

Core Buddhists Beliefs

Buddhist beliefs and how they differ

There are various beliefs in Buddhism that are centred around reaching enlightenment and ending suffering (also called dukkha).

The Wheel of Life

The Buddha taught that all human experience is ultimately tainted by dukkha. Often translated as suffering, dukkha refers also to the sense of unsatisfactoriness, which the Buddha believed was ever-present. The Buddha taught that dukkha has various causes and effects. The idea of kamma (kamma is also known as karma) is that actions have consequences.

The Wheel of Life (Bhavachakra) represents the idea in Buddhism of life, death and rebirth. This idea is also known as samsara. Buddhists believe that what they are reborn as in future will depend on how they live their current life. For example, if a person lives a good life and has good kamma, they will be reborn into a better realm.

The wheel has seven elements:

The inner hub of the wheel shows the Three Poisons, which are ignorance, attachment (or greed) and hatred.

The second layer represents kamma.

The third layer represents the six realms of samsara.

The fourth layer represents the 12 links of dependent arising (or paticca-samuppada).

The demon figure over the wheel represents the idea that nothing lasts forever (impermanence).

The moon above the wheel represents the idea of liberation or freedom from samsara.

The Buddha pointing towards the white circle shows the idea that it is possible for people to become free from samsara.

The Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths are one of the most important teachings of the Buddha. They consist of the following ideas:

All life is imperfect and involves suffering (dukkha).

The cause of suffering is desire (samudaya).

Suffering can end (nirodha).

The way to end suffering is by following the Noble Eightfold Path (magga).

Divisions of Buddhism

There are two main divisions in Buddhism: Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism.

Theravada Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism is older and the more conservative of the two main divisions of Buddhism and is often referred to as the 'traditions of the elders'. Many Theravada Buddhists follow the teachings of the Buddha exactly, and many of them are monks or nuns.

Theravada Buddhists strive to be arhats. Arhats are perfected people who have gained true insight into the nature of reality. This means they have followed the Noble Eightfold Path to 'blow out' the three fires of greed, hatred and ignorance and have become enlightened. In Buddhism, enlightenment leads to nibbana (or nirvana), which means freedom from the cycle of rebirth (samsara). Consequently, they will no longer be reborn through samsara.

Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhists believe they can achieve enlightenment through following the teachings of the Buddha. The goal of a Mahayana Buddhist may be to become a Bodhisattva and this is achieved through the Six Perfections. Compassion is very important in Mahayana Buddhism. Therefore, Bodhisattvas choose to stay in the cycle of samsara to help others to achieve enlightenment as well as themselves.

This is a key difference between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists. Whereas Theravada Buddhists strive to become Arhats and gain freedom from the cycle of samsara, Mahayana Buddhists may choose to stay in the cycle of samsara out of compassion for others.

The Noble Eightfold Path

The Noble Eightfold Path (also called the Middle Way, or the Threefold Way) is the fourth part (magga) of the Four Noble Truths. It gives Buddhists a path they can follow to end suffering. However, these are not steps but rather eight guiding principles that suggest the way to end suffering and ultimately achieve enlightenment.

The Noble Eightfold Path is also known as the Threefold Way as it contains the three basic aspects of Buddhist life, which are ethics, meditation and wisdom. Each part of the Noble Eightfold Path falls within one of the elements of the Threefold Way:

The Threefold Way

1. Ethics

2. Meditation
others)

3. Wisdom

The Noble Eightfold Path

1. Right action (behaving in a skilful way and not harming others)

2. Right speech (speaking truthfully)

3. Right livelihood (earning a living in a way that doesn't cause suffering or harm to others)

4. Right mindfulness (being aware of yourself and the emotions of others)

5. Right effort (putting effort into meditation and positive emotions)

6. Right concentration (developing focus so that you are able to meditate)

7. Right view/understanding (remembering that actions have consequences)

8. Right intention (being clear about following the Buddhist path)

These eight actions are important as a person's actions in life will determine what they are reborn as in their next life. Kamma is gained through good actions (following the Noble Eightfold Path) and results in positive consequences. Bad actions (not following the Noble Eightfold Path) result in negative consequences.

The Buddhist symbol of the eight-spoked wheel represents the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path

Following the Threefold Way

Buddhists should begin with how they behave (ethics) as by clearing themselves of bad thoughts they will be in a better position to meditate. Buddhists can clear themselves of bad thoughts through following the ideas in the Five Precepts and understanding that actions have consequences.

Meditation becomes easier the more it is done. It helps Buddhists to rid their mind of negativity.

Meditation leads Buddhists to gain wisdom, as by acting in a morally and ethical way, Buddhists can grow their wisdom.

Human life

The Five Khandas

Theravada Buddhists are taught that the human personality is made up of five parts, called the Five Khandas or the Five Aggregates. This idea appears in the Khanda Sutta, a Buddhist scripture, in which the Buddha teaches monks about the Five Khandas.

The Five Khandas are the different parts that come together to make a human. The Buddha taught that all people are made up of these five elements.

The Five Khandas - Buddhist word - What does this mean? - An example

1. Form (the body) – Rupa - This is matter that is tangible (ie can be touched). This Khanda is linked to our five senses (smell, touch, taste, sight and hearing). - Seeing a physical object, such as a chair.
2. Sensation (feelings) – Vedana - These are feelings experienced from using the five senses. They can be physical or emotional. - Seeing a comfortable chair after a long, tiring day may lead to a sense of happiness.
3. Perception (the process of recognising what things are) – Samjna - This allows people to recognise things in the world because they have seen or experienced those things before. - Recognising the chair through experience of using them before.
4. Mental formations (thoughts) – Samskara - This is about the different opinions and feelings that people may have. - Creating an opinion about the chair in relation to other chairs experienced previously.
5. Consciousness (an awareness of things) – Vijnana - This is the awareness a person has of the things around them in the world. - Being aware of things in the world. - The Buddha believed that these different parts are fluid, which means they are changing all the time.

Therefore, the 'self' is also changing all the time. The belief that everything is in a state of change and there is no permanent self is called anatta

Theravada Buddhists believe that these different parts relate to each other and that they make a person who they are. The Khandas give people their personalities.