

Buddhism Basics

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SUMMARY

The basic beliefs of Buddhism are well known. Meditating on the Middle Way, Siddhartha Gautama intuitively realized the Four Noble Truths which focus on the condition, cause, and cure of universal suffering. The Buddha taught that by following the Eight-fold Path of self-effort one could escape life's suffering and its changing illusion. Attaining enlightenment by eliminating all desires (the cause of suffering), one enters Nirvana which primarily is a state of escape (a breaking free from the endless cycles of birth and rebirth).

—Alex G. Smith, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes* (Littleton, CO: OMF International, 2001) p. 10.

HISTORY OF “THE BUDDHA”

Siddhartha Gautama or Sakyamuni (sage of the Sakya clan); born c 500 BC (varying views). He was a prince, saw suffering, left his wife and child for seven years of extreme asceticism (living on one grain of rice a day, eating his own feces, etc.) Nothing worked. He meditated under a tree. The “gods” rejoiced: he was near enlightenment. Mara (evil god of desire) tried to distract him. But he was a Buddha (his claim) by the next morning.

He rejected Hinduism's priestly hierarchy, its concept of soul. He wandered and taught; disciples followed him. He became ill after eating spoiled pork and told his followers he'd no longer be available to them after death. He was cremated, his relics dispersed. According to Sakyamuni, enlightenment can be achieved by neither extreme (luxury or asceticism), but by a middle way. The problem with existence is attachment to physical life. The key to salvation is to let go of everything. Buddha declared that behind the illusion is absolutely nothing . . . the void.

BUDDHISM IN NUMBERS

3 Refuges

I seek refuge in...

- ...the Buddha
- ...the dharma (teaching)
- ...the sangha (community of monks)

4 Noble Truths

- All existence is suffering
- There is a cause to the suffering
- The cause may be stopped
- There is a way to the stopping

5 Precepts

- No killing
- No stealing
- No adultery
- No lying
- No drinking alcohol

8-fold Path

- Right vision
- Right representation
- Right word
- Right activity
- Right means of subsistence
- Right application
- Right presence of mind
- Right positioning of the psyche

8-fold Negation

- birth/death
- one/many
- indeterminate/determinate
- coming/going
- “Truth is attained only when both sides of universal polarity are suppressed.” [Huh?]

10 States of Life

- hell
- anger
- animality
- hunger
- tranquility
- rapture
- learning
- realization
- bodhisattva
- buddha

26 Buddhas

49 Days of death rituals

108 Beads in Buddhist rosary

108 Sins

MAJOR BRANCHES/SECTS OF BUDDHISM

BRANCH (gray) and Sects Main locations	Scripture Buddhas	Catch phrase/characteristics
THERAVADA 500 BC Southern; Southern India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos	Pali Canon—closest to Buddha’s teaching Sakyamuni Maitreya	“Keep the rules.” Conservative. Only monks can attain nirvana; laity supports them. Buddha is “unreachable” but still prayed to for blessings. Nirvana is void (nothingness).
MAHAYANA c 200 BC Northern: China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam	Lotus Sutra (new doctrines) Sakyamuni Avalokitesvara (Chenresig, Guanyin, Quan Yin, Kannon)	“Rules, rituals, and more buddhas.” Liberal; new scriptures. Sakyamuni as a manifestation of God-like Celestial Buddha; more buddhas and bodhisattvas (buddhas-to-be) & more accessible than in Theravada. Others besides monks may attain nirvana. “Void” now means absolute compassion.
Zen , c 500 AD China, Japan, worldwide Branches: Soto (Dark Zen) & Rinzai.	Special transmission outside of scripture; direct “unmediated” insight into truth	“The simple way;” intuitive; meditate until you “get it.” “Non-dual thinking”—accept reality as it is, no dependence on words. Extreme asceticism while meditating; “third eye.”
Tendai , c 500 AD China, Japan	Lotus Sutra (i.e., sermon)	“Meditate for insight.” Rationalist. Reality is both empty (non-existent) and caused (existing in time). Universalist—all will attain Buddhahood.
Pure Land , c 150 AD India, China, Tibet, Japan	Amitabha Sutra Infinite Life Sutra Amida	“Buddha of compassion and grace.” Concept of grace: no works except chant of gratitude to Amida. Also called Jodo-Shin Shu (true Pure Land) for doctrine of Western Paradise.
Nichiren , c 1200 AD sub-school Soka Gakkai , c 1930 Japan, worldwide	Lotus Sutra Sakyamuni	“Reject all previous forms of Buddhism.” Evangelistic/exclusive. All can achieve nirvana in a few years of chanting; enshrined written chant (Gohonzon) is object of worship; “health and wealth” teaching appeals to many; SGI involved in social justice and charity.
VAJRAYANA c 700 AD “Tibetan Buddhism” Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, Northern India	Book of the Dead many writings, books of magic Chenrezig (god of compassion)	“Break the rules.” Black magic; fast lane to nirvana. Mahayana + Bon black magic + Hindu tantrism (sex magic). Cult/sect leaders: Dalai Lama (Chenrezig incarnate), Panchen Lama (Amida incarnate), Karmapa Lama. For the elite, TB is a philosophy similar to Western psychoanalysis; all realities (life, gods, demons) are real, but projections of oneself and are subject to his control; for the uneducated, it’s magical control of evil spirits.
Shingon (“true word”) China, Japan	Magical teachings handed down orally; i.e., secretly Dhyani Buddha (Solar Manifestation)	Tibetan Buddhism’s “little sister.” Offshoot of Tibetan Buddhism—magic & mantra (word). Ryobu: another Japanese sect: Shingon + Shinto (Japanese animism). Worship of Dhyani Buddha and Sun Goddess (aka Vairocana) as one and the same.

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