

# Good Question, Good Answer

Ven. S. Dhammika



E-mail: [bdea@buddhanet.net](mailto:bdea@buddhanet.net)  
Web site: [www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net)

**Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc.**

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# Good Question, Good Answer



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# 1. What is Buddhism?

**QUESTION: What is Buddhism?**

**ANSWER:** The name Buddhism comes from the word '*budhi*' which means 'to wake up' and thus Buddhism is the philosophy of awakening. This philosophy has its origins in the experience of the man Siddhata Gotama, known as the Buddha, who was himself awakened at the age of 36. Buddhism is now 2,500 years old and has about 300 million followers world-wide. Until a hundred years ago, Buddhism was mainly an Asian philosophy but increasingly it is gaining adherents in Europe and America.

**QUESTION: So Buddhism is just a philosophy?**

**ANSWER:** The word philosophy comes from two words '*philo*' which means 'love' and '*sophia*' which means 'wisdom'. So philosophy is the love of wisdom or love and wisdom, both meanings describing Buddhism perfectly. Buddhism teaches that we should try to develop our intellectual capacity to the fullest so that we can understand clearly. It also teaches us to develop love and kindness so that we can be like a true friend to all beings. Thus Buddhism is a philosophy but not *just* a philosophy. It is the supreme philosophy.

**QUESTION: Who was the Buddha?**

**ANSWER:** In the year 563 B.C. a baby was born into a royal family in northern India. He grew up in wealth and luxury

but eventually found that worldly comfort and security do not guarantee happiness. He was deeply moved by the suffering he saw all around and resolved to find the key to human happiness. When he was 29 he left his wife and child and set off to sit at the feet of the great religious teachers of the day to learn from them. They taught him much but none really knew the cause of human suffering or how it could be overcome. Eventually, after six years study and meditation he had an experience in which all ignorance fell away and he suddenly understood. From that day onwards he was called the Buddha, the Awakened One. He lived for another 45 years in which time he traveled all over northern India teaching others what he had discovered. His compassion and patience were legendary and he made thousands of followers. In his eightieth year, old and sick, but still happy and at peace, he finally died.

**QUESTION: Wasn't it irresponsible for the Buddha to walk out on his wife and child?**

**ANSWER:** It couldn't have been an easy thing for the Buddha to leave his family. He must have worried and hesitated for a long time before finally leaving. But he had a choice, dedicating himself to his family or dedicating himself to the whole world. In the end, his great compassion made him give himself to the whole world. And the whole world still benefits from his sacrifice. This was not irresponsible. It was perhaps the most significant sacrifice ever made.

**QUESTION: The Buddha is dead so how can he help us?**

**ANSWER:** Faraday, who discovered electricity, is dead but what he discovered still helps us. Luis Pasteur who discovered the cures for so many diseases is dead but his medical discoveries still save lives. The great artist Leonardo da Vinci is dead but what he created can still uplift and give joy. Noble men and heroes may have been dead for centuries but when we read of their deeds and achievements we can still be inspired to act as they did. Yes, the Buddha is dead but 2500 years later his teachings still help people, his example still inspires people, his words still change lives. Only a Buddha could have such power centuries after his death.

**QUESTION: Was the Buddha a god?**

**ANSWER:** No, he was not. He did not claim that he was a god, the child of a god or even the messenger from a god. He was a human being who perfected himself and taught that if we followed his example, we could perfect ourselves also.

**QUESTION: If the Buddha is not a god, then why do people worship him?**

**ANSWER:** There are different types of worship. When someone worships a god, they praise and honor him or her, make offerings and ask for favors, believing that the god will hear their praise, receive their offerings and answer their prayers. Buddhists do not indulge in this kind of worship. The other kind of worship is when we show respect to some-

one or something we admire. When a teacher walks into the room we stand up, when we meet a dignitary we shake their hand, when the national anthem is played we salute. These are all gestures of respect and worship and indicate our admiration for certain persons or things. This is the type of worship Buddhists practice. A statue of the Buddha with its hands rested gently in its lap and its compassionate smile reminds us to strive to develop peace and love within ourselves. The perfume of incense reminds us of the pervading influence of virtue, the lamp reminds us of the light of knowledge and the flowers which soon fade and die, remind us of impermanence. When we bow, we express outwardly what we feel inwardly; our gratitude to the Buddha for what his teachings have given us. This is the nature of Buddhist worship.

**QUESTION: But I have heard people say that  
Buddhists worship idols.**

**ANSWER:** Such statements only reflect the misunderstanding of the persons who make them. The dictionary defines an idol as “an image or statue worshipped as a god”. As we have seen, Buddhists do not believe that the Buddha was a god, so how could they possibly believe that a piece of wood or metal is a god? All religions use symbols to express various concepts. In Taoism, the ying-yang is used to symbolize the harmony between opposites. In Sikhism, the sword is used to symbolize spiritual struggle. In Christianity, the fish is used to symbolize Christ’s presence while the cross is

used to symbolize his sacrifice. And in Buddhism, the statue of the Buddha is used to symbolize human perfection. The statue of the Buddha also reminds us of the human dimension in Buddhist teaching, the fact that Buddhism is human-centered, rather than god-centered, that we must look within not without to find perfection and understanding. So to say that Buddhists worship idols is not correct.

**QUESTION: Why do people do all kinds of strange things in Buddhist temples?**

**ANSWER:** Many things seem strange to us when we don't understand them. Rather than dismiss such things as strange, we should try to find out what they mean. However, it is true that Buddhist practices sometimes have their origins in popular superstition and misunderstanding rather than the teachings of the Buddha. And such misunderstandings are not found in Buddhism alone but arise in all religions from time to time. The Buddha taught with clarity and in detail and if some fail to understand fully, the Buddha cannot be blamed. There is a saying;

*If a person suffering from a disease does not seek treatment even when there is a physician at hand, it is not the fault of that physician. In the same way, if a person is oppressed and tormented by the disease of the defilements but does not seek the help of the Buddha, that is not the Buddha's fault.*

JN 28–9

Nor should Buddhism or any religion be judged by those who



don't practice it properly. If you wish to know the true teachings of Buddhism, read the Buddha's words or speak to those who understand them properly.

**QUESTION: If Buddhism is so good why are some Buddhist countries poor?**

**ANSWER:** If by poor you mean *economically poor*, then it is true that some Buddhist countries are poor. But if by poor you mean *a poor quality of life*, then perhaps some Buddhist countries are quite rich. America for example, is an economically rich and powerful country but the crime rate is one of the highest in the world, millions of old people are neglected by their children and die of loneliness in old people's homes, domestic violence and child abuse are major problems. One in three marriages end in divorce and pornography is a major industry. Rich in terms of money but perhaps poor in terms of the quality of life. Now take traditional Buddhist countries. Some are economically backward but parents are honored and respected by their children, their crime rates are relatively low, divorce and suicide are almost unheard of, domestic violence and child abuse, pornography and sexual license are not common. Economically backward but perhaps a higher quality of life than in a country like America. But even if we judge Buddhist countries in terms of economics alone, one of the wealthiest and most economically dynamic countries in the world today is Japan where a large percentage of the population call themselves Buddhists.

**QUESTION: Why is it that you don't often hear of charitable work being done by Buddhists?**

**ANSWER:** Perhaps it is because Buddhists don't feel the need to advertise about the good they do. Several years ago the Japanese Buddhist leader Nikkho Niwano received the Templeton Prize for his work in promoting inter-religious harmony. Likewise a Thai Buddhist monk was recently awarded the prestigious Magsaysay Prize for his excellent work among drug addicts. In 1987 another Thai monk, Ven. Kantayapiwat was awarded the Norwegian Children's Peace Prize for his many years of work helping homeless children in rural areas. And what about the large scale social work being done among the poor in India by the Western Buddhist Order? They have built schools, child minding centres, dispensaries and small scale industries for selfsufficiency. Buddhists see help given to others as an expression of their religious practice just as other religions do but they believe that it should be done quietly and without self-promotion. Thus you don't hear so much about their charitable work.

**QUESTION: Why are there so many different types of Buddhism?**

**ANSWER:** There are many different types of sugar: brown sugar, white sugar, granulated sugar, rock sugar, syrup and icing sugar but it is all sugar and it all tastes sweet. It is produced in different forms so that it can be used in different ways. Buddhism is the same. There is Theravada Buddhism,

Zen Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, Yogacara Buddhism and Vajrayana but they are all Buddhism and they all has the same taste — the state of freedom. Buddhism has evolved into different forms so that it can be relevant to the different cultures in which it exists. It has been reinterpreted over the centuries so that it can remain relevant to each new generation. Outwardly, the types of Buddhism may seem very different but at the center of all of them is the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. All major religions, Buddhism included, have split into schools and sects. But the different sects of Buddhism have never gone to war with each other, they have never been towards each other and to this day, they go to each other's temples and worship together. Such tolerance and understanding are certainly rare

**QUESTION : Buddhism started in India but it eventually died out there. Why?**

**ANSWER:** The Buddha's teachings grew to become one of India's major religions but gradually it went into decline and finally disappeared just as Christianity started in Palestine but eventually died out there. No one really knows why this happened. Perhaps a combination of political and social changes combined with wars and invasions made it difficult such a gentle and peaceful religion to survive. However long before it disappeared in India is spread from there to the furthest corner of Asia.

**QUESTION: You certainly think highly of Buddhism. I suppose you think your religion is right and all the others are wrong.**

**ANSWER:** No Buddhist who understands the Buddha's teaching thinks that other religions are wrong. No one who, has made a genuine effort to examine other religions with an open mind could think like that either. The first thing you notice when you study the different religions is *just how much they have in common*. All religions acknowledge that mankind's present state is unsatisfactory. All believe that a change of attitude and behavior is needed if the human situation is to improve. All teach an ethics that includes love, kindness, patience, generosity and social responsibility and all accept the existence of some form of Absolute. They use different languages, different names and different symbols to describe and explain these things; and it is only when they narrow-mindedly cling to their one way of seeing things that religious intolerance, pride and self-righteousness arise. Imagine an Englishman, a Frenchman, a Chinese and an Indonesian all looking at a cup. The Englishman says, "That's a cup." The Frenchman answers, "No it's not. It's a tasse." The Chinese comments, "You're both wrong. It's a pet." And the Indonesian laughs at the others and says "What fools you are. It's a cawan." The Englishman gets a dictionary and shows it to the others saying, "I can prove that it is a cup. My dictionary says so." "Then your dictionary is wrong," says the French-man "Because my dictionary clearly says it is a tasse." The Chinese scoffs at them. "My dictionary is

thousands of years older than yours, so my dictionary must be right. And besides, more people speak Chinese than any other language, so it must be a pet.” While they are squabbling and arguing with each other, a Buddhist comes up and drinks from the cup. After he has drunk, he says to the others, “Whether you call it a cup, a tasse, a pet or a cawan, a cup is meant to be used. Stop arguing and drink, stop squabbling and refresh your thirst.” This is the Buddhist attitude to other religions.

**QUESTION : I have read that Buddhism is just a type of reformed Hinduism.**

**ANSWER:** One sometimes hears uninformed people saying this. But we read in the Buddhist scriptures that the Hindu priests, the Brahmins, were strongly opposed to the Buddha. This is because he criticized the Hindu caste system and the practice animal sacrifice, he denied the existence of a supreme god and he rejected the authority of the Hindu scriptures. Buddhism and Hinduism have things in commons but they also have enough important differences to make them two distinct religions.

**QUESTION: Is Buddhism scientific?**

**ANSWER:** Before we answer that question it would be best to define the word ‘science’. Science, according to the dictionary is “knowledge which can be made into a system, which depends upon seeing and testing facts and stating

general natural laws, a branch of such knowledge, anything that can be studied exactly.” There are aspects of Buddhism that would not fit into this definition but the central teachings of Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths, most certainly would. Suffering, the First Noble Truth is an experience that can be defined, experienced and measured. The Second Noble Truth states that suffering has a natural cause, craving, which likewise can be defined, experienced and measured. No attempt is made to explain suffering in terms of a metaphysical concept or myths. Suffering is ended, according to the Third Noble Truth, not by relying upon a Supreme Being, by faith or by prayers but simply by removing its cause. This is axiomatic. The Fourth Noble Truth, the way to end suffering, once again, has nothing to do with metaphysics but depends on behaving in specific ways. And once again behavior is open to testing. Buddhism dispenses with the concept of a Supreme Being, as does science, and explains the origins and workings of the universe in terms of natural laws. All of this certainly exhibits a scientific spirit. Once again, the Buddha’s constant advice that we should not blindly believe but rather question, examine, inquire and rely on our own experience, has a definite scientific ring to it. He says:

*“Do not go by revelation or tradition, do not go by rumor, or the sacred scriptures, do not go by hearsay or mere logic, do not go by bias towards a notion or by another person’s seeming ability and do not go by the idea ‘He is our teacher’. But when you yourself know that a thing is good, that it is not blamable,*

*that it is praised by the wise and when practiced and observed that it leads to happiness, then follow that thing.”*

A.I, 188

So we could say that although Buddhism is not entirely scientific, it certainly has a strong scientific overtone and is certainly more scientific than any other religion. It is significant that Albert Einstein, the greatest scientist of the twentieth century said of Buddhism:

*“The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual and a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description. If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism.”*



## **2. Basic Buddhist Concepts**

**QUESTION: What are the main teachings of the Buddha?**

**ANSWER:** All of the many teachings of the Buddha center on the Four Noble Truths just as the rim and spokes of a wheel center on the hub. They are called ‘Four’ because there are four of them. They are called ‘Noble’ because they ennoble one who understands them and they are called ‘Truths’ because, corresponding with reality, they are true.

**QUESTION: What is the First Noble Truth?**

**ANSWER:** The First Noble Truth is that life is suffering. To live, you must suffer. It is impossible to live without experiencing some kind of suffering. We have to endure physical suffering like sickness, injury, tiredness, old age and eventually death and we have to endure psychological suffering like loneliness, frustrations, fear, embarrassment, disappointment, anger, etc.

**QUESTION: Isn’t this a bit pessimistic?**

**ANSWER:** The dictionary defines pessimism as ‘the habit of thinking that whatever will happen will be bad,’ or ‘The belief that evil is more powerful than good.’ Buddhism teaches neither of these ideas. Nor does it deny that happiness exists. It simply says that to live is to experience physical



and psychological suffering which is a statement so true and so obvious that it cannot be denied. The central concept of most religions is a myth, a legend or a belief that is difficult or impossible to verify. Buddhism starts with an experience, an irrefutable fact, a thing that all know, that all have experienced and that all are striving to overcome. Thus Buddhism is the only truly universal religion because it goes right to the core of every individual human being's concern — suffering and how to avoid it.

**QUESTION: What is the Second Noble truth?**

**ANSWER:** The Second Noble Truth is that all suffering is caused by craving. When we look at psychological suffering, it is easy to see how it is caused by craving. When we want something but are unable to get it, we feel frustrated. When we expect someone to live up to our expectation and they do not, we feel let down and disappointed. When we want others to like us and they don't, we feel hurt. Even when we want something and are able to get it, this does not often lead to happiness either because it is not long before we feel bored with that thing, lose interest in it and commence to want something else. Put simply, the Second Noble Truth says that getting what you want does not guarantee happiness. Rather than constantly struggling to get what you want, try to modify your wanting. Wanting deprives us of contentment and happiness.

**QUESTION: But how does wanting and craving lead to physical suffering?**

**ANSWER:** A lifetime wanting and craving for this and that and especially the craving to continue to exist creates a powerful energy that causes the individual to be reborn. When we are reborn, we have a body and, as we said before, the body is susceptible to injury and disease; it can be exhausted by work; it ages and eventually dies. Thus, craving leads to physical suffering because it causes us to be reborn.

**QUESTION: That's all very well. But if we stopped wanting altogether, we would never get or achieve anything.**

**ANSWER:** True. But what the Buddha says is that when our desires, our craving, our constant discontent with what we have, and our continual longing for more and more *does* cause us suffering, then we should stop doing it. He asks us to make a difference between what we need and what we want and to strive for our needs and modify our wants. He tells us that our needs can be fulfilled but that our wants are endless — a bottomless pit. There are needs that are essential, fundamental and that can be obtained and this we should work towards. Desires beyond this should be gradually lessened. After all, what is the purpose of life? To get or to be content and happy.

**QUESTION: You have talked about rebirth, but is there any proof that such a thing happens?**

**ANSWER:** There is ample evidence that such a thing happens, but we will look at this in more detail later on.

**QUESTION: What is the Third Noble Truth?**

**ANSWER:** The Third Noble Truth is that suffering can be overcome and happiness attained. This is perhaps the most important of the Four Noble Truths because in it the Buddha reassures us that true happiness and contentment are possible. When we give up useless craving and learn to live each day at a time, enjoying without restless wanting the experiences that life offers us, patiently enduring the problems that life involves without fear, hatred and anger, then we become happy and free. Then, and only then, do we begin to live fully. Because we are no longer obsessed with satisfying our own selfish wants, we find we have so much time to help others fulfil their needs. This state is called Nirvana. We are free from all psychological suffering as well. This is called Final Nirvana.

**QUESTION: What or where is Nirvana?**

**ANSWER:** It is a dimension transcending time and space and thus is difficult to talk about or even to think about. Words and thoughts being only suited to describe the time-space dimension. But because Nirvana is beyond time, there is no movement and so no aging or dying. Thus Nirvana is

eternal. Because it is beyond space, there is no causation, no boundary, no concept of self and not-self and thus Nirvana is infinite. The Buddha also assures us that Nirvana is an experience of profound happiness. He says:

*Nirvana is the highest happiness.*

Dp 204

**QUESTION: But is there any proof that such a dimension exists?**

**ANSWER:** No, there is not. But its existence can be inferred. If there is a dimension where time and space *do* operate and there is such a dimension — the world we experience, then we can infer that there is a dimension where time and space *do not* operate — Nirvana. Again, even though we cannot prove Nirvana exists, we have the Buddha's word that it does exist. He tells us:

*“There is an. Unborn, a Not-become, a Not-made, a Not-compounded. If there were not, this Unborn, Not become, Not-made, Not-compounded, there could not be made any escape from what is born, become, made, and compounded. But since there is this Unborn, Not become, Not-made, Not-compounded, therefore is there made known an escape from what is born, become, made, and compounded.”*

Ud. 80

We will know it when we attain it. Until that time, we can still practice.

**QUESTION: What is the Fourth Noble Truth?**

**ANSWER:** The Fourth Noble Truth is the Path leading to the overcoming of suffering. This path is called the Noble Eightfold Path and consists of Perfect Understanding, Perfect Thought, Perfect Speech, Perfect Action, Perfect Livelihood, Perfect Effort, Perfect Mindfulness and Perfect Concentration. Being a Buddhist practice consists of practicing these eight things until they become more complete. You will notice that the steps on the Noble Eightfold Path cover every aspect of life: the intellectual, the ethical, the social and economic and the psychological and therefore contain everything a person needs to lead a good life and to develop spiritually.



### 3. Buddhism and the God-idea

**QUESTION: Do Buddhists believe in a god?**

**ANSWER:** No, we do not. There are several reasons for this. The Buddha, like modern sociologists and psychologists, believed that religious ideas and especially the god idea have their origins in fear. The Buddha says:

*Gripped by fear people go to sacred mountains, sacred groves, sacred trees and shrines.*

Dp. 188

Primitive humans found selves in a dangerous and hostile world, the fear of wild animals, of not being able to find enough food, of injury or disease, and of natural phenomena like thunder, lightning and volcanoes were constantly with them. Finding no security, they created the idea of gods in order to give them comfort in good times, courage in times of danger and consolation when things went wrong. To this day, you will notice that people become more religious at times of crises, you will hear them say that the belief in a god or gods gives them the strength they need to deal with life. You will hear them explain that they believe in a particular god because they prayed in time of need and their prayer was answered. All this seems to support the Buddha's teaching that the god-idea is a response to fear and frustration. The Buddha taught us to try to understand our fears, to lessen our desires and to calmly and courageously accept the things we cannot change. He replaced fear, not with irrational belief but with rational understanding. The second

reason the Buddha did not believe in a god is because there does not seem to be any evidence to support this idea. There are numerous religions, all claiming that they alone have god's words preserved in their holy book, that they alone understand god's nature, that their god exists and that the gods of other religions do not. Some claim that god is masculine, some that she is feminine and others that it is neuter. They are all satisfied that there is ample evidence to prove the existence of their god but they laugh in disbelief at the evidence other religions use to prove the existence of another god. It is not surprising that with so many different religions spending so many centuries trying to prove the existence of their gods that still no real, concrete, substantial or irrefutable evidence has been found. Buddhists suspend judgement until such evidence is forthcoming. The third reason the Buddha did not believe in a god is that the belief is not necessary. Some claim that the belief in a god is necessary in order to explain the origin of the universe. But this is not so. Science has very convincingly explained how the universe came into being without having to introduce the god-idea. Some claim that belief in god is necessary to have a happy, meaningful life. Again we can see that this is not so. There are millions of atheists and free-thinkers, not to mention many Buddhists, who live useful, happy and meaningful lives without belief in a god. Some claim that belief in god's power is necessary because humans, being weak, do not have the strength to help themselves. Once again, the evidence indicates the opposite. One often hears of people who have overcome great disabilities and handicaps, enormous odds and

difficulties through their own inner resources, through their own efforts and without belief in a god. Some claim that god is necessary in order to give man salvation. But this argument only holds good if you accept the theological concept of salvation and Buddhists do not accept such a concept. Based on his own experience, the Buddha saw that each human being had the capacity to purify the mind, develop infinite love and compassion and perfect understanding. He shifted attention from the heavens to the heart and encouraged us to find solutions to our problems through self-understanding.

**QUESTION: But if there are no gods how did the universe get here?**

**ANSWER:** All religions have myths and stories which attempt to answer this question. In ancient times, when humankind simply did not know, such myths were adequate, but in the 20th century, in the age of physics, astronomy and geology, such myths have been superseded by scientific fact. Science has explained the origin of the universe without recourse to the god-idea.

**QUESTION: What does the Buddha say about the origin of the universe?**

**ANSWER:** It is interesting that the Buddha's explanation of the origin of the universe corresponds very closely to the scientific view. In the Aganna Sutta, the Buddha describes the universe being destroyed and then re-evolving into its



present form over a period of countless millions of years. The first life formed on the surface of the water and again, over countless millions of years, evolved from simple into complex organisms. All these processes are without beginning or end and are set in motion by natural causes.

**QUESTION: You say there is no evidence for the existence of a god. But what about miracles?**

**ANSWER:** There are many who believe that miracles are proof of god's existence. We hear wild claims that a healing has taken place but we never get an independent testimony from a medical office or a surgeon. We hear second-hand reports that someone was miraculously saved from disaster but we never get an eyewitness account of what is supposed to have happened. We hear rumors that prayer straightened a diseased body or strengthened a withered limb, but we never see X-rays or get comments from doctors or nurses. Wild claims, second-hand reports and rumors are no substitute for solid evidence and solid evidence of miracles is very rare. However, sometimes unexplained things do happen, unexpected events do occur. But our inability to explain such things does not prove the existence of gods. It only proves that our knowledge is as yet incomplete. Before the development of modern medicine, when people didn't know what caused sickness people believed that god or the gods sent diseases as a punishment. Now we know what causes such things and when we get sick, we take medicine. In time when our knowledge of the world is more complete, we

will be able to understand what causes unexplained phenomena, just as we can now understand what causes disease.

**QUESTION: But so many people believe in some form of god, it must be true.**

**ANSWER:** Not so. There was a time when everyone believed that the world was flat, but they were all wrong. The number of people who believe in an idea is no measure of the truth or falsehood of that idea. The only way we can tell whether an idea is true or not is by looking at the facts and examining the evidence.

**QUESTION: So if Buddhists don't believe in gods, what do you believe in?**

**ANSWER:** We don't believe in a god because we believe in humanity. We believe that each human being is precious and important, that all have the potential to develop into a Buddha — a perfected human being. We believe that humans can outgrow ignorance and irrationality and see things as they really are. We believe that hatred, anger, spite and jealousy can be replaced by love, patience, generosity and kindness. We believe that all this is within the grasp of each person if they make the effort, guided and supported by fellow Buddhists and inspired by the example of the Buddha. As the Buddha says:

*No one saves us but ourselves, No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path, but Buddhas clearly show the way.*

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## 4. The Five Precepts

**QUESTION:** Other religions derive their ideas of right and wrong from the commandments of their god or gods. You Buddhists don't believe in a god, so how do you know what is right and wrong?

**ANSWER:** Any thoughts, speech or actions that are rooted in greed, hatred and delusion and thus lead us away from Nirvana are bad and any thoughts, speech or actions that are rooted in giving, love and wisdom and thus help clear the way to Nirvana are good. To know what is right and wrong in god-centered religions, all that is needed is to do as you are told. But in a human-centered religion like Buddhism, to know what is right or wrong, you have to develop a deep self-awareness and self-understanding. And ethics based on understanding are always stronger than those that are a response to a command. So to know what is right and wrong, the Buddhist looks at three things — the intention, the effect the act will have upon oneself and the effect it will have upon others. If the intention is good (rooted in giving, love and wisdom), if it helps myself (helps me to be more giving, more loving and wiser) and help others (helps them to be more giving, more loving and wiser), then my deeds and actions are wholesome, good and moral. Of course, there are many variations of this. Sometimes I act with the best of intentions but it may not benefit either myself or others. Sometimes

my intentions are far from good, but my action helps others nonetheless. Sometimes I act out of good intentions and my acts help me but perhaps cause some distress to others. In such cases, my actions are mixed — a mixture of good and not-so-good. When intentions are bad and the action helps neither myself nor others, such an action is bad. And when my intention is good and my action benefits both myself and others, then the deed is wholly good.

**QUESTION: So does Buddhism have a code of morality?**

**ANSWER:** Yes, it does. The Five Precepts are the basis of Buddhist morality. The first precept is to avoid killing or harming living beings. The second is to avoid stealing, the third is to avoid sexual misconduct, the fourth is to avoid lying and the fifth is to avoid alcohol and other intoxicating drugs.

**QUESTION: But surely it is good to kill sometimes. To kill disease-spreading insects, for example, or someone who is going to kill you?**

**ANSWER:** It might be good for you but what about that thing or that person? They wish to live just as you do. When you decide to kill a disease-spreading insect, your intention is perhaps a mixture of self-concern (good) and revulsion (bad). The act will benefit yourself (good) but obviously it will not benefit that creature (bad). So at times it may be necessary to kill but it is never wholly good.

**QUESTION: You Buddhists are too concerned about ants and bugs.**

**ANSWER:** Buddhists strive to develop a compassion that is indiscriminating and all-embracing. They see the world as a unified whole where each thing or creature has its place and function. They believe that before we destroy or upset nature's delicate balance, we should be very careful. Just look at those cultures where emphasis is on exploiting nature to the full, squeezing every last drop out of it without putting anything back, on conquering and subduing it. Nature has revolted. The very air is becoming poisoned, the rivers are polluted and dead, so many beautiful animal species are extinct, the slopes of the mountains are barren and eroded. Even the climate is changing. If people were a little less anxious to crush, destroy and kill, this terrible situation may not have arisen. We should all strive to develop a little more respect for life. And this is what the first precept is saying.

**QUESTION: The Third Precept says we should avoid sexual misconduct. What is sexual misconduct?**

**ANSWER:** If we use trickery, emotional blackmail or force to compel someone to have sex with us, then this is sexual misconduct. Adultery is also a form of sexual misconduct because when we marry we promise our spouse we will be loyal to them. When we commit adultery we break that promise and betray their trust. Sex should be an expression of love

and intimacy between two people and when it is it contributes to our mental and emotional well-being.

**QUESTION: Is sex before marriage a type of sexual misconduct?**

**ANSWER:** Not if there is love and mutual agreement between the two people. However it should never be forgotten that the biological function of sex is to reproduce and if an unmarried woman becomes pregnant it can cause a great deal of problems. Many mature and thoughtful people think it is far better to leave sex until after marriage.

**QUESTION: But what about lying? Is it possible to live without telling lies?**

**ANSWER:** If it is really impossible to get by in society or business without lying, such a shocking and corrupt state of affairs should be changed. The Buddhist is someone who resolves to do something practical about the problem by trying to be more truthful and honest.

**QUESTION: Well, what about alcohol? Surely a little drink doesn't hurt.**

**ANSWER:** People don't drink for the taste. When they drink alone it is in order to seek release from tension and when they drink socially, it is usually to conform. Even a small amount of alcohol distorts consciousness and disrupts self-awareness. Taken in large quantities, its effect can be devastating.

**QUESTION: But drinking just a small amount wouldn't be really breaking the precept, would it? It's only a small thing.**

**ANSWER:** Yes, it is only a small thing and if you can't practice even a small thing, your commitment and resolution isn't very strong, is it?

**QUESTION: The five precepts are negative. They tell you what not to do. They don't tell you what to do.**

**ANSWER:** The Five Precepts are the basis of Buddhist morality. They are not all of it. We start by recognizing our bad behavior and striving to stop doing it. That is what the Five Precepts are for. After we have stopped doing bad, we then commence to do good. Take for example, speech. The Buddha says we should start by refraining from telling lies. After that, we should speak the truth, speak gently and politely and speak at the right time. He says:

*“Giving up false speech he becomes a speaker of truth, reliable, trustworthy, dependable, he does not deceive the world. Giving up malicious speech he does not repeat there what he has heard here nor does he repeat here what he has heard there in order to cause variance between people. He reconciles those who are divided and brings closer together those who are already friends. Harmony is his joy, harmony is his delight, harmony is his love; it is the motive of his speech. Giving up harsh speech his speech is blameless, pleasing to*

*the ear, agreeable, going to the heart, urbane, liked by most. Giving up idle chatter he speaks at the right time, what is correct, to the point, about Dhamma and about discipline. He speaks words worth being treasured up, seasonable, reasonable, well defined and to the point.”*

M. I, 179





## 5. Rebirth

**QUESTION:** Where do we come from and where are we going?

**ANSWER:** There are three possible answers to this question. Those who believe in a god or gods usually claim that before an individual is created, he does not exist, then he comes into being through the will of a god. He lives his life and then, according to what he believes or does during his life, he either goes to eternal heaven or eternal hell. There are others, humanists and scientists, who claim that the individual comes into being at conception due to natural causes, lives and then at death, ceases to exist. Buddhism does not accept either of these explanations. The first gives rise to many ethical problems. If a good god really creates each of us, it is difficult to explain why so many people are born with the most dreadful deformities, or why so many children are miscarried just before birth or are still-born. Another problem with the theistic explanation is that it seems very unjust that a person should suffer eternal pain in hell for what he did in just 60 or 70 years on earth. Sixty or seventy years of non-belief or immoral living does not deserve eternal torture. Likewise, 60 or 70 years of good living seems a very small outlay for eternal bliss in heaven. The second explanation is better than the first and has more scientific evidence to support it but still leaves several important questions unanswered. How can a phenomenon

so amazingly complex as consciousness develop from the simple meeting of two cells, the sperm and the egg? And now that parapsychology is a recognized branch of science, phenomena like telepathy are increasingly difficult to fit into the materialistic model of the mind. Buddhism offers the most satisfactory explanation of where man came from and where he is going. When we die, the mind, with all the tendencies, preferences, abilities and characteristics that have been developed and conditioned in this life, re-establishes itself in a fertilized egg. Thus the individual grows, is reborn and develops a personality conditioned both by the mental characteristics that have been carried over and by the new environment. The personality will change and be modified by conscious effort and conditioning factors like education, parental influence and society and once again at death, re-establish itself in a new fertilized egg. This process of dying and being reborn will continue until the conditions that cause it, craving and ignorance, cease. When they do, instead of being reborn, the mind attains a state called Nirvana and this is the ultimate goal of Buddhism and the purpose of life.

**QUESTION: How does the mind go from one body to another?**

**ANSWER:** Think of it being like radio waves. The radio waves, which are not made up of words and music but energy at different frequencies, are transmitted, travel through space,

are attracted to and picked up by the receiver from where they are broadcast as words and music. It is the same with the mind. At death, mental energy travels through space, is attracted to and picked up by the fertilized egg. As the embryo grows, it centers itself in the brain from where it later “broadcasts” itself as the new personality.

**QUESTION: Is one always reborn as a human being?**

**ANSWER:** No, there are several realms into which one can be reborn. Some people are reborn in heaven, some are reborn in hell, some are reborn as hungry ghosts and so on. Heaven is not a place but a state of existence where one has a subtle body and where the mind experiences mainly pleasure. Some religions strive very hard to be reborn in a heavenly existence mistakenly believing it to be a permanent state. But it is not. Like all conditioned states, heaven is impermanent and when one’s life span there is finished, one could well be reborn again as a human. Hell, likewise, is not a place but a state of existence where one has a subtle body and where the mind experiences mainly anxiety and distress. Being a hungry ghost, again, is a state of existence where the body is subtle and where the mind is continually plagued by longing and dissatisfaction. So heavenly beings experience mainly pleasure, hell beings and ghosts experience mainly pain and human beings experience usually a mixture of both. So the main difference between the human realm and other realms is the body type and the quality of experience.

**QUESTION: What decides where will be reborn?**

**ANSWER:** The most important factor, but not the only one, influencing where we will be reborn and what sort of life we shall have, is kamma. The word kamma means ‘action’ and refers to our intentional mental actions. In other words, what we are is determined very much by how we have thought and acted in the past. Likewise, how we think and act now will influence how we will be in the future. The gentle, loving type of person tends to be reborn in a heaven realm or as a human being who has a predominance of pleasant experiences. the anxious, worried or extremely cruel type of person tends to be reborn in a hell realm or as a human being who has a predominance of painful experiences. The person who develops obsessive craving, fierce longings, and burning ambitions that can never be satisfied tends to be reborn as a hungry ghost or as a human being frustrated by longing and wanting. Whatever mental habits are strongly developed in this life will continue in the next life. Most people, however, are reborn as human beings.

**QUESTION: So we are not determined by our kamma.  
We can change it.**

**ANSWER:** Of course we can. That is why one of the steps on the Noble Eightfold Path is Perfect Effort. It depends on our sincerity, how much energy we exert and how strong the habit is. But it is true that some people simply go through life under the influence of their past habits, without making an effort

to change them and falling victim to these unpleasant results. Such people will continue to suffer unless they change their negative habits. The longer the negative habits remain, the more difficult they are to change. The Buddhist understands this and takes advantage of each and every opportunity to break mental habits that have unpleasant results and to develop mental habits that have a pleasant and happy result. Meditation is one of the techniques used to modify the habit patterns of the mind as does speaking or refraining to speak, acting or refraining to act in certain ways. The whole of the Buddhist life is a training to purify and free the mind. For example, if being patient and kind was a pronounced part of your character in your last life, such tendencies will re-emerge in the present life. If they are strengthened and developed in the present life, they will re-emerge even stronger and more pronounced in the future life. This is based upon the simple and observable fact that long established habits tend to be difficult to break. Now, when you are patient and kind, it tends to happen that you are not so easily ruffled by others, you don't hold grudges, people like you and thus your experiences tend to be happier. Now, let us take another example. Let us say that you came into life with a tendency to be patient and kind due to your mental habits in the past life. But in the present life, you neglect to strengthen and develop such tendencies. They would gradually weaken and die out and perhaps be completely absent in the future life. Patience and kindness being weak in this case, there is a possibility that in either this life or in the next life, a short temper, anger and cruelty could grow and develop, bringing

with them all the unpleasant experiences that such attitudes create. We will take one last example. Let us say that due to your mental habits in the last life, you came into the present life with the tendency to be short-tempered and angry, and you realize that such habits only cause you unpleasantness and so you make an effort to change them. You replace them with positive emotions. If you are able to eliminate them completely, which is possible if you make an effort, you become free from the unpleasantness caused by being short tempered and angry. If you are only able to weaken such tendencies, they would re-emerge in the next life where with a bit more effort, they could be eliminated completely and you could be free from their unpleasant effects.

**QUESTION: You have talked a lot about rebirth but is there any proof that we are reborn when we die?**

**ANSWER:** Not only is there scientific evidence to support the Buddhist belief in rebirth, it is the *only* after-life theory that has any evidence to support it. There is not a scrap of evidence to prove the existence of heaven and of course evidence of annihilation at death must be lacking. But during the last 30 years parapsychologists have been studying reports that some people have vivid memories of their former lives. For example, in England, a 5 year-old girl said she could remember her “other mother and father” and she talked vividly about what sounded like the events in the life

of another person. Parapsychologists were called in and they asked her hundreds of questions to which she gave answers. She spoke of living in a particular village in what appeared to be Spain, she gave the name of the village, the name of the street she lived in, her neighbors' names and details about her everyday life there. She also fearfully spoke of how she had been struck by a car and died of her injuries two days later. When these details were checked, they were found to be accurate. There *was* a village in Spain with the name the five-year-old girl had given. There *was* a house of the type she had described in the street she had named. What is more, it was found that a 23-year-old woman living in the house *had* been killed in a car accident five years before. Now how is it possible for a five year- old girl living in England and who had never been to Spain to know all these details? And of course, this is not the only case of this type. Professor Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia's Department of Psychology has described dozens of cases of this type in his books. He is an accredited scientist whose 25 year study of people who remember former lives is very strong evidence for the Buddhist teaching of rebirth.

**QUESTION:** Some people might say that the supposed ability to remember former lives is the work of devils.

**ANSWER:** You simply cannot dismiss everything that doesn't fit into your belief as being the work of devils. When

cold, hard facts are produced to support an idea, you must use rational and logical arguments if you wish to counter them—not irrational and superstitious talk about devils.

**QUESTION: You say that talk about devils is superstition but isn't talk about rebirth a bit superstitious also?**

**ANSWER:** The dictionary defines 'superstition' as 'a belief which is not based on reason or fact but on an association of ideas, as in magic'. If you can show me a careful study of the existence of devils written by a scientist I will concede that belief in devils is not superstition. But I have never heard of any research into devils; scientists simply wouldn't bother to study such things, so I say there is no evidence for the existence of devils. But as we have just seen, there is evidence which seems to suggest that rebirth does take place. So if belief in rebirth is based on at least some facts, it cannot be a superstition.

**QUESTION: Well, have there been any scientists who believe in rebirth?**

**ANSWER:** Yes. Thomas Huxley, who was responsible for having science introduced into the 19th century British school system and who was the first scientist to defend Darwin's theories, believed that reincarnation was a very plausible idea. In his famous book 'Evolution and Ethics and other Essays', he says:



*In the doctrine of transmigration, whatever its origin, Brahmanical and Buddhist speculation found, ready to hand, the means of constructing a plausible vindication of the ways of the Cosmos to man... Yet this plea of justification is not less plausible than others; and none but very hasty thinkers will reject it on the ground of inherent absurdity. Like the doctrine of evolution itself, that of transmigration has its roots in the world of reality; and it may claim such support as the great argument from analogy is capable of supplying.*

Then, Professor Gustaf Stromberg, the famous Swedish astronomer, physicist and friend of Einstein also found the idea of rebirth appealing.

*Opinions differ whether human souls can be reincarnated on the earth or not. In 1936 a very interesting case was thoroughly investigated and reported by the government authorities in India. A girl (Shanti Devi from Delhi) could accurately describe her previous life (at Muttra, five hundred miles from Delhi) which ended about a year before her “second birth.” She gave the name of her husband and child and described her home and life history. The investigating commission brought her to her former relatives, who verified all her statements. Among the people of India reincarnations are regarded as commonplace; the astonishing thing for them in this case was the great number of facts the girl remembered. This and similar cases can be regarded as additional evidence for the theory of the indestructibility of memory.*

Professor Julian Huxley, the distinguished British scientist who was Director General of UNESCO believed that rebirth was quite in harmony with scientific thinking.

*There is nothing against a permanently surviving spirit-individuality being in some way given off at death, as a definite wireless message is given off by a sending apparatus working in a particular way. But it must be remembered that the wireless message only becomes a message again when it comes in contact with a new, material structure — the receiver. So with our possible spirit-emanation. It... would never think or feel unless again 'embodied' in some way. Our personalities are so based on body that it is really impossible to think of survival which would be in any true sense personal without a body of sorts... I can think of something being given off which would bear the same relation to men and women as a wireless message to the transmitting apparatus; but in that case 'the dead' would, so far as one can see, be nothing but disturbances of different patterns wandering through the universe until... they... came back to actuality of consciousness by making contact with something which could work as a receiving apparatus for mind. Even very practical and down-to-earth people like the American industrialist Henry Ford found the idea of rebirth acceptable. Ford was attracted to the idea of rebirth because, unlike the theistic idea or the materialistic idea, rebirth gives you a second chance to develop yourself. Henry Ford says: I adopted the theory of Reincarnation when I was twenty-six. Religion offered nothing to the point.. Even work could not give me*

*complete satisfaction. Work is fume if we cannot utilize the experience we collect in one life in the next. When I discovered Reincarnation it was as if I had found a universal plan. I realized that there was a chance to work out my ideas. Time was no longer limited. I was no longer a slave to the hands of the clock... Genius is experience. Some seem to think that it is a gift or talent, but it is the fruit of long experience in many lives. Some are older souls than others, and so they know more... The discovery of Reincarnation put my mind at ease... If you preserve a record of this conversation, write it so that it puts men's minds at ease. I would like to communicate to others the calmness that the long view of life gives to us.*

So the Buddhist teachings of rebirth *does* have some scientific evidence to support it. It is logically consistent and it goes a long way to answering questions that theistic and the materialistic theories fail to do. But it is also very comforting. What can be worse than a theory of life that gives you no second chance, no opportunity to amend the mistakes you have made in this life and no time to further develop the skills and abilities you have nurtured in this life. But according to the Buddha, if you fail to attain Nirvana in this life, you will have the opportunity to try again next time. If you have made mistakes in this life, you will be able to correct yourself in the next life. You will truly be able to learn from your mistakes. Things you were unable to do or achieve in this life may well become possible in the next life. What a wonderful teaching!

## **6. Meditation**

**QUESTION: What is Meditation?**

**ANSWER:** Meditation is a conscious effort to change how the mind works. The Pali word for meditation is ‘bhavana’ which means ‘to make grow’ or ‘to develop’.

**QUESTION: Is meditation important?**

**ANSWER:** Yes, it is. No matter how much we may wish to be good, if we cannot change the desires that make us act the way we do, change will be difficult. For example, a person may realize that he is impatient with his wife and he may promise himself: “From now on I am not going to be so impatient.” But an hour later he may be shouting at his wife simply because, not being aware of himself, impatience has arisen without him knowing. Meditation helps to develop the awareness and the energy needed to transform ingrained mental habit patterns.

**QUESTION: I have heard that meditation can be dangerous. Is this true?**

**ANSWER:** To live, we need salt. But if you were to eat a kilogram of salt it would kill you. To live in the modern world you need a car but if you don’t follow the traffic rules or if you drive while you are drunk, a car becomes a dangerous machine. Meditation is like this, it is essential for our mental health and well-being but if you practice in a stupid way, it

could cause problems. Some people have problems like depression, irrational fears or schizophrenia, they think meditation is an instant cure for their problem, they start meditating and sometimes their problem gets worse. If you have such a problem, you should seek professional help and after you are better then take up meditation. Other people over reach themselves, they take up meditation and instead of going gradually, step by step, they meditate with too much energy for too long and soon they are exhausted. But perhaps most problems in meditation are caused by “kangaroo meditation”. Some people go to one teacher and do his meditation technique for a while, then they read something in a book and decide to try that technique, then a week later a famous meditation teacher visits town and so they decide to incorporate some of his ideas into their practice and before long they are hopelessly confused. Jumping like a kangaroo from one teacher to another or from one meditation technique to another is a mistake. But if you don’t have any severe mental problem and you take up meditation and practice sensibly it is one of the best things you can do for yourself.

**QUESTION: How many types of meditation are there?**

**ANSWER:** The Buddha taught many different types of meditation, each designed to overcome a particular problem or to develop a particular psychological state. But the two most common and useful types of meditation are Mindfulness of Breathing (*anapana sati*) and Loving Kindness Meditation (*metta bhavana*).

**QUESTION: If I wanted to practice Mindfulness of Breathing, how would I do it?**

**ANSWER:** You would follow these easy steps: the four Ps place, posture, practice and problems. First, find a suitable place, perhaps a room that is not too noisy and where you are not likely to be disturbed. Second, sit in a comfortable posture. A good posture is to sit with your legs folded, a pillow under your buttocks, your back straight, the hands nestled in the lap and the eyes closed. Alternatively, you can sit in a chair as long as you keep your back straight. Next comes the actual practice itself. As you sit quietly with your eyes closed you focus your attention on the in and out movement of the breath. This can be done by counting the breaths or watching the rise and fall of the abdomen. When this is done, certain problems and difficulties will arise. You might experience irritating itches on the body or discomfort in the knees. If this happens, try to keep the body relaxed without moving and keep focusing on the breath. You will probably have many intruding thoughts coming into your mind and distracting your attention from the breath. The only way you can deal with this problem is to patiently keep returning your attention to the breath. If you keep doing this, eventually thoughts will weaken, your concentration will become stronger and you will have moments of deep mental calm and inner peace.

**QUESTION: How long should I meditate for?**

**ANSWER:** It is good to do meditation for 15 minutes every day for a week and then extend the time by 5 minutes each

week until you are meditating for 45 minutes. After a few weeks of regular daily meditation you will start to notice that your concentration gets better, there are less thoughts, and you have moments of real peace and stillness.

**QUESTION: What about Loving Kindness Meditation? How is that practiced?**

**ANSWER:** Once you are familiar with Mindfulness of Breathing and are practicing it regularly you can start practicing Loving Kindness Meditation. It should be done two or three times each week after you have done Mindfulness of Breathing. First, you turn your attention to yourself and say to yourself words like “May I be well and happy. May I be peaceful and calm. May I be protected from dangers. May my mind be free from hatred. May my heart be filled with love. May I be well and happy.” Then one by one you think of a loved person, a neutral person, that is, someone you neither like nor dislike, and finally a disliked person, wishing each of them well as you do so.

**QUESTION: What is the benefit of doing this type of meditation?**

**ANSWER:** If you do Loving Kindness Meditation regularly and with the right attitude, you will find very positive changes taking place within yourself. You will find that you are able to be more accepting and forgiving towards yourself. You will find that the feelings you have towards your loved ones will

increase. You will find yourself making friends with people you used to be indifferent and uncaring towards, and you will find the ill-will or resentment you have towards some people will lessen and eventually be dissolved. Sometimes if you know of someone who is sick, unhappy or encountering difficulties you can include them in your meditation and very often you will find their situation improving.

**QUESTION: How is that possible?**

**ANSWER:** The mind, when properly developed, is a very powerful instrument. If we can learn to focus our mental energy and project it towards others, it can have an effect upon them. You may have had an experience like this. Perhaps you are in a crowded room and you get this feeling that someone is watching you. You turn around and, sure enough, someone is staring at you. What has happened is that you have picked up that other person's mental energy. Loving Kindness Meditation is like this. We project positive mental energy towards others and it gradually transforms them.

**QUESTION: Do I need a teacher to teach me meditation?**

**ANSWER:** A teacher is not absolutely necessary but personal guidance from someone who is familiar with meditation is certainly helpful. Unfortunately, some monks and laymen set themselves up as meditation teachers when they simply don't know what they are doing. Try to pick a teacher



who has a good reputation, a balanced personality and who adheres closely to the Buddha's teachings.

**QUESTION: I have heard that meditation is widely used today by psychiatrists and psychologists. Is this true?**

**ANSWER:** Yes, it is. Meditation is now accepted as having a highly therapeutic effect upon the mind and is used by many professional mental health workers to help induce relaxation, overcome phobias and bring about self-awareness. The Buddha's insights into the human mind are helping people as much today as they did in ancient times.



## **7. Wisdom and Compassion**

**QUESTION:** I often hear Buddhists talk about wisdom and compassion. What do these two terms mean?

**ANSWER:** Some religions believe that compassion or love (the two are very similar) is the most important spiritual quality but they fail to develop any wisdom. The result is that you end up being a good-hearted fool, a very kind person but with little or no understanding. Other systems of thought, like science, believe that wisdom can best be developed when all emotions, including compassion, are kept out of the way. The outcome of this is that science has tended to become preoccupied with results and has forgotten that science is to serve man not to control and dominate him. How, otherwise could scientists have lent their skills to develop the nuclear bomb, germ warfare, and the like. Religion has always seen reason and wisdom as the enemy of emotions like love and faith. Science has always seen emotions like love and faith as being enemies of reason and objectivity. And of course, as science progresses, religion declines. Buddhism, on the other hand, teaches that to be a truly balanced and complete individual, you must develop both wisdom and compassion. And because it is not dogmatic but based on experience, Buddhism has nothing to fear from science.

**QUESTION: So what, according to Buddhism, is wisdom?**

**ANSWER:** The highest wisdom is seeing that in reality all phenomena are incomplete, impermanent, and not self. This understanding is totally freeing and leads to the great security and happiness which is called Nirvana. However, the Buddha doesn't speak too much about this level of wisdom. It is not wisdom if we simply believe what we are told. True wisdom is to directly see and understand for ourselves. At this level then, wisdom is to keep an open mind rather than being closed-minded, listening to other points of view rather than being bigoted; to carefully examine facts that contradict our beliefs, rather than burying our heads in the sand; to be objective rather than prejudiced and partisan; to take time about forming our opinions and beliefs rather than just accepting the first or most emotional thing that is offered to us; and to always be ready to change our beliefs when facts that contradict them are presented to us. A person who does this is certainly wise and is certain to eventually arrive at true understanding. The path of just believing what you are told is easy. The Buddhist path requires courage, patience, flexibility and intelligence.

**QUESTION: I think few people could do this. So what is the point of Buddhism if only a few can practice it?**

**ANSWER:** It is true that not everyone is ready for Buddhism yet. But to say that therefore we should teach a religion that

is false but easily understandable just so that everyone can practice it is ridiculous. Buddhism aims at the truth and if not everyone has the capacity to understand it yet, they perhaps will be ready for it in their next life. However, there are many who, with just the right words or encouragement, *are able* to increase their understanding. And it is for this reason that Buddhists gently and quietly strive to share the insights of Buddhism with others. The Buddha taught us out of compassion and we teach others out of compassion.

**QUESTION: So we arrive at compassion. What, according to Buddhism, is compassion?**

**ANSWER:** Just as wisdom covers the intellectual or comprehending side of our nature, compassion covers the emotional or feeling side of our nature. Like wisdom, compassion is a uniquely human quality. Compassion is made up of two words, ‘co’ meaning together and ‘passion’ meaning a strong feeling. And this is what compassion is. When we see someone in distress and we feel their pain as if it were our own, and strive to eliminate or lessen their pain, then this is compassion. So all the best in human beings, all the Buddha-like qualities like sharing, readiness to give comfort, sympathy, concern and caring — all are manifestations of compassion. You will notice also that in the compassionate person, care and love towards others has its origins in care and love for oneself. We can really understand others when we really understand ourselves. We will know what’s best for others when we know

what's best for ourselves. We can feel for others when we feel for ourselves. So in Buddhism, one's own spiritual development blossoms quite naturally into concern for the welfare of others. The Buddha's life illustrates this very well. He spent six years struggling for his own welfare, after which, he was able to be of benefit to the whole of mankind.

**QUESTION:** So you are saying that we are best able to help others after we have helped ourselves. Isn't that a bit selfish?

**ANSWER:** We usually see altruism, concern for others before oneself, as being the opposite of selfishness, concern for oneself before others. Buddhism does not see it as either one or the other but rather as a blending of the two. Genuine self-concern will gradually mature into concern for others as one sees that others are really the same as oneself. This is genuine compassion and it is the most beautiful jewel in the crown of the Buddha's teaching.



## **8. Vegetarianism**

**QUESTION: Buddhists should be vegetarians, shouldn't they?**

**ANSWER:** Not necessarily. The Buddha was not a vegetarian. He did not teach his disciples to be vegetarians and even today, there are many good Buddhists who are not vegetarians.

**QUESTION: But if you eat meat you are indirectly responsible for the death of a creature. Isn't that breaking the first precept?**

**ANSWER:** It is true that when you eat meat, you are indirectly and partially responsible for killing a creature but the same is true when you eat vegetables. The farmer has to spray his crop with insecticides and poisons so that the vegetables arrive on your dinner plates without holes in them. And once again, animals have been killed to provide the leather for your belt or handbag, oil for the soap you use and a thousand other products as well. It is impossible to live without, in some way, being indirectly responsible for the death of some other beings, and this is just another example of the First Noble Truth, ordinary existence is suffering and unsatisfactory. When you take the First Precept, you try to avoid being directly responsible for killing beings.

**QUESTION: Mahayana Buddhists don't eat meat.**

**ANSWER:** That is not correct. Mahayana Buddhism in

China laid great stress on being vegetarian but both the monks and laymen/laywomen of the Mahayana tradition in Japan and Tibet usually eat meat.

**QUESTION: But I still think that a Buddhist should be vegetarian.**

**ANSWER:** If there was a person who was a very strict vegetarian but who was selfish, dishonest and mean, and another person who was not a vegetarian but who was thoughtful to others, honest, generous and kind, which of these two would be the better Buddhist?

**QUESTION: The person who was honest and kind.**

**ANSWER:** Why?

**QUESTION: Because such a person obviously has a good heart.**

**ANSWER:** Exactly. One who eats meat can have a pure heart just as one who does not eat meat can have an impure heart. In the Buddha's teachings, the important thing is the quality of your heart, not the contents of your diet. Many Buddhists take great care never to eat meat but they are not concerned about being selfish, dishonest, cruel or jealous. They change their diet which is easy to do, while neglecting to change their hearts which is a difficult thing to do. So whether you are a vegetarian or not, remember that the purification of the mind is the most important thing in Buddhism.

## 9. Good Luck and Fate

**QUESTION:** What did the Buddha teach about magic and fortune telling?

**ANSWER:** The Buddha considered such practices as fortune telling, wearing magic charms for protection, fixing lucky sites for building, prophesizing and fixing lucky days to be useless superstitions and he expressly forbids his disciples to practice such things. He calls all these things ‘low arts.’

*“Whereas some religious men, while living of food provided by the faithful make their living by such low arts, such wrong means of livelihood as palmistry, divining by signs, interpreting dreams... bringing good or bad luck... invoking the goodness of luck... picking the lucky site for a building, the monk Gotama refrains from such low arts, such wrong means of livelihood.”*

D.I, 9–12

**QUESTION:** Then why do people sometimes practice such things and believe in them?

**ANSWER:** Because of greed, fear and ignorance. As soon as people understand the Buddha’s teachings, they realize that a pure heart can protect them much better than bits of paper, bits of metal and a few chanted words and they no longer rely on such things. In the teachings of the Buddha,



it is honesty, kindness, understanding, patience, forgiveness, generosity, loyalty and other good qualities that truly protect you and give you true prosperity.

**QUESTION: But some lucky charms do work, don't they?**

**ANSWER:** I know a person who makes a living selling lucky charms. He claims that his charms can give good luck, prosperity and he guarantees that you will be able to pick three numbers. But if what he says is true then why isn't he himself a multi-millionaire? If his lucky charms really work, then why doesn't he win the lottery week after week? The only luck he has is that there are people silly enough to buy his magic charms.

**QUESTION: Then is there such a thing as luck?**

**ANSWER:** The dictionary defines luck as 'believing that whatever happens, either good or bad, to a person in the course of events is due to chance, fate or fortune.' The Buddha denied this belief completely. Everything that happens has a specific cause or causes and there must be some relationships between the cause and the effect. Becoming sick, for example, has specific causes. One must come into contact with germs and one's body must be weak enough for the germs to establish themselves. There is a definite relationship between the cause (germs and a weakened body) and

the effect (sickness) because we know that germs attack the organisms and give rise to sickness. But no relationship can be found wearing a piece of paper with words written on it and being rich or passing examinations. Buddhism teaches that whatever happens does so because of a cause or causes and not due to luck, chance or fate. People who are interested in luck are always trying to *get* something — usually more money and wealth. The Buddha teaches us that it is far more important to develop our hearts and minds. He says:

*Being deeply learned and skilled. Being well-trained and using well-spoken words; this is the best good luck. To support mother and father, to cherish wife and child and to have a simple livelihood; this is the best good luck. Being generous, just, helping one's relatives and being blameless in one's actions; this is the best good luck. To refrain from evil and from strong drink, and to be always steadfast in virtue; this is the best good luck. Reverence, humility, contentment, gratitude and hearing the good Dhamma; this is the best good luck.*

Sn. 261–265

## 10. Becoming a Buddhist

**QUESTION:** What you said so far is very interesting to me. How do I become a Buddhist?

**ANSWER:** Once there was a man called Upali. He was the follower of another religion and he went to the Buddha in order to argue with him and try to convert him. But after talking to the Buddha, he was so impressed that he decided to become a follower of the Buddha. But the Buddha said:

*“Make a proper investigation first. Proper investigation is good for a well-known person like yourself.”*

*“Now I am even more pleased and satisfied when the Lord says to me: ‘Make a proper investigation first.’ For if members of another religion had secured me as a disciple they would have paraded a banner all around the town saying: ‘Upali has joined our religion.’ But the Lord says to me: ‘Make a proper investigation first. Proper investigation is good for a well known person like yourself.’”*

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In Buddhism, understanding is the most important thing and understanding takes time. So do not impulsively rush into Buddhism. Take your time, ask questions, consider carefully, and *then* make your decision. The Buddha was not interested in having large numbers of disciples. He was concerned that people should follow his teachings as a result of a careful investigation and consideration of facts.

**QUESTION: If I have done this and I find the Buddha's teaching acceptable, what would I do then if I wanted to become a Buddhist?**

**ANSWER:** It would be best to join a good temple or Buddhist group, support them, be supported by them and continue to learn more about the Buddha's teachings. Then, when you are ready, you would formally become a Buddhist by taking the Three Refuges.

**QUESTION: What are the Three Refuges?**

**ANSWER:** A refuge is a place where people go when they are distressed or when they need safety and security. There are many types of refuge. When people are unhappy, they take refuge with their friends, when they are worried and frightened, they might take refuge in false hopes and beliefs. As they approach death, they might take refuge in the belief in an eternal heaven. But, as the Buddha says, none of these are true refuges because they do not give comfort and security based on reality.

*Truly these are not safe refuges, not the refuge supreme. Not the refuge whereby one is freed from all sorrow But to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha and to see with real understanding the Four Noble Truths, Suffering, the cause of suffering, the transcending of suffering and the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the transcending of suffering, This indeed is a safe refuge, it is the refuge supreme. It is the refuge whereby one is freed from all suffering.*

Dp. 189–192

Taking Refuge in the Buddha is a confident acceptance of the fact that one can become fully enlightened and perfected just as the Buddha was. Taking Refuge in the Dhamma means understanding the Four Noble Truths and basing one's life on the Noble Eightfold Path. Taking Refuge in the Sangha means looking for support, inspiration and guidance from all who walk the Noble Eightfold Path. Doing this one becomes a Buddhist and thus takes the first step on the path towards Nirvana.

**QUESTION: What changes have taken place in your life since you first took the three refuges?**

**ANSWER:** Like countless millions of others over the last 2,500 years, I have found that the Buddha's teachings have made sense out of a difficult world, they have given meaning to what was a meaningless life, they have given me a humane and compassionate ethics with which to lead my life and they have shown me how I can attain a state of purity and perfection in the next life. A poet in ancient India once wrote of the Buddha:

*To go to him for refuge, to sing his praise, to do him honor and to abide in his Dhamma is to act with understanding.*

I agree with these words completely.

**QUESTION: I have a friend who is always trying to convert me to his religion. I am not really interested in his religion and I have told him so but he won't leave me alone. What can I do?**

**ANSWER:** The first thing you must understand is that this person is not really your friend. A true friend accepts you as you are and respects your wishes. I suspect that this person is merely pretending to be your friend so he can convert you. When people try to impose their will on you they are certainly not friends.

**QUESTION: But he says he wants to share his religion with me.**

**ANSWER:** Sharing your religion with others is a good thing. But I suggest that your friend doesn't know the difference between sharing and imposing. If I have an apple, I offer you half and you accept my offer, then I have shared with you. But if you say to me "Thank you, but I have already eaten" and I keep insisting that you take half the apple until you finally give in to my pressure, this can hardly be called sharing. People like your 'friend' try to disguise their bad behavior by calling it 'sharing', 'love' or 'generosity' but by whatever name they call it, their behavior is still just rude, bad manners and selfish.

**QUESTION: So how can I stop him?**

**ANSWER:** It is simple. Firstly, be clear in your mind what you want. Secondly, clearly and briefly tell him so. Thirdly, when he asks you questions like "What is your belief on this matter" or "Why don't you wish to come to the meeting with me", clearly, politely and persistently repeat your first statement. "Thank you for the invitation but I would rather

not come”. “Why not?” “That is really my business. I would rather not come.” “But there will be many interesting people there.” “I am sure there will be but I would rather not come.” “I am inviting you because I care about you.” “I am glad you care about me but I would rather not come.” If you clearly, patiently and persistently repeat yourself and refuse to allow him to get you involved in a discussion he will eventually give up. It is a shame that you have to do this, but it is very important for people to learn that they cannot impose their beliefs or wishes upon others.

**QUESTION: Should Buddhists try to share the Dhamma with others?**

**ANSWER:** Yes, they should. And I think most Buddhists understand the difference between sharing and imposing. If people ask you about Buddhism, tell them. You can even tell them about the Buddha’s teachings without their asking. But if, by either their words or their actions, they let you know that they are not interested, accept that and respect their wishes. It is also important to remember that you let people know about the Dhamma far more effectively through your actions than through preaching to them. Show people the Dhamma by always being considerate, kind, tolerant, upright and honest. Let the Dhamma shine forth through your speech and actions. If each of us, you and I, know the Dhamma thoroughly, practice it fully and share it generously with others, we can be of great benefit to ourselves and others also.

