

Draft Only

This information is currently in draft form as it is subject to further consultation with representatives of religious groups.

Buddhism

Teacher's notes and background information

Buddhism is a way of life that is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (Gautama Buddha or just Buddha) or “Enlightened One,” to achieve Enlightenment (the final liberation from the cycle of birth and death). Buddhism is the faith that developed as a result of the realisation that all beings possess enlightenment, but most do not yet realise this. Buddhism provides guidance and teachings to achieve enlightenment through meditation, wisdom and self-control.

Buddhism developed in India as a belief system outside of Hinduism about 2500 years ago. Buddhism deliberately rejected Vedic rites and refused to accept the caste system. Buddhism does, however, share many of the beliefs of Hinduism. These include the concepts of reincarnation, karma and enlightenment.

Buddha is a historical figure who lived in the area of ancient India that is now Nepal. He was born the son of a wealthy ruler of a small kingdom. It was foretold that he would become either a great ruler or a great religious teacher. His father sought to protect him from the realities of life and he lived a life of luxury. Gautama married and had a son. One day he left the palace and was confronted by old age, illness and death. This shocked him and changed his life. It caused him to recognise that his luxurious lifestyle was empty and without meaning. He chose to become a holy man leading a life of deprivation and austerity. While meditating under a Bodhi tree, Gautama achieved enlightenment. Having achieved enlightenment, Gautama spent the rest of his life travelling and preaching (teaching) about the wisdom he had gained.

The Buddha's teachings followed by the main branches of Buddhism are:

The Four Noble Truths:-

- all life contains suffering
- suffering is caused by our selfish attachment to the things of the world
- we can escape from the suffering by rejecting worldly things
- the way to doing this is by avoiding all extremes in life.

Suffering can be overcome by following the “Eightfold Path” of:

- right understanding
- right intention
- right speech
- right conduct
- right occupation
- right endeavour
- right contemplation
- right concentration.

Buddha's path concentrates on the pursuit of an individual's spiritual goals.

Meditation is seen as the key to developing this spiritual pathway. Some people do not

see Buddhism as a religion, as there is no deity or formal ceremonies of worship. These are seen by Buddhists as hindrances to enlightenment. Living as a Buddhist includes following a set of guidelines, or *Precepts*. The main precepts are:

- not harming or killing living things
- not taking things unless freely given
- having a sensible, decent (moral) life
- not speaking unkindly or deceitfully (lying)
- not to take intoxicants (alcohol or drugs)

There are many different kinds of Buddhists. With different interpretations of Buddha's teachings and different methods of practising their faith. The main groups are Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Other branches of Buddhism include Zen Buddhism (found in Japan) and Tantric Buddhism (found in Tibet). The leader of Tibet's Buddhists is the Dalai Lama who now lives in exile in India. There are many Buddhist temples throughout Asia where followers go to pray and meditate. Some Buddhist spend several months or years in a monastery. It is common for families in some parts of Asia to send their sons to a monastery to learn the teachings of Buddha.

Every Buddhist country has its own festivals and celebrations. The festival of the golden tooth is celebrated in Sri Lanka during August, while in Japan the *O-bon* festival is held in July to honour families' ancestors. Some festivals are celebrated all over the world such as *Wesak*, held in May to celebrate Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death.

About 2% of Australians¹ follow Buddhism. Most have come from Asian countries or are the descendants of these migrants. There are a number of Buddhist converts among other Australians of non Asian descent.

During the gold rush era many of the Chinese who arrived to work the goldfields would have been Buddhist. Most of these Chinese returned home after the gold rush. One of the earliest permanent Buddhist settlements were Sri Lankan migrants who settled on the Queensland sugar plantations and some who worked in the Thursday Island pearling industry. Japanese Buddhist settled in Broome and Darwin. These communities remained small but significant. Due to the White Australia policy it was not until the 1970s that increased migration from Asian countries occurred and the number and diversity of Buddhists increased in Australia.

Resources:

Belief in Action, DET 2002, *Places of worship* page 72

Belief in Action, DET 2002, *Going by the book: An overview of holy books* page 80

Belief in Action, DET 2002, *Symbols of religions* page 84

¹ *calculated from ABS data 2001 B10 Religious affiliation by sex*