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BUDDHISM

By Harry Jivenmukta

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

Buddhism is a religion which started in India 2,500 years ago and today is prevalent mainly in India and the Far East countries of Asia. The religion was formed by an Indian Prince who left his rich life style after seeing the poverty in which some people lived. **Siddhartha Guatama** was born in 560 BC and led a fairly normal life until he was 29. When he saw the poverty of the people, the sickness and hopelessness, he left his rich and protected life to set out to find an answer to how the suffering of the human soul could achieve peace.

Guatama spent some time with monks of various orders but eventually moved on to seek other answers. When he reached **Bodh-Gaya**, (modern name), he sat under a fig tree and meditated for 46 days. He achieved what Buddhists today refer to as **supreme enlightenment**. This is a state of meditation which allows a person to see life as it truly is and find the answer to the problems of human life. From then on he was called the **Buddha**, which means 'enlightened one'.

Buddha travelled to Benares where he preached his first sermon. Up until his death at the age of 80, the Buddha travelled throughout India preaching this new way of thinking which he called '**The Middle Way**'.

After the Buddha's death there was no replacement leader to continue the work and the religion survived but was little heard of until about 200 years later. By the 3rd century BC Buddhism began to spread quickly throughout India. Since then it has spread throughout south and east Asia, and is the official religion of some nations.

Today there are two branches of Buddhism; the Northern Mahayana school, and the Southern Theravada school. These are both Buddhist but have developed slightly differently through the way they spread in Asia. The essential principles of the religion are common to both except the Mahayanas believe that Buddha was not human but an eternal being, whilst the Theravadas believe that Buddha was a human albeit with great powers.

QUESTIONS

What were the social conditions like in India at the time of the Buddha?

Did the Buddha find enlightenment in existing religions?

How many people are there in Britain who are Buddhists? Are there any Buddhist temples in the UK?

BELIEFS

The two most important pillars of belief in Buddhism are;

Samsara (continuation of life after life)

Karma (the good or bad that people do which is carried over to the next life)

Samsara is the belief that when a person dies that person will be re-born as another life, either a human or as an animal or creature. Buddhists will not kill even an insect because it is the re-incarnation of another life. The only way to avoid being re-born is to reach a state of **Nirvana**, through meditation, which raises the consciousness beyond the cycle of birth and re-birth.

Karma is the belief that all that a person does in life is kept as a record. If a person commits great evil then that person will be re-born as a lower creature, and if a person has done good he or she will be re-born as a better person. But only the person who commits no evil can break the cycle of re-birth and free their spirit. According to Buddhists, reaching the level of being born human is a sign that we have reached a high level already. Individuals have the choice of either wasting the opportunity and being re-born lower down the animal scale next time, or by belief and meditation free the spirit from this seemingly eternal birth and re-birth and reach Nirvana.

Nirvana is probably best described, though not totally accurately, as heaven, in the context of Christianity and other similar religions. Buddhism is very popular as an alternative religion for many people in the West because it gets away from the simple ideas of heaven and hell and offers quite a radical alternative.

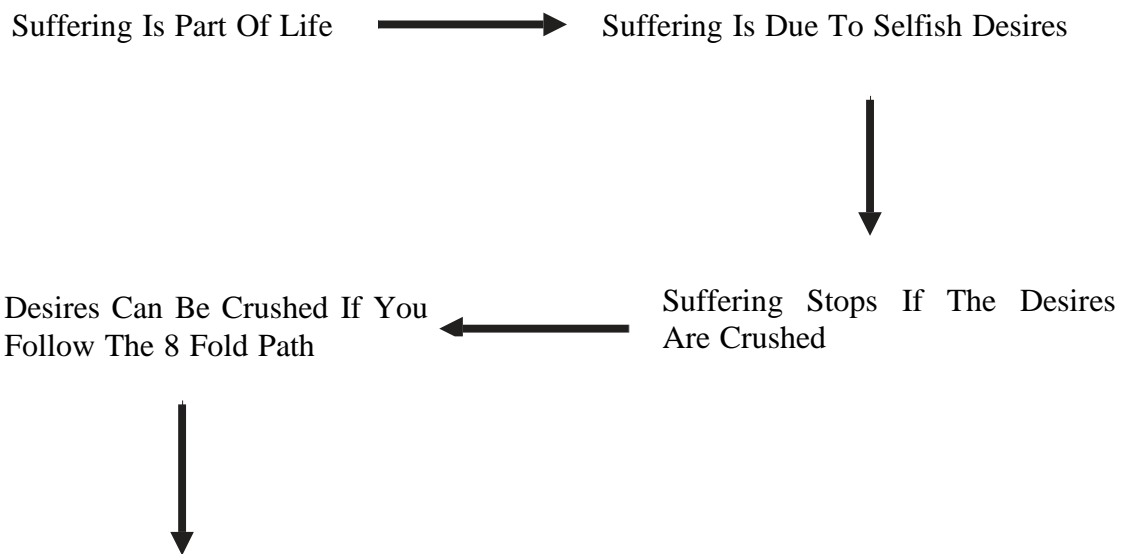
QUESTIONS

Hinduism also talks of re-birth and Karma. Compare Hinduism with Buddhism. What are the similarities and differences?

Is it possible to reach Nirvana and also live a normal life?

BELIEFS

Buddhists believe in the four notable truths. These are;



The Eight Fold Path:

- * Accept the Buddha's teachings
- * Carry out the Buddha's teachings
- * Do not lie or speak harshly
- * Do not take any life, avoid drugs, do not steal, do not commit adultery
- * Follow an occupation which allows you to live according to the teachings of Buddhism
- * By living life correctly it is easier to achieve Nirvana
- * Control your mind in meditation and thought
- * Meditate and concentrate properly to achieve Nirvana

PLACE OF WORSHIP

Buddhists pray at monasteries, shrines or temples which may vary in size and style. At most monasteries there are resident monks who live and look after the place. Their lifestyle is simple as is the monastery itself. The place where the resident monks live is likely to be very sparse without many modern fixtures and fittings. Simplicity is key to their way of life.

The monastery will have a shrine which is likely to be the brightest and most intricate construction in the building. The shrine has a picture, or more likely a statue of the Buddha. There are spaces around for offerings to be placed and a larger space for people to sit and pray or meditate.

Temples and shrines may be built anywhere where there is a need, and in Britain you might find a shrine in a house or other building which is the meeting place for Buddhists. There are symbols of the five elements of the faith in all shrines. These are **Earth, Fire, Water, Air,** and **Wisdom**. Symbols representing these elements are placed strategically around the shrine. The symbol of wisdom is often a spire which rises from the roof of the building.

There are some shrines which have become places of pilgrimage for Buddhists. One such shrine is the one at Bodh-Gaya where the Buddha originally meditated for 46 days. Another is at Candy in Sri Lanka where one of the Buddha's teeth is set in silver.

Buddhists do not have a particular day when they will visit the shrine, but do observe various phases of the moon. Devotees enter the shrine barefoot and meditate mostly in silence. Sometimes the monks may chant, and there may be a reading from holy scriptures.

Meditation is very important to Buddhists and many will take an hour or two each day to meditate either at a shrine or elsewhere. Through meditation Buddhists reach a plane of consciousness far beyond that reached by people in everyday life.

QUESTIONS

Draw a plan of how a Buddhist shrine might look.

How does a Buddhist shrine compare to the holy buildings used by people of different religions?

Find out where the nearest Buddhist shrine is to you.

HOLY SCRIPTURES

Originally Buddhist beliefs were spread by the telling of stories and passing these down the generations. Soon, however, written records did begin. The earliest scriptures which exist until today are some which were inscribed on stone monuments at about 250BC. The first complete version of the '**Way Of Virtue**' to survive is a 2nd century edition. It is said that the first written version, (which does not survive today) was written and agreed by 400 monks and others as being accurate before being released to people generally.

The Theravada Buddhists call their holy book **Tri-Pitake**, and it contains three sections;

The first concerns itself with the disciplined life that monks should live,

The second one contains the teachings of the Buddha,

The third is a commentary of the teachings and explanations of the main tenets of the religion.

The second book is thought to be the most important and contains over 540 stories of the Buddha. The most important section is probably the 'Path of Virtue' which many Buddhists know by heart.

The Mahayana Buddhists also use other writings, (Sutras), which are written mostly in Sanskrit, and older language of the Hindus. Most important in these is the '**Lotus Scripture**' which shows the Buddha as being a lotus flower rising from the imperfections of the world, (through the water) up to enlightenment, (the surface of the lake).

Studying the scriptures is an important part of the Buddhist monk's life in particular, but also for the ordinary believer. Often stories from the scriptures are read at shrines, and chanted by all the participants.

QUESTIONS

How important are holy scriptures to the Buddhist believer?

How do Buddhist scriptures compare to the scriptures of other religions?

Does your local library stock any copies of these scriptures?

ZEN BUDDHISM

Zen Buddhism is a branch of Buddhism which developed in China and then spread to Japan where it is very popular today. Zen is a Japanese translation of the Chinese 'Chan' which means meditation.

Zen is about reaching a higher state of enlightenment which is difficult to describe. It is an awareness about oneself and the world and can be transmitted from mind to mind amongst those who have attained the ability through meditation.

Zen teachers pose very difficult problems for their students which often seem like nonsense to other people. One popular example of this kind of question is;

What is the sound of one hand clapping?

This type of question forces the student to think in a different way to the way he or she would think of any normal question. The point is to break the cycle of standardised thinking patterns. The student will tell his or her teacher what the answer is and the teacher can tell from the answer whether in fact the student is thinking in an ordinary or an exceptional way from that answer and from the way the student reached his or her conclusions.

In Zen, simplicity is very important and this can be seen from looking at Zen art and poetry. The Zen monk will spend a great amount of time in meditation in order to understand why things are the way they seem, and what they are really like. It is like looking at an object from different angles. If you and your friends stand around an object you will all see the same object but it will have a different meaning to each of you and you will all see different parts of the object.

QUESTIONS

How does Zen Buddhism differ from traditional Buddhism?

Trace the development of Zen Buddhism.

Is Zen Buddhism an attractive way of belief to you? Why?

CEREMONIES (THERAVADA)

Magha Puja is celebrated on a full moon in February and celebrates the time when the Buddha ordained 1250 monks who had been enlightened. At this time the Buddha also laid down many of the rules which Buddhists follow to this day. Temples and shrines are lit by 1250 candles, one to represent each monk.

The **New Year** is always celebrated by Buddhists and is an important festival. These celebrations vary from country to country but some similar aspects include:

Honouring the Buddha
Releasing fish into streams **Releasing**
birds who have been captured **Holding**
processions

Wesak is celebrated in May at the full moon and lasts for three days, each representing the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha. Monks will read the scriptures and again, the release of captured fish and birds occurs. Money is donated to charity.

Asala celebrates Buddha's birth, his decision to leave his life of luxury, and his first sermon. It is held in July.

QUESTIONS

Why do Buddhists release birds and fish at some festivals?

Are there any similar festivals held by other religions which you can think of?

CEREMONIES (MAHAYANA)

Oban is celebrated in Japan, in July, and is a time to remember ancestors. Lanterns are lit to guide the spirits of ancestors back home. The festival is followed by dancing and singing.

The Chinese have a similar celebration called '**Lost Souls Day**' which is held in September. These are for the souls who have no descendants to care for them. Buddhists also believe that those people who die at sea lose their souls and lanterns are placed on leaves and floated on the water to honour their lost souls.

Higan is another Japanese festival in which prayers are offered to the dead and on occasion gifts are exchanged. This festival occurs twice each year; once in the Spring, and once in the Autumn. People go to monasteries and shrines to listen to the scriptures being read.

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QUESTIONS

Why do Buddhists release birds and fish at some festivals?

Why do Buddhists honour their dead ancestors?

BIRTH

Buddhists believe that when a child is born, it has lived before many times. The child is being re-born either into a better life than before, because in its previous life it did great good, or into a worse life because of evil deeds committed before.

The child has been born according to the Karma of the person's previous life. In this life the child has three options:

To do good and be born into an even better life next time

To do evil and be re-born as an animal or creature next time

Live according to the teachings of the Buddha and achieve enlightenment and possibly Nirvana which will free it from the cycle of birth and re-birth.

Much of what the child will achieve depends on its circumstances. An example of this might be the moral and religious attitudes of its parents, or the relative greed for material goods. There is undoubtedly a link between Karma of other people and the way in which the Karma of the child will develop. That is why some Buddhists deny their families and wealth and seek solitude or refuge in monasteries so that they are not implicated by the bad deeds of those around them.

EXAMPLE

If one family member was doing something illegal and everyone else in the family knew but did nothing about it, then all of the family would be guilty of misdeeds and get bad Karma.

QUESTIONS

Is it possible to gain Nirvana whilst still living a relatively normal life?

Is the Buddhist code of behaviour similar to that of other religions?

Assess your own life to date? How close are you to Nirvana?

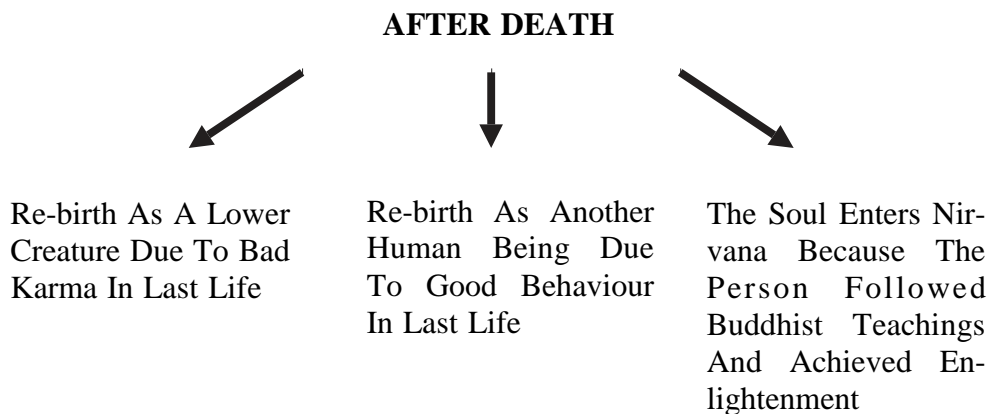
DEATH

Buddhists believe in life after life. This means that when a person dies they are re-born either into a better or worse living being, depending on the deeds they did in their last life. This means that if someone has committed very bad deeds in their last life they may be born as an animal or small creature. Good deeds may see the person being born as a human again, with another opportunity to trying to gain Nirvana.

Buddhists believe in achieving Nirvana so that they can escape the life after life cycle and be elevated beyond it. Death in some cases can mean that a person who lived a very bad life goes down the animal chain and may need several lives of good behaviour before being able to be born as a human again.

The reason why Buddhists believe that a person should never kill even an insect is that it gives them bad Karma for doing the deed and also affects the Karma of the creature killed. Many Buddhists sweep the floor before sitting down in case they inadvertently sit on an insect.

Unlike Christianity and some other religions, in Buddhism death is more than an end of life and the entry into heaven or hell.



QUESTIONS

How many chances does a human being have of trying to achieve Nirvana?

If a human is re-born as an animal can he or she become a human again in a later life?

What happens if a person achieves Nirvana in their life?

MARRIAGE

Getting married involves developing a relationship and compromising with the partner. This is why, like some other monks, Buddhist monks do not get married. In order to achieve Nirvana it is necessary that there are no distractions from the life of meditation and prayer.

Obviously most Buddhists do get married and are not as devoted as the monks to their strict way of life. It is less likely, however, that a married person can achieve Nirvana because bringing up children and maintaining a family involves getting heavily involved in all parts of everyday life with the accompanying distractions. This is one reason why these Buddhists get involved in the ceremonies and festivals of the religion. It is the best way that they can see of showing their devotion to the religion. Also giving money to charity and helping others leads to good Karma.

The Buddha himself was married but left his wife and child when he embarked on his journey of self-discovery. There is always a dilemma about reaching the very heights of any religion. To give oneself completely can in itself lead to making the life of others difficult. And yet maintaining one's responsibilities in everyday life denies the individual the conditions to achieve the ultimate Nirvana.

Without reproduction there would be no children or future in any case. So it goes without saying that most people have to maintain a compromise in order that some others can reach the highest point in spiritualism.

QUESTIONS

Can you resolve the dilemma that life itself and the responsibilities it involves can deny a person Nirvana?

How can a person both work to bring up children and offer them security and at the same time spend enough time on trying to be good enough to achieve Nirvana?

Are there some people who are born into a position which allows them to be selfish about their religion? Is being totally devoted to God selfish?