



Buddhism

Faith Guide

A short introduction to Buddhism, its origins and population in the UK

A Short Introduction to Buddhism

Origins of Buddhism

Based on the inheritance of Siddhartha Gautama (Sanskrit form) /Siddhattha Gotama (Pali form).

Siddhartha Gautama is believed by Buddhist tradition to have been born in the fifth century BCE. He began a six year spiritual search at the age of 29, leading to his Enlightenment under what is now known as the Bodhi Tree, at Bodh Gaya in North India.

At the age of eighty he died and entered into his parinirvana/parinibbana (final entry to nirvana).

Central Aspects of Buddhism

The Three Jewels

The idea and practice of the Three Jewels (triratna/tiratana) is central to Buddhists who affirm that:

1. I take refuge in the Buddha (the enlightened or awakened one)
2. I take refuge in the dharma (the teachings of the Buddha)
3. I take refuge in the samgha/sangha (the community of the Buddha)

The Four Noble Truths (Catur Aryasatya/Cattari Ariyasaccani)

The Four Noble Truths express the heart of the Buddhist dharma or teaching:

1. Dukkha (Unsatisfactoriness) Is seen as the experience of the transitoriness and imperfection of life. It is one of the Three Signs of Being, the others being anitya/anicca (impermanence), and anatman/anatta (no permanent self).
2. Samudaya (Origin of Unsatisfactoriness) Dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) is seen as originating in trishna/tanha, a craving which cannot be satisfied and results in attachment to transitory things and rebirth.
3. Nirodha (Cessation of dukkha) The overcoming of trishna (craving) is known as nirvana which includes the “quenching” or “extinction” of the thirst and craving that leads to dukkha.
4. Marga (The Way) The Arya Ashtangika Marga/Ariya Atthangika Magga (The Noble Eightfold Path – see below) is often known as the Middle Way of life.

The Noble Eightfold Path (Arya Astangika Marga):

The fourth of the Four Noble Truths is the way to overcome dukkha which is the Noble Eightfold Path:



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

The Five Precepts

The Five Precepts (Panca Silani) are, for lay Buddhists (ordained Buddhists take additional vows), the basis of samyakkammanta/samma kammanta (Right Action). They include the intention to refrain from:

1. harming living beings
2. taking what is not given
3. sexual misconduct and misuse of the senses
4. harmful speech
5. drink or drugs which cloud the mind

Paramitas

In Mahayana Buddhist tradition, there is also a focus on practising the positive paramitas (Perfections), including especially the first six:

1. giving
2. keeping the moral precepts
3. patience
4. strength to persevere
5. meditation
6. wisdom

Meditation

Though practised through a wide variety of methods, meditation among Buddhists can be found in two basic forms: shamatha/samatha (tranquillity) and vipashyana/vipassana (insight) meditation.



Diversity within Buddhism

There are two major traditions or “transmissions” of Buddhism: The Theravada (Way of the Elders) and the Mahayana (Great Vehicle), the latter containing a range of schools with differing emphases and practices. There are also some contemporary attempts to evolve western forms of Buddhism.

Theravada

The Theravada (Way of the Elders) tradition is associated particularly with Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Burma and the southern part of Vietnam and, because of this, it is sometimes known as the Southern Transmission.

Theravada Buddhism focuses upon the historical Buddha and its ideal is that of the arahat, the individual who has achieved release from rebirth.

It is based upon the Pali canon of scriptures (known as the Tipitaka or the Three Baskets). Some of the earliest material attributed to the Buddha and his disciples is found in this canon which is generally acceptable among all Buddhists.

Rather than having distinctive schools as such, the variations within the Theravada tradition owe more to the influence of its varied cultural contexts.

Mahayana

The Mahayana (Great Vehicle) tradition is found in Central Asia, China, Tibet, Korea, Japan and the northern part of Vietnam and, because of this, it is sometimes known as the Northern Transmission.

Its special characteristics include belief in many Buddhas who can simultaneously be present and the concept of shunyata/sunnata (Voidness or Emptiness).

It also holds the ideal of the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva, a fully perfected being who embodies prajna/panna (wisdom) and karuna (compassion). Among humans, a Bodhisattva is dedicated to assist in the liberation of all sentient beings.

In the Mahayana tradition there are a number of canons of scripture including the Agama; the Chinese Canon (the Ta MultiFaithNet 1997 – 1999s’ang-ching or Great Scripture Store); and the Tibetan canon.

The varied schools within Mahayana Buddhism reflect either different cultural influences or the role of particular texts or sutras:

Tibetan Buddhism began c755-797CE and contains four main lineages:

- the Nyingmapa
- the Sakyapa
- the Kagyupa
- the Gelugpa

Ch’an (Chinese) Buddhism

Ch’an was introduced to China in the 6th century CE. Zen (Japanese) Buddhism has two main lineages:

1. Rinzai Zen, which began in the 9th century and reached Japan in the 12th century
2. Soto Zen, taken to Japan in the 8th century.

Pure Land Buddhism has two main Japanese branches:

1. Jodo Shu (Pure Land School)
2. Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land School, often simply known as Shin).

Nichiren Buddhism was its origins in the work of the Japanese teacher Nichiren (1222-1282CE).

Buddhist origins

In the 19th and early 20th century Buddhism was often spread by people who originated the UK and became Buddhists when abroad, and who then returned to spread the religion.

In 1908 the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland was formed to receive a Buddhist mission by the Venerable Ananda Metteyya (Alan Bennett) who, in 1901, had been ordained as a monk in Burma.

The [Buddhist Society UK](#) has been recognised as a key source of information on Buddhists and Buddhism in the UK. More recently, [The Network of Buddhist Organisations UK](#) has also played a similar role.

Buddhists of many ethnic backgrounds, and a great variety of Buddhist traditions and movements are found in the UK.

The greatest concentrations of Buddhists in England and Wales are found in

The [Buddhist Society](#) produces a range of resources. An introduction to Buddhists in the UK and contact details for a range of national, local and regional organisations can also be found in the directory [Religions in the UK](#).

Buddhists in the UK

Buddhist Populations

Global	c. 494,881,000
UK	261,584
England	238,626



Wales	9,117
Scotland	12,795
Northern Ireland	1,046

As a proportion of the population in local authority areas, the 2011 Census shows that, in England, the greatest concentration of respondents identifying themselves as Buddhists is to be found in:

	% of Population	Total Numbers
Rushmoor	3.3%	3,092
Greenwich	1.7%	4,223
Kensington & Chelsea	1.5%	2,447
Westminster	1.5%	3,194
Hounslow	1.4%	3,617

Buddhist Organisations

	UK	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Local	422	364	30	23	5
Regional	30	29	1	0	0
National	70	1	1	1	1

Buddhist Places of Worship

The estimate for Buddhist places of worship includes centres, viharas, monasteries and other publicly accessible buildings.

UK	94
England	84
Wales	5

Scotland	3
Northern Ireland	2

Acknowledgement of Sources

UK Buddhist population data is sourced from the [Office for National Statistics’ Table QS210EW](#) (Census 2011: Religion [Detailed], Local Authorities in England & Wales, Crown Copyright 2012), the [Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency’s Table QS218NI](#) (Census 2011: Religion – Full Detail), and the [National Records of Scotland’s Table AT_001_2011](#) (Census 2011: Religion [Detailed], Crown Copyright 2013). Crown copyright material is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of HMSO.

Estimates for the global Buddhist population are taken from Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim (eds.), *World Religion Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2012).

Estimates for the numbers of Buddhist organisations and places of worship are taken from P. Weller (ed.), *Religions in the UK: A Directory, 2007-10* (Derby: Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, 2007). The section on ‘A Short Introduction to Buddhism’ summarises and abstracts from the same publication’s chapter on ‘Introducing Buddhists in the UK’ (pp. 103-126), which was developed with input from a range of consultants (pp. 329-338).

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