

BUDDHISM OVERVIEW

THE FOUNDING OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism was founded by Prince Siddhartha Gautama (Gotama), also known as Sakyamuni, or the sage of the Sakya clan. When he attained nirvana, Gautama was given the name Buddha, or enlightened one. It is thought that the Buddha lived many lives before his birth as Gautama, and that he continues to live through his teachings and his relics.

Buddhism is the religion and philosophy which developed out of the teachings of Buddha Gautama. It is the one of the central religious, social, and cultural institutions in Southeast Asia.

Buddhism first appeared around 500 BCE (BCE stands for Before the Common Era, which is replacing BC, or Before Christ. CE, or Common Era, is replacing AD, Anno Domini).

Buddhism began in India, and spread throughout Southeast Asia. Its influence in India declined, finally waning completely in the 12th century CE. It is currently practiced mainly in Southeast Asia, but has adherents around the world, because of both immigration and conversions.

WHO IS GOD?

Buddhism is a socio-philosophical institution, and is, in its essence, atheistic, meaning that there is no god to worship. Buddha was not and is not a god (except in Mahayana Buddhism), but was a yogi who achieved nirvana, or the reversal of the apprehension of a real self or ego or selfhood. Nirvana is the goal of all Buddhists and is the cessation of all pain and suffering. It is the end of samsara, or the cycle of birth and death that all are subject to (reincarnation). Buddha Gautama is very highly respected, and his teachings are the basis of all Buddhist thought and action.

WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

Buddhists believe in a cyclical view of history, and do not have a theology of origins. Samsara, or the cycle of birth, life and death, is never-ending, except for those who have attained nirvana. Since life before nirvana is considered illusory, there is no attempt to discern a beginning. Rather, all effort is directed toward nirvana, to ending the cycle of transmigration and reincarnation.

WHY ARE WE HERE?

We are here to attain nirvana, the cessation of suffering. Life is suffering, according to Buddha, and the cycle of samsara or reincarnation perpetuates this suffering. Through nirvana, or enlightenment, one can reach a place where suffering and pain do not exist. Life is thought to be illusory, and nirvana is considered attainment of true life. Related to nirvana is the concept of karma, or the idea that good conduct brings a pleasant and happy result and creates a tendency toward similar good acts. Likewise, bad conduct brings about evil results and creates a tendency toward similar evil acts. Karma affects how long it takes a person to achieve nirvana, and the process often takes many lifetimes. When Gautama was born, he is believed to have said, "This is the last birth I shall endure," a prophetic statement pointing to his achievement of nirvana.

HOW DO WE KNOW?

The teachings of Buddha were passed down orally by his followers, and were codified in the Tipitaka (three baskets), written in the Pali language. The Tipitaka is the main Buddhist scripture and is ascribed directly or indirectly to Buddha. There are also writings called sutras.

WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO?

Buddhists generally acknowledge the four noble truths. They are as follows:

- * Life is suffering (dukha).
- * The cause of suffering is desires (tanha).
- * The cure for suffering (cessation of suffering) is to remove desires.
- * To remove desires, and end suffering, follow the Eight Fold Path (to nirvana).

The Eight Fold Path is as follows:

- * Right Knowledge (understanding of the noble truths).
- * Right Thinking (setting one's life on the correct path).
- * Right Speech (don't lie, don't criticize unjustly, no harsh language, no gossip).
- * Right Conduct (follow the Five Precepts).
- * Right Livelihood (earn a living that doesn't harm living things).
- * Right Effort (conquer evil thoughts, maintain good thoughts).
- * Right Mindfulness (intense awareness of all states in body, feeling and mind).
- * Right Concentration (deep meditation to lead to a higher state of consciousness).

The Five Precepts are as follows:

- * Do not kill.
- * Do not steal.
- * Do not lie.
- * Do not be unchaste.
- * Do not take drugs or drink intoxicants.

WHAT'S GOING ON TODAY?

Today, there are over 350,000,000 Buddhists. Most are in Southeast Asia, but there is a growing number of Buddhists in the United States as well (Mostly Zen Buddhists). There are three main branches of Buddhism in existence. The branches are as follows:

* Theravada (Hinayana, or smaller vehicle). Theravada Buddhists strongly emphasize meditation, the eighth step in the Eight Fold Path. Because of this emphasis, Theravada Buddhism tends to be practiced in a monastic community, and is not generally available (because of time constraints) to the broad public. It is generally practiced only in Southeast Asia.

* Mahayana (large vehicle). Mahayana Buddhists felt that Theravada Buddhism was too exclusive. They sought to include as many people as possible, and developed the idea of gradations of Buddhahood, or bodhisattvas (previous lives, Buddhas in waiting). The gradations are pratyeka-buddha (one who has awakened to the truth, but keeps it a secret) and arhant (worthy, one who has learned the truth from others and accepted it as truth). Mahayana Buddhists also developed a theology of Buddha, where Buddha Gautama was not a human being, but rather the manifestation of a universal, spiritual being. Some subdivisions of Mahayana include the Pure Land School, Tian Dai (China) or Tendai (Japan), and Chan (China) or Zen (Japan). Mahayana Buddhism is mainly practiced in China, Japan and Korea, although there are some Zen Buddhists in the United States as well.

* Vajrayana (the vehicle of the thunderbolt). Vajrayana developed out of Tantric Buddhism (itself an outgrowth of Tantric Hinduism), which emphasized the magical or mystical aspect of Buddhism. Both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists felt that the physical world was unreal, an illusion, and should be rejected as such. Vajrayana Buddhists felt that though the world was an illusion, it need not be rejected, but could instead be used as a meditative technique. All activities, including sexual intercourse, can be used to help one meditate. Vajrayana is practiced mainly in Tibet.

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE IT?

Buddhism can be recognized by the Dharma Wheel (sometimes called the wheel of life), which has eight spokes, each one signifying one of the steps in the eight fold path. Different branches of Buddhism are also associated with other symbols. The circle is a very important aspect in Buddhist iconography.

SOURCES

* Sopa, G. & Jones, E.W. Buddhism: A Portrait. In Beversluis, J. (Ed.). (1995). A Sourcebook for Earth's Community of Religions. (pp. 14-18). Ada: CoNexus Press.

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