

Buddhist Worldview Traditions

In-Depth Subject Knowledge Essay



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About the author

Professional

Denise Cush is Emeritus Professor of Religion and Education at Bath Spa University, having retired after 29 years there in 2015. Her roles during this time included leading and teaching Study of Religions and Philosophies and Ethics, teaching within Education Studies, and teacher training for both primary and secondary RE. Before that she taught Religious Studies (including Buddhism at A level and A/O level) as well as Religious Education for nine years at St. Mary's RC Sixth-form College in Middlesbrough. She has an MA in Theology from Oxford University, a PGCE in RE with Science as second subject from Westminster College, Oxford, an MA in Religious Studies from the University of Lancaster (where her dissertation focused on Buddhism in Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism in the West, employing historical, textual and ethnographic methods), a PhD in Religious Education from the University of Warwick, and an honorary doctorate from the University of Uppsala. She was a member of the Commission on Religious Education 2017-18, and Deputy Editor of the *British Journal of Religious Education* from 2011-2018. Publications include *Buddhism*, a still much-used textbook (Hodder, 1994), the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Hinduism* (2007), *Celebrating Planet Earth, a Pagan/Christian Conversation* (Moon, 2015) and many others .

Personal

Denise was brought up within a Roman Catholic family and attended Catholic maintained schools in the North East. She identified as Catholic (of a liberal, post Vatican II, 'preferential option for the poor', 'justice and peace' tendency) for the first 30 years of her life, including teaching in a Catholic Sixth-form college. Since then she has resisted labels, and identifies as non-binary in relation to the religious/non-religious construct, though has sometimes called herself a 'positive pluralist', acknowledging the influence of several religious and non-religious worldviews on her personal worldview. She has never identified as Buddhist although she acknowledges the influence of Buddhist ideas and practices, among others, on her personal worldview. The factors affecting her interpretations of Buddhism are her position as 'a sympathetic outsider', visits to Sri Lanka, Japan and Nepal, a partner who spent a month living as a novice in a Thai monastery, friends and colleagues who belong to

Theravada and Tibetan traditions, and interactions with many different Buddhist communities in the UK. She first decided to study Buddhism (and Hinduism) at MA level, mainly because of the contrast with the Christianity of her upbringing and Theology degree, and probably also because of the positive image 'Eastern' religions had in 1970s alternative youth culture. She has continued to campaign for the inclusion of Buddhism in religious studies curricula (as well as Paganism, Humanism, Jainism, Rastafari and other smaller groups) because of a commitment to whomever and whatever is neglected, marginalised, or different. No doubt however class, gender, whiteness, sexual orientation and personal experience also affect her perspective. The conclusion of her 1994 A level textbook emphasised the partial, provisional and flawed nature of any attempt to summarise a tradition, but also the value of such an attempt if it helps a little in developing knowledge and understanding.

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Introduction to Buddhism

Preconceptions

Even if you do not know much about Buddhism, you will have some existing preconceptions. It is interesting to stop and think what these are and from where they have come. Are they positive or negative or neither? How did they get inside your head and how reliable or representative are the sources of these preconceptions? Contemporary Western perceptions of Buddhism are often positive in a rather romanticised way – Buddha images are found in houses, gardens or spa centres, bought by people who want to suggest peace and serenity. The Dalai Lama is generally held in high esteem, and is something of an international celebrity. Festival-goers sang 'Happy Birthday' to him when he visited Glastonbury festival in 2015, close to his 80th. Others are attracted by the idea of Buddhism as a rational religion, or perhaps not a 'religion' but a 'philosophy', based on personal experience and compatible with modern science. These are however perceptions, deriving from a variety of sources including earlier scholarship, colonial encounters and even advertising. If your picture of a Buddhist is an oriental man in an orange robe, then this reflects the British history of colonialism and earlier scholarship, as well as patriarchy. Earlier preconceptions were not always as positive, and negative preconceptions can still be found today – Buddhists as worshippers of idols (think of the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in 2001), or as pessimistic and fatalistic and therefore not doing much to help people practically, or monks and nuns as parasites on the hardworking people. The author suggests above some of the origins of her own initial interest in and experience of Buddhists and Buddhism, which she hopes have been improved by over four decades of studying and meeting Buddhists. Her own initially rather romanticised view of Buddhism was challenged by arriving in Sri Lanka in 1983 on the day when violence broke out between Buddhist-identifying Sinhalese and Hindu-identifying Tamils. It might be useful to stop and reflect on where your own preconceptions come from, and how they might develop.

A note on languages

Students and teachers alike find it difficult remembering all the non-English words used in books and other resources on Buddhism. It is also hard to know how to pronounce them. Some of these terms just have to be used as they are technical terms with no accurate English equivalent. A few, like karma or nirvana have entered into everyday English use over the last half century or so, which helps, or perhaps hinders, if the meaning is not quite the same. The oldest texts are written in two ancient Indian languages, Pali and Sanskrit, which like Latin in Europe are no longer spoken. As well as the Theravada canon (authorised collection of texts), written in Pali, there are Chinese and Tibetan canons, and resources will also use terms from other modern languages such as Japanese, Thai, Korean, Sinhalese, or Vietnamese. English textbooks tend to prioritise the classical Pali or Sanskrit terms, but there is no logic (but probably an interesting history) to which of these has become more familiar in English, for example nirvana is Sanskrit but anatta is Pali. If there are pupils from Buddhist families in the classroom they might be more familiar with terms in their own heritage

language or as used in their particular Buddhist community rather than the classical ones used in textbooks. In this essay, where both Sanskrit and Pali terms are given, Sanskrit comes first. As giving both every time can become tedious, sometimes only one is used. Academic texts will use diacritic marks (for example Mahayana would be Mahāyanā) for accuracy, but this essay ignores them for simplicity. However, if trying to look things up in indexes of resources that do use diacritics, it might be useful to know for example that shunyata (emptiness) would be found as sūnyatā. Terms taken from other languages, especially Chinese, can also be rendered differently, for example Kwan yin can be found spelt Gwanyin and in other ways.

What is Buddhism? Is it a religion, a worldview, a philosophy, a way of life, a spiritual path? Does it even exist?

One way of answering 'what is Buddhism?' would be to say that Buddhism is one of largest and most influential religious traditions in the world, sharing with Christianity and Islam the vision of spreading to the whole of humanity rather than being limited to a particular ethnic or national group. In the nineteenth century it was estimated that Buddhism was a major influence on 40% of the world's population. Even after the upheavals of the twentieth century, especially the adoption of non-religious Marxist/Maoist ideologies in China and several other countries where Buddhism was previously important, it is claimed by most sources (such as Wikipedia, adherents.com, worldpopulation.com) that there are about 500-535 million adherents, or somewhere between 7-10% of the world's population. An alternative view is that there could be really more like 1.6 billion or 22%, mainly reliant on counting much larger numbers of Chinese people as Buddhists, and counting people who include some Buddhist practices in their lives (buddhaweekly.com). Perhaps the figure is somewhere between the two, and of course, it depends on who you count as a Buddhist and the methods of collecting the data.

Another way of answering this would be to query whether there is even such a thing as 'Buddh-ism', whether it is correct to classify it as a religion or religious tradition, and whether it is possible to separate it out from other traditions. Many contemporary scholars consider that the idea of 'religions' as clearly defined separate belief systems is a Western notion dating back to the eighteenth or nineteenth century and thus that the idea of something called 'Buddh-ism' is an invention of Western scholars. Given that many Buddhist countries were colonised by Western powers, this means that accounts read by Westerners were first written by or for the foreign rulers. However, as the colonised (especially indigenous elites) were not just passive recipients of labels given by others, but joined in the process of definition with their own agenda, it might be better to say that 'Buddh-ism' as most people imagine it, and many textbooks describe it, is a product of the colonial encounter. For example, in the UK, there is a tendency to see Theravada Buddhism as the more mainstream because of British involvement with Sri Lanka, and of Buddhism as rational, playing down the more ritual or mystical elements, because of the efforts of Buddhist modernisers in Sri Lanka. Many Buddhists would prefer to talk about the Dharma/Dhamma or truth about the way things are rather than an 'ism'. Some Theravada Buddhists would distinguish between Buddhāmagga 'the way of the Buddha' and

Buddhasasana, Buddhism as an institution, the latter subject to the problems of the human condition. A helpful phrase from leading scholar Richard Gombrich (1996:7) is 'Buddhism is not an inert object, it is a chain of events' (which fits in well with Buddhist teaching). Having said all this, in this essay, in spite of the issues above, the term 'Buddhism' continues to be used but only for convenience. This is quite a Buddhist approach to take.

Whether Buddhism is a religion depends on what you mean by 'religion'. If 'religion' is a Western category as argued above, it is easy to see that the label might not fit an 'Eastern' tradition, and if 'religion' (as some argue) has negative image, it is easy to see that people might prefer another label. If religion is modelled narrowly on Christianity – centred on belief in God, one sacred text, salvation through faith – then Buddhism doesn't really fit. Calling Buddhism a philosophy sounds both more rational and more sophisticated, but perhaps ignores much of Buddhism as lived in practice. The historical Buddha himself refused to discuss many 'philosophical' questions, stressing the need to get on with practice. In contrast, 'way of life' stresses that it is not some theoretical 'ism', but a practical, ethical lifestyle (but many – if not all – other traditions can also be found saying that they are 'not a religion but a way of life'). For some people 'spirituality' has a more positive feel than 'religion', suggesting a more personal, experiential, meditative awareness than an organised bureaucracy, and there is a common stereotype that 'Eastern' traditions are more 'spiritual' than 'Western' religions, but this is a stereotype, and ignores the institutional, political, and social aspects of the tradition. Some contemporary Buddhists have attempted to strip away the 'religious trappings' of Buddhism (such as metaphysical beliefs, myths, deities, rituals, even beliefs in any life after death) and recast it as a practical secular philosophy or way of life that minimises suffering for all (though the division between 'secular' and 'religious' is also a product of 'Western' thought). However, if a wider, vaguer and more flexible view of the label 'religion' is taken, without the centrality of God, then Buddhism does seem to have similar concerns to other religious worldviews.

What does it mean to call Buddhism a worldview, whether labelled religious or not (or neither or both)? In the most general sense, 'worldview' refers to an overall approach to life. But 'worldview', like 'religion,' is another term that means different things to different people. It can mean the intellectual or cognitive ideas, teachings and beliefs of a tradition, put together in a systematic way by scholars within the tradition. Buddhism does have these, but they are diverse, and do not form a single 'ism', and many Buddhists would not see the teachings (Dharma/Dhamma) as 'beliefs' or 'views' (in the sense of opinions) but the truth (Dharma/Dhamma) or 'right view'. It can also mean something much wider, including emotions, experience, ethical and ritual practice, sense of identity, and the Buddhist tradition includes these too. It can mean an 'institutional' worldview, so would refer to the official versions of teachings, ethical expectations, approved practices, definitions of membership, or views on contemporary issues put forward by accepted authorities within the tradition. Buddhism has these too, but they are many and varied, and in any case, individuals and smaller groups identifying with a particular institution do not always accept or live by the whole 'package'. 'Worldview' then can be communal so that instead of talking about one Buddhist worldview, we should talk about worldviews plural for the many different Buddhist groups. Our worldviews are also personal, so we might talk about the

worldview of an individual, in which Buddhist ideas, values, practices and identity might form a major or just a contributory part alongside other influences. 'Worldview' also can be used in a narrow sense to mean just views about the 'world' or cosmos, rather than other aspects of human experience, or to refer to the taken-for-granted assumptions of any particular society – so that some might talk about gods and spirits (both good and evil, such as the tempter Mara) being part of the 'worldview' (it might be called a 'mythological worldview') at the time of the Buddha, but not generally accepted in contemporary Western society.

One of the problems with the Western notion of religion (or worldview) is the idea that they are separate and distinct, whereas in the 'Dharmic' religions with origins in India, the boundaries between traditions are (or perhaps were, in the light of relatively recent attempts at 'fundamentalist' purity) much less defined than in Western thought. This is illustrated by the story of the Nepali who answered 'yes' when asked they were Hindu or Buddhist. This is not just because as Buddhism spread it did not insist that people gave up their previous beliefs and customs, so that local deities still feature in practices, but that elements that have later been separated out as 'Hindu' are present from the beginning – such as the deities Brahma and Indra who are said to have persuaded the Buddha to teach. There are many aspects of Buddhism that could be said to be part of a 'shared Indian worldview' and can also be found in what have become labelled as 'Hinduism', 'Jainism' or 'Sikhism' – traditional cosmologies, the idea of samsara or many lives, ideas of karma (results of actions), the problem of delusion and the aim of liberation. The historical figure who has become known as 'the Buddha' lived at a particular time and place, and scholars have pointed out a shared heritage of what later became viewed as separate 'religions' in what has been labelled 'shramana culture', the ferment of ideas, values and practices of groups and individuals who renounced both everyday life and the institutional religion of the time and sought spiritual liberation, generally through ascetic practices.

Who are Buddhists

The easiest answer to the question of who is a Buddhist is anyone who identifies as such. We might however query this statement if the beliefs, values and behaviour of the person bore no resemblance to anything associated with the term Buddhist or if they had no connections with any Buddhist community. As with any such identification, being a Buddhist can mean many different things. For many it means having been born into a Buddhist family with roots in a majority-Buddhist country, so is linked with ethnic and cultural identity. For others, with different family backgrounds, it might have been a choice in adulthood, and less about ethnicity and culture and more about personal experience, values and beliefs.

Although there are now Buddhists worldwide, Buddhist-majority countries today include Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Bhutan, and Mongolia. Other countries with substantial Buddhist populations are China, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Nepal. Japan is an interesting case. Though many claim to be secular or non-religious, Buddhism has been, and still is, very influential in Japan. Different sources use different ways of counting who is a Buddhist, and as many people combine elements that

might be labelled Buddhist or Shinto or secular in their personal worldview and practice, figures vary between 36% and 67% or even higher if counting all those who include at least something recognisably Buddhist in their lives. This listing of countries soon becomes political. Tibet is a Buddhist-majority country, but claimed as part of China. It is interesting to see which lists include Tibet separately and which do not, and to wonder why, and also (in different ways) Taiwan or Hong Kong. In the past, and especially prior to the expansion of Islam, India, Indonesia and many of the Central Asian 'silk road' centres (now in countries such as Afghanistan or Uzbekistan) also had substantial Buddhist populations. Whether the 20% of some lists or the much larger estimates of others, the largest number of Buddhists in the world live in China, whether in the minority areas of Theravada or Tibetan-style Buddhist practice, or within the majority Han population. Roughly three-quarters of all Buddhists in the world follow Mahayana traditions, which is important to remember given the UK tendency to view Theravada as the mainstream.

When did Buddhism begin?

Most textbooks would say that Buddhism began about 2,500 years ago in India with the teaching of a man who became known as 'the Buddha' ('the enlightened one'), in other words, the person who woke up to the truth about life. His name was Siddhartha Gautama (Sanskrit) Siddhattha Gotama (Pali). Although he is often called 'the' Buddha, he is also called Shakyamuni Buddha ('wise man of the Shakya people') to distinguish him from other Buddhas, especially in Mahayana Buddhism, where there are many. That he was a real historical person is rarely disputed nowadays given the evidence, but his exact dates are a matter of some debate. Various Buddhist traditions have differing dates for his life such as 624-544 BCE, 566-486 BCE, or 448-368 BCE. Western scholars used to favour the middle date, but more recent evidence tends to favour the later one.

However, to call this historical person the 'founder of Buddhism' would be not quite right on two counts. For a start, as we have argued above, 'Buddh-ism' is a Western concept. In Buddhist thought, he did not 'start' but 'discovered' the Dharma/Dhamma or truth about life, which is eternal. In addition, there have been other Buddhas in previous eras before him, who discovered the same truth, and there will be future Buddhas in times to come. A text in the Pali Canon states that 'our' Buddha took his first steps towards enlightenment when listening to the teaching of a Buddha called Dipankara, twenty-four Buddhas (and zillions of lifetimes) ago. In Mahayana Buddhism, there are many other Buddhas even now, in other dimensions.

How this essay is organised

The headings in this essay are derived from the six 'Big Ideas' (Wintersgill ed. 2017, Wintersgill et al, 2019) and the Commission on RE's National Entitlement (CoRE 2018). This introductory section for example links to NE2 – key concepts such as religion and the complexity of worldviews, NE4 – the ways in which worldviews develop in interaction with each other and have some shared beliefs and practices, and that people may draw upon

more than one tradition, and Big Idea 1 – continuity, change and diversity and what we mean by religion(s)/worldview(s).

Where to begin?

The Dalai Lama tends to start by talking about the importance of kindness. Another starting point would be the quest for happiness. Peggy Morgan also suggested starting with rainbows and impermanence with young children (1986). Buddhist families and supplementary schools might start with a focus on good behaviour, meditation or ritual practice. Many school textbooks start with the life of 'the' Buddha, and then the Four Noble Truths, which might be the Buddha's first sermon according to the Pali Canon, but was notably addressed to religious ascetics experienced in various meditation techniques and so not necessarily where to start for beginners, whether children or adults. The tendency is to start with an outline of what is viewed as 'basic' Buddhist teaching, which in the UK tends towards a Theravada perspective, and then later deal with 'diverse' interpretations which are then seen as later developments, either declining from or improving on the basics. The Big Ideas project decided to start instead with diversity as the current reality and avoid setting up a 'basic' version which tends to get stuck. This essay will attempt this starting point, before looking at 'matters of central importance' which is where the National Entitlement starts (but the main thing is to start).

Diversity, Change and Continuity

Diversity, Change and Continuity (Big Idea 1; NE 2 and 3)

As argued in the Introduction, there is no fixed monolithic entity called Buddhism. Rather, like other traditions, it is diverse, particularly so having had such a long history and wide geographical spread through many countries, cultures and languages. According to Guy Claxton 'Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Buddhism in Tibet and Buddhism in Japan are as different on the surface as Christianity, Judaism and Islam' (1989). Scholars and syllabuses tend to divide Buddhism into Theravada ('way of the elders') and Mahayana ('the great vehicle') but this is really just for convenience as these are not even the same kind of term (Theravada is a line of ordination and/or a school of philosophy, and Mahayana a sort of different vision of Buddhism (see Willams 2008), including many different lines of ordination, schools of philosophy and traditions of practice). The two strands have different scriptural texts, somewhat different concepts of what is meant by 'Buddha', and differing ideas of the eventual goal of the Buddhist path. Theravada is the only surviving non-Mahayana tradition, but there were many others in earlier Buddhist centuries. In medieval India, monks in the same monastery might be following non-Mahayana and Mahayana paths. The label 'Mahayana' covers many different types of Buddhism, so that some scholars divide Buddhism into three instead: Southern (Theravada in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos), Northern (Tibetan Buddhism, in Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia as well as Tibet) and Eastern (the many different forms in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam, noting that China is such a huge area that there are also Theravada and Tibetan-style Buddhist minorities as well as 'Eastern' traditions). There are several different strands of Tibetan/Northern

Buddhism, and the far-Eastern traditions include (using the Japanese names) Zen, Jodo (Pure Land), Shingon, Tendai, Sanron, Kegon Nichiren Buddhism and others, as well as each having subgroups. There are also groups started in the 20th century such as the Triratna movement (formerly Friends of the Western Buddhist Order) which started in the UK, and Soka Gakkai, a development of Nichiren Buddhism, which started in Japan.

The point to grasp is that there are many different Buddhist groups, that Buddhist tradition has changed and developed over time and in different contexts, and that even individuals in the same group may have different ideas, values, emotions and experience. No one source, whether a scholar, textbook or person calling themselves a Buddhist can speak for all. Having said that, there are still some basics that most Buddhists would share, and without which it would be hard to count them as Buddhists, though this list should not be seen as hard-and-fast. These might include: acceptance of impermanence, the working of karma, rebirth and the cycle of lives (samsara), the possibility of enlightenment or liberation, respect for 'the' or 'a' or several Buddhas and their teachings, a commitment to a moral and compassionate lifestyle, and practise of some form of traditional ritual or meditation. One factor making for continuity amidst the change is the care Buddhists have taken over the centuries to ensure the authenticity of their teachings. This may be through passing on texts, or by tracing lineages of teachers. Buddhist texts were passed on through memorisation to start with, until first written down several centuries after the time of the Buddha. Contrary to popular opinion, Richard Gombrich has argued that the regular oral recitation of texts in a group, as was the case in the early monastic community, makes it less likely that errors or deliberate changes are introduced than when texts are written down. Several individuals in Buddhist history went to great efforts, such as travelling from China to India or over the Himalayas between India and Tibet, to collect authentic scriptures. Ordained Buddhists have records of the lineage of their teachers, in theory at least stretching back to the Buddha himself, and identifying your teacher is important to lay Buddhists too, especially in Tibetan Buddhism.

The Big Picture (Big Idea 6; NE 1&6)

Introduction

Matters of central importance, human nature and destiny, reality, the natural world and ultimate questions (Big Idea 6; NE 1 and 6)

This section looks at the Buddhist worldview(s) in a narrower sense of the word, referring to the ideas or fundamental teachings on the meaning and purpose of life in a cognitive or intellectual sense as systematised by scholars within and outside the tradition – views about human nature and destiny, reality, the natural world and ultimate questions. However, as a rich and varied tradition, there is no set creed or list of beliefs to which all Buddhists subscribe or centralised authority to enforce them.

What is really of central importance?

Given the diversity of Buddhism, different Buddhists might have different views about what is a matter of central importance in Buddhism, and many might prioritise ethical behaviour,

meditation or ritual practice, personal experience or even political action over the ideas discussed in this section. But all would be focused in one way or another on what it is to be human.

Human Nature and Destiny – The Central Concern

a) Human nature

As Buddhism is not centred on God, it seems best to start with the human condition and potential. Human nature is viewed in both negative and positive ways, and as not fixed but capable of change. Humans are prone to greed, hatred and delusion (symbolised on the 'Tibetan Wheel of Life' as a cockerel, snake and pig). That one of our biggest problems is delusion about the way things are is a teaching shared with other traditions of Indian origin.

However, humans are also capable of change for the better, by starting to live lives that are ethical and compassionate, taking control of our thoughts and emotions by means of meditation and self-discipline and learning to see things more clearly and wisely.

In common with other Dharmic traditions, most Buddhists assume that we live many lives rather than just one – this is known as samsara ('wandering on'), the cycle of life, death and rebirth, a constant process of 'rebecoming' (punabhava) which occurs during this life and on into the next. The process of rebecoming is fuelled by karma/kamma ('action'), all our morally significant actions which have consequences in this life or the next. Human life is characterised by the 'three marks', in Pali these are known as dukkha, anicca and anatta.

Dukkha is translated as 'suffering', 'ill', 'unsatisfactoriness' or 'dissatisfaction'. Basically, our lives are not as good as we wish they were. There is plain suffering itself, pain and illness, whether physical or mental, poverty and hunger, war and violence, unjust and unequal treatment, negative discrimination, natural disasters. Even if our own lives are comfortable, we know that those of others are not. Then there is the fact that the good things in life that bring us happiness do not last forever, they come to an end at some point, or we lose interest, and eventually we ourselves also come to an end in death. Third is the unsatisfactory nature of our limitations – our abilities are limited, we cannot be in more than one place at a time, each of our choices rules out other possibilities. The translation 'dissatisfaction' suggests that much of the problem is in our attitudes, whereas 'unsatisfactoriness' suggests that the problems are with life in the world in itself rather than with us as individuals.

The second mark of life, Anicca or impermanence, focuses on the fact that nothing lasts forever. Everything in life is impermanent, which is part of the sadness of life when applied to good things, but can be comforting or energising if applied to bad circumstances.

The third mark of life is Anatta (or in Sanskrit, anatman), which means 'no self, soul or inner essence'. Other religious traditions may find refuge from impermanence in an eternal God, in the case of Abrahamic traditions, or in the idea that behind the impermanent, changing

material body and mind there is an eternal, inner essence, soul or self, but not Buddhism. This teaching distinguishes Buddhism from other Indian traditions. Peter Harvey expresses 'no-self' well: 'no permanent, substantial, independent, metaphysical self can be found' and 'a "person" is a collection of rapidly changing and interacting mental and physical processes' (1994:23-4). It is not saying that you don't exist, but that you exist in a constantly changing way, and dependent on other things, people and events.

Analysis in reflection and meditation is claimed to reveal that a human being is made up of five skandhas/khandhas, which can be translated as 'heaps', 'aggregates' or 'collections of components.' These are: the physical body (rupa), feelings (vedana), perceptions/cognitions (sanna), impulses/constructing activities (sankaras), and consciousness (vinnana). The names in brackets are in Pali. All of these are changing and impermanent and there is nothing else. A famous analogy in a text known as The Questions of King Milinda compares the 'self' to a chariot. A chariot is made of components such as wheels, axles etc put together in a certain way for a certain purpose – 'chariot' is not another component, but simply a label to express the collection of components and their current use. If the 'chariot' was broken up, the bits would still be there but no chariot, yet nothing has actually disappeared. The same with the 'self' – it is just a label not an entity, and the word used just for convenience, as it is easier to say 'I' than 'this collection of atoms, feelings, thoughts/perceptions, willed impulses and consciousness in its current state'.

'No self' is considered one of the difficult concepts in Buddhism to grasp. Part of this is because of the difficulties of translation ('self' in Indian philosophies tends to imply something separate from the body, eternal and unchanging, whereas it need not in English). A second reason is that many other religions do have the concept of an eternal self or soul which is the true 'you'. A third reason in Buddhist thought is our own psychological attachment to the idea of ourselves as being permanent and unitary. In Buddhist thought, everything changes, including people, including you. From death to rebirth is just a more extreme change in the ongoing process.

Some Mahayana texts and thinkers add further perspectives on human nature. One philosophy, called Madhyamaka, teaches that all things including people are characterised by shunyata or 'emptiness'. Nothing, not even the components or 'dharma/dhammas' into which Theravada thought analysed people and chariots, has 'self-existence'. The simplest way of explaining this is to say that nothing is anything in or by itself, but only in relation to other things. A teacher is only a teacher if she has students and vice versa. Once retired she is not a teacher any more but no-one has disappeared from the universe. Another school of philosophy teaches that the ultimate truth about human nature is that at the deepest level it is Buddha-nature, and that all are, or will be, Buddha(s). More on this can be found in the section on Buddhist philosophies.

b) Human destiny

Given the presumption of many lives, there are both interim and ultimate destinies for human life-processes. Most Buddhists expect rebirth into another form after death. Many

Buddhists prefer the term 'rebirth' to 'reincarnation' as the latter suggests a soul moving to a new physical body, which is not what Buddhism teaches. However, others do use the term reincarnation. As the idea of an immortal soul getting a new body (whether in reincarnation or resurrection) is more familiar, people often wonder how rebirth can work without a soul/self. The idea to grasp is that of process – the new life starts as a result of the old life. One analogy is to think of the energy of one snooker ball causing another to move – there is no 'inner ball' that jumps from one ball to the other.

Traditionally there are said to be six realms into which rebirth can occur – as a human or an animal, but also into the temporary paradise realm of the gods (with a small g), or the less happy world of another category of beings with god-like powers, called angry or jealous gods or demons, or the two miserable realms of the hungry/unsatisfied ghosts, or temporary hells. These are pictured in the well-known Tibetan 'wheel of life', and Buddhists may understand these on a spectrum of literal to metaphorical truth (some human lives are 'hell'). There are also other levels, more refined and hard to imagine (but possibly experienced in advanced meditation), above and beyond these six.

However, rebirth even as a fortunate human or a deity who has everything is not the ultimate goal in Buddhism, as these are also part of the world of suffering, impermanence and no-self, and the heavenly or hellish lives will come to an end when the karma fuelling them runs out. Though not the happiest, human birth is considered to be the most conducive to spiritual progress, as animals, ghosts and beings in hell are too focused on basic survival or utter misery and gods and jealous gods are too focused on their pleasures or their plots to reflect deeply on the meaning of life and make the efforts to do something about it.

Theravada perspective

The ultimate goal for Theravada Buddhists is for the whole process of karma and rebirth and going around in circles to cease. This cessation is known as nirvana/nibbana which literally means 'blown out' – the end of all that suffering, birth and death. Nirvana is mostly described in negative terms like cessation, extinction, stopping, the unborn, the deathless. It is not made, it is uncaused and unconditioned (whereas everything we know has causes and conditions), invisible, without shape or size. It can sound like total annihilation, that suffering is escaped by no longer existing in any sense, death as understood by 'non-religious' materialists (who did exist at the time of the Buddha and are not only a 'modern' phenomenon). That might seem a desirable goal if repeating the sufferings and deaths of millions of lives is contemplated, and some have interpreted nirvana in this way. However, the Buddha criticised both annihilationists and eternalists, and asserted that nirvana 'is'. There are positive words used like peace, calm, joy, bliss, and poetic imagery like water to a person overwhelmed by heat and thirst, or the magic wishing jewel of Indian stories. That nirvana 'is' can be known (it is claimed) from the testimony of those who have experienced it, such as the Buddha himself and many of his early followers. It is experienced while still in a human body as well as after death (presumably, given the Buddha's refusal to answer the question about whether an enlightened Buddha exists after death). But it is so removed

from normal experience that there are no words to describe it even for the best of teachers like the Buddha, and not even worth those without the experience trying to imagine it. It has been suggested that it is a form of consciousness, but not as we know it, not only while the enlightened person is still alive, but also after death (parinirvana/parinibbana).

The name given by Theravada Buddhism to someone who achieves nirvana/nibbana is an arhat/arahant, a 'worthy one'. In the Buddha's lifetime, hundreds of his followers, women as well as men, are said to have achieved this goal. The Pali Canon includes 107 poems by senior monks and 73 poems by senior nuns celebrating the joy of their liberation (in the case of the women, including freedom from the oppressions suffered by the female gender). Such people are enlightened, like the Buddha, but not called 'Buddhas' because that term is reserved for the very rare individuals who discovered the truth and the way themselves – only one such person in our era according to Theravada.

The teaching on human nature and destiny has been summarised in two well-known and memorable formulations, the Four Noble Truths and 12 links of paticcasamupada 'dependent origination'. The Four Noble Truths are recorded as the first teaching of the Buddha after his enlightenment, the 'Deer Park Sermon' given to a group of fellow shramanas.

1. The truth of dukkha (see 'three marks of life' above) – life is characterised by suffering/unsatisfactoriness, in birth, sickness, getting old, death, sorrow, physical and mental pain, having to put up with things and people we don't like, not having the things and people we love, not getting what we want. This does not deny the happiness, beauty and joys of life, but these also cause suffering because they do not last.

2. The truth of the origin of suffering. This teaches that the fundamental cause of suffering is tanha or craving, our own selfish desire. Not just in the obvious sense that we don't always get what we want, but in a deeper sense that this is the motor behind continuous rebirth into samsara, and thus more suffering. Craving includes both wanting to live forever and wanting to die in the sense of complete annihilation, as well as wanting all the good things in life. It is as if we are samsara addicts, wanting more even though it will only bring more suffering.

How this works is explained in another formula, the 12 links of paticcasamupada 'dependent origination' which traces everything back to ignorance as well as craving. Ignorance causes karma formations, causes consciousness, causes 'name and form' i.e. existence in samsara, which means we have six senses (Western five plus mind), which means we come into contact with things, which means we develop feelings, causing cravings, then grasping at what we crave, so we become involved in the process of becoming, so we are reborn into samsara again, so we have to endure more suffering, decay and death. It is perhaps easier to follow in reverse order, asking: why do we have to suffer and die? Because we are born into samsara. Why are we born into samsara? Because we are caught up in the process of becoming...

The 12 links have been interpreted in many ways (whole PhDs have been written on the topic) but the thing to grasp is that our human condition is brought about by a collection of interrelated causal conditions over which we potentially have some control ourselves. It's not down to fate or God or completely random.

3. The truth of the cessation of dukkha. If you know what causes something, you can start to do something about it. The chain of causation can be broken. The Third Truth focuses on the craving highlighted in the Second Truth, but other links can be broken too, especially ignorance, or attempting to stop feelings turning into cravings. That we can be set free from the craving that causes suffering is the 'good news' of the Buddha's teaching.

4. The truth of the way to stop dukkha. This is what you have to do. The Fourth Truth is basically that you must live a Buddhist life, the whole point of which is to tackle the problem of the first Truth. In the formula of the Four Noble Truths, it is summarised as the 'Noble Eightfold Path' (though there are other summaries to be found in the Pali Canon, including a tenfold path, and many other lists of factors that lead to enlightenment, so perhaps this particular formula has become seen as too fixed). There are eight things that have got to be put right – right views, intentions, speech, conduct, livelihood, mindfulness and concentration. It has often been commented that the first two are about becoming wiser – sorting out ideas and attitudes, the next three are basically about ethical behaviour, including in the way one earns a living, and the final three about disciplining the mind through working on one's mental bad habits, cultivating calm and awareness, and practising more formal techniques of meditation. All together work on the basic problems of ignorance and craving, or greed, hatred and delusion.

The Four Noble Truths have been compared to a doctor's diagnosis – this is what's wrong with you, this is what has caused it, you can do something about it, and this is what you have to do/take. Most textbooks on Buddhism highlight the Four Noble Truths as 'the' teaching of the Buddha but there are a number of things to remember about them. The Buddha taught many other things. This particular sermon was aimed at his ascetic shramana audience, people who were probably already expert meditators and could be expected to have a realistic possibility of following the path to nirvana in their current lifetime. Although generally accepted as 'basic Buddhism' and 'what the Buddha taught', this formulation is as found in the Pali Canon, from the Theravada tradition, and although many Mahayana texts also refer to this teaching, and accept it as the Buddha's foundational teaching, they do so in a somewhat different overall context. Bearing these comments in mind, the Four Noble Truths would not be the first thing taught to Buddhist children, nor would the vast majority of Buddhists, even ordained ones, expect to be able to follow the eightfold path to its conclusion in their current life.

Mahayana perspectives

A differing view of the ultimate human destiny is one of the main distinguishing features of the Mahayana vision. The goal of becoming an enlightened arhat /arahant is seen as insufficient. The ultimate aim for all beings, not just the rare extraordinary one in an aeon, is

to become a Buddha, someone whose goal is liberation for all beings. This means choosing the path of the bodhisattva/bodhisatta 'being of enlightenment' or 'Buddha-to-be'. In non-Mahayana Buddhism this name is used of 'the' Buddha before he became enlightened, and as in stories about previous lives of 'the' Buddha, the Mahayana bodhisattva starts with a vow to work endlessly throughout countless lives towards gaining enlightenment in order, as 'the' Buddha did, to save others. In a way which makes sense if no-self and emptiness are understood, a bodhisattva rather gloriously vows to gain enlightenment and save all beings while simultaneously realising that no beings as such exist. The bodhisattva path involves many lifetimes attaining the perfections of giving, morality, patience, vigour, meditation, wisdom, skilful means, power and knowledge until supreme Buddhahood is achieved. Thus in Mahayana we hear of many other Buddhas in addition to Shakyamuni, who are however not historical in the sense that he was. One very popular in China and Japan is Amitabha (Sanskrit) or Amida (Japanese) Buddha who is said to have made a vow to become a Buddha and then create a wonderful universe (a 'pure land') where life is much easier and it is much easier to become enlightened, which he then did. Devotees of Amida hope that when they die, he will appear and take them to his 'pure land' if they have had faith in and devotion to him in this life. Whether this destiny is an interim step to nirvana or a more poetic way of talking about the ultimate human destiny is debated. As well as such Buddhas, Mahayana has many bodhisattvas who are far advanced on their path, and thus have almost the same powers as a Buddha, such as Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, or Tara.

The other main Mahayana teaching is that when Buddhas come to the end of their final life, they do not pass away into a nirvana that has no connection with the samsaric world, but are still present in a heavenly or spiritual form, so that Buddhas and advanced bodhisattvas are available to help struggling humans. That the twin ideas that all can be Buddhas and that Buddhas are still around were seen as new developments in Buddhist thought is recognised by the scriptural texts that teach this, for example the Lotus Sutra claims that these were taught by the historical Buddha, but only to a select audience, and kept secret until the time came to reveal them.

A further Mahayana development teaches the idea of the Tathagata-garbha 'embryo/womb of the Buddha', that not only are all beings potential Buddhas, but from an eternal perspective, already are, as all have Buddha nature, it is just that we do not realise it. So the goal of life is not so much to become something new, but that all the efforts are needed to see what we always have been.

If your aim is to have a good rebirth, you would focus on being generous, moral, detached from materialistic possessions, supporting the monastics and engaging in Buddhist practices. If your aim was to become an arhat, you would follow the eightfold path, and probably take monastic vows. If your aim is to reach Amida's Pure Land when you die, you would have faith in and pray to Amida (plus being a good person, depending on which group you belong to). If you want to become a Buddha, you follow the bodhisattva path, if (as in forms of Japanese Zen) you wish to realise your already existing Buddha-nature, you would practice the forms of meditation conducive to this.

'Ultimate' Reality and 'Ultimate' Questions

Compared with the crucial teaching on human nature and destiny and the need to get on with it, other big ontological and metaphysical questions are secondary in Buddhism and even get in the way. There are many traditions of Buddhist philosophy, in both Theravada and Mahayana, but none are speculation for its own sake but all geared to the matter of central importance which is getting everyone out of suffering. The historical Buddha was said to have refused to discuss a number of questions including: is the world eternal, not eternal, both or neither? Is the world finite, not finite, both or neither? Does the Tathagata (Buddha) exist after death, or not, both, or neither? Is the 'self' identical with the body, or is it different from the body? These questions are similar to the 'ultimate' questions of other religions, so it is clearly of importance that the Buddha refused to answer them. He described them as 'a net' and refused to be drawn into such a net of theories, speculations and dogmas which waste the time that should be spent on taking action. It is said that it was because the Buddha was free of bondage to all theories, philosophies, dogmas and ideologies that he achieved enlightenment. He told a well-known story of a person shot by an arrow who refused to have the arrow removed until he knew all about it – type of wood, family background of the person who shot it – and so died. Likewise we can waste time discussing fascinating philosophical and metaphysical questions instead of getting on with freeing ourselves from greed, hatred and delusion.

The 'ultimate' is not something often discussed in Buddhism. This is because the Buddha, after much meditation, concluded that everything is changing and impermanent so that there is nothing permanent and unchanging like the ultimate 'God' in monotheistic religions, or the soul/self in other Indian religions or Christianity. Theravadins consider nirvana /nibbana to be the opposite of the three marks, so it could perhaps be described as 'ultimate' but Mahayanists who follow the philosophy of Madhyamaka view even nirvana as being empty of 'svabhava' or 'own being', independent, ultimate reality. So not even nirvana or Buddha or Buddha nature is ultimate in the sense of being separable from everything else, so perhaps to talk of ultimate reality in Madhyamaka Buddhism is not quite right, except perhaps to describe the ultimate truth that nothing is ultimate.

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Deities, Gods and God

The word Buddha 'enlightened one' can have different meanings. In Theravada Buddhism it refers predominantly to the historical person who lived roughly 2,500 years ago, but also to the rare enlightened beings who lived in previous aeons and the one who will come next (Maitreya/Metteya). Once passed into parinibbana a Buddha has no contact with those still stuck in samsara. In Mahayana Buddhism, the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, is one of many Buddhas past, present and future. These can and do have contact with those still in samsara. Advanced level bodhisattvas are similarly available to help struggling beings. Thus, functionally, Buddhas and bodhisattvas resemble deities, gods/goddesses or saints in other religions as they can be pictured and prayed to. The difference is that they are not ultimately real or separate from the devotee. Even Theravada Buddhists may in practice pray to the

Buddha, whom they know (see Gombrich, 1971:5), 'cognitively' to be 'human' but feel 'affectively' as 'divine'.

A further meaning of the term 'Buddha' is to refer to the underlying Buddha-nature within all, rather than to an individual being. Some forms of Mahayana Buddhism use the concept of the trikaya or 'three bodies' of Buddha. Buddha can appear in earthly form, as for example in Gautama, or in heavenly form, as the glorious beings called Buddhas (like Amitabha) or bodhisattvas (like Avalokiteshvara) who may appear in visions and can be prayed to, or the Dharmakaya or true form, the reality within or behind everything. Many gods and goddesses and other categories of 'supernatural' beings appear in Buddhist texts, temples and practices, including Indian deities. However, these are best understood as another lifeform, inhabitants of the complex multidimensional universe in which we live. They may have limited powers to help (or hinder) humans with worldly things so can be prayed to. One can be reborn as a goddess or spirit being, but this is still rebirth into samsara and impermanent.

The Mahayana understanding of Buddha, especially ideas of the Dharmakaya, or the Buddha-nature within, can begin to sound a little like the concept of God in Christianity, if God is thought of as 'being' rather than 'a being', or like Brahman in some forms of Hinduism. However, there is no concept of a personal monotheistic God, transcendent and separate from the material world and humanity, which is his creation. A passage in the Pali Canon gently mocks the idea of a creator God, in a story about the god Brahma, who woke up just as a particular world cycle was beginning and imagined he was the cause of it. Even in Mahayana, the Dharmakaya form of Buddha is not a separate, transcendent being.

Cosmology

Prescientific Indian cosmology was much more complex than prescientific ideas in the West. As well as many lives, there are many worlds. Theravada cosmology describes 31 levels to the universe in three categories, the lower realm of desire (shared by the six states of human, gods, jealous gods, animals, ghosts and beings in hell), then more rarified forms of existence in the realm of form and the formless realm. All are impermanent, and although the historical Buddha refused to answer questions about eternity or infinity, the impression is given of beginningless change without need for a starting point, whether creation or big bang. Mahayana cosmology is even more complex. There are many universes, some are 'Buddhfields', universes in which a Buddha dwells, such as the Pure Land of Amida. As to whether any of this is even real, whereas Theravada tends to give the impression of relatively real but ever changing, Mahayana concepts such as 'mind-only' or 'emptiness' query the reality of the perceived cosmos more strongly, so that it might be more accurate to say it is unreal, or neither real nor unreal, or only relatively real.

Buddhist Philosophies

The historical Buddha refused to answer many traditional ontological questions, or enter into many of the philosophical debates current at the time as they were distractions from

the urgent task of saving beings from unnecessary further suffering. Soon after his time, Buddhists did begin to create more systematic philosophical treatments of Buddhist thought, but still always geared to liberation rather than philosophy for its own sake (somewhat similar to Marx's opinion of previous philosophy, though Buddhist philosophy focuses more on changing ourselves rather than, or as a means to, changing the world). Traditional Indian philosophy does not show the same separation between 'rational' and 'religious' thinking that was made in postEnlightenment Western philosophy. They can only be mentioned briefly here, but Theravada philosophy starts with the Abhidhamma (further teaching) section of the Pali Canon, and its method of breaking everything down into components (dhammas). There were several other non-Mahayana, non-Theravada philosophies taught by types of Buddhism that no longer exist (18? 30?), one of the most interesting being the 'Personalist' who taught that although there is no 'self', the notion of a 'person' is required to explain continuity and karma/kamma from one life to the next. One important Mahayana philosophy is Madhyamaka, originating with Nagarjuna and the Prajnaparamita 'Perfect Wisdom' texts. Its central teaching is that all things, even dharmas/dhammas, the skandhas making up a human being, Buddhas, or central Buddhist teachings like the Four Noble Truths are sunya 'empty'. What they are empty of is 'svabhava' or 'own being', separate, independent, necessary existence. Another is Yogachara 'teaching of yoga' also known as Cittamatra 'mind-only' which teaches that what we think of as reality is a mental construct. It analysed human consciousness into several levels including one called the 'store consciousness' in which the seeds of karmic actions are stored from one life to the next. An Indian-origin philosophy, known better by its Chinese name Hua-yen or 'flower garland' teaches the 'total interpenetration of all things'. What all Mahayana philosophies have in common is that whereas Theravada philosophy implies that we have to escape from samsara into nibbana, in Mahayana, nirvana is seeing samsara for what it really is.

Buddhism and Science

The accounts of how and why the world and human life within it is as it is were developed in religious/philosophical traditions such as Buddhism long before the development of modern scientific methods, so are often seen as incompatible with it or reinterpreted in the light of it. However, modern and contemporary Buddhists have argued that as it is not centred on God or belief in creation, and with its stress on experience and evidence, it has a great deal in common with science, and fewer issues than, for example, Christianity. Abhidharma/Abhidhamma thought, where the world is broken up into constituent parts illustrating causality, is reminiscent of scientific method, and Mahayana thought is sometimes compared to theories in quantum physics. The Dalai Lama is very interested in science and technology and encouraging of scientific exploration, especially in connection with the effects of meditation on the brain. There has been a substantial amount of scientific research into the effects of Buddhist meditation, claiming that new scanning techniques can demonstrate changes in the brain, and mindfulness meditation, originating in Buddhism, has been used in practical ways to reduce anxiety and depression. However, the evaluations of such research are varied and require further investigation.

Theravada modernists in particular have tended to play down the mythological and ritual aspects of the tradition and point to the rationality and evidence-based nature of Buddhist thought. A favourite quotation from the Pali Canon for both Theravada modernists and Western Buddhists is in the Kalama Sutta where the Buddha tells his audience (who were wondering which of the many religious and non-religious teachers to believe) not to rely on hearsay, or traditional authorities and claimed revelation, or philosophical speculation and argument, or reflection on opinions, or because it fits your assumptions or out of respect for individual teachers (we might add now, or social media, or leading politicians...) but to try the teachings out in practice and see which lead to better lives and which just cause more harm and suffering. The Buddha claimed to have discovered the truth experientially through his own meditation. The fact that 'ordinary' followers do have to take his word for it at least at first can be compared to the way that most ordinary people have to place faith in scientists and scientific theories as we do not have the required knowledge and expertise to empirically check theories on quantum physics (or work out how similar the claims are to Mahayana philosophy) for example.

It has to be admitted that aspects of Buddhist worldviews such as karma/kamma, rebirth, other dimensions where gods, Buddhas and bodhisattvas dwell, or the existence of nirvana have not been verified by scientific experiment, even if Buddhists claim that they are verified in the experience of arhats, bodhisattvas and Buddhas. This is not to say that they are incompatible with science. On the one side, 'science' is not fixed and current views are the most convincing interpretations of the evidence currently available – but new data or better explanations of existing data may develop. On the other side, the historical Buddha taught that Buddhist teaching is also provisional, compared to a raft to get one across a river that is discarded when its job is done, so that Buddhist teachings do not have to be taken as the final word either. With Mahayana teachings such as 'emptiness' or 'mind only', the suggestion is that all such concepts as Buddha, rebirth, karma, are only true in a manner of speaking, leaving room for reconciliation with scientific findings.

Words and Beyond (Big Idea 2; NE 5)

Texts (or 'Scriptures')

One of the earliest accounts of the (historical) Buddha's life tells that the newly enlightened Buddha did not immediately set out to share his discovery with others because of the great difficulty of explaining what he experienced, but then out of compassion and with the pleading of the gods Brahma and Indra, decided to try, as there might be some who would get it, or some of it. Part of the problem is that the truth or Dharma/Dhamma, enlightenment, nirvana or central ideas such as no-self or emptiness cannot be adequately expressed in words designed only to describe samsaric existence and can only be fully understood by an experiential intuitive grasp, beyond words. If Buddhist teaching seems difficult, it is because only the enlightened can fully comprehend it, and the rest of us do our best to understand as much as we can and teach it to the best of our ability in the hope that it helps someone to some extent.

There is no one Buddhist text that plays the same role in the tradition as the Qur'an or the Bible, so scholars often reject the term 'scripture' as misleading and prefer to talk more vaguely of 'texts'. These are not 'revelation from God' or the 'word of God', though many are claimed to be the word of Buddha, so have the authority of his enlightenment. Buddhist texts are many. The teaching of the historical Buddha was not written down at the time but memorised by his close disciples, who met after his death to recite all that they remembered (see under Diversity, Change and Continuity). The earliest written versions appear a few centuries later. There are three main collections. The Theravada Pali Canon, written down in Sri Lanka in the 1st century BCE, is in three sections (Tripitaka/Tipitaka), Sutta (talks given mostly by the Buddha, but a few by leading disciples), Vinaya (monastic discipline, rules and regulations) and Abhidhamma (Buddhist teaching expressed more systematically and philosophically). In book form, it would fill a small bookcase. Most Mahayana texts were originally written in Sanskrit, some of these still exist, others are only found in translation in the Chinese Canon (put together in its current printed form of 2,184 texts around 10th century CE) and Tibetan Canon (current form 14th century CE). These are extensive collections include versions of material found in the Pali Canon, specifically Mahayana sutras (i.e. talks given by the Buddha), the vinayas of now defunct non-Mahayana traditions other than Theravada, commentaries and all sorts of material, including tantras or esoteric texts describing rituals created to speed up the journey to enlightenment. Although the collections in their current form are later, some Mahayana sutras are considered by scholars to be as old as the date at which the Pali Canon was written. Mahayana Buddhists consider that they are 'the word of the Buddha', taught when he was alive and kept until the time they were needed. Among the most well known are the Prajnaparamita 'Perfect Wisdom' sutras, the Pure Land sutras, and the Lotus Sutra.

One idea is that they were not taught when the Buddha was alive on earth, but seen and heard in meditation visions of Shakyamuni.

Given such a mass of texts, few Buddhists will have read many of them, but rely on interpretations by classical scholars or contemporary teachers. Some Mahayana groups focus on one text only as the most important, others rank the various texts in order of texts for beginners to advanced teaching. In Nichiren Buddhism, chanting the title of the Lotus Sutra is sufficiently powerful. Although words cannot fully capture the truth, and Buddhist texts are not quite like the Bible or Qur'an, they are nevertheless so precious to Buddhists that they have endured great hardships to obtain copies (one historical account of a 7th century Chinese monk who travelled to India to bring back texts was the basis of the well-known 16th century novel Journey to the West, otherwise known as Monkey which has been made into films, TV series, and stage performance). A custom in forms of Tibetan Buddhism is to keep Dharma texts on the highest shelf, even above statues of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, to express their central importance. As well as canonical texts, Buddhists may read classical and contemporary commentaries and books by the founders of particular Buddhist groups old and new, and the many books written by contemporary Buddhist leaders and scholars.

Stories

Stories have always been an effective way of explaining and expressing teachings, and can often do this in more subtle, memorable and existentially challenging ways than recounting facts. The historical Buddha, the Buddha of the Mahayana sutras, and Buddhist teachers today all use stories to illustrate ideas, provoke thoughts or model behaviour. The central story is that of the life of the historical Buddha. The Pali Canon incidentally relates many events from the Buddha's life, but a full biography did not appear until the 1st century CE, so the various versions draw upon a range of sources. A very brief summary will suffice here. The birth of a 'prince' to a leading noble family of the Shakya people in North-east India/Nepal was accompanied by miraculous events signifying the arrival of no ordinary person. His childhood was exemplary, he was married at 16, he lived a life of luxury until encountering suffering outside his privileged circle in the form of a very old person, a very ill person and a corpse on its way to cremation. The fourth 'sight' was a shramana or ascetic, someone who had renounced material possessions to seek spiritual liberation, and the Buddha-to-be decided to leave home and join those who were seeking to find truth and peace through asceticism, meditation, and discussions with leading teachers. After six years of this, he decided that extreme asceticism was not working and concentrated on meditation instead. The story outlines the events of one night of mediation during which the Buddha-to be overcame temptations, reached deep meditative states, remembered thousands of past lives, understood how beings are trapped in samsara and how they can be liberated, and by morning had himself found liberation from the round of rebirth, achieved the peace of nirvana and enlightenment. The rest of his life (45 years) he spent teaching, organising his renouncer followers (monks and nuns), gaining many lay followers including the rich and powerful who donated land and other material support, debating with other religious and non-religious teachers, and helping many groups and individuals.

There are many stories from the Buddha's life that are often told such as his conversion of the famous robber Angulimala (who wore a necklace of his victim's fingers), or his consolation of Kisagotami whose baby had died, and of his leading disciples Sariputta, Moggallana and Ananda, his cousin and constant companion. He also told many stories, including that of the blind men and the elephant, to illustrate why religious/non-religious teachers disagree – because they only perceive part of the truth. This story is also found in other Indian traditions.

The Buddha is also said to have told stories of his previous lives, including as animals or even a tree-spirit. These are known as the Jataka tales or birth stories, and the Pali Canon contains 547 of them. Many of these illustrate the extreme efforts necessary to reach enlightenment, and may focus on a particular virtue, so are popular ways of teaching good behaviour to children. Among the most well-known are the story of Prince Vessantara who was so generous that he gave away all his possessions including his wife and children (it ends happily), and the story of the monkey king who sacrificed his own life to save the other monkeys. Contemporary Buddhists also make use of stories to express and form Buddhist values and beliefs, both traditional and new.

Iconography, Symbols and Creative Arts

If it is hard to express truth in plain words, as well as stories, pictures can help. Buddhist art includes images (statues and paintings) of Buddha(s) and bodhisattvas, stupas and temples, symbols, mandalas, flags, even gardens. Creative arts include dance and drama.

Although Buddha statues are everywhere today, common in non-Buddhist as well as Buddhist homes, none have been found from the first 400-500 years of Buddhist history, and one wonders whether the historical Buddha would have even approved. Instead, symbols were used that are reminders of his presence and teachings, which are the important thing. These include footprints, a tree (under which he gained enlightenment), the eight-spoked wheel (eightfold path), a lotus flower (purity). Such symbols are still common and included in patterns such as the Tibetan 'eight auspicious symbols': Parasol (embodying notions of wealth), Golden Fish, Treasure Vase, Lotus, Conch Shell, Endless Knot, Victory Banner, Dharma Wheel.

An early way of commemorating the Buddha was the Stupa. These monuments take various forms but typically include a square base, a dome, a conical section, a canopy and a finial which have multiple symbolic meanings including the five elements (earth, water, fire, air, space) and the enlightened mind of the Buddha. The first were built to hold relics of the Buddha which were shared out after his cremation (notably to lay followers rather than monastics), and the 3rd century BCE Buddhist emperor Ashoka built many throughout his empire, some of which can still be seen from Nepal to Sri Lanka. The stupa is normally a solid structure but some temples have been designed in a stupa shape such as the new 'Great Stupa of Universal Compassion' near Bendigo in Australia, which houses the Jade Buddha and many relics. The Chinese/Japanese pagoda is a development from the original stupa form, and thought to have originated in Nepal.

One complex symbolic structure is the mandala (circle), which has become well-known through the temporary 'sand-mandalas' created by Tibetan monks (and now nuns) throughout the world. A mandala is a kind of mystical diagram of both the cosmos and the individual, created as part of a meditation ritual, and described in tantric texts. Parts of the mandala represent five Buddhas but simultaneously the five skandhas, and five material elements. After spending such care and expertise on creating the mandala of coloured sands, the creators then destroy it and dispose of the sand, often in a river, a visual illustration of impermanence.

Images of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, whether sculptures or flat paintings such as Tibetan thangkas, painted on cloth for ease of transport, are many and varied, especially in the many different versions of Mahayana, and interpretation of all the symbolic details is an academic specialism in itself. Different hand positions or mudras show whether the Buddha is teaching, meditating, protecting, giving, or touching the earth to witness to the truth of his enlightenment. Images may be of 'the' Buddha, or of Dipankara, who was 24 Buddhas ago in 'our' world, or Maitreya the next to come in 'our' world. They may represent one of the five Buddhas that appear in Mahayana mandalas: Akshobhya, Amitabha, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, and Amoghasiddhi (who all have their own 'worlds' such as Amitabha's

Pure Land). They may be of Bhaishajyaguru, the 'Medicine Buddha', who protects from illness, or the Buddha Vajrasattva who embodies the balance between wisdom and compassion, represented in Tibetan symbolism by the bell and vajra (thunderbolt or diamond sceptre). The fat 'happy' Buddha, now often used as a 'good luck' charm, even by non-Buddhists, is not the 'historical' Buddha, but a version of Maitreya Buddha, the next Buddha to come.

Then there are the many bodhisattvas, female as well as male, of whom the most well known are Avalokiteshvara (bodhisattva of compassion, sometimes pictured with thousands of arms to help everyone), Manjushri (bodhisattva of wisdom, pictured with a sword and a book), Kshitigarbha (concerned with the welfare of the dead, and connected with post-abortion rituals in contemporary Japan), and Tara (or Taras, as there are several), the saviouress, connected with Avalokiteshvara and popular in Tibetan Buddhism. In far-eastern Buddhism, the male Avalokiteshvara has transitioned into the female Kwan Yin (Kannon in Japanese), compassionate to all in trouble, and in recent times an important symbol for gender-fluid and transgender people. Other images may be found on shrines and in temples, including arhats, famous human Buddhist teachers and founders of Buddhist groups, and in both Theravada and Mahayana settings, gods and goddesses recognisable from 'Hindu' traditions such as Ganesh, Vishnu or Sarasvati, and various protector deities. Temple architecture varies by country and type of Buddhism, but are often very ornate inside, with many images. They may be attached to a monastery and have a large stupa or many small ones somewhere in the design, and offerings including flowers, incense, water, food and candles. Buddhists of all kinds may also have their own small shrine at home with an image or a few images, offering bowls, incense and a candle. Temples and shrines are places for contemplation, devotion and prayer, and are often put in the same category with 'places of worship' in other religions. However, there are important differences. In Theravada, the Buddha is not 'worshipped' but shown respect and thanks, and at least in theory, he cannot answer prayers. The offerings have symbolic meaning rather than being 'gifts', for example flowers fade quickly so teach impermanence. Even if the gods on the side altars are asked for favours, they are just another life-form. In Mahayana, although Buddhas and bodhisattvas are still contactable and can answer prayers, it is still not like theistic worship, in that these beings are not completely other, but represent one's own future state and ultimately do not exist separately from their devotee.

Although Theravada monks and nuns give up music and dance as worldly frivolities, in Tibetan Buddhism there are monks who perform music and dance/dramas as Buddhist ceremonies, with spiritual purpose for both themselves and the audience. Chanting of various kinds is found in most varieties of Buddhism and can have a musical as well as meditative effect. Tibetan Buddhism in particular has a wealth of artefacts such as prayer beads, prayer wheels both large and hand-held, the bell and vajra used in ceremonies, and prayer flags. The latter are now widely found outside Buddhist circles, such as decorating tents at music festivals. There is also an international, interdenominational 'Buddhist flag', designed by a Westerner, the Theosophist Henry Steele Olcott, in Sri Lanka in the 19th century.

In contrast to the rich profusion of precious texts, religious art and ceremonial implements in Tibetan Buddhism, is the attitude to both texts and visual forms in Zen Buddhist traditions. The focus is on simplicity, perhaps a piece of calligraphy with a few brushstrokes. There are stories about throwing both scriptures and wooden Buddha statues on the fire, and of a 16th century monk who used to go around reading a blank scroll to mock those who imagined that reading texts could lead to enlightenment, which happens by personal realisation of one's inner Buddha-nature and direct transmission of truth from teacher to pupils beyond any words. On the other hand, Zen does employ art forms such as calligraphy, haiku poetry, and the creation of beautiful gardens out of simple arrangements of stones and gravel, as well as having its own traditional texts. The seemingly iconoclastic blank scroll reading and Buddha-statue burning can themselves be viewed as a form of performance art. Buddhists from all traditions would agree that all things like scriptures, statues, philosophies, shrines, ideas, meditation practices, temples, relics, are not sacred in themselves but ultimately all just means to an end, the ending of suffering for all. The Buddhas and bodhisattvas have produced these 'skilful means' as a way of helping people, and so they should be treated with respect, unless they start to get in the way.

A Good Life (Big Idea 3; NE 7)

The Central Importance of Ethics

The attempt to be a good, kind, compassionate person is of central importance to the Buddhist way of life in all forms of Buddhism, and for both monastics and lay people. Morality is a crucial part of the eightfold path to nirvana, and the bodhisattva path to Buddhahood, and the key to good karma and a better rebirth. Even to reach Amida's Pure Land, living a good life is important alongside faith, at least in some traditions. Indeed, for most 'ordinary' Buddhists, who do not expect to reach nirvana or Buddhahood in the immediate future, kindness, compassion and good behaviour are what being a Buddhist is all about. Buddhist ethics can be summed up (as they are in the Pali Canon) as 'cease doing evil and learn to do good' or 'love not hatred', but of course these need unpacking.

Precepts

In Theravada tradition, Buddhist morality is summed up in the Five Precepts. It is important to note that these are not commands to obey, but disciplines undertaken, an individual choice:

- to refrain from harming living beings;
- to refrain from taking what is not given;
- to refrain from misconduct concerning sense-pleasures/sexual misconduct;
- to refrain from false speech;
- to refrain from unmindful states due to alcoholic drinks or drugs.

Mahayana Buddhists sometimes refer to a list of ten precepts, which subdivide 'false speech' into false, harsh, malicious and idle speech (underlining how much evil can result from

words as well as actions), and add covetousness, ill-will and wrong views. Sometimes the rule about intoxicants appears and sometimes not. There are also many lists of positive behaviour, and generosity or 'giving' features highly in Theravada lay life and is the first of the perfections to complete in the bodhisattva path.

It is important to note that Buddhist moral guidelines are not inflexible rules, but have to be adapted to circumstances in order to do the right thing. This is particularly stressed in Mahayana Buddhism, where the concept of 'skilful methods or means' requires working out what exactly is the best thing to do – for example one might have to lie to save someone's life. One famous example in Tibet involved a monk who assassinated an evil king during a dance performance. However, 'skilful means' is one of the perfections of the more advanced bodhisattva, so generally the normal rules should be followed. Another important feature of Buddhist morality is the stress on the mind – our behaviour springs from our mental attitudes, and it is important to work on our thoughts and minimise greed, hatred and delusion, so meditation helps morality. Intentions are important in Buddhist morality, so that doing what looks good for the wrong reasons is a problem, whereas doing what looks bad with good intentions is less blameworthy.

Lay Morality

The historical Buddha taught both those willing to completely renounce ordinary life and join his community of monks and nuns (the sangha) and also those from all walks of life who were not able or ready to do this. It is important to remember that the latter are by far the majority of all who identify as Buddhists, who do not spend all their time in deep meditation or studying Buddhist texts. Advice given to lay people includes looking after your family, respecting and obeying parents and looking after them when elderly, bringing up children to be loving and responsible, being faithful to your partner and sharing work fairly, choosing the right friends and being loyal and helpful. Good relationships should be formed between teachers and pupils and employers and employees, with respect on both sides. Careers should be chosen wisely and money used responsibly and generously. Advice given to one particular young man, Sigala, sounds remarkably up to date 2,500 years later. Avoid drinking, roaming the streets late at night, spending all your time at fairs, festivals and entertainment, gambling, mixing with addicts, cheats and criminals, and being idle. You will regret it.

The most important thing about Buddhist morality is that it should spring from love. Buddhist tradition identifies four aspects of love: metta or friendliness, wishing well for all; karuna or compassion, sympathising with the suffering of others; mudita or sympathetic joy, being pleased at the happiness of others; and upekkha or even-mindedness, spreading love equally and not becoming too emotionally attached. These four states, known as the brahma viharas should be developed as a form of meditation, but also apply to how we treat others in practice.

Monastic Morality

Guidance for those who choose to renounce the world and dedicate their lives fulltime to Buddhist practice are far more stringent, requiring more self-discipline and asceticism. In Theravada, novice monks, or those joining the community for a short period, undertake five extra precepts:

To abstain from food after midday

To abstain from a luxurious bed, sleeping on a mat

To abstain from amusements like music, dancing and shows

To abstain from personal adornments like jewellery and clothes, wearing a simple robe

To abstain from having anything to do with money

And for monastics, the precept about no sensual/sexual misconduct means no sex at all.

Once monks (and nuns, where they exist) are ordained, they must follow the whole vinaya (monastic discipline). The Theravada version contains 227 rules, laid down in the Pali Canon. These range from four serious issues which lead to expulsion: murder, sexual intercourse, serious theft and falsely claiming supernatural powers, to not wearing noisy clogs around the monastery. There is no Mahayana vinaya as such, but monastics follow vinaya passed down from non-Mahayana traditions other than Theravada (different ones in the case of China and Tibet) with slightly differing number of rules, and occasionally different customs. For example, Tibetan monks may play instruments and dance, in a religious context, and may cook their own food. In certain circumstances, monastics from all traditions would adapt the rules.

Many of the rules (such as not preaching to a woman alone) seem formulated with men in mind. The historical Buddha did eventually allow women to be ordained in their own separate female community, but they are required to keep eight extra precepts which all establish the superior authority of the male bhikku (monk). In many Buddhist countries, the lineage of fully ordained nuns has been allowed to die out, or was never even established, but there have been recent revivals, and there are also communities of women who keep the ten precepts and live nun-like lives, but do not have the same official status as monks.

Contemporary Moral Issues

There is no one 'Buddhist' view on any moral issue, anymore than one 'Christian' or 'Pagan' view. There is only space here to indicate some Buddhist perspectives on some controversial moral issues.

Killing and harming is ruled out by the first precept, but there are areas of disagreement.

Death penalty – still used in modern Thailand, a country whose population of over 90% Buddhist, with a Buddhist monarchy and a powerful Buddhist establishment, but banned by the 13th Dalai Lama in pre-communist Tibet.

Assassination – usually wrong, but see above the case of the Tibetan monk who assassinated the evil king.

War – Buddhists are generally committed to non-violence. The historical Buddha taught that you should not feel hatred even if someone were to carve you in pieces. Many Buddhists, including monastics, have been involved in anti-war protests, and are active in peace movements and peace negotiations. However, Buddhist-majority countries have armies, and have been involved in international and civil wars. Examples include the Sri Lankan war against Indian invaders in the 1st century BCE, the civil war between mainly Buddhist Sinhalese and mainly Hindu Tamils in Sri Lanka that started in the 1980s, Buddhist support for Japanese aggression in World War II, and the treatment of the Rohingya minority by the army in Myanmar in the present. In most such cases there are other Buddhist voices speaking out in protest. It is possible for Buddhists to feel more sympathy with the oppressed using violence rather than the powerful, which has happened for example in Tibet.

Suicide – generally seen as a selfish act springing from desire for annihilation, but monks in Vietnam and Tibet have used self-immolation by fire to draw attention to situations of great suffering, and the historical Buddha allowed one monk in great pain to kill himself.

Abortion – many Buddhists see abortion as wrong because killing a living being/potential human, but there may be circumstances where it is the most compassionate action. In Japan abortion is legal and widely practised and there are post-abortion Buddhist religious rituals, seen by some as a helpful way of addressing the associated emotions, and by others as exploitation of vulnerable people.

Euthanasia – generally considered wrong as end-of-life suffering may be a necessary burning out of past bad karma, and should be endured with patience, but there may be circumstances where it is the most compassionate action (see suicide above).

Nuclear weapons – many Buddhists are at the forefront of campaigns against, and Japanese Buddhists remember the horrors of Hiroshima. A Buddhist could support having nuclear weapons if she believed in the deterrence argument that they prevent more war and suffering.

Killing and harming animals – should be minimised. Animals are sentient beings, one of the forms of possible rebirth and potentially may eventually, like humans, achieve nirvana or Buddhahood. Many Buddhists are vegetarian and vegetarianism is considered superior, but many others eat meat and/or fish. This usually depends on circumstances. Tibetan Buddhists traditionally ate meat because of the climate and dependence on animal food sources, some Sri Lankan Buddhists are dependent on fishing. The Buddha taught that it was OK for his monks/nuns to accept meat if it hadn't been killed especially for them, and so in some Buddhist cultures butchers tend to be from other religions, allowing Buddhists to eat meat while not involved in the killing themselves. Buddhists would generally support animal

welfare such as free-range conditions, would want experiments on animals to take place only when completely necessary, and would not kill insects unless they were, for example, spreading diseases such as malaria.

Sexual Matters

Monastics renounce sexual activity as it involves one of the strongest desires keeping beings in samsara, but also because it is associated with the distraction of family life, paid work and responsibilities. Self-control in sexual matters is also expected of lay people, so traditionally faithful male/female marriages are the ideal. Marriage is viewed as a secular custom and these differ so faithful non-married couples are also acceptable (and in some Buddhist societies there have been examples of polygyny and – in Tibet – polyandry). Modern forms of contraception were not commented on by the Buddha so tend to be accepted. Divorce should not be necessary if both partners live Buddhist lives, but allowed if the marriage breaks down. The Buddha himself and several of his followers left partners to join the sangha (monastic community) usually (but not always) with the partner's consent.

LGBTQI+ issues of sexual conduct There is not much to find on this topic in the earliest texts as advice on sexual conduct tends to be addressed to the heterosexual male, and celibacy, abstinence from any sort of sexual behaviour, is the ideal. Many Buddhists have argued that therefore sexual orientation is irrelevant, and what matters is responsibility and compassion, and examples of acceptance of diversity can be found in Buddhist history. Views differ, both historically and today, in texts and in practice, with many contemporary Buddhists both Western and Eastern tending to liberal views. However, some classical Buddhist sources in both Theravada and Mahayana, have considered same-sex relationships as sexual misconduct, along with several heterosexual practices. The Dalai Lama was criticised a decade ago for seeming negative about gay and lesbian relationships when asked about what the traditional texts taught, but more recently has emphasised that there can be different interpretations, that everyone has equal rights, and that gay marriage 'can be OK'. A good summary of a complex history can be found in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_and_sexual_orientation

Drugs and Alcohol

The use of intoxicants is against the fifth precept, and given that the lack of a clear mind is one of the most fundamental problems with human flourishing according to Buddhism, it would not seem sensible to add to delusion and ignorance (and possibly cause more greed, desire and hatred) by drinking or taking drugs. Many Buddhists, not only monastics, completely renounce alcohol and other drugs. However, some argue that the problem is using alcohol/drugs to excess rather than at all. It sometimes depends on local culture, for example, drinking beer is traditional in Tibet and Mongolia. Nothing was said by the Buddha about smoking tobacco, so some Buddhists have smoked, but in the light of recent knowledge of its harmfulness, many would no longer see it as acceptable.

Issues of Social Justice

Human rights

All sentient beings are capable of reaching nirvana or Buddhahood so deserve respect and compassion, but human life is precious as the best placed for spiritual progress. Thus all human beings should be treated well. Tibetan Buddhists often point out that in the endless round of rebirths, all beings have at one time been your mother, so should be viewed as such.

Equality

In one sense all beings are equal, and should be viewed with evenmindedness. However, as some have progressed further on the path towards nirvana or Buddhahood, in another sense they are not. A Buddha is superior to the average human who is superior to a slug. The historical Buddha accepted people from all classes and castes into his sangha as spiritually equal, but 'Hindu' renouncers also renounce class and caste as spiritually irrelevant, and that is not the same as campaigning for the abolition of class and caste distinctions in worldly life. Thus Buddhists can accept both socially conservative and progressive or socialist societies, advising obedience to superiors, and protesting against unfairness.

Gender

It is anachronistic to expect ancient texts and traditions not to be sexist by contemporary standards. A survey of Buddhist texts and history reveals much that is patriarchal and oppressive. The historical Buddha was reluctant to ordain women, and only agreed after adding extra rules (some commentators have blamed later monastic editors for this); in most Buddhist societies nuns either have lower status than monks or do not exist; texts tend to stereotype women as weak and temptresses; rebirth as a female is considered less fortunate (it usually was); there are no female Buddhas; and women have suffered inequality in practice in Buddhist societies. On the other hand, there is material for Buddhist feminists to build on, such as the fact that women were ordained and many did gain enlightenment, there are female bodhisattvas, and a few important women can be discovered in both history and texts. Recent developments have included the (controversial) re-establishment of ordination for women in Theravada, and the formation of Sakyadita, the International Association of Buddhist Women. Gender is not an essential part of spiritual identity, as all beings have been/may be both male and female or other in previous and future rebirths, however this downplaying of the current physical body can lead to ignoring the particular experience of women in the here-and-now and thus to sexist attitudes and behaviour. In ancient Buddhist texts, four genders are recognised, not just male and female. It is not quite clear how to translate the terms used, but one may be intersex, and the other possibly refers to a form of male prostitute or someone like the contemporary hijra. These two groups were not allowed to join the monastic sangha. Attitudes to anyone other than heterosexual cis-gendered male have been varied in both theory and practice in Buddhist history, often negative but with some more positive and thus important to the contemporary

LGBTQI+ community (see issues of sexual conduct above). Kwan Yin bodhisattva, who transitioned from male to female in the course of Buddhist history, is an important figure not only for women in general but also for transgender people, but s/he (they?) can also symbolise more generally the fluidity and spiritual irrelevance of either gender or sex.

Racism

The Buddha accepted people of all backgrounds into the sangha, and teachings of no-self, emptiness and rebirth mean that 'race' is a human construct that does not define one spiritually. As a tradition that started in India and spread mostly eastwards, one would not expect to find the need to consider anti-Asian racism in Buddhism. However, Western constructions of 'Buddh-ism' may contain elements of colonial and racist attitudes, and there are sometimes indigenous prejudices about skin colour, or particular minority ethnic groups in Buddhist-majority countries. There are increasing numbers of Buddhists of African descent, mostly in Western countries, some of whom point out that 'no-self', and the downplaying of the physical body in Buddhist teaching, can lead to 'colourblind' attitudes that ignore the different actual experience that being black means, especially in Buddhist groups in the West dominated by wealthy, white practitioners, where 'race' is compounded intersectionally with class, leading to unconscious or institutional racism and classism.

Wealth and poverty

Generosity is a fundamental Buddhist virtue, and the Buddha set an example of helping the poor and hungry, and advised rulers to enable everyone to earn a fair living to avoid both poverty and crime. He had wealthy and royal friends and did not criticise wealth per se, but can be interpreted as implying that a more equal distribution would be better.

Work

Advice for laypeople includes the importance of working hard and obeying employers, but also responsibilities from employers for treating employees fairly. 'Right livelihood' is one of the factors in the eightfold path, so it is important to choose a job that helps rather than harms. Paid employment is not the only option if you are spending time in a worthwhile way, notably monastics do not usually earn money (and monastic rules technically do not allow even handling it) but rely on the lay community to support them.

The Environment

On the one hand, Buddhist traditions can be seen as environmentally friendly. The precept against harming living beings, the simple life of monastics living with little consumption of resources, many of the rules for monastics such as recycling robes and not polluting rivers, the implications of rebirth (you will suffer the consequences of the many ways in which humans are destroying the planet yourself, not just your great-grandchildren), the Mahayana idea of Buddha-nature in all things are all resources for creating an ecologically-minded Buddhism. Today, there are many practical environmental projects inspired by Buddhism

such as the memorable activity in Thailand of ordaining trees as monastics in order to prevent them being cut down. An internet search, including projects listed by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation <http://www.arcworld.org>, can reveal many examples of 'Green Dharma' in practice.

However, like contemporary feminism or gay rights, environmentalism as we know it today, was not an 'issue' at the time of the Buddha or for much of Buddhist history. Humans just did not make such a negative impact 2,500 years ago. There are aspects of Buddhist teaching that suggest that environmental action is not the most important thing on which to be working. The physical world is impermanent and will decay anyway, and in one sense, in some Buddhist thought, not even real. Samsara altogether, including rebirth as human or animal in the material world, is something to be liberated from, so for example the precept against harming is not really about saving the planet, but for your own spiritual development. Nevertheless, the fundamental Buddhist quest for the reduction of suffering for all would seem to support environmental action.

Engaged Buddhism

Buddhists who prioritise practical action to reduce suffering, whether in environmental, peace, social justice, relieving poverty, equality, and human rights have been given the label 'Engaged' or 'Socially Engaged' Buddhists, to counter the stereotype of the solitary meditator concerned with only their own spiritual quest. The historical Buddha approved of taking action, as in the parable of the person shot with the arrow, but meditation and wisdom are also in their own way taking action, alongside practical ethics.

Role Models

If looking for examples of living a good life according to Buddhist traditions, these could include the historical Buddha himself, some of his notable disciples, or King (or Emperor) Ashoka who conquered a large part of present day India and beyond a couple of centuries after the historical Buddha, then renounced violence (both war and hunting) and supported Buddhism. His 'rock edicts', 32 of which have been found by archaeologists, gave the population guidelines for living morally responsible lives, and he engaged in useful social projects such as medical services for both people and animals, constructing wells and reservoirs, building places for travellers to stay, and prisoner welfare services. He also supported teachers of other religions, built stupas to house Buddhist relics, and sent out missionaries to spread Buddhist teachings to other lands, most successfully in sending his own ordained son and daughter to Sri Lanka, which has had a continuous Buddhist history ever since. Each Buddhist country and group has its own heroes throughout history and today. Well known exemplary Buddhists today might include the current Dalai Lama, or the Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. Though women tend to be less well known, there are exemplary women throughout Buddhist history, starting with his aunt Mahaprajapati Gotami who argued for women's ordination, and the 73 nuns whose work is included in the Pali Canon. Many earlier RE textbooks have included the Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi who received the Noble Peace prize in 1991 for her long, non-violent struggle, but she has

recently been criticised for defending the actions of the military in Myanmar against the Rohingya people.

Making Sense of Life's Experiences (Big Idea 4; NE 6&5)

Experience as the Main Source of Knowledge

A strong case can be made that making sense of life's experiences is the central concern of the Buddhist tradition. The historical Buddha taught the Kalama people that they should not accept teachings as true until they had tested them out in their own experience – does it actually work in making you a better person? (see under Buddhism and Science). The teaching of the historical Buddha sprang from his own experience – his privileged life which did not bring him happiness, his reflections on suffering, his study and practice of meditation and asceticism and his experience of Enlightenment. The category of 'experience' covers both everyday experience, for example how irresponsible behaviour leads to suffering and less common experiences such as some profound states reached in meditation, remembering past lives, unusual psychic powers, and finally the experience of nirvana or Buddhahood. It is the latter that are usually called 'religious' experiences, but this perhaps makes too sharp a distinction between what is 'religious' and what is not. Experience that leads to insight or spiritual feelings such as devotion can include the events of daily life, meditation, or taking part in ceremonies and rituals, all of which are available to the many and not just the few. Even 'religious' experiences that seem to suggest levels of reality beyond the everyday do happen to more people than we hear about, whether Buddhist, 'religious' or not.

Meditation

Meditation, or cultivation of the mind, is very important in Buddhism, as a mind that is deluded and unable to see clearly or think straight is a major part of the human problem. Three elements of the eightfold path are concerned with meditation – right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Right effort is the conscious working on one's own good and bad mental habits. Right mindfulness refers to the cultivation of awareness, of the body, feelings, mind and mental states, the attempt to calm down the usual distracting chatter and lack of concentration that goes on in our heads. A starting point might be mindfulness of breathing, concentrating just on the breath going in and out and letting other thoughts and emotions fade away. Mindfulness, often detached from its origins in Buddhism, has become a fashionable method of addressing mental health issues such as anxiety. Right concentration refers to deeper states of meditation, known in Theravada as samatha or calm and vipassana or insight which can achieve higher states of consciousness like those reached by the Buddha during his enlightenment experience, such as completely clear, pure consciousness. There is also meditation which focuses on developing the four types of love (friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy and evenmindedness) for oneself and all others.

Further forms of meditation are found in Mahayana Buddhism, which blend into devotional practices, such as visualisations of particular Buddhas and bodhisattvas, which may at deeper levels lead to visions or mystical experiences. There is the 'just sitting' meditation of Zen (which means meditation). Meditation is traditionally undertaken in a quiet place, either alone or in a group, sitting crosslegged in the 'lotus' position, but it can also be done sitting in a chair. Apart from such formal meditation, which monastics have more time for than laypeople, mindfulness can be applied to everyday activities, such as sweeping or washing up. For more advanced meditation, Buddhists recommend that you have a teacher, as practices are customised for individual personalities, and can be dangerous if inappropriate (such as an already depressed person meditating on death, or someone with body-image problems meditating on the disgusting aspects of the physical body).

Devotion

Sometimes contrasted with the kinds of experience found in meditation is the more emotional experience found in devotional practices. In Theravada, the first tends to be more associated with monastics and the second with laypeople. However, the two may be very close, such as when meditation on an image of the Buddha is combined with making offerings. Devotion is probably a better word to use than 'worship' for the Indian word 'puja'. The simplest form of devotion is to 'take refuge' in the Buddha, the Dharma/Dhamma or teaching, and the Sangha (the community, usually referring to the monastics), which is a way of declaring oneself a Buddhist. Watching a Buddhist make offerings (such as flowers, incense, food, water or lights) to an image or symbol looks like someone worshipping a god in other religions, but has a different meaning. In Theravada, it is showing respect for the Buddha and reminding oneself of his teaching, as he does not require offerings and cannot be asked for favours, having passed away completely into nirvana. Mahayana devotion is a little more like other religions, as the Buddhas and bodhisattvas have not disappeared but are available and can be asked for help. Yet there is still a difference – the bodhisattvas and Buddhas represent one's own potential future state rather than wholly other beings, and the effect of devotion on the mind is important.

As well as making offerings to images, there are many other devotional practices such as bowing and prostrating. Chanting of Buddhist texts or the qualities of the Buddha can be seen as intellectual learning, or a form of meditation or a form of showing devotion. Chanting of mantras, short series of syllables or words, as found in various forms of Mahayana, may be directed at a particular Buddha, bodhisattva or even text, and can be seen as devotional and/or meditative. Relics of the historical Buddha, other important teachers, or even pieces of ancient texts are revered, stupas are circumambulated, and especially in Tibetan Buddhism, many artefacts such as prayer wheels, prayer flags, and mandalas are a constant reminder of Buddhist teaching as well as devotional practice.

Festivals

Calendar events also serve to intensify Buddhist emotions and experience, and are opportunities to remember Buddhist teaching. The festival calendar varies in different

Buddhist traditions and countries, and bound up with national and local cultural traditions but there is usually something celebrating the birth, enlightenment, teaching and death of the historical Buddha. In Theravada countries, Wesak on the full moon in late April/May celebrates the birth, enlightenment of the Buddha, and his first teaching is celebrated on the full moon in July. There are celebrations at the end of the monastic rains retreat in the autumn, when laypeople bring gifts to the monasteries. Sri Lanka holds a grand procession of the tooth-relic of the Buddha in Kandy in August, Thais float candles on rivers in November and recall the story of the generosity of Vessantara. In Tibet as well as Theravada countries, there is an autumn festival focused on the story of a visit by the Buddha to his departed mother reborn in one of the top heaven worlds, in China a festival in August to remember the 'hungry ghosts' recalling an event when one of the Buddha's leading disciples visited his own mother in a ghost or hell rebirth and was able to set her free, and at autumn and spring equinoxes people visit family graves. Such festivals address the near-universal human concern for deceased relatives and provide an opportunity for helping them by prayers, offerings, and dedicating merit earned by ceremonial or moral actions to their (good) karmic account. In Japan, where the 19th century adoption of the Western Gregorian calendar means it is possible to give an exact date, the birthday of the Buddha is celebrated on April 8th (Hanamatsuri, 'flower festival') where images of the baby Buddha are bathed in scented tea.

Pilgrimage

Some modern and contemporary Buddhists play down the importance of pilgrimage, and it is certainly not of central importance. However, visiting place associated with the historical Buddha or other important events or people is at least as old as the Emperor Ashoka, and recommended even in the Pali Canon. Pilgrimage is meritorious, and can be a spiritually important experience, whether the self-discipline of enduring hardship, the mind-expanding opportunity of seeing new people and places, or feeling a deeper connection to the Buddhist path. Places of pilgrimage include the four sites associated with the historical Buddha in India/Nepal: Lumbini (in Nepal) – the place of the Buddha's birth; Bodh Gaya – the place of the Buddha's Enlightenment; Sarnath – where he delivered his first teaching; Kusinara – where he died. Other countries have their own. In Sri Lanka these include Sri Pada – a mountain trek to a footprint said to be that of the Buddha (alternatively Adam or the Hindu deity Shiva), and ancient sites associated with the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. In China and Japan there are many special temples and holy mountains, usually associated with important Buddhist teachers, such as Mounts Hiei and Koya in Japan. On Shikoku Island there is popular pilgrimage route associated with the teacher Kobo Daishi and Shingon Buddhism. In Tibet, pilgrims would travel to the home of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa.

Lifecycle Ceremonies and Ordination

In one sense, ceremonies marking birth, adulthood, or marriage are seen as purely worldly activities, not relevant to the spiritual pursuit, and so monastics are rarely involved. Having said that, there are often blessings from monks for a new baby, new house or wedding (maybe separate from any civil ceremony), and in some Buddhist groups religious marriage

ceremonies do exist, including for same-sex partners, even before civil provision. As this article is being written in July 2020, Thailand looks likely to be the first Buddhist-majority country to legalise 'same sex unions'.

Funerals are different, as relevant to reflecting on the central concerns of Buddhism with suffering and death. Funerals are conducted by monks or other Buddhist clergy in many Buddhist cultures. In Japan it is something of a Buddhist speciality ('born Shinto, die Buddhist'). The dead are clothed as if for ordination, and memorial tablets are kept in Buddhist temples.

There are ceremonies for the ordination of novices, and for full ordination as a monk (or nun, where this exists). In some countries, such as Sri Lanka and Tibet, boys can become novice monks as children, and this was a way of gaining an education before state provision of schools, later taking full ordination or returning to lay life. In other countries, for example in Thailand, periods of temporary ordination for men for perhaps a month or so are common as a transition to adulthood, or before getting married.

Community, Culture, Authority and Power (Big Idea 5; NE 8)

Introduction

This section looks at Buddhism as a social phenomenon, rather than a set of ideas about life, an individual spiritual path, an ethical way of life, or a number of diverse literary and artistic traditions. Right from the start, Buddhists have had to interact with wider society and culture, both influencing and influenced by the world in which they find themselves. The historical Buddha himself was born into a particular time and place, and his teaching had some things in common with, and used the concepts and vocabulary of, the surrounding culture, as well as challenging other received ideas, assumptions, customs and practices.

Identity and Community

The majority of adherents of most religions are not so because they have from some (impossible) neutral starting point debated the key ideas intellectually and decided to agree, but because they were born into a particular family and community. Buddhist children will learn about the tradition from their family, and in many Buddhist-majority countries, at school. Even those who 'convert' as adults may do so more from personal experience, or encounters with a group of people whose way of life they find attractive, than from philosophical conviction alone. 'Religion' is not only about ideas or beliefs, or even values and behaviour, but also a sense of identity.

Identifying as a Buddhist is often expressed, especially in Theravada, by taking the 'three refuges' also known as the 'three jewels' – repeating 'I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma (Dhamma), I take refuge in the Sangha' – aligning yourself with a teacher, a teaching accepted as the truth and a community. The term 'sangha' or community, which may be used to refer to the whole Buddhist community, is often used just

to refer to the monastic community, whose identity is usually marked out by their shaved heads and distinctive robes – not only the different shades of orange found in Sri Lanka and Thailand, but elsewhere dark red, yellow, ochre, black, brown, white or the burgundy and yellow of Tibetan monastics. Novices usually wear white robes. The various categories of not-quite-nuns may also wear white, or burgundy and yellow (like the monks) in Tibetan Buddhism, dark brown in the Thai forest monastery tradition, and in Myanmar they wear pink. There are some Buddhist traditions where the clergy do marry, or where leadership is lay, but even where there is a strict separation of lay and monastic life, the two parts of the community are mutually interdependent, the monastics needing the lay people for food and other material requirements, and the lay community needing the monastics for teaching, spiritual, moral and practical advice and ceremonies.

Sources of Authority in Buddhism

Although Buddhists may stress the authority of individual experience, there are nevertheless other sources of authority in Buddhism as an institution (or institutions). The historical Buddha, and even more so his teaching, the Dharma/Dhamma, have the authority of his enlightenment experience and his full insight into the truth. This would also apply in Mahayana to those sutras made known after the earthly life of the historical Buddha.

The sangha, or monastic community, was created not only for the spiritual development of individuals who joined, but also to preserve and transmit the teaching. Thus they have great authority in practice in many Buddhist contexts, particularly male monks. There were early schisms in the sangha and so there were several monastic lineages within the non-Mahayana forms of Buddhism. In some forms of Mahayana Buddhism, such as Tibetan Buddhism, the monastic sangha is very important, in other developments, especially in China and Japan, there can be married rather than monastic clergy and lay leadership. In some Buddhist groups, new forms of leadership have been developed, such as the Dharmachari in the Triratna movement. The New Kadampa Tradition focuses on the books written by its founder. Although the term sangha tends to be restricted to monastics (and often, where the female ordination lines do not exist, male monks), the early texts talk of a fourfold sangha of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, so other Buddhists use the term for the whole Buddhist community.

Monks (and sometimes nuns or not-quite-nuns) can be involved in teaching children and young people in formal and informal educational settings. They may provide advice and counselling to lay people, as well as conducting ceremonies. Within the monastic traditions of Zen, the relationship between teacher and apprentice is crucial, as the truth cannot be put into words but only transmitted mind to mind. In Tibetan Buddhism, both monastic and lay Buddhists may take refuge in a particular lama (guru or teacher) who guides their spiritual progress. Some leading lamas (such as the Dalai Lama) are considered to be tulkus, reincarnations/rebirths of particular identified holy teachers as well as manifestations of a Buddha or bodhisattva.

Politics

During the life of the Buddha, local kings and leading citizens became important supporters and sponsored the new community. In spreading Buddhism throughout India, and beyond, the Emperor Ashoka played an important role and both then and later gaining the support of local leaders was crucial – notable examples being Prince Shotoku in Japan, or the various Mongolian Khans who supported Tibetan Buddhism. There are Buddhist monarchs today in Thailand and Bhutan. In pre-communist Tibet, for several centuries, the Dalai Lamas held both political and religious leadership, and the current Dalai Lama, in exile in India, has considerable influence.

The historical Buddha himself however rejected his alternative career of local ruler/king (or as predicted at his birth, emperor) in favour of a higher calling. In one sense, Buddhist monastics have renounced the world and thus not involved in day to day political matters: 'kings and politics' are one of the topics that monastics are advised in the Pali Canon not to waste their time discussing. However, it is near impossible in practice to have nothing to do with politics, as political issues are also ethical ones, and not getting involved is a political act. Throughout Buddhist history, Buddhist monastics have been important advisers to rulers, and the historical Buddha's advice to his royal friends is recorded in the Pali Canon. At times, he was directly involved in political matters, such as when he intervened to stop a war. Generally the advice is to obey government: 'I prescribe, monks, that you meet the king's wishes' is an oft quoted saying (particularly by kings and those in power); however the Buddha was not afraid to speak truth to power where required, such as pointing out that alleviating poverty would do more to solve crime than harsh punishments. There have been occasions in Buddhist history where monks have even been involved in political violence as well as peaceful political protests. Lay Buddhists are involved in politics from top government levels (the modern world's first female prime minister was a Buddhist, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, in 1960) to grass-roots activism. It is possible to interpret Buddhism as supporting either socialist or conservative politics, monarchy or revolution. As happens with other religions, in some Buddhist-majority countries Buddhist identity can become entangled with national identity, in both benign and dangerous ways, the latter seen for example in the Sri Lankan civil war or contemporary Myanmar.

Two examples of Buddhists involved in politics are Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and the current Dalai Lama. Ambedkar (1891-1956) was born into a Dalit family and suffered caste discrimination. He nevertheless gained an education and became the chair of the committee that drew up the constitution of independent India in 1949. He adopted Buddhism (as he saw it) as a faith that was Indian but unlike Hinduism (as he perceived and experienced it) without caste prejudice, and just before he died, he and 400,000 followers became Buddhists. There are about 7 million Ambedkarite Buddhists today (but 200 million Dalits in total).

The current Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959 and set up an alternative government in exile in India. He campaigns for a free Tibet, and has become a highly respected international figure (except by the Chinese government). Though he has expressed understanding for the few

Tibetans who have been involved in armed resistance, his own resistance is peaceful and non-violent, for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 1989.

Cultural and Institutional Diversity Within Buddhism

As noted earlier, there is great diversity within what is labelled 'Buddhism', especially as it spread to so many different countries and cultures. Cultural contexts led to the development of different ways of expressing Buddhism, and different customs. It is hard – almost impossible – to disentangle culture and religion, as it this depends on having a fixed idea of 'religion' or 'real Buddhism' that is open to debate. Nor do separate countries have completely separate cultures, as 'cultural' elements were often spread along with the 'religious' ones, as missionaries and businesspeople travelled to and fro – thus 'Indian' ideas and customs as well as Buddhist ideas spread further east, and other ideas and customs came back. Different approaches to Buddhism were debated, sometimes living happily side by side and sometimes one gaining dominance. Conversely, Buddhists in some more remote areas might have had access to particular texts and teachers and not know that others even existed, evolving their own versions over time.

Institutional diversity occurs even within one country. From earliest times, Buddhist have disagreed about matters of teaching or practice and formed new groups. Others have had new visions and insights, discovered new texts, come to new interpretations, or sought to cater for a different sector of society and intentionally or otherwise formed new organisations. There are now many different groups and subgroups, with new organisations forming all the time. Contemporary communications however are creating more possibilities for Buddhists from different groups to meet, dialogue and cooperate.

Today Buddhists exist all over the world. In the UK, there are Buddhists with ethnic origins in many different Buddhist-majority (or Buddhist significant minority) countries, and those who have personally or in recent generations converted from other backgrounds. The latter may follow a traditional form of Buddhism or belong to a group that particularly caters for Westerners (or something in between).

Buddhism and Encounter with Other Religions, Debate and Dialogue

The historical Buddha lived in a time when many different religious and non-religious teachers and teachings were around, both the more official practices of the Brahmin priests and the many new ideas of the shramanas, and is portrayed as debating with them. In Buddhist history in India and elsewhere, Buddhist teachers and scholars have done the same, including with other interpretations of Buddhism. Elements of non-Buddhist traditions have been incorporated into or practised alongside Buddhism where found helpful or harmless. However, encounters with non-Buddhists in the course of history have sometimes been negative and even violent, especially where religion was tied up with nationality, and in times of war. Many contemporary Buddhists in the UK are open to interfaith dialogue, although there are some groups and individuals who consider that one should concentrate on the one (correct) path, and Buddhists will criticise aspects of other

traditions if these are seen as harmful or not conducive to progress on the journey to enlightenment.

A Note on Studying and Teaching Buddhism

This essay has only been able to outline some features and aspects of what might be labelled Buddhism. When seeking to learn more, it is important to use a variety of sources – academic texts, texts by practising Buddhists, and actually meeting Buddhist adherents. Academic texts may arise from different disciplines – some may focus on ancient scriptural texts, or historical periods, and others on sociological and ethnographic study of contemporary people. It is important to ask – particularly of random internet sources, but the same applies to books and this essay – who wrote this and why, and whether they are likely to be reliable (and in what way: may be reliable about one Buddhist group but unrepresentative of others). You will gradually build up your own provisional picture of Buddhism.

In teaching Buddhism, it is also important to be clear about why you are doing it and what you wish to achieve. There are now many resources to help, appropriate to different ages of pupils, but the same questions need to be asked about the reliability and representative nature of resources for children as are asked about resources for adults. For example, what impression is given if all the pictures are of men in orange robes?

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Wikipedia – among many other useful articles

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