

## **Faith and Society Files: Encountering Buddhists**

In this document, author Paul Weller provides background information about Buddhist beliefs and practices to aid dialogue.



# Introducing people of different religions or beliefs

As set out in the resource on the *Religion or Belief Landscape of the UK*, (downloadable from [www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/516106/Religion\\_or\\_Belief.aspx](http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/516106/Religion_or_Belief.aspx)) Baptist Christians in the UK are likely to encounter people of various religion and belief traditions in a whole variety of ways and contexts. This can include at school/college/university; in work; in leisure contexts, in public settings; and when visiting places of worship.

We have produced a series of resources that aim to provide a brief introductory overview to people of other than Christian religions or beliefs. Just as Christians can understandably become uncomfortable and even distressed when words and concepts central to our understanding of Christianity are misused or misunderstood, so also can others be concerned when the words that they use are ignorantly misused or are replaced by other words that are not part of their traditions.

Even though this is rapidly changing, Christians in the UK have the relative advantage that many key Christian words and concepts have, over the centuries, entered into the English language. By contrast, many of the key words and concepts used by people of other than Christian traditions to signify things of importance to them can seem unfamiliar and perhaps, initially, off-putting. Using the terms that people use about themselves (and which, within these resources are signaled by the word or words concerned *appearing in italics*), we are respecting how our neighbours understand themselves and showing our readiness to learn how others describe themselves, their beliefs and practices.

# Buddhist Individuals, Communities and Organisations

## Encountering Individual Buddhists

There is no general visual way in which one would always know that one was encountering an individual Buddhist, except for those who have taken monastic vows as part of the *Sangha* (see below) who generally have shaved heads and wear distinctive monastic robes.

## Encountering Buddhist Communities

### *Buddhist Transmissions/Traditions*

Buddhists in the UK are of very diverse ethnic and national origins, although most Buddhist teaching in the UK is conducted in English. There are two major traditions or 'transmissions' of Buddhism: The *Theravada* (Way of the Elders) and the *Mahayana* (Great Vehicle), although there are also some contemporary attempts to evolve what have become known as 'western' forms of Buddhism.

The *Theravada* (Way of the Elders) tradition is associated particularly with Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Burma and the southern part of Vietnam. Because of this, it is sometimes known as the *Southern Transmission*. It focuses upon the historical Buddha. Its ideal is 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 accepted 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.

The *Mahayana* (Great Vehicle) tradition is found in Central Asia, China, Tibet, Korea, Japan and the northern part of Vietnam. Because of this, it is sometimes known as the *Northern Transmission*. Its special characteristics include belief in many *Buddhas* who can simultaneously be present. It also has the concept of *shunyata/sunnata* (Emptiness) and holds to 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'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:

- *Nyingmapa*
- *Sakyapa*
- *Kagyupa*
- *Gelugpa*

*Ch'an* (Chinese) Buddhism was introduced to China in the 6th century CE. *Zen* (Japanese) Buddhism has two main lineages: *Rinzai Zen*, which began in the 9th century and reached Japan in the 12th century, and *Soto Zen*, taken to Japan in the 8th century.

*Pure Land* Buddhism has two main Japanese branches: *Jodo Shu* (Pure Land School) and *Jodo Shinshu* (True Pure Land School, often simply known as *Shin*).

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

# Buddhist Places of Devotion

Most Buddhists have a small shrine somewhere in their homes, with a *Buddharupa* – which is a statue or picture(s) of the *Buddha* – that is usually found in a central position within the shrine area, in front of which there will usually be an incense holder, flowers and candles. They are intended as reminders of the teaching and as aids to devotion and meditation.

## Vihara/the Temple

Buddhist places of devotion vary considerably in style and practice, reflecting the different traditions, schools and ethnic groupings of the Buddhists who use them. Styles range from the stark simplicity of meditation halls to the elaborate ornateness of some temples. Such places may be a part of a *vihara* (a place where monks live), or may be found in a general centre. In either case, the actual place of devotion is the shrine room which is primarily a place for meditation and teaching.

A Buddhist temple or *vihara* (or monastery) usually contains at least a *Buddharupa* (statue or image of the *Buddha*) or, in some Buddhist traditions, of a *Bodhisattva*. These will be in a central position, commonly with an incense holder, flowers and candles by its side. The shrine room is a place for the performance of *puja* – the expression of devotion through offerings and chanting. The offering of incense is symbolic of the importance of diligent action. Candles symbolise the light that the *Buddha's* teaching brings to the world. Vases of cut flowers are a reminder of impermanence. A Buddhist text wrapped in silk sometimes represents the teaching.

Tibetan Buddhists offer bowls of water to represent water for bathing, washing the feet, rinsing the mouth and drinking, as well as food, flowers, incense and light. In the *Zen* tradition, offerings of fruit, tea and water are made. If a temple is influenced by Chinese tradition (including Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese) memorials of a family's dead are kept in a chapel outside the main place of worship.

On entering a temple or *shrine room*, one may see Buddhists prostrating themselves three times (representing body, speech and mind, or the *Three Refuges*) before the shrine, or else bowing with hands in the *anjali* (hands together) position.

## Visiting a Buddhist Temple

When visiting a Buddhist temple there are no particular requirements with regard to clothing except that it should be modest and there are no expectations of joining in any ritual. For reasons of practicality it is best if clothing is loose fitting because of the normal practice of sitting on the floor. Because of the need to remove shoes, clean and presentable socks, stockings or tights are a good idea. Before entering the *shrine room*, shoes should be removed as a mark of respect. Inside the room, seating is generally on the floor and it is appropriate to adopt a quiet and meditative demeanour. In some traditions it is considered disrespectful to sit with one's legs or feet pointed in the direction of the shrine, or with one's back turned to the *Buddha*.

# Buddhist Beliefs and Practices

## Origins of Buddhism

Buddhism is based on the inheritance of Siddhartha Gautama (Sanskrit form)/ Siddhattha Gotama (Pali form) who Buddhist tradition believes was born in the fifth century BCE in Lumbini, in what is today Nepal. Traditionally it is said that Siddhartha Gautama's father was the ruler of Kapilavastu and that, on his birth, it was prophesied that Siddhartha would either become a great king or someone who renounced the world in search of Enlightenment. In order to try to ensure the former, it is said that his father surrounded the young prince with a life of luxury. However, when the prince he got his charioteer to take him to see life in the city, on the first occasion he encountered an old man; on the second, a diseased man; on the third, a dead man; and, finally, he encountered a mendicant (a man who had renounced the world). These experiences awakened in him a wish to understand and alleviate suffering and 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. He died aged eighty years old and is believed by Buddhists to have entered into his *parinirvana/parinibbana* (final entry to *nirvana*).

## Central Aspects of Buddhism

Buddhism does not teach belief in a personal deity. In many ways it could be called 'a-theistic' since abstract debate on the question of the nature of ultimate reality is seen as being a distraction from the central challenge facing human beings.

Buddhism also does not claim to possess a divinely revealed book and has no central organisational authority. Buddhists are those who claim to have found its teachings to be valid for themselves. In the early stages of Buddhist training one can learn about the teachings, but in the end every individual must discover truth in their own experience. These teachings and their key concepts are the inheritance of Siddhartha Gautama/Siddhattha Gotama's search for truth.

In the text that follows, after being introduced in both their Sanskrit and Pali forms, only the Sanskrit form of key concepts is used, except in relation to the term *sangha*, where only this form is used.

## The Three Jewels

Buddhists speak of 'going for refuge' or 'taking refuge' in the *triratna/tiratana* (*Three Jewels*) - an affirmation of their commitment to the sources of Buddhist life:

- 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 historical *Buddha* is revered as the uncoverer of the *dharma/dhamma* (teachings). He was acknowledged by his followers to be a *Buddha* or Awakened or *Enlightened* one (from *bodhi* meaning to awaken). He himself claimed only to have rediscovered 'an ancient way leading to an ancient city'. Therefore, the emphasis is upon the *dharma* and upon the *Buddha* as exemplar of the teaching.

In the *Theravada* tradition references to the *Buddha* are usually to the historical figure of Gautama. In the *Mahayana* Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha Gautama is generally known as *Shakyamuni/Sakyamuni* (the sage of the Shakya/Sakya clan) in order to distinguish him from what are believed in that tradition to be the pantheons of celestial *Buddhas*. The *Mahayana* also believe in multiple worlds, in which innumerable *Buddhas* can simultaneously appear. Going to the *Buddha* for refuge not only means accepting the *Buddha* as the ultimate spiritual guide and example for one's life, but also appreciating one's own potential for enlightenment, which some *Mahayanists* call one's *Buddha-nature*.

## The Four Noble Truths

The *Four Noble Truths* (*Catur Aryasatya/Cattari Ariyasaccani*) 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 (often known more widely in the popular culture as 'reincarnation', although strictly speaking in Buddhist understanding there is no continuing 'soul' to reincarnate).
- 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:

The fourth of the *Four Noble Truths* is the way to overcome *dukkha* which is the *Noble Eightfold Path* (*Arya Astangika Marga*):

- 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 *samyakkamanta/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.

## Scriptures

The Buddhist scriptures are, in the case of the *Southern Canon*, which forms the basis of the *Theravada* tradition, preserved in Pali and in Chinese, Japanese, Sanskrit and Tibetan in the case of the *Mahayana* scriptures. The Pali texts contain some of the oldest material ascribed to the Buddha and his disciples and are known as the *Tipitaka*, meaning the *Three Baskets*, perhaps because its palm leaf manuscripts were originally kept in three different containers or baskets. The three 'baskets' are the *Vinaya-pitaka* (Basket of [Monastic] Discipline); the *Sutta-pitaka* (Basket of Discourses); and the *Abhidhamma-pitaka* (Basket of Further Teachings). These are probably the common heritage of early Buddhism and are the only scriptures accepted by the *Theravada* school as being canonical. They are, in general, acceptable to all Buddhist schools, though the canon is not much known in large parts of the *Mahayana* traditions, which also reject the *Abhidhamma* as inauthentic. Within the *Sutta-pitaka* of the Pali canon, is a collection of over five hundred *Jataka stories* which are said to have been told to his followers by the *Buddha*, and are about his former lives. Among them are the earliest collection of animal fables in the world which form the basis of much popular teaching in both *Theravada* and *Mahayana* traditions and are often used in teaching children.

The *Mahayana* canon is extensive. Its wide variety of texts include many that were originally written in Sanskrit or other Indian languages and then translated into Tibetan and Chinese, plus some originally written in these languages. Those texts, known in the Far East as the *Agama*, are held in common with the *Pali canon*.

The term *sutra/sutta* is used of the texts and refers to the idea of a single 'thread' running through the discourse. Among the more widely known *Mahayana sutras* are the *Saddharma-pundarika* (Lotus of the True Dharma), the vast collection of the *Prajna-paramita sutras* (Perfection of Wisdom), the long *Mahayana Parinirvana Sutra*, and the compilation known as the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (Flower Ornament). These *sutras* were enormously important in the development of East Asian Buddhism and were gathered into canonical collections of writings. The Chinese canon is known as the *Ta-ts'ang-ching* (Great Scripture Store). Its standard modern edition consists of fifty-five volumes with forty-five supplementary volumes. In Japan, this standard compilation is known as *Taizokyo*. The equally vast Tibetan canon consists of the *bKa'gyur* (pronounced 'Kangjur' and meaning 'The Translated Words of the Buddha') which is ninety-eight volumes in length, and the *bsTan'gyur* (pronounced 'Tengjur' and meaning 'The Translated Treatises'). In its Beijing edition, this is in two hundred and twenty-four volumes and it can also be found in Japan in its original wood-block print copies.



# Buddhist Calendar And Festivals

## Buddhist Calendar

Buddhist religious festivals are based on the lunar calendars of the countries concerned. However the actual festivals and their dates and meanings vary according to Buddhist tradition and the national/ethnic origins of the group concerned. Because of these national/ethnic variations and the lunar cycle, individuals cannot easily predict the exact dates of particular festivals. Some, as in Japan, have fixed dates by the Western calendar. But many other Buddhists rely for moon dates on printed calendars, such as the one produced at the Tibetan Medical Centre in Dharamsala, India, which is consulted by Tibetan Buddhists all over the world. Many festivals also incorporate pre-Buddhist customs and, in the West, large-scale celebrations often take place on the weekend nearest to the festival.

## Buddhist Festivals

*Uposatha Days* are observed at full moon and new moon and also on the days half-way through the lunar fortnight. The full moon and new moon observances are the most important. On these days monks, nuns, and devout lay Buddhists engage in more intense religious activities. The way in which these days are observed varies considerably among Buddhists, but their observance usually includes a visit to a monastery to make offerings of food to the monks and nuns, to pay one's respect to Buddha images and shrines, and to listen to a Dharma talk.

*Parinirvana* (early February) is when Far Eastern *Mahayana* Buddhists mark the final passing away of Shakyamuni Buddha at Kushinagara, India, at the age of eighty.

*Buddha's Birthday* (8 April in Japan) is celebrated by Far Eastern *Mahayana* Buddhists celebrate as a festival of flowers, reflecting the Buddha's birth in a garden. Sweet tea or water is ceremonially poured over a statue of the infant Buddha.

Wesak or Buddha Day (May), which is also known in Theravada Buddhism as *Vaisakha Puja* and *Buddha Jayanti* in Theravada Buddhism, generally occurs on the full moon day in May. It commemorates the Birth, Enlightenment and *Parinirvana* (passing away) of the Buddha, all of which, according to the *Theravada* tradition, occurred on the full moon day in the Indian lunar calendar month equivalent to May. Far Eastern *Mahayana* Buddhists celebrate these three events on different dates (see above). In the West, the day is generally known as *Buddha Day* and it is usually observed in common by Buddhists of all schools.

*Poson* (June) is the Sri Lankan name for the month and the festival that marks the conversion of Sri Lanka to Buddhism through the Venerable Mahinda, son of the Indian Emperor Asoka, who brought the dharma to what is now Sri Lanka in c.250BCE.

*The Rains Retreat* (June/July -September/ October) is known in South Asian countries as *Vassa* and is an annual feature of the *Theravada* monastic calendar which monks and nuns observe for three months. During this period monks and nuns should remain in one place except for emergencies. In the *Northern Transmission* and in the West, dates vary in accordance with the climate. The *Zen* school has two such retreats each year, each one for three months. Special services are held on the opening and closing days.



*Asalha (Dhammachakka Day)* (July/August) is the anniversary of the Buddha's first sermon to the five ascetics at what is now Sarnath, a suburb of the Indian holy city of Varanasi. It is celebrated by *Theravadins* and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. The *sutra's* name is The Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of the *Dharma*, the last phrase of which is, in Pali, the meaning of *Dhammachakka*. The day also marks the beginning of the *Rains Retreat*.

*Kathina Day* (October/November) is celebrated by *Theravadins* and follows the *Rains Retreat* either on its final day or within one month. On this day, the laity present monks and nuns with a cloth which is supposed to be made into a robe for a monk on the same day (although nowadays it is often ready-made). The precise date of its observance varies according to the end of the rainy season in the various countries.

*Sangha Day* (November) is celebrated by the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order and sometimes by other Western Buddhists as an expression of the spiritual community of all Buddhists.

*Enlightenment Day* (8 December) is celebrated by Far Eastern *Mahayana* Buddhists. In India, *Mahayana* Buddhists observe this by celebrating under the *Bodhi Tree* in Bodh Gaya.

*New Year* - Although it is generally celebrated in Buddhist countries as a major festival, apart from the incorporation of some elements of Buddhist practice into its observance, *New Year* is not a specifically religious festival for Buddhists. The Sri Lankan, Burmese and Thai *New Years* fall in mid-April, and in Thai tradition, *New Year* also involves a water festival. It is of greater importance in the *Mahayana* countries with their colder and darker winters. The *Chinese New Year* (also marked by Vietnamese and Tibetans) falls at the end of January or the beginning of February. In Japan, the western *New Year* date has been adopted.

*Padmasambhava Day* occurs in every Tibetan Lunar month; it is celebrated among Tibetan Buddhists in order to honour Padmasambhava as a founder of Buddhism in Tibet.

Some *Mahayana Buddhists* also have festival days for various *Bodhisattvas* and for the founders of particular temples and monasteries. In the Far East, the Spring and Autumn equinoxes are celebrated as times of change and for remembrance of the dead.

# Further Materials on Buddhists in the UK

For a more extensive introduction to Buddhists in the UK, see the chapter on 'Introducing Buddhists in the UK', in P. Weller, ed. (2007), *Religions in the UK: A Directory, 2007-10*, Derby: Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby in association with the University of Derby, pp 103-126, to which acknowledgement is made for having drawn upon some of the materials in summarised and, where appropriate, updated form.

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