

# WHAT IS BUDDHISM?

**AJAHN BRAHMAVAMSO**

Abbot of Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery

Spiritual Director of the Buddhist Society of

Western Australia, Perth, Australia

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# What is Buddhism?

**Ajahn Brahmavamso**

## Introduction

**F**or more than 2,500 years, the religion we know today as Buddhism has been the primary inspiration behind many successful civilizations, a source of great cultural achievements and a lasting and meaningful guide to the very purpose of life for millions of people. Today, large numbers of men and women from diverse backgrounds throughout the world are following the Teachings of the Buddha. So who was the Buddha and what are his teachings?

## The Buddha

The man who was to become the Buddha was born Siddhattha Gotama around 2,600 years ago as a prince of a small territory near what is now the Indian-Nepalese border. Though he was raised in splendid comfort, enjoying aristocratic status, no amount of material pleasure could conceal life's imperfections from the unusually inquisitive young man. At the age of 29 he left wealth and family to search for a deeper meaning in the secluded forests and remote mountains of Northeast India. He studied under the wisest religious teachers and philosophers of his time, learning all they had to offer, but they could not provide the answers he was seeking. He then struggled with the path of self-mortification, taking that practice to the extremes of asceticism, but still to no avail.

Then at the age of 35, on the full moon night of May, he sat beneath the branches of what is now known as the Bodhi Tree, in a secluded grove by the banks of the river Neranjara, and developed his mind in deep and luminous, tranquil meditation. Using the extraordinary clarity of such a mind, with its sharp penetrative power generated by states of deep inner stillness, he turned his attention to investigate the truth of mind, universe and life. Thus he gained the Supreme Enlightenment experience and from then on he was known as the Buddha, the Awakened One.

His Enlightenment consisted of the most profound and all-embracing insight into the nature of mind and all phenomena. This Enlightenment was not a revelation from some divine being, but a discovery made by himself based on the deepest levels of meditation and the clearest experience of mind. It meant that he was free from the shackles of craving, ill-will and delusion, that all forms of inner suffering had been eliminated and that he had acquired unshakeable peace.

## The Teachings of the Buddha

Having realised the goal of Perfect Enlightenment, the Buddha spent the next 45 years teaching a path which, when diligently followed, will take anyone regardless of race, class or gender to the same Perfect Enlightenment. The teachings about this path are called the Dhamma, literally meaning the nature of all things or the truth underlying existence. It is beyond the scope of this pamphlet to present a thorough description of all these teachings, but the following seven topics will give you an overview of what the Buddha taught.

### 1. The Way of Inquiry

The Buddha warned strongly against blind faith and encouraged the

way of truthful inquiry. He pointed out the danger in fashioning one's beliefs merely on the following grounds: hearsay, tradition, because many others say it is so, the authority of ancient scriptures, the word of a supernatural being or out of trust in one's teachers, elders or priests. Instead one maintains an open mind and thoroughly investigates one's own experience of life. When one sees for oneself that a particular view agrees with both experience and reason and leads to the happiness of one and all, then one should accept that view and live up to it!

This principle of course also applies to the Buddha's own teachings. They should be considered and inquired into using the mental clarity born of meditation. As one's meditation deepens, one eventually sees these teachings for oneself with insight, and only then do they become one's own truth giving blissful liberation.

The traveller on the way of inquiry needs to be tolerant. Tolerance does not mean that one embraces every idea or view but that one doesn't get angry at what one can't accept. Further along the journey what one initially disagreed with might be seen to be true. So in the spirit of tolerant inquiry, here are some of the Buddha's basic teachings.

## 2. The Four Noble Truths

The main teaching of the Buddha focuses not on philosophical speculation about a Creator God or the origin of the universe, nor on reaching a heaven world ever after. The teaching instead is centred on the down-to-earth reality of human suffering and the urgent need to find lasting relief from all forms of discontent. The Buddha gave the simile of a man shot by a poison-tipped arrow who, before he would accept a doctor to treat him, first demanded to know who shot the arrow, his social standing, where he was from, what sort of bow he used, what the arrow was made of... This foolish man would surely die before his

questions could be answered. In the same way, the Buddha said, our most urgent need is to find lasting relief from recurrent discontent, which robs us of happiness and leaves us in strife. Philosophical speculations are of secondary importance and are best left until after one has trained the mind in meditation to the stage where one has the ability to examine the matter clearly and see the truth for oneself.

Thus the central teaching of the Buddha, around which all his other teachings revolve, is the Four Noble Truths:

1. All beings, human and otherwise, are afflicted with all sorts of disappointments, sadness, discomfort, anxiety etc. In short they are subject to suffering.
2. The cause of this suffering is craving, born of the illusion of a 'soul' (see below, topic 7).
3. Suffering has a final end in the experience of Enlightenment (Nibbana), which is the complete letting go of the illusion of 'soul' and the consequent ending of craving and ill will.
4. This peaceful and blissful Enlightenment is achieved through a gradual training, a path called the Middle Way, or the Eightfold Path.

It would be mistaken to label this teaching as 'pessimistic' on the grounds that it begins by focusing on suffering. Rather, Buddhism is 'realistic' in that it unflinchingly faces up to the truth of life's many sufferings, and it is 'optimistic' in that it shows a final end to the problem: Nibbana - Enlightenment in this very life! Those who have achieved this ultimate peace are inspiring examples that demonstrate once and for all that Buddhism is far from pessimistic but is a path to true happiness.

### 3.The Middle Way or Eightfold Path

The way to the end of all suffering is called the Middle Way because it avoids the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. Only when the body is in reasonable comfort but not overindulged, does the mind have the clarity and strength to meditate deeply and discover the truth. This Middle Way consists of the diligent cultivation of virtue, meditation and wisdom, which are explained in more detail as the Eightfold Path:

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

(‘Right’ in the sense of being conducive to happiness and Enlightenment)

Right Speech, Action and Livelihood constitute the training in virtue or morality. For a practising lay Buddhist it consists of maintaining the five Buddhist precepts, which are to refrain from:

1. Deliberately causing the death of any living being;
2. Intentionally taking for one’s own the property of another;
3. Sexual misconduct, in particular adultery;
4. Lying and breaking promises;
5. Drinking alcohol and taking stupefying drugs which lead to a weakening of mindfulness and moral judgement.

Right Effort, Mindfulness and Concentration refer to the practice

of meditation, which purifies the mind through the experience of blissful states of inner stillness and empowers the mind to penetrate the meaning of life through profound moments of insight.

Right Understanding and Thought are the manifestations of Buddha-Wisdom which ends all suffering, transforms the personality and produces unshakeable serenity and tireless compassion.

According to the Buddha, without perfecting the practice of virtue it is impossible to perfect meditation, and without perfecting meditation it is impossible to arrive at Enlightenment Wisdom. Thus the Buddhist path is a gradual one, a middle way consisting of virtue, meditation and wisdom, explained in the Eightfold Path and leading to happiness and liberation.

#### 4. Kamma

Kamma means ‘action’. According to the law of kamma there are inescapable results of our intentional actions. There are deeds of body, speech and mind that lead to one’s own harm, to others’ harm, or to the harm of both. Such deeds are called ‘bad’ or ‘unwholesome’ kamma. They are motivated by craving, ill-will or delusion, and because they bring painful results they should not be done.

There are also deeds of body, speech and mind that lead to one’s own well-being, to the well-being of others, or to the well-being of both. Such deeds are called ‘good’ or ‘wholesome’ kamma. They are motivated by generosity, compassion or wisdom, and because they bring pleasant results they should be done as often as possible.

Much of what one experiences is the result of one’s own previous kamma. Thus when misfortune occurs, instead of blaming someone else, one can look for faults in one’s own past conduct. If a fault is

found, the experience of its consequences will make one more careful in the future. When happiness occurs, instead of taking it for granted, one can look for the past good kamma that caused it. If one can find such a cause, the experience of its pleasant results will encourage more good kamma in the future.

The Buddha pointed out that no being whatsoever, divine or otherwise, has the power to stop the consequences of good and bad kamma. The fact that one reaps just what one sows gives the Buddhist a powerful incentive to avoid all forms of bad kamma and do as much good kamma as possible.

Though one cannot escape the results of bad kamma one can lessen their severity. A spoon of salt mixed in a glass of water makes the whole glass very salty, whereas the same spoon of salt mixed in a freshwater lake hardly changes the taste of the water at all. Similarly, the results of bad kamma in a person habitually doing only a small amount of good kamma is painful indeed, whereas the result of the same bad kamma in a person habitually doing a great deal of good kamma is only felt mildly.

This natural law of kamma thus becomes the force behind, and the reason for, the Buddhist practice of morality and compassion in our society.

## 5. Rebirth

The Buddha clearly remembered many of his past lives. Even today many Buddhist monks and nuns, and others also, remember their past lives. Such a strong memory is a result of deep meditation. For those who remember their past lives rebirth becomes an established fact which puts this life in a meaningful perspective.

The law of kamma can only be understood in the framework of many lifetimes because it sometimes takes this long for kamma to bear its fruit. Thus kamma and rebirth offer a plausible explanation to the obvious inequalities of birth - why some are born into great wealth whereas others are born into pathetic poverty; why some children enter this world healthy and full-limbed whereas others enter it deformed and diseased. The painful results of bad kamma should not be regarded as punishment for evil deeds but as lessons from which to learn. For example, how much better to learn about the need for generosity than to be reborn among the poor!

Rebirth takes place not only within the human realm. The Buddha pointed out that the realm of human beings is but one among many. There are many separate heavenly realms and grim lower realms too, including the realm of animals and the realm of ghosts. Not only can we go to any of these realms in our next life, but we may have come from any of these realms into our present life. This explains a common objection against rebirth: “How can there be rebirth when there are 10 times as many people alive today than there were a century ago?” The answer is that people alive today have come from many different realms.

Understanding that we come and go between different realms, gives us more respect and compassion for the beings in these realms. It is unlikely, for example, that one would exploit animals when one has seen the link of rebirth that connects them with us.

## 6. No Creator God

The Buddha also pointed out that no God or priest nor any other kind of being has the power to interfere in the working out of someone else's kamma. Buddhism, therefore, teaches individuals to take full responsibility for themselves. For example, if you want to be wealthy then be generous, trustworthy and diligent, and if you want to live in a

heavenly realm then always be kind to others. There is no God to ask favours from, or to put it another way, there is no corruption possible in the workings of the law of kamma.

Do Buddhists believe that a Supreme Being created the universe? Buddhists would first ask which universe you mean. This present universe from the moment of the 'big bang' up to now, is but one among a countless number in Buddhist cosmology. When one universe cycle ends another begins, again and again, according to impersonal law and without discoverable beginning. A Creator God is redundant in this scheme.

No being is a Supreme Saviour, because gods, humans, animals and all other beings are subject to the law of kamma. Even the Buddha had no power to save - he could only point out the truth for the wise to see for themselves. Everyone must take responsibility for their own future well-being, and it is dangerous to give that responsibility to anyone else.

## 7. The Illusion of a 'Soul'

The Buddha taught that there is no 'soul', no essential and permanent core to a living being. Instead, that which we call a 'living being', human or otherwise, can be seen to be but a temporary coming-together of many parts and activities - when complete it is called a 'living being', but when the parts have separated and the activities have ceased it is not called a 'living being' anymore. Like a computer assembled of many parts and activities, only when it is complete and performs coherent tasks is it called a 'computer', but when the computer is taken apart and the activities cease it is no longer called a 'computer'. No essential and permanent core can be found which we can truly call the 'computer', and just so no essential and permanent core can be found in a living being which we can call the 'soul'.

Yet rebirth still occurs without a ‘soul’. Consider this simile: on a Buddhist shrine a candle is burnt low and is about to go out. A monk takes a new candle and lights it from the old one. The old candle goes out but the new candle burns bright. What went across from the old candle to the new? There was a causal link but no ‘thing’ went across! In the same way, there was a causal link between your previous life and your present life, but no ‘soul’ went across.

Indeed, the illusion of a ‘soul’ is said by the Buddha to be the root cause of all human suffering. The illusion of ‘soul’ manifests as the ‘ego’. The natural unstoppable function of the ego is to control. Big egos want to control the world, average egos try to control their immediate surroundings of home, family and workplace, and all egos strive to control what they take to be their own body and mind. Such control manifests as desire and aversion, and it results in a lack of both inner peace and outer harmony. It is this ego that seeks to acquire possessions, manipulate others and exploit the environment. Its aim is its own happiness but it invariably produces suffering. It craves for satisfaction but experiences discontent. Such deep-rooted suffering cannot come to an end until one sees, through insight based on deep and powerful meditation, that the idea of ‘me and mine’ is no more than a mirage.

These seven topics are a sample of what the Buddha taught. Now, to complete this brief sketch of Buddhism, let’s look at how these teachings are practised today.

## Types of Buddhism

One could say that there is only one type of Buddhism and that is the huge collection of teachings originally given by the Buddha. These teachings are found in the Pali Canon, the ancient scriptures of Theravada Buddhism, widely accepted as the oldest and most reliable record of

the Buddha's word. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion in Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos.

Between 100 and 200 years after the passing away of the Buddha the Sangha (the monastic community) split over the question, apparently, of who has influence in Sangha affairs. A controversy over some monastic rules had been decided by a committee of mostly Arahants (fully Enlightened monks or nuns) against the views of the majority. The overruled majority were not reconciled to this decision and they probably viewed the Arahants as excessively influential. The disaffected monks subsequently lowered the exalted status of the Arahant and eventually raised in its place the ideal of the Bodhisattva (an unenlightened being said to be in training to become a Buddha). This group of monks and nuns was first known as the 'Maha Sangha', meaning the 'great (part of the) monastic community'.

After centuries of development, previously unknown scriptures appeared, attempting to give a philosophical justification for the superiority of the Bodhisattva over the Arahant. The adherents to these new scriptures called themselves the 'Mahayana'. Mahayana retained most of the original teachings of the Buddha (in the Chinese scriptures these are known as the 'Agama'), but these core teachings were mostly overwhelmed by layers of expansive interpretations and new ideas.

The Buddhism which established itself in China, and which is still vibrant in Taiwan, reflects the earlier development of Mahayana. From China Mahayana spread to Vietnam, Korea and Japan, one result of which was the emergence of Zen. The Buddhism in Tibet and Mongolia is a still later development, usually referred to as 'Vajrayana'.

## Buddhism's Relevance in the World Today

Today, Buddhism continues to gain ever wider acceptance in many lands far beyond its original home. People throughout the world, through their own careful choice, are adopting Buddhism's peaceful, compassionate and responsible ways.

The Buddhist teaching of the law of kamma offers people a just, incorruptible foundation and reason for living a moral life. It is easy to see how a wider embracing of the law of kamma would lead any country towards a stronger, more caring and virtuous society.

The teaching of rebirth places this present short lifetime of ours in a broader perspective, giving more meaning to the vital events of birth and death. The understanding of rebirth removes so much of the tragedy and grief surrounding death and turns our attention to the quality of a life, rather than its mere length.

From the very beginning the practice of meditation has been at the very heart of the Buddhist way. Today, meditation grows increasingly popular as its proven benefits to both mental and physical well-being are becoming more widely known. When stress is shown to be such a major cause of human suffering, the quieting practice of meditation becomes ever more valued.

Today's world is too small and vulnerable for us to live angrily and alone, and thus tolerance, love and compassion are so very important. These qualities of mind, essential for happiness, are formally developed in Buddhist meditation and then diligently put into practice in everyday life.

Forgiveness, gentleness, harmlessness and peaceful compassion

are the well-known ‘trademarks’ of Buddhism, and they are given freely and broadly to all beings, including animals of course, and also, most importantly, to oneself. There is no place for dwelling in guilt or self-hatred in Buddhism, not even a place for feeling guilty about feeling guilty!

Teachings and practices such as these are what bring about qualities of gentle kindness, unshakeable serenity and wisdom, identified with the Buddhist religion for over 25 centuries and sorely needed in today’s world. In all its long history, no war has ever been fought in the name of Buddhism. It is this peace and tolerance, growing out of a profound yet reasonable philosophy, that makes the Buddha’s message timeless and always vitally relevant.

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## The Buddhist Society of WA and the Dhammaloka Buddhist Centre in Perth

The Buddhist Society of WA has been established to encourage the teaching, practice and realisation of the Dhamma (the Buddhist word for 'Truth') with special emphasis on Theravada Buddhism. To fulfil this aim, the Society has established Bodhinyana Monastery in Serpentine, 60 km south of Perth, and Dhammasara Nuns' Monastery in Gidgegannup, 35 km north east of Perth. The Society actively supports the monastic communities living there.

The complex which we call Dhammaloka Buddhist Centre at Nollamara consists of a large Dhamma Hall, used for talks on Buddhism, instruction in meditation and for major Buddhist Ceremonies; adjoining meditation and shrine rooms; a Community Hall for Buddhist cultural activities. A multipurpose building provides accommodation for monks, offices for the administration of the Buddhist Society, a library containing many books for loan and sale as well as audio cassettes and CD recordings of many talks given by monks and nuns and a reception area and kitchen where visitors can sit down to a cup of tea and friendly chat. The whole complex of buildings is set in beautiful grounds on a very quiet street opposite a park, just 5 km north of the centre of Perth.

Dhammaloka Buddhist Centre aims to serve the whole Buddhist community and others, regardless of age, gender or country of origin. Our usual schedule of activities is outlined on the following page.

Regular Activities at the  
Dhammaloka Buddhist Centre  
in Nollamara

<b>Friday</b>	7.00 - 7.20pm	Chanting.
	7.30 - 8.00pm	Guided sitting meditation.
	8.00 - 9.00pm	A talk on Buddhism by one of the senior monks or by the senior nun.
<b>Saturday</b>	10.30am	Food offering to the Sangha.
	3.00 - 4.15 pm	Instruction, meditation and discussion. Separate classes for new and experienced meditators. A four-week Introduction to meditation course begins on the first Saturday of each month.
<b>Sunday</b>	8.30 – 10.30am	Sitting and walking meditation.
	10.30am	Food offering to the Sangha.
	3.00 - 4.30pm	Dhamma school for children is on the 2 <sup>nd</sup> and 4 <sup>th</sup> Sundays of each month.
	3.00 - 4.30pm	Buddhist Study Group on the 2 <sup>nd</sup> and 4 <sup>rd</sup> Sundays of each month.
<b>South of the River</b>		
Tuesday	7.00 - 9.00pm	Meditation Instruction and Dhamma talk. Enquires on 9390 1188.

## **Addresses**

### **The Buddhist Society of WA (Inc)**

Dhammaloka Buddhist Centre

18-20 Nanson Way

Nollamara WA 6061

Phone: (61-8) 9345 1711

Fax: (61-8) 9344 4220

Website: [www.bswa.org](http://www.bswa.org)

Email address: [info@bswa.org](mailto:info@bswa.org)

### **Bodhinyana Monastery**

216 Kingsbury Drive

Serpentine WA 6125

Phone: (61-8) 9525 2420

Fax: (61-8) 9525 3420

### **Dhammasara Nuns Monastery**

203 Reen Road

Gidgegannup WA 6083

Phone/Fax: (61-8) 9574 6583

MAY ALL BEINGS BE HAPPY

