

Buddhist Worldview Traditions

Core Subject Knowledge Essay



This core subject knowledge essay is also available on our website. We also have an accompanying in-depth subject knowledge essay and glossary, available both on our website and for download.

In-depth subject knowledge essay: <http://reonline.org.uk/religion-worldview/buddhist-worldview-traditions/table-of-contents/>

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Introduction

Buddhism* is a global religious worldview, or spiritual path, followed by hundreds of millions of people. It began with Siddhartha Gautama, later known as the Buddha, who found a way to end human suffering and taught it to others. The Buddha, whilst greatly revered for his teaching, is not worshipped as a deity. Buddhists “take refuge” in the Three Jewels, which are also known as the three treasures or three refuges:

- the Buddha
- the Dhamma or Dharma, which is the teaching of the Buddha.
- the Sangha, which refers to the community of Buddhists.

History and origins

Buddhism began about 2,500 years ago in North India/Nepal. Siddhartha Gautama, later known as the Buddha, lived in the sixth century BCE, and is described in traditional stories as being born a prince in luxury but with a protected youth. He encountered suffering, seeing The Four Sights: an old person, a sick person, a dead person and an ascetic on a forbidden trip out of the palace. As a result of this, he left the palace and began searching for answers to suffering. After years of meditative practice and severe renunciation, he finally reached enlightenment beneath the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya.

From then on, he taught for around 45 years and gathered a Sangha of monks and nuns. After his passing, (Parinirvana) his teaching spread widely, taking root in many cultures.

Over time, diverse schools formed. The two main schools are:

- Theravada (“Way of the Elders”) which initially flourished in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.
- Mahayana (“Greater Vehicle”) spread across East Asia and Tibet; Tibetan Buddhism, which is part of the Mahayana tradition, developed distinctive practices sometimes known as the Vajrayana in the Himalayan region.
- modern movements, such as the Triratna movement and New Kadampa also emerged.

Now, followers of these different schools and movements can be found in many areas of the world, and all can be found in the UK.

Core beliefs

Buddhists often summarise human experience through the Three marks of existence:

- dukkha: suffering or unsatisfactoriness.
- anicca: impermanence.

- anatta: there is no permanent self.

The Buddha's first teaching outlined The Four Noble Truths:

- the reality of dukkha, that life involves suffering.
- this suffering originates from craving or desire (Tanha).
- suffering can be ended, nirodha, if desire or craving is replaced by a person reaching Nirvana, a state of secure and perfect liberation.
- The Noble Eightfold Path or Middle way is, Buddhists believe, the practical route to freedom from desire and craving.

The Eightfold Path or Middle way is a practical guide to living by the teachings of the Buddha. This series of practices can lead to the end of suffering and stepping off the cycle of birth, death and rebirth:

- right understanding (know the Buddha's teaching).
- right intention (have the right attitude to following the Buddha).
- right speech (speak truthfully).
- right action (behave with good intentions).
- right livelihood.
- right effort.
- right mindfulness.
- right concentration.

In the Theravada school of Buddhism, the ideal is the Arhat, one who realises Nibbana (Nirvana), "blowing out" greed, hatred and delusion.

The Mahayana school emphasises the Bodhisattva ideal, which is where an Arhat postpones the personal final Nirvana to help all beings. This school also teaches a series of ethical principles, or six perfections: generosity, morality, patience, energy, meditation and wisdom.

Practices and rituals

Buddhists train the mind and heart through meditation of different types including:

- samatha (calm), one example of this is Metta bhavana (Loving kindness).
- Vipassana (insight).

Many Buddhists chant mantra, use Mala beads and adopt symbolic hand gestures when focusing on a Buddharupa, a Buddha image. Whilst some Buddhists visit temples, many practice at shrines in their home or garden.

Daily ethics are shaped by the five precepts:

- not harming,
- not taking the not given,
- sexual responsibility,
- truthful speech,
- avoiding intoxicants.

Monks and Nuns extend these precepts (e.g., not eating after noon, avoiding entertainment and luxury, not handling money). Lay Buddhist communities support Monks and Nuns through dana, generosity, such as giving food.

Scriptures

Scriptures in Theravada Buddhism are known as Tipitaka, which literally means ‘three baskets,’ as the original writings were on leaves and kept in baskets. It is also called the Pali canon.

The Tipitaka is a collection of sacred texts in three parts:

- Vinaya: rules for the monks and nuns.
- Sutta: talks, sayings and teachings of the Buddha. One well known part of this is the Dhammapada, which has moral and philosophical guidance from the Buddha.
- Abhidhamma: philosophical discussions.

In the Mahayana tradition, there are also many other additional texts called the Mahayana sutras. These include texts such as the Heart Sutra, the Diamond Sutra and the Lotus Sutra

Theravada school (“Way of the Elders”) stresses the early teachings and the goal of Arhat liberation and includes traditions like the Thai Forest and Vipassana movements.

Diversity within the tradition

Mahayana school (“Greater Vehicle”) which has a rich variety including:

- Tibetan Buddhism, sometimes know as Vajrayana Buddhism, part of the Mahayana tradition : integrated ritual, philosophy and meditation.
- Zen Buddhism, emphasis on direct insight; “just sitting”.
- Pure Land Buddhism, devotion to Amitabha Buddha.

Newer global expressions of Buddhism include Engaged Buddhism, applying Dhamma to social justice and peace, the Triratna movement, and New Kadampa communities.

Key figures and places

- Buddha: the historical Buddha is central, stories of his past lives are preserved in Jataka tales, and some traditions venerate many Buddhas.
- The Dalai Lama is a prominent and spiritual teacher for Tibetan Buddhism.
- Important places include Bodh Gaya, the place where the Buddha gained enlightenment, Sarnath, the place where the Buddha delivered his first sermon and Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha. These are also places of pilgrimage.
- A Stupa, which is a burial mound, built to house relics of the Buddha. Buddhists often walk around them chanting mantras.
- Vihara are monasteries for monks and nuns.
- A Gompa is found in Tibetan Buddhism and contain a shrine, a vihara and a hall for meditation.

Festivals

- Wesak (Vesak), also known as Buddha Day celebrates the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and sometimes death, commonly on May's full moon.
- Dharma Day, celebrated on the July full moon celebrates the Buddha's first teaching at Sarnath
- Sangha Day celebrated on the November full moon celebrates the Sangha jewel, spiritual community and friendship
- Parinirvana day/ Nirvana or Nibbana day (8th or 15th February) is a reflective time to remember impermanence and loved ones who have died.

Contemporary expressions

Buddhists engage today with environmental care, peace-making and equality, often under the banner of Engaged Buddhism.

Many create mandala sand art to teach Anicca, impermanence; others keep simple Zen calligraphy or gardens.

Some British Buddhist groups identify with Pure Land Buddhism, others with Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, or modern movements like Triratna and New Kadampa. However, there are members of almost all Buddhist schools living in contemporary Britain.

Statistics in Britain

Scottish Census (2022): 15,501 people (roughly 0.3%) identified as Buddhist.

England & Wales Census (2021): about 272,500 people (roughly 0.5%) identified as Buddhist.

Key takeaways

- Human life is marked by suffering (dukkha), impermanence (Anicca) and (Anatta), and freedom is possible through insight and practice.
- The Eightfold Path or Middle way is the practical core of Buddhism. Ethics are gathered in the five precepts for lay Buddhists.
- Traditions vary: Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan (Vajrayana) Buddhism, plus modern global movements.
- Practice includes meditation, Puja, chanting mantras, using Mala beads, and cultivating the Brahmaviharas (kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity).
- In Britain, Buddhists are a small but visible minority, contributing a wide range of temples, vihara and community centres.

Link to where this comes from and link to the glossary