

Frequently Asked Questions about Buddhism

These FAQ's are meant to provide the reader with a brief introduction to the religion of Buddhism. FAQ's on Hinduism, Judaism and Islam are also available. They are provided as a service of Peak Communication Performance, a consultancy firm specializing in cross-cultural management and communication issues. Contact: info@peakcp.com

Where does the word "Buddhist" come from?

The word "Budhi" means to awaken.

Who is the founder of Buddhism?

It was founded in southern Nepal in the 5th or 6th centuries B.C.E. by Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha was a Hindu born into a royal family. He led a rich and pampered life, and was unaware of human suffering. One day he journeyed from the palace and saw an old man. On subsequent trips, he saw a sick man, a corpse and a monk. He became interested in the cause of suffering. He renounced worldly things and began a program of study and meditation. After eight years, he reached a state of enlightenment to become the Buddha. For rest of his life, he traveled and taught the principles of Buddhism. He died at the age of 80. He is not considered to be a god by Buddhists nor did he consider himself to be divine.

What country has the most followers?

69% of Sri Lanka's population of 20,000,000 are Buddhist, as are 95% of Thailand's 60,000,000 people. Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar also have large Buddhist populations. Worldwide, there are approximately 350,000,000 adherents, making it the fourth largest religion after Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.

How many different versions or sects are there?

All Buddhists share the same basic beliefs of the Noble Truths and the Eightfold path. There are at least 3 major traditions that differ in how they interpret some of the rules of conduct. They are the Theravada, Mahayana, Varjayana.

What do Buddhists believe?

As a system of beliefs and practices, Buddhists believe in the four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

The four Noble Truths were taught by Buddha at his first sermon after attaining enlightenment.

1. Life is suffering
2. Suffering is caused by desire
3. Suffering can be overcome
4. The end of suffering is the Noble 8-fold path.

The Eightfold Path is a guide to conduct one's life and end suffering.

1. Right Views
2. Right Thoughts
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

What is the holy text of Buddhism?

The teachings and conversations of Buddha are divided into three parts, which collectively make up the Tripitaka (three baskets):
Sutta—discourses of Buddha
Vinaya—rules for right conduct
Abhidhamma—further knowledge
There will also be different sutras depending on the sect.

What are the holy places and why are they special?

Holy places in Buddhism usually have some association with Buddha himself. They include Bodh Gaya (India), where he reached enlightenment, Sarnath (India), where he preached his first sermon, Lumbini Grove (Nepal), where he was born and Kusingara (India), where he died. In addition, some temples contain relics. For example, the temple of the tooth in Kandy, Sri Lanka is said to contain the tooth of Buddha. It is an especially important relic since all his words of wisdom passed by it.

What is the place of worship?

One can worship in a monastery or at home. For those experienced practitioners, they can keep on worshipping anywhere and anytime without interruption.

How does one worship?

Although Buddhists may venerate images of Buddha, they consider this to be paying respect, not worshipping.

There is no one special holy day of the week in Buddhism. New and full moons have importance in Buddhist worship.

One can chant sacred mantras, sutras, or Buddha's name (such as Buddha Amitabha); and meditate. They may also prostrate themselves to images of Buddha. These are common practices. The purpose is to recover one's pure mind, and correct one's offence and wrong thought toward the world.

Are there any special dietary practices?

Mahayana Buddhism in China emphasizes being vegetarian. They believe that it is beneficial to practice compassion to be a vegetarian. However, there is no strict constraint in Theravada and Varjayana on being vegetarian. Nevertheless, all

the Buddhist followers must abide by the precept of no killing.

What are the rituals of Buddhism?

There are only death rituals in Buddhism. The ceremony is subject to different traditions, and different in forms. To correct some misunderstandings, Buddhist practice is sometimes mistaken as a ceremony for the dead. Actually, Buddhist teachings and practices have a high requirement for the living, not for the dead.

What are the special days or times of the year?

There is much variety in the celebration of holy days depending on the country and local culture. The lunar calendar is used extensively to determine the dates of celebrations. Vesak Day is the most popular in 3 Buddhist traditions. Vesak Day celebrates Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death.

What happens to someone after they die?

The 4 Bardos are

1. the "natural bardo of this life
2. the "painful" bardo of dying
3. the "luminous" bardo of dharmata
4. the "karmic" bardo of becoming

After death, the mind experiences the phases of 2, 3, 4 one by one in transition until rebirth.