering and teaching the Dhamma. During the rainy season travel was difficult so these followers began to gather together in Viharas (resting places). Eventually the Viharas developed into the Buddhist monasteries of today.
* At Buddha’s death he gathered members of the Sangha around him to give advice. He said *‘****be lamps unto yourselves’*** which is seen by Theravada Buddhists to show that enlightenment is achieved through personal effort. This is not seen as an act of selfishness but rather to put all effort and concentration into getting rid of self**. “It is sometimes felt that this self-reliant religion is rather selfish, concerned only with saving oneself from suffering, but this is to misunderstand Theravada Buddhism. It is a contradiction in terms to strive to save ‘yourself’. By definition, an arahat is one who has lost all sense of ‘self’ separate from others, and all selfish impulses. Compassion for others, and helping them on their spiritual path, is a vital part of Theravada Buddhism. Monks teach ‘for the sake of the welfare and happiness of gods and men’. Without a compassionate mind, enlightenment would never be attained.” *[Denise Cush p 46]***

Magga is Buddhist teachings

* Theravada Buddhsts look to the stories of the Sangha at the time of the Buddha where individuals became Arahats by following the eightfold path. The Pali Canon explains the advice the Buddha gave to disciples on how to practice the Middle way.
* As well as the Suttas, Theravada Buddhists look to the Vinaya Pitaka to teach them how to follow The Way. The Vinaya Pitaka (basket of discipline) contains not only the rules to be followed but also information about the life of Buddha and the early Sangha. It contains the 227 rules for monks who were known as Bhikkhus (one who shares) and includes the rules that must be followed in order to remain in the Sangha as well as the additional rules for Buddhist nuns.
* As the number of Theravada nuns dwindled, the additional rules helped lead to their extinction. Full ordination of nuns can only be given in the presence of both Theravada monks and nuns. There have been no fully ordained Bhikkhunis (nuns) in the Theravada tradition since the 11th Century. Women who shave their heads and follow the ten precepts are still technically lay sisters.
* Only Mahayana Buddhists accept Mahayana Sutras as scripture. Mahayana monks and nuns follow the Vinaya rules passed down by earlier schools. However, the main difference is in the interpretation of the rules to suit the circumstances of the school. Tibetan monks may cook their food and Zen monks even see the growing of food as part of their spiritual progress.

Magga in Buddhist practice

* Theravada Buddhists believe that the path to Nibbana is one that takes many lifetimes to achieve. This is because Kamma that increases attachment to Samsara is accumulated gradually and similarly getting rid of attachment can only be achieved gradually and without full realisation of the progress.
* Theravada Buddhists believe that Nibbana can only be achieved by following the eightfold path. This can be quite challenging as everyday life makes it difficult to understand ultimate truth. **“It is harder to overcome the clinging to a self when we are seeing, hearing or thinking, than to endure bodily hardship. The development of wisdom is a life task. We need much courage and perseverance in order to be aware of daily life.”[ Van Gorkam: *Buddhism in Daily life p76]***
* Monks are given the highest respect in Theravada Buddhism as they have devoted their lives to perfecting the Middle Way and are living examples of this for all members of the Sangha. **“We take refuge in the Sangha also when we pay our respect to the monks, no matter whether they are Aryans or not, because the goal of monkhood is to apply what the Buddha taught in order to realise the truth and to try to help other people as well to realise the truth. The monks remind us of the ‘three Gems: The Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha [Ibid p77]**

**The Five precepts/Monastic and Lay community**

All Buddhists, the lay community and monastic Buddhists follow the five precepts and these encourage the development of selflessness.

* Avoid harming other life
* Avoid taking what is not given
* Avoid sexual misconduct
* Avoid incorrect speech
* Avoid drink and drugs that cloud the mind

Monks follow the five precepts to show the lay community what is expected of them and to develop a sense of Anatta. Monks are able to follow these precepts to the fullest degree with the word avoidance being replaced by abstinence. In addition they follow another set of five which are more difficult outwith the monastic environment.

* Avoid food after midday
* Avoid a high or luxurious bed
* Avoid public amusements e.g. music, dancing
* Avoid jewellery and perfume
* Avoid handling gold and silver

Monks are not allowed to work for money and therefore rely on the lay community for support. This is often seen in the daily alms round where the monastic Sangha travel through the villages with their alms bowls into which lay people donate food. Lay people may go to the vihara to provide and cook meals for the monks or they may invite monks to their homes for meals.

The only possessions which a Buddhist monk has are a robe, a begging bowl, a razor for shaving his head, and a filter to strain insects out of his water. They live in small huts in a monastery which has very little furniture.

The monks usually get up early and spend their days meditating, studying scriptures, performing ceremonies and preaching sermons to lay people. During the rainy season retreat (vassa) they spend most of their time in meditation and at the end of the retreat they celebrate Kathina day where the lay people provide them with new robes.

Lay people are often seen as inferior in religious status to monks as they cannot devote all their lives to the Dhamma but are concerned with worldly attachments. However the relationship between the monastic and lay community is essentially interdependent – the monks rely on the lay community for their material needs and the lay people rely on the monks for their spiritual needs.

The goal for most lay people is to gain good Kamma for a better rebirth (Samsara). Merit can be gained through moral behaviour, by taking part in religious ceremonies and by supporting the monastic Sangha.

**Ahimsa**

The principle of ahimsa is of non-violence and abstention from harming living things. This principle involves all living creatures because Buddhists believe that everything is interconnected. If they do not want to suffer and experience pain then it is only good sense to assume that neither does anything else. A Buddhist would not believe it was right to impose pain and suffering on any living creature. As a result many Buddhists are vegetarian. Behaving in this manner nurtures the positive quality of loving kindness to all creatures.

Buddhists should also apply the principle of ahimsa to themselves. They should not put themselves through undue pain and suffering whilst on the path to enlightenment as extreme actions would not be the ‘middle way’.

**Meditation and worship/Puja**

Puja

Performing Puja (worship) is seen as an important way for lay people to gain good Kamma. Lay Buddhists recite the three refuges and renew their taking of the five precepts either in daily puja at a shrine, at home or more formally at the temple. People make offerings before the statue of the Buddha as a symbolic reminder of the truth of Buddha’s Dhamma. For example flowers represent impermanence and candles represent enlightenment.

Some lay Buddhists take additional precepts when they visit the Temple. They dress in white robes with no jewellery, perfume or amusements. They do not eat after midday and do not use comfortable chairs or beds.

Rites of passage are seen as less important as they focus on the self. Initiation and death are the only religious ceremonies as they focus on the concepts of Anicca and Samsara. Many lay Buddhist families encourage their sons to join the monastic community for a period of time in order to gain good Kamma for themselves and the whole family. Temporary admission to the monastic Sangha is not seen as failure as everything is impermanent and in some countries it gives boys the additional material advantage of a good education.

In the Mahayana schools the difference between the monastic and lay community may in some schools seem less distinct whilst in others there are greater divisions.

Pure land Buddhism with its emphasis on faith in Amida Buddha encourages lay people to believe that enlightenment is possible for anyone who calls upon his name.

Tibetan Buddhism has very obvious divisions between the monastic and lay Sangha. Buddhism was the foundation of Tibetan society with one in six men being monks at one time. Joining the monastic Sangha is a lifetime commitment and for some this begins at a very early age. The different sects within the Tibetan school each have a lineage of leadership. In some cases when an important teacher or lama dies the monastery searches for his reincarnation. These lamas are believed to be Bodhisattvas who take human form in order to help others towards Nibbana. When the incarnation is found the small boy is taken to the monastery and brought up as a monk. His parents see giving birth to a lama as being a special honour which produces good Kamma and will not be as reluctant therefore to give him up as a western family might be. The Dalai Lama, head of Tibetan Buddhism, is believed to be the fourteenth incarnation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara orCheenrezig.

Tibetan Buddhists are taught that everyone has a Buddha nature. Each Buddhist has gained the perfect human rebirth which is believed to be as rare as a blind turtle swimming in a vast ocean and only surfacing once in a century putting its head through a small ring which is floating somewhere on the surface of the water. Therefore all Buddhists should try to make spiritual progress during this lifetime and if possible achieve Nibbana.

Meditation

Meditation is often seen as central to Buddhism because only through training of the mind can you begin to see the world and yourself as they really are. Only then can you stop craving and follow the path that leads to enlightenment – Nibbana. Remember that it was as a direct result of meditation that Buddha hained enlightenment.

Meditation also forms one-third of the Noble Eightfold Path: ‘Samadhi’ (right effort, mindfulness and concentration).

Meditation allows the person to get rid of thoughts and feelings that are motivated by the three root poisons and to replace them with calm, peaceful and loving thoughts and feelings.

Samatha Meditation

This is the simplest form of meditation which involves concentration on one thing in particular: Your breath, for example. This helps to calm the mind and increase self-awareness. Samatha meditation also induces contentment and patience.

Vipassana (insight) meditation

This is a more advanced form of meditation in which Buddhist teachings are explored in a deeper way. Mahayana Buddhists may concentrate on a bodhisattva with some, or all, of his virtues. Samatha meditation helps to bring about temporary changes whereas vipassana meditation helps to bring about permanent changes.

**Glossary**

**Anicca**: Impermanence

**Arahat (Arhat):** An enlightened monk in the Theravada tradition

**Asceticism:** living with only the bare minimum needed for existence

**Avalokiteshvara**: The Bodhisattva of compassion

**Bodhisattva:** A person with the potential to gain enlightenment or someone who chooses to help others gain enlightenment. Literally Bodhi-Sattva Enlightened – Being

**Biddhi:** Monk ‘one who shares’

**Dhamma (Dharma):** Buddhist teachings, The way of Buddhism

**Hinayanna:** The lesser vehicle (Mahayana term for Theravada Buddhism)

**Kamma (Karma):** An action that produces good or bad results

**Mara:** The arch tempter who tries to trap the Buddha with sense pleasures

**Mahayana:** The greater vehicle

**Nibbana (Nirvana):** enlightenment

**Pali Canon:** Authoritative Buddhist scriptures

**Sakyamuni:** A title of Siddhatta Gautama: ‘sage of the Sakyas’

**Samsara:** The cycle of rebirth

**Siddhatta Gotama (Siddhartha Gautama):** the Buddha’s name before enlightenment

**Skandhas:** the five bundles that make up a person ‘body’, feelings, perceptions, impulses, consciousness

**Tathagata:** A title of the Buddha (Theravada) ‘thus gone’

**Theravada:** Teachings of the Elders

**Tipitaka (Tripitaka):** The three baskets of Buddhist scriptures