



**Buddhist Council of NSW**

*Working for the Buddhist Community*

## **Introduction to Buddhism**

### **Brief History of Buddhism**

Siddhartha Gautama was born into a royal family in the area around Northern India that is currently Southern Nepal, in 563 BCE. At the age of 29, Siddhartha realised that wealth and luxury did not guarantee happiness, so he explored the different teachings, religions and philosophies of the day, to find the key to lasting human happiness.

After six years of study and meditation he finally discovered (not invented) 'the middle path' and gained enlightenment at the age of 35. The title Buddha means 'the awakened one'. After enlightenment, the Buddha spent the rest of his life teaching until his passing at the age of 80. The Buddha taught a path to enlightenment (or lasting happiness) from his own experience.

His teachings are called 'the Dharma', meaning Truth. These teachings later came to be known as Buddhism. His teachings are maintained by the 'Sangha', a term used to refer to community of monks and nuns.

### **Buddhist Teachings**

All sentient beings have a shared goal – humans, animals and insects alike – have a desire to be happy and free from suffering. The Buddha recognised this, and taught a more skilful approach to life that leads to more lasting happiness.

Instead of relying on external factors such as fame, wealth and materialism to give us happiness, the Buddha's teaching asks us to look within, and change our perception of the world. We normally see our problems as "out there", but Buddhism teaches that it's actually all about our perception of reality. Seeing clearly where our difficulties originate is the first step to overcoming them. The paradox is that most of us find ourselves unknowingly creating conditions that lead us back to the dissatisfaction we so desperately seek to eliminate.

Buddhism points to the underlying causes of our day-to-day problems and teaches a graduated path to liberate us from suffering. This is known as the Noble Eight-Fold Path. Buddhist teachings are therefore about reducing the causes of suffering and increasing the causes of happiness.

The Buddha's teachings cannot be absorbed through intellectual understanding alone; it needs to be realised through direct experience. This is where meditation fits in. The aim of Buddhist teachings is to develop the capacity to recognise that the ever changing, inter-connected universe follows the law of cause and effect. In order to realise this both intellectually and experientially, it is necessary to learn how to cultivate mindfulness. Meditation practice helps us to achieve this.

### **Everyday Buddhism**

The daily practices of Buddhists depend on personal choice as well as many other factors. Some Buddhists simply set aside a time each day to meditate, while others may include prayers, chanting, reciting the Buddha's name, taking refuge and bowing to the altar (which normally holds a Buddha image). The language used for chanting can be any one of many languages such as English, Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, or Tibetan. Daily practice typically lasts from 15 minutes to one hour.



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Another common practice among Buddhists is taking the vow to follow the five precepts. These precepts include refraining from killing, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, harmful speech and the taking of intoxicants. The act of keeping these vows serves as a moral code that allows Buddhist practitioners to refrain from engaging in harmful or unskillful acts.

Some practitioners may decide to renew these vows from time to time. This serves as a continual reminder to foster generosity, compassion and loving kindness (a wish for all beings to be well and happy).

Some Buddhists, and those simply wishing to explore Buddhism, may choose to go on a retreat. This offers a defined period of quiet reflection and meditation lasting from days to weeks, or even months. A Buddhist pilgrimage involves making a special trip to holy places such as in India, Nepal, Tibet, China or Sri Lanka.

Buddhist teachings can be explored and tested by anyone. The Buddha's teachings do not rely on blind faith. Rather, the Buddha encouraged his students to test his teachings by applying them to daily life. When one's faith and confidence in the Buddhist path develops, a formal ceremony can be undertaken called 'taking refuge'. This essentially involves recognising the importance of the Triple Gem or Three Jewels: namely the Buddha (who discovered the path), the Dharma (the teachings) and the Sangha (the community of ordained monks and nuns who devote their lives to spiritual practice). For most Buddhists, ordained monks and nuns play the central role in the Buddhist community as teachers and spiritual leaders, although some Buddhists prefer less ceremony and instead learn from lay teachers.

### **Further Resources**

[BuddhaNet](#) is an excellent introductory Buddhist education and information network that provides a range of Buddhist Studies resources, ranging from an e-library of bilingual texts and definitions to a directory of different Buddhist traditions.

[Tricycle](#) is an independent journal about Buddhism in the West. They are dedicated to publishing articles that disseminate Buddhist values and teachings, to explore different views and attainable methods of enlightened living in the modern age.

[SuttaCentral](#) provides original texts and English translations of early Buddhist texts, ranging from texts in Pali, Chinese, Tibetan and Sanskrit.

