Topic Page: Buddhism

Definition: Buddhism from Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary

(1801) : a religion of eastern and central Asia growing out of the teaching of Gautama Buddha that suffering is inherent in life and that one can be liberated from it by mental and moral self-purification

Bud•dhist \bü-dist, bu̇-\ n or adj
Bud•dhis•tic \bü-dis-tik, bu̇-\ adj

Summary Article: Buddhism
From The Brill Dictionary of Religion

Concept
1. ‘Buddhism’ is the term used to denote the religion descending from the ascetic movement founded by Gautama Buddha. To be sure, the teachings of early Buddhism have been developed in very different ways over the course of time. A large number of schools, at times with considerably divergent philosophical systems and corresponding monastic rules, were and are scattered across an immense geographical space (today nearly all of Asia, with the exception of India, Buddhism's land of origin). The three great directions are Tantric (Tantra), Mahāyāna (Northern), and Hīnayāna (Southern) Buddhism. To the last named belongs today's most important form, Theravada, which prevails in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

Geographical Expansion
2. The Buddha's resolve to share his knowledge with others was the exemplary act imitated by the monks. Sent by the Buddha, they went forth and proclaimed the great teaching to others who strove for release from the cycle of rebirths. This missionary activity, altogether foreign to Hinduism (even, basically, today), led to the rapid spread of the still young religion. Of decisive consequence here was the royal protection that Buddhism enjoyed. Under Maurya king Aśoka (268–232 BCE), it became the state religion and penetrated not only most parts of the Indian subcontinent, but also India's neighboring lands.

While Buddhism flourished in these lands, its time in India gradually ended, as the Hindu religion waxed in strength in the first centuries CE. The monastic universities of Bihar and Bengali were completely destroyed by the troops of Muhammad Ghuri—Nālandā in 1197, Vikramaśīla in 1203—and Buddhism's fate on Indian soil was sealed. Almost simultaneously, Buddhism was promoted to the status of state religion in two of India's neighboring countries: Burma at the end of the eleventh century and Siam near the end of the thirteenth. And in these countries, as also in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), it maintains this role down to the present day.

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Cultic veneration of the Buddha at first played a subordinate role in Buddhism. It was recognized only as a means of producing a salvific state of consciousness. In the course of time, however, the wish spread, especially from the side of the laity, for a piety that could be practiced on a daily basis. On models borrowed from the various Hindu religions, an elaborate cult developed, at whose midpoint stands the representational image of the Buddha and various bodhisattvas. Here, in a little Buddhist temple in Hong Kong, a monk makes his daily meditation. (T. Oberlies)
Of special importance for the further history of Buddhism was the patronage of the Kuşāṇas. Their realm stretched over the territory of today’s Pakistan and Afghanistan, far into Central Asia. The political stability of this enormous empire favored the spread of Buddhism from Northwest India to Sogdia in the far West, and along the silk route to China. From China it penetrated Vietnam and Korea in the fourth century CE, and in the seventh century Japan. From India’s east coast Buddhism reached Burma, Kampuchea, and Indonesia; from the north, in the seventh century, it traversed the Himalayan Pass to Tibet, whence it came once more to the Mongols and the Manchus.

Teaching

3. As for nearly all of the religious and philosophical systems of India, the cycle of rebirths and the effect of karma are a basic given in Buddhism (Reincarnation). The present existence is not the first, nor in all likelihood will it be the last, and the mode and manner of each is determined by karma, the sum of a being’s good and evil deeds. Regardless of its actual quality, the ‘being’ of this life, in Buddhism’s appraisal, is basically one of suffering. Thus, the goal of Buddhism is a complete and definitive liberation from the painful transience of life. This can be attained through the recognition, and definitive elimination, of the factors leading to a birth eternally replicated, and with it to suffering endlessly
repeated—namely that of the demand for sensory satisfaction and, especially, for new existence. This occurs through the contemplation of the Four Noble Truths, which means: (1) that all of the elements composing being, and therefore composing earthly personhood, are elements of suffering; (2) that the cause of this suffering is desire and craving, which leads to rebirth ever and again; (3) that this suffering can come to an end when desire and craving are completely eliminated; and (4) that one can reach this goal by means of the practice of right view, right intent, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The final member is the decisive moment of the Noble Eightfold Path: by means of meditative absorption, a person can gain the redemptive insight: recognition and knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. The Buddhist practice of meditative absorption consists in a series of spiritual exercises—for example, the practice of the Unbounded, in which the subject radiates, to all points of the skies, the feelings, in succession, of benevolence, compassion, joy, and equanimity—or the trancelike kasina meditations; or the satipatthana visualizations (observation of one’s breathing and other bodily functions); or the meditative or objective consideration of the various stages of the decomposition of a corpse.

Rules of the Order

4. In the components, right speech and right conduct, of the Noble Path the seeker after liberation is prescribed to refrain from untrue, slanderous, gross, or rash speech; from the wounding or killing of living beings, from the unlawful appropriation of possessions; and from all sexual activity. Right manner of life consists in abstinence from more than one meal a day, from observing dance presentations and from like pleasures, from the use of garlands or balms, from sleeping on luxurious bedding, and so on. Suchlike prescriptions and prohibitions, whose observance is an indispensable prerequisite if release from the cycle of rebirths is to be effected, are collected in the Vinayapitaka, the code of Buddhist monastic regulations. The core of Buddhist penal law is the Prātimokṣasūtra. It lists the transgressions, divided into eight parts, which monks and (with variations) nuns must not commit. At the beginning come the transgressions on whose grounds a monk is excluded from the Order forever: (1) the prohibition of all manner of sexual contact, (2) the prohibition of serious theft, (3) the prohibition of the killing of a human being, and (4) the prohibition of false presumption of spiritual perfections and supernatural characteristics. In its procedural as well as in its monastic law, Buddhism is indebted to the earlier Vedic religion (Hinduism). Hence the Order has adopted ceremonies modeled after age-old rituals. The Pabbajā, or reception of a novice, with shearing of the head and beard, precedes the Upasampadā, or ordination as monk (with an analogous procedure for nuns). The first step may be taken as early as the eighth year, and the second at twenty, a time frame corresponding to that of the Brahmanic ritual of initiation. Of equal importance, for the existence of the community, to that of the consecration of the novice and the monk, is the semi-monthly confessional celebration, the Uposatha, in the course of which the Prātimokṣasūtra, the confessional formula, is recited. The Uposatha is celebrated throughout the nights before full and half-moon, in an assembly of a minimum of four full-fledged monks. In the tradition of Theravāda Buddhism, freedom from transgression is a prerequisite for participation for the celebration of the Uposatha. Admission of a transgression normally comes before the recitation of the Prātimokṣa. Of the various Buddhist rituals, we may mention the Kathina celebration, among the great religious feasts of the Southeast Asian lands still today. Here the Order receives (mostly from laity) monks’ attire, or the material of which it is made.

5. True, the monk does not make a vow to renounce possessions, but he is expected to live in the most extreme poverty. He has but three articles of clothing, a cincture, a begging bowl, a small knife, a
needle, and a water strainer, that he can call his own. He lives on contributions of food that he receives on his daily alms rounds. He does have leave to accept personal invitations to meals, but he is forbidden to receive gifts otherwise. Lay devotees must care for monks, as the latter have completely rejected worldly life (which is still true today in Burma, on a monk's daily alms route). Thus, from earliest times, the Order has been attended by a circle of laity, who continue with their secular lives, but who have 'taken refuge with the Buddha, the Teaching, and the Community.' Lay Buddhists are bound not by strict rejection of the world, but—at least on the days of the Uposatha (see section 4)—by the renunciation of the 'killing of living beings, acquiring things that have not been bestowed, false speech, unchastity, and the ingestion of alcoholic or other intoxicating beverages.' On these days, the laity who would pursue the stricter discipline fast, sleep on the bare earth, and abstain from the use of any cosmetics. For this ethically and morally good behavior, which is required with the legacy of good kamma through their acts of generosity, the laity anticipate a recompense in heaven and in a better rebirth. There, as nuns and monks, they can strive for their release. Only in Mahāyāna Buddhism was the opportunity finally offered of liberation in the here and now, through a corresponding manner of life.

Development of the Buddhist Order

5. In a narrow sense, the Saṅgha, the Buddhist Order, is made up only of the monks and nuns who were the Buddha's direct interlocutors. Even in the wider sense, Theravāda Buddhism regards the female monastic tradition as extinct, and only the tradition of the monks continues to be acknowledged. A principle received in ancient times delineates that the Saṅgha consists of four parts—monks, nuns, male and female lay disciples—thus taking into account the importance of the laity in and for Buddhism, even though they are not organized. In days of old, the Order was extensively modeled after the ancient republican states, and knew practically no hierarchical organization. The highest authority was the Buddha, and all monks had identical rights and duties, irrespective of the caste from which they came. The only ranking was that according to seniority of ordination. Early enough, however, and over the course of time, this principle of equality gradually fell into disuse. The Buddhist texts leave no doubt that the Order, with its strict discipline, was created as a framework in which the human being, freed from all worldly ties and obligations, can strive after the realization of nirvāṇa, or deliverance. Thus, the discipline of the Order is the formal aspect of morality, the point of departure and foundation of the path to liberation. Accordingly, the rules of the Order compose an integral element of the monk's spiritual exercise and practice. Even the economic situation of the respective Buddhist communities depends directly on the observance of these rules. Only that community whose monks lead a pure and observant life is worthy of munificence in the eyes of the laity. Only a like community is accepted as a promising 'merit field' in which it is worthwhile to invest. The account of the first serious disagreement in the community, while the Buddha was actually still living, is a clear demonstration: the dispute was settled because the laity refused to feed the monks until they had settled their quarrel.

Relationship of Monks, Nuns, and Laity

7. A most intimate relationship prevails between monks and laity, especially in countries where every male Buddhist enters the Order at least once in his lifetime—and usually on more than one occasion, almost always before taking a wife—as in Burma, Kampuchea, Laos, and Thailand today. Indeed, this temporary monasticism offers large prospects of social promotion. Monks and laity live in a symbiotic rapport—after all, each of the two groups provides the other with an opportunity to gain merit, and thereby to make a contribution to their karma 'account.' And since, for the ordinary Buddhist—monk or lay person—nirvana is far too remote and intangible a goal to be striven for immediately, religious praxis
focuses on the gaining of merit. Monks recite and explain the sacred texts to the laity, conduct for them the ceremony of the Paritta, a kind of protective spell or charm, and function as their ‘priests’ on other religious occasions, as at blessing of the home, at weddings, or at funerals. The laity afford the monks material support. Little has changed here in the course of centuries. A very ancient text of the Theravada Canon reads: “Great utility, O monks, the masters of the house provide to you, for they impart to you raiment, victuals, roof, and remedy when you ail. And great comfort, as well, O monks, are ye to the masters of the house, for ye announce to them the teaching, [...] and show them the blameless way of life. In this wise, in mutual dependency, monks and the masters of the house lead a pure life, with the goal of crossing the torrent of saṃsāra [the cycle of rebirths] and putting an end to suffering. In mutual dependency, you make this good teaching to prosper [...].” This exchange of life sustenance for ‘spiritual service rendered,’ occurs, for instance, on the days of the Uposatha (see section 4), when laity visit the nearest monastery to provide its residents with food, or, on special occasions, to invite them to share a meal; and reciprocally, when monks bear forth the sacred texts. Such generosity is of great importance to the laity, for, in terms of a widespread viewpoint in Buddhist lands, they are able to transfer the merit thus acquired to the account of departed relatives, or to others, and thereby offer them the prospect of a better rebirth. This transfer of merit corresponds to the cult of ancestors in other religions. Merit can also be gained by pilgrimage to holy places, or by the maintenance of the pagodas called stūpas—originally, monuments that housed relics of the Buddha. The laity can also acquire merit by ransoming animals intended for slaughter, or held in cages, and releasing them in their natural environment.

**Current Situation**

8. Not without reason is Buddhism regarded as an uncommonly tolerant religion. In its long history, few wars have been waged in its name (but see Conflict/Violence [illustration]), and the cohabitation of monks of altogether divergent Buddhist schools in the same monastery has never presented any difficulties. As it is for its tolerance, this religion is distinguished for its flexibility. Not only is it the affair of each individual what degree of bodily privation he or she mean to embrace, or what vows to assume; neither is the meaning of ritual and worship for practical living called in question, however foreign these may have been to original Buddhism. After all, the existence of powerful goddesses, gods, and spirits, that intervene both positively and negatively in the life of human persons, is undisputed. (It is, therefore, an utterly inadmissible simplification to refer to Buddhism as a religion without God—as an atheistic religion.) Thus, in many Buddhist lands, amulets, to cite but one instance, are an important component of religious life, and Buddhist monks are quite decisively engaged in the production of protective talismans. This flexibility also distinguishes Buddhism’s relationship to society and state. The religion was inculturated in the most varied forms of rule and government, and the most diverse cultures, and it always succeeded in maintaining is characteristic imprint. Since Buddhism’s supreme goal is to indicate to human beings a supra-worldly condition of salvation, it has seldom called the concrete social order into question, and this has repeatedly brought upon it the reproach that it is little concerned with daily human needs.

The connection between a philosophy bent on practical aims (in the form of an analysis of an existence identified as one of suffering) and a manner of life that includes techniques of meditation and yoga (and, in Zen, of combat), as well as a worship that speaks to the senses—often coupled, it is true, with presentations stemming from Orientalist discourse—has awakened a fascination in the Westerner, and this not only at the critical moments of the past century (Esalen Institute; New Age). A life of
personally attained inner peace, above the suffering and helplessness of daily life, and a life of a
discovery of oneself, has appealed to seekers of all psychological and cultural hues, at different stages
in their life and in different social strata. Philosophers like Schopenhauer, musicians like Yehudi Menuhin,
scientists and authors, as well as beatniks and New Age spiritists, have all yielded to its magnetism. A
Western adaptation of Buddhism, accompanied by the foundation of numerous communities, has not,
admittedly, come off without dogmatic encrustations or internal schisms.

Asceticism, Buddha, China/Japan/Korea, Indian Subcontinent, Meditation, Monasticism,
Order/Brotherhood, Tibet, Zen Buddhism

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