Buddhism

A brief overview
History

2500 years old

One of the great faiths - nearly 400 million followers

Based on the teachings and experiences of Siddhartha Gautama

Rejects belief in an omnipotent deity

Spread by teachers and merchants, not by force. Entered China and East Asia via the Silk Road
Buddhism at a glance

- Personal spiritual development
- Attainment of deep insight into the true nature of life
- Aim to reach state of nirvana, following Buddha’s teachings
- No personal god
Enlightenment comes through morality, meditation and wisdom: an evolutionary process.

Nothing is fixed or permanent; change is always possible.

Life is endless, and subject to impermanence, suffering, and uncertainty.

Our belief that things can last forever is a chief cause of suffering.
Common Views on Religion

Many say religion involves belief in (a) god(s)

God is a supreme being, responsible for creation

God is interested in us, has a personal relationship
Key Differences

Buddhism has no belief in God

Denies existence of a creator god

Some Buddhists recognize existence of supernatural beings

Teachings are to be tested by individuals, not just accepted as true at face value - applies also to teachings of Buddha
Is Buddhism a religion?

Suggestion that Buddhism is a ‘non-theistic’ religion

Western definition of religion too narrow

Perhaps a different way of looking at religion is needed?
Seven Dimensions of Religions

- Practical and ritual
- Experiential and emotional
- Narrative and mythic
- Doctrinal and philosophical
- Ethical and legal
- Social and institutional
- Material
Buddhism is a religion

Buddhism has unusual and distinctive features

More than just a philosophy, a way of life, or a code of ethics

Includes all these modes, in many combinations

Perspective of individual determines view

Clearly a religion when viewed holistically
Buddhist Universe

Two parts: the physical universe; and the beings within it

Five elements: earth, water, fire, air, space

‘World systems’ (solar systems) evolve through interaction of the five elements

World systems evolve and decline over billions of years, in a cyclic process repeated many times as a “great eon”.
Moral status of inhabitants determines the fate of the world system

Ignorance and selfishness lead to faster decline than wisdom and virtue

But even “good” world systems will eventually decline

We are caretakers and creators of our immediate environment
Earth is not the hub around which the cosmos revolves
Humans are not the only actors on the stage
Time is cyclic rather than linear
History has no overall direction or purpose
Similar patterns of events may repeat many times over
The Buddha

Birth name: Siddhartha Gautama

Born into the aristocratic warrior caste in Nepal, approx. 566BCE

Birth said to have been accompanied by miracles

Lived a protected, luxurious and unfulfilling life for 29 years

Said to have seen four signs compelling him to seek an end to suffering
The Four Signs

First Sign: What did it mean to grow old?
Second Sign: What did it mean to become sick?
Third Sign: What did it mean to die?
Fourth Sign: Was there a spiritual solution to the problems of the human condition?
Renunciation and Austerity

Renounced family life to seek spiritual knowledge
First teacher taught him meditation techniques
Second teacher taught a more sophisticated technique
First offered leadership; Second asked to be his disciple
Gautama realized that extremes of any kind were bad
Renunciation and Austerity

The ‘middle way’ was most productive

Avoid total denial and excessive indulgence

Continued meditation led to complete awakening

Aware of previous existences

Eliminated craving and ignorance - attained nirvana
A person may be reborn an infinite number of times.

The repeated process of rebirth is *samsāra* (“endless wandering”).

All living creatures are part of this process.

It continues until they attain nirvana.
Reincarnation

An ancient idea that did not originate with Buddhism

Connected to the doctrine of karma:

- Circumstances of future rebirths determined by moral deeds performed in this life

Karma is fundamentally important to Buddhist thought, although it too was incorporated after the time of Gautama
A natural law, just like gravity - not an active force/agent of divine punishment

More like an ‘elevator’ taking people between levels

Karmic actions are *moral* actions: based on moral choices and the acts that follow them

Karmic actions affect self as well as others

Endless knot symbolises the connection between current causes and future effects
“Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.”

–Buddhist proverb
Some Buddhists have a fatalistic perspective
But not all that happens, good or bad, is due to karma
Many things are entirely due to natural causes
Karma does not have precise effects - individuals are free to resist conditioning and establish new behaviours to short-circuit the endless cycle of rebirth
Karma and Morality

Actions are motivated by “good roots” or “bad roots”

- Good roots: Non-attachment, benevolence, understanding
- Bad roots: greed, anger, ignorance (the “three poisons” at the center of the bhavacakra)

Intentions are not enough: good people can do evil

Good intentions must be expressed in right actions; right actions do no harm to oneself or to others
Nirvana

Nirvana is the only way to escape *samsāra* (the cycle of reincarnation)

It is the ultimate goal of many Buddhists

Accumulation of good karma aids progress towards *nirvana*

One of the Four Noble Truths
Six Realms of Rebirth

Depicted in the bhavacakra ("Wheel of Life")

Three realms are auspicious: Humans, Gods*, Titans

Three realms are unfortunate: Ghosts, Hell, Animals

A person can transmigrate repeatedly between the realms
The Wheel of Life

8 spokes: the Eightfold Path

Hub: discipline, the core of meditation

Rim: mindfulness, which holds everything together
Realm of Hell

A place of torment, but not for eternity
Release comes when evil karma has run its course
Hot hells and cold hells
Realm of Animals

Undesirable for several reasons:

- Brute instinct
- Lack of intellectual capacity to understand or improve situation
- Hunted for food by humans and other animals
Realm of Ghosts

Former humans with binding attachments to the earth
Consumed by desires that cannot be satisfied
Realm of Titans

At the mercy of violent impulses
Will make any sacrifice if it helps them gain power
Success never brings fulfillment
Realm of Humans

Highly desirable and difficult to attain

Reason and free will assist in development of understanding and implementing Buddhist teachings

A ‘middle way’ between pleasure of higher realms and suffering of lower realms
Realm of Gods

Do not possess powers of creation, salvation or judgement
Have not attained nirvana, and still subject to emotions
Also suffer in *samsāra*, subject to karma and cyclic rebirth
Expending good karma leaves a negative balance, and results in a likely rebirth in one of the three lower realms
This is why the human realm is often more desirable
The Four Noble Truths

The Truth of Suffering
(*dukkha*)

The Truth of Arising
(*samudaya*)

The Truth of Cessation
(*nirodha/nirvana*)

The Truth of the Path (*magga*)
Truth of Suffering (*dukkha*)

Many things do not live up to our expectations

Even things novel and promising can become boring

Life can be unsatisfactory and unfulfilling

“Unsatisfactoriness” is a better translation of *dukkha*
Why do we suffer?

Buddha could find no evidence for a human soul

Human nature is constituted by five factors

These factors constantly shift in a way that makes suffering inevitable

Suffering is thus an integral part of the human experience
Truth of Arising (samudaya)

Suffering arises from craving (‘thirst’)

Desire for life and pleasant experiences causes rebirth

Three forms of desire:
- Pleasure of the senses
- Existence
- Destruction
Destructive Desires

Impulses to negate, deny and reject the unpleasant
Also includes self-denying and self-negating behavior
Low self-esteem: “I’m no good” or “I’m a failure”
Desires that are excessive or wrongly directed
Positive Desires

Craving leads only to craving, and holds us back
Avoid desires that are compulsive, limiting, cyclic
Right desires enhance and liberate
Truth of Cessation (*niruddha*)

Suffering ceases when craving is removed

Nirvana: “quenching” or “blowing out”

Radically transformed state of consciousness

Freedom from obsession with personal property

No more greed, hatred or ignorance
Nirvana

Transformed state of personality

Characterized by peace, deep spiritual joy, compassion, and a refined and subtle awareness

Negative mental states and emotions are absent from the enlightened mind

These qualities are achieved by the extinguishing of the three fires (the “three poisons”: greed, anger, ignorance)
“Nirvana is not a result, else it would be an effect produced by cause. Nirvana, Truth, is beyond cause and effect. It simply is. All you can do is see it. A path leads to it, but it’s not the result of the path. You get to a mountain along a path, but the mountain is not result of path.”

–Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche
Truth of the Path (magga)

The Fourth Noble Truth explains transition from *samsāra* (cycle of reincarnation) to nirvana.

Buddha thought that development of virtue and knowledge was the highest form of life.

The Eightfold Path is intended to support this goal.

It steers a course between indulgence and austerity.
The Eightfold Path

A guide for areas to explore and practice
Wisdom to be tried and tested in daily life
Learn to see life realistically
Benefit by cutting out delusions and mental noise
Not a linear path, and many parts overlap
The word “right” means “wholesome” or “skillful”
Teachings of Siddhartha Gautama

- Control your thoughts.
- Resist evil.
- Free your mind of evil.
- Work for the good of others.
- Practice meditation.
- Say nothing to hurt others.
- Know the truth.
- Respect life.

The Eightfold Path
The Eightfold Path

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Wisdom (Paññā), Morality (Sīla), and Meditation (Samādhi) are the three Pillars of the Eightfold Path.
Right View

Acceptance of Buddhist teachings (Four Noble Truths)

Experiential confirmation of Buddhist teachings

Nothing has to be taken on faith alone

Can also include belief in: karma, respect for parents and religious teachers, and personal spiritual progress
Right Intention (Right Resolve)

- Making a serious commitment to developing right attitudes
- Embracing friendliness and compassion
- Abandoning hatred
- Abstain from causing harms to others (*ahimsā*)
Right Speech

Telling the truth

Speaking in a thoughtful and sensitive way:

- Avoiding “divisive speech”
- Avoiding harsh speech that is aggressive or hurtful
- Avoiding frivolous talk (e.g. gossip, idle chatter)
Right Action

Abstaining from wrongful conduct:

- Killing
- Stealing
- Abuse of sensual pleasures
Right Livelihood

Not engaging in an occupation that causes harm to others

Includes humans and non-humans

Occupations to avoid include:

- Weapons manufacture/trade
- Slavery
- Alcohol

Be honest in business dealings
Right Effort

Gaining control of one’s thoughts

Replace negative thoughts with positive/wholesome ones
Right Mindfulness

Cultivating constant awareness in four areas:

- Body
- Feelings
- Mental state (mood)
- Thoughts
Right Mindfulness

Eliminate negative thought patterns:

- Sensual desire
- Ill-will
- Sloth and drowsiness
- Worry and agitation
- Nagging doubts
Right Concentration

Developing deep levels of clarity and mental calm

Use techniques that concentrate the mind and integrate the personality
The Five Precepts (Ethics)

To undertake the training to avoid taking the life of beings
To undertake the training to avoid taking things not given
To undertake the training to avoid sensual misconduct
To undertake the training to refrain from false speech
To undertake the training to refrain from substances which cause intoxication and heedlessness
Buddhism teaches that ethical and moral principles are based on avoidance of harm to self and others.

A skillful mind identifies and avoids such actions.

Five Precepts: training rules, not commandments.

No divine punishment: reflection for future avoidance.

Intentions more important than the actual action.
Lamas

The *Dharma* are the teachings and doctrines of Buddha

A lama is a Tibetan teacher of the *dharma*

It is a title given to monks who have attained a level of spiritual development

Not a term that applies to all monks, or all branches of Buddhism

Dalai Lamas are the leaders of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism
Buddhist Prayer & Worship

Buddhists can worship at home or at a temple

Communal worship is not required or expected

Buddhist homes may have a space set up as a shrine. It will include a statue of Buddha, candles, and incense

The best known Buddhist temples are the pagodas of China and Japan

Buddhist temples are designed to symbolise the five elements: Fire, Air, Earth, Water, and Wisdom
Buddhist Prayer

No prayer to a Creator God as in other religions

Meditational practices are comparable to prayer

Radiating loving kindness to all beings benefits everyone

Sharing of merit dedicates goodness of one’s life to the benefit of all living beings
Physical Prayer Aids

Prayer beads mark the repetitions of a mantra.

Mantras may be displayed on a prayer wheel.

Prayer flags: the prayer is repeated with each movement of the flag in the wind.

Prayer wheels can be small enough to fit in your pocket, or big enough that only a temple can accommodate it.

Spinning a prayer wheel is sufficient to invoke the prayer.
Mantras

Prayer is a continuing practice in Tibet

Use of mantras is an important part of Tibetan Buddhism

Mantras are based on certain sounds and words

Constant repetition of mantras arouses good vibrations

Mantras can open a mind to consciousness beyond words and thoughts
Mandalas

Mandalas are a tool for gaining wisdom and compassion
Focus for meditation
A palace in which deities reside
Sand mandalas are unique to Tibetan Buddhism
Transmit positive energies to the environment and viewers
Shrines in Buddhist homes and temples are focal points of Buddhist practice.

Images of Buddha may be made from a wide range of materials.

Shrines may also include a volume of Buddhist scripture to represent the Dharma.

Images, pictures, or photographs of Buddhist monks or masters may also be included.
The Golden Rule

That nature only is good when it shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self.

Blessed is he who prefers his brother before himself.

What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. That is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary.

Hurt not others with that which pains yourself.

This is the sum of duty: do naught to others that which if done to thee would cause pain.

No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother what he desires for himself.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.