



www.globaled.org.nz

GEC WEBSITE HOME

RELEVANT LINKS



image from: <http://indiaclips.tripod.com>

FACT SHEET

BUDDHISM – A process of enlightenment

OVERVIEW

In 566BC Siddhartha Guatama was born in India in Northern India, the eldest son of a wealthy ruling family. Although he enjoyed the privileges of a prince the suffering he saw in life troubled him deeply. He left home at 29 and set out on a rigorous spiritual quest. The answers given by traditional religion did not satisfy him and he did not rest until, at the age of 35, he discovered The Middle Way and experienced a profound spiritual awakening. He became the Buddha (a title meaning The Awakened or Enlightened one). For the remaining fifty years of his life he encouraged men and women to gain Enlightenment for themselves, by increasing awareness in all aspects of life through practicing the Noble Eightfold Path. By practicing this anyone can come to a profound understanding of the interdependence of all things and be released from suffering.

Buddhism does not involve belief in God, neither is it merely philosophy. It offers methods, practices and ways of living that cooperate with the universal truth that all things are impermanent which leads to happiness and freedom from suffering.

Buddhism evolved into many varied forms of expression as it gradually spread from India into many countries including China, Japan, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar. Lately it has influenced many western countries.

Buddhists do not worship a god or an idol, rather they embrace a philosophy or a way of life. As Buddhism has evolved it has diversified in form and there are now many schools including the Mahayana, Theravada, Zen and western schools. However all the schools have the same core beliefs and emphasis on the dharma and developing compassion. It is through developing compassion that we can work towards the goal of alleviating suffering for all beings.

SOME IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

When the Buddha became enlightened he understood that the nature of existence could not be fully conveyed in conceptual terms. However, a mind prepared by spiritual practice can embrace Truth. Both concepts and images are used to communicate the nature of the Buddha's understanding of The Four Noble Truths central to all humanity.

They are:

1. Suffering, or unsatisfactoriness, exists and should be understood;
2. Unsatisfactoriness arises from attachment to desires;
3. Suffering ceases when attachment to desire ceases;
4. Freedom from suffering is possible by practicing the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold path is a path of vision and transformation:

1. Right view (the stage of vision)
2. Right thought
3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right contemplation

The **Buddhist philosophy and practice** is primarily concerned with incorporating the above into daily life. This is said to be 'taking refuge' and making a commitment to:

1. The Buddha – the self awakened one, the original nature of the heart;
2. The Dharma – the true nature of reality;
3. The Sangha – the Buddhist community.


GEC WEBSITE HOME
HOW DOES BUDDHISM DIFFER FROM THE MAIN WORLD RELIGIONS?

There is no god to worship in Buddhism, instead there is an emphasis on the enquiry into the nature of reality. The tool for this enquiry is the practice of various types of meditation. Many religions incorporate meditation practices, the difference being that Buddhism encourages a process of internal enquiry rather than on received wisdom through the word of God.

BECOMING A BUDDHIST

To become a Buddhist is a matter of intent. The intention is to take the Eight Fold Path (as above) and to under take the Five Precepts.

These are:

1. Not to kill living beings, instead cultivating kindness;
2. Not to take that which is not given, instead cultivating generosity;
3. Avoiding over dependence of sense pleasures, instead practicing stillness, simplicity and contentment;
4. Avoiding dishonesty, speaking with truth, clarity and peace;

Avoiding intoxication of all kinds, instead living with mindfulness.

There are many formal institutions for training in Buddhism where people have the opportunity to immerse themselves in understanding the scriptures and deepening their meditation practice. Many are monasteries, often men only, and require a very strong commitment. Some schools emphasise the importance of practicing Buddhism as an integral part of daily life, and offer opportunities to learn the principles and techniques, go on short retreats and have the ongoing support of a local sangha.

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

Meditation is at the centre of most spiritual and religious traditions. In the context of Buddhism it is the practice of stilling and purifying the mind in order to gain insight. No special tools are required but silence is helpful. One technique that is used to help still the mind is to focus on the breath and gently count rounds of 10. This helps the meditator to concentrate and not be distracted by random thoughts in the preliminary stages.

FORMS OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism has evolved into various schools or traditions through being expressed in different cultures. Broadly they are:

The Mahayana tradition

which originated in India and includes Tibetan Buddhism and Zen.

The Theravadan tradition

mostly found in Thailand and other parts of South East Asia.

The Zen tradition

mostly associated with Japan and Vietnam.

The Western Buddhist Order

very strong in England and Europe, with branches in New Zealand and Australia.

Vajrayana

a Tibetan tradition.

All of the traditions adhere to the same core concepts and understandings, as described earlier.



GEC WEBSITE HOME

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF BUDDHISM.

Buddhists adhere to the five precepts and follow the Eight-Fold Path, and in so doing they inherently follow a path of simplicity and peacefulness. There is no notion of a dogma to protect or defend. Buddhism encourages self-responsibility, selfish individualism is profoundly questioned and the individual is compelled to understand the dynamics of cause and effect. The understanding of the inter-connectedness of all beings and all matter gives rise to a willingness to become peaceful and respectful. Buddhist principles can be incorporated by practitioners of other religions and beliefs to the extent that something that helps one to grow can be considered to be Dharma.

WHERE DO BUDDHISTS PRACTICE?

The central practices of Buddhism are ethics and meditation, which doesn't require a special place although peace and quiet are helpful. Buddhist's also regularly attend temples or centres to meditate and do puja (rituals). In many of the schools of Buddhism it is usual for people (mainly young men) to enter a monastery either for a short time or as life vocation. Monasteries exist all over the world but for some countries it is a way of life, for example in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Tibet, Japan and India. Increasingly in the West monasteries and retreat centres are being opened for short and long term stays.

MAIN BUDDHIST CEREMONIES
Vesak – Buddha Day

Vesak is the major Buddhist festival of the year as it celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha on the first full moon in May.

Magha Puja –Sangha Day

This day is observed to commemorate the assembly of devotees, or the community of Buddhists. This celebration is held on the full moon of the third lunar month.

Asalha Puja – Dharma Day

This day, the full moon day of the eighth lunar month, commemorates the Buddha's teaching, that is the path and the truth.

Together these three aspects, the Buddha, the Sangha and the Dharma are referred to as The Three Jewels.

RELEVANT LINKS

www.buddhanet.net

www.buddhism.about.com