

History

Buddhism was founded in Northern India by Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama , circa 563-483 BCE). At the age of 29, he left his wife, children and political activities in order to seek truth. Leaving one's family to lead the life of an ascetic was an accepted practice at the time for some men. He studied Brahmanism, but ultimately rejected it. In 535 BCE, he reached enlightenment and assumed the title Buddha (one who has awakened). He is also referred to as the Sakyamuni, (sage of the Sakya clan). He promoted The Middle Way and rejected the extreme ways of hedonism or the mortification of the flesh as paths toward the state of Nirvana. He had many disciples and accumulated a large following by the time of his death in his early 80's. Two and a half centuries later, a council of Buddhist monks collected and recorded his teachings and the oral traditions of the faith in written form, called the Tripitaka. This included a very large collection of commentaries and traditions; most are called Sutras (discourses).

Buddhist Beliefs

Buddhists believe in reincarnation: the concept that one must go through many cycles of birth, living, and death. If a person releases his attachment to desire and the self, he can attain Nirvana after many such cycles.

With some simplification, Buddha's Four Noble Truths may be described as:

- to be fully understood: the universality of suffering
- to be abandoned: the desire to have and control things that cause suffering
- to be made visible: the supreme truth and final liberation of nirvana that is achieved as the cause of suffering is eliminated – the mind experiences complete freedom and liberation
- to be brought into being: the truth of the eightfold ariya path leading to the cessation of suffering.

His Eightfold Path consists of:

- 1. right understanding
- 2. right thinking
- 3. right speech
- 4. right conduct
- 5. right livelihood
- 6. right effort
- 7. right mindfulness
- 8. right concentration

Buddhist Sects

Buddhism is not a single monolithic religion. Many of its adherents have combined the teachings of Buddha with local religious rituals, beliefs and customs. Little conflict occurs, because Buddhism at its core is a philosophical system to which such additions can be easily grafted.

Splits occurred among his followers after Buddha's death. Currently, there are three main systems of thought within Buddhism which are geographically and philosophically separate. Each tradition in turn has many sects. One source (J.R. Hinnels, *A Handbook of Living Religions*, Penguin, 1991) divides the religion into three main groups by their location:

Southern Buddhism (known as Theravada Buddhism) has 100 million followers, mainly in Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka and Thailand, and parts of Vietnam. It started in Sri Lanka when Buddhist missionaries arrived from India. They promoted the Vibhajjavada School (Separative Teaching). By the 15th century, this form of the religion reached almost its present extent.

Concepts and practices include:

- Dana - thoughtful, ceremonial giving
- Sila - accepting Buddhist teaching and following it in practice
- Refraining from killing, stealing, wrong behavior, and use of drugs - on special days, three additional precepts may be added: restricting adornment, entertainment, and comfort
- Karma - the balance of accumulated sin and merit, which will determine ones future in the present life, and the nature of the next life to come
- The Cosmos - consists of billions of worlds grouped into clusters, clusters are grouped into galaxies, which are themselves grouped into super-galaxies. The universe also has many levels: four underworlds and 21 heavenly realms
- Paritta - ritual chanting

Worship: of the relics of Buddha, of items made by Buddha, or of symbolic relics.

Festivals: days of the full moon, and three other days during the lunar cycle are celebrated.

There is a new year's festival, and celebrations tied to the agricultural year.

Pilgrimages: particularly to Buddhist sites in Sri Lanka and India.

Eastern Buddhism is the predominant religion in China, Japan, Korea, and much of Vietnam. Buddhism's Mahayana tradition entered China during the Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE). It found initial acceptance there among the workers; later, it gradually penetrated the ruling class. Buddhism reached Japan in the 6th century. It underwent severe repression during the 1960's in China during the Cultural Revolution.

Eastern Buddhism contains many distinct schools: T'ien-t'ai, Hua-yen, Pure Land teachings, and the Meditation School. They celebrate New Years, harvest festivals, and five anniversaries from the lives of Buddha and of the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin. They also engage in Dana, Sila,

Chanting, Worship, and Pilgrimage.

Northern Buddhism has approximately 10 million adherents in China, Mongolia, Russia, and Tibet. It entered Tibet circa 640 CE. Conflict with the native Tibetan religion of Bon caused it to go largely underground until its revival in the 11th century. The heads of the Gelu School of the Buddhist teaching became the Dalai Lama, and ruled Tibet. It has been wrongly dismissed as a degenerate form of Buddhism until recently.

Ceremony and ritual are emphasized. They also engage in Dana, Sila, Chanting, Worship, and Pilgrimage. They developed the practice of searching out a young child at the time of the death of an important teacher. The child is believed to be the successor to the deceased teacher. They celebrate New Years, harvest festivals, and the anniversaries of the five important events in the life of Buddha. Buddhist and Tibetan culture suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution in China when an attempt was made to destroy all religious beliefs.

Buddhism in the West

Southern Buddhism became established in Europe early in this century. The Zen Buddhist tradition of Eastern Buddhism has also made inroads, particularly in North America. Canadian Buddhists totaled 163,415 in the 1991 census.

(Our thanks to the Ontario Religious Tolerance Site for this Information...)

Holy Days in Buddhism

1. The Nirvana Day is held in mid February. It commemorates the death of Siddhartha Gautama, Buddha.
2. New Year's Day is also celebrated in mid-February in China, Korea, and Vietnam.
3. Wesak is Buddha's birthday in April or May. In some traditions, this day is intended to celebrate Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death together.
4. Khao Pansa marks the beginning of the Buddhist lent. In some countries, it is the preferred day for Buddhist men to be ordained as monks. It is celebrated in the full moon of the eighth lunar month, typically July.
5. Boun Ok Pansa marks the end of lent. It is at the end of the rainy season, in October.
6. Bodhi Day, in early December, celebrates Buddha's enlightenment in 596 B.C.E.