Culturescope Resources: Belief Systems

HSC Depth Study: Belief Systems
Focus Study: Buddhism
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Historical Basis

Buddhism was founded in northeastern India, in approximately 500 BC, and was based on the teachings of an Indian Prince, Siddhartha Gautama, who became known as the Buddha, which means, "enlightened one".

Siddhartha was born in Kapilavastu near the present Indian-Nepal border in about 563BC and, as there were no written accounts of his life for centuries after his death, what is known of the real person is fragmentary at best. His father was the ruler of a small kingdom and, at his birth a sage predicted that he would either become a great military or a great religious leader. Legend has it that his mother, Maya, dreamed that a white elephant entered her body when she conceived him, and legend also says that when she gave birth he stood and took seven steps.

The young Prince Siddhartha was indulged and protected. When he came of age he married Yasodhara, and they had a son. Then, at the age of twenty nine, he had an experience that made him realize how empty his life was. He left the privileged life of the palace and saw four things: an old man, a sick man, a corpse and then a wandering holy man. He understood that the first three states, old age, sickness and death, were the destiny of every human and that the only solution to this was to understand the very nature of being. The search for this understanding was embodied in the holy man. Renouncing the attachments of everyday life, Siddhartha left the palace and his wife and son and took up the ascetic life of a wandering holy man, vowing to find a way to neutralise the suffering he had witnessed.

For six years he followed various forms of religious practice and meditation, first, with various teachers or gurus then, on his own, a solitary practice of such severe self-denial that he almost starved to death. Finally he realised that none of these held the answer. So, giving up his hardships, he began to follow what he termed "The Middle Way", a practice without physical extremes. His travels brought him to what is today Bodh Gaya in Northern India, and it was here, during his meditation seated under a Bodhi tree that, it is said he reached enlightenment and became a Buddha.

He spent the rest of his life (he died at eighty) teaching all those who were interested in listening. He also founded a community of monks to spread and practice his teachings, this is known as the Sangha.
Extent of Buddhism's following in the world today

Shortly before his death, the Buddha refused his disciples' request to appoint a successor to lead them, telling his followers that they had to work out their own way on the path to enlightenment. Groups and individual monks began to spread throughout the subcontinent, only coming together in the Rains Retreat (during the monsoons) and for important councils, which met to work out rules and common practices. After the third council meeting in the third century BC missionaries were specifically sent throughout Asia to spread the message of the Dharma (teachings).

Many people began to convert to the new religion and in the third century BC, King Asoka made Buddhism the national religion of India. The influence of Indian civilization and Buddhism spread down into Sri Lanka and the Indonesian archipelago as far as Bali. Missionaries also had great success in China where their doctrines meshed with a prevailing philosophy called the Tao or path. From here it spread to Japan, Tibet and Indo-china as well as along the Silk Road into what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan where the fabled Buddhist kingdom of Gandara flourished and then disappeared.

By the next millennium Hinduism had reasserted itself in India and Buddhism virtually disappeared there until the late twentieth century. It also vanished from the Indonesian archipelago, and the Middle East with the introduction of new religions, especially Islam.

Today Buddhism is one of the great world religions and is practiced in a variety of countries and cultures. It is the state religion of Thailand and continues to be widely practiced in Indo-China, Burma, and Sri Lanka. Whilst the communist regime in China does not endorse or support any religion, religious practice, including Buddhist beliefs, is now tolerated and Buddhist traditions are still permitted in Tibet, which is under Chinese control. Countries like Korea and Japan have monastic orders and Buddhist followers, but amongst their urban populations, religious practice is often as marginalized as it is in many western societies.

The migration of Asian Buddhists all over the world during the last two hundred years has introduced aspects of Buddhism into many cultures, including Australia. However, it is its recent discovery and adoption by westerners that has produced some of the biggest changes to its distribution. Despite the fact that, in general, Buddhism does not actively seek converts, Buddhist centers can be found in every major western city and it has, for example in Australia, become one of the fastest growing religions amongst non-Asian citizens.

Important Places and/or Scripts

For several hundred years after his death, the Buddha's teachings existed only as an oral tradition but, as Buddhism continued to spread, difficulties arose in terms of maintaining continuity in doctrine and practice without a written canon. In the following centuries the monastic order met periodically to reach agreement on such matters. Four major councils were convened which formed the basis of all subsequent Buddhist traditions.

The first council was held immediately after the Buddha's death. Its purpose was to recite and agree on the Buddha's actual teachings and on proper monastic discipline. It is recorded that Ananda, his closest disciple, recited all his sayings and the rules for the monks that he had laid down.

The aim of the Third Council, which met in the 3rd Century BC, was to bring consensus and make the sangha (the organization of monks and nuns) and the dhamma (the teachings), consistent in practice and doctrine by writing it all down. The result was the compilation of the Buddhist scriptures as a text...
called the Tripitaka. This was written down in Pali which, like Latin, is no longer a living language but is frequently used in ritual and education. The term Tripitaka means three baskets. The first basket is the Vinaya Pitaka, the rules of discipline for the monks; the second is the Sutta Pitaka, the sayings of the Buddha, and the third is the Abhidhamma Pitaka, the Buddhist teachings about consciousness and meditation.

"Do not be led by the authority of religious texts!" This is a saying attributed to the Buddha, and it is meant to emphasise that as far as he was concerned the search for enlightenment was a matter for each individual alone. Despite this, the sacred books of Buddhism number several thousand. The Buddha's saying is itself recorded in a sacred text.

In Buddhism there is no teaching revealed by a god and then written in a sacred text, as with the Bible or the Koran. All the same, the sayings of Buddha have a similar authority to both these sacred books, and so it is that these sutras are an important part of Buddhist doctrine.

As time went on and other schools of Buddhism emerged, they too tended to develop their own individual texts. This was particularly true among the different Mahayana schools, which flourished in China, Japan and Tibet. Because these texts were usually attributed to a bodhisattva, or Buddhist saint, they were given almost the same status as the sayings of the Buddha himself, and this gave them a great deal of authority. So it is that many of them also are known as sutras, for instance, the Lotus Sutra.

The study of these sacred texts is an important activity in Buddhism; whole lifetimes are spent learning texts by heart and reflecting on their meaning, while special texts may be chanted as an aid to meditation or as a means of instruction. Buddhist tradition also treats books that contain the teachings, particularly the words of the Buddha, with respect. For example they should not be piled up with other books or left on the floor.

Buddhism places no importance on stories about the creation of the world. In the first place, there is no creator god who could be responsible for bringing the world into being. Second, the world is regarded as being a temporary thing, in the sense that it is continually changing. It is not really worthwhile being too concerned with questions of how it began and how it will end. These were questions that the Buddha said only distracted people from the quest for enlightenment.

The main story in the Buddhist tradition is the legend of the Buddha's life and his search for enlightenment. This story provides an example for anyone who would follow in his footsteps and so reach nirvana. (An accessible version of this story can be found in the film The Little Buddha directed by Bernardo Bertelucci).

Another type of story that is popular in Buddhism is the parable, particularly famous are those from the Zen school. They are intended to highlight the belief that enlightenment or satori as it is called in Zen is a sudden insight into reality.

There are many important or sacred places associated with Buddhism. For example, when the Buddha died his body was cremated, as was the custom, and a stupa (memorial mound) was erected over his ashes. A stupa's construction is usually a square base with a dome surmounted by a spire, and is meant to represent earth, water, air and fire, in that order. It often has prayer wheels mounted around it. A stupa cannot be entered and people will usually circle one doing ritual acts such as spinning the prayer wheels, pouring water or decorating it with flowers and other offerings. The custom of erecting stupas over sacred relics has continued in many Buddhist countries.

There are many types of Buddhist shrines or temples. They usually contain images of the Buddha in various postures as well as an altar or point of central focus where flowers are displayed, incense and candles or lamps are burnt and other symbolic objects, often specific to a particular culture, are placed. The structures can be very simple or very richly adorned, depending on the culture involved.
Again, depending on the culture, various rituals are performed there and meditation takes place. Often shrines and temples are attached to a monastery and shrines can also be found in the home environment.

While there are places throughout Asia for Buddhist pilgrimage these are usually culturally specific. For many Buddhists around the world one of the most significant places to visit would be Bodh Gaya, where tradition has it that the Buddha attained enlightenment. There are no doctrinal requirements on Buddhists to embark on a pilgrimage or to visit particular places, as may be found in other religions.

The role and acceptance of dissent

Inevitably conflicting interpretations of what the Buddha actually taught or meant began to appear after his death. At the time of what is known as the Second Council, in 383BC, there was a significant split in the Buddhist movement into the Theravada (Teaching of the Elders), sometimes called Hinayana (small vessel), and the Mahayana (large vessel) movements.

The split between the Theravada and Mahayana schools arose over matters of practice and doctrine. Some people had come to think that the Theravadans were too conservative and literal minded in their attachment to the Buddha's message, too concerned with individual enlightenment and insufficiently concerned with the needs of the laity (the non-monastic community). Theravadans consider the Buddha to be a perfectly enlightened human teacher whilst the Mahayana's developed a more transcendental view of him. The Buddha in this latter view has a threefold nature: an ultimate, unchanging nature of pure consciousness that can be attained in meditation; a heavenly form that can be worshipped; a human body that appears on earth to convert humankind. According to this view the Buddha has taken on human form countless times and Siddhartha was only one example of the body of transformation, as it is called.

This new Mahayana concept made possible the idea of a divine grace that could be bestowed as a result of worship rather than attained through practice. Also the idea of continuing revelation beyond the original teachings of Siddhartha, especially through bodhisattvas, meant that a belief system could adapt to the needs and desires of society in a more flexible way, thus suiting the everyday concerns and behaviours of that society's members. One example of this is the concept of "merit", which is not found in Buddha's original teachings but is widespread in many Asian societies. The idea is that people can positively affect future rebirths through actions that build up merit such as through devotional rituals and certain good deeds, rather than through a strictly spiritual lifestyle.

An important new concept in Mahayana was that of the bodhisattva or enlightened being, as the ideal toward which the good Buddhist should aspire. A bodhisattva is an individual who has attained perfect enlightenment but delays entry into final nirvana (the perpetual state of enlightenment) in order to make possible the salvation of all other sentient beings. The bodhisattva transfers merit built up over many lifetimes to less fortunate creatures and thus can also be worshipped. The key attributes of this social saint are compassion and loving-kindness. A present day example, although he denies it, would be the current Dalai Lama.

Theravada Buddhism is today found in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Laos. Mahayana is found in China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and Tibet.

Like Hinduism, Buddhism is more a way of life than "just" a religion. To accept the Dharma is to practice it in all facets of one's life. The teachings ascribed to the Buddha and contained in the Tripitaka are common to all branches of Buddhism and all Buddhists would accept and try to live by the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path and the Five Precepts. Most Buddhists accept the concepts of impermanence and samsara (the cycle of birth and rebirth), and all branches practice some
form of meditation. Beyond that there are many variations and interpretations of Buddhist practice depending on the culture involved, including that found in western nations. The most notable differences are between cultures that have adopted Theravada and those that have adopted Mahayana Buddhism. Yet neither of these branches could be considered hostile to each other's beliefs in any way.

In Buddhism, therefore, the concept of dissent is not as problematical as it can be for other religions. Because the path to enlightenment is entirely one's own, there is usually complete tolerance of how that is achieved as long as one doesn't cause suffering to others in its pursuit. There is no evangelical movement, indeed there is a complete acceptance of the validity of the beliefs of others and no mechanisms to promote conversion beyond the presentation of the teachings in particular forums. However, if one joins an order then one naturally has to accept the rules that govern it, or leave.

Some of the most contentious issues in Buddhism today have come about through globalisation and the religion's adoption by the West, particularly in the area of female ordination and enlightenment. Western women in particular have been forceful in demanding access to ordination and asserting the reality of female enlightenment in the face of some very strong, male dominated, hierarchical cultures which had determined that women could never achieve either unless reborn as men. However, it must be said that most Buddhist leaders, notably the Dalai Lama, have accepted that change, albeit slow, must happen in this area and women are consequently being ordained in greater numbers.

**Power and Authority**

There is no absolute hierarchy in Buddhism. There are monastics and lay people and men and women and each has a particular status that tends to follow in that order of importance. In the sangha there is usually some form of leadership. A monastery will have an abbot and perhaps senior monks who organise the daily routines and rituals and who provide spiritual teaching and guidance. In some traditions, for example in the Tibetan traditions, a spiritual teacher or guide to whom one is completely devoted, a guru, is seen as an important part of the path to enlightenment. Also the Tibetan tradition involves a series of reincarnated spiritual leaders called lamas who are venerated by everyone and, in the case of the Dalai Lama can become a political leader too. But the essential teaching of the Buddha, that we are all ultimately responsible for our own enlightenment, also remains true.

In traditionally Buddhist cultures men invariably have spiritual and temporal power over women because that has been a constant in most human societies throughout history. Generally today in the West this is not the case, although in some western sanghas men may still retain some predominance in rituals. Most monastics and religious leaders are treated with complete reverence and in many Asian societies command a great deal of power and authority, even though they have little material wealth or power.

The Buddha himself did not seem to seek personal power or impose his will on others by creating a hierarchy or leaving a set of hard and fast rules. He recommended to his monks that regular councils based upon republican traditions would ensure the growth of the sangha. However in a secular world often ruled by kings or rajas within small states, he was also obliged to define the ideal ruler. This is one who "rolls the Wheel of the Dharma", in other words one who rules according to the Dharma or spiritual path, and the Buddha continually reinforced the qualities of wise leadership in his teachings.

Another aspect of governance that the Buddha taught repeatedly was that compassionate love is the ultimate weapon against all problems and suffering. Contemporary Buddhist leaders continue to say that putting effort into developing this quality is the most important thing a society can do. Believing love alone will make a successful government is not a view that is generally embraced, but Buddhists
believe that the only way to change the world is through understanding and compassion, and that first we must change ourselves; and then our governments. The Dalai Lama has become a universal example of international action through person-to-person contact and constant good humour and compassion. When asked his reaction to being awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace, His Holiness responded with the Bodhisattva Vow:

So long as space remains
So long as sentient beings' suffering is there
I will be there
To serve as much as I can

Of course love must also be accompanied by wisdom. The Noble Eightfold Path is divided into three parts, of which wisdom is the third. Compassion alone, without the wisdom to see if it is really benefiting sentient beings, can still cause harm if used unwisely. Compassion used without wisdom is often referred to as idiot compassion.

Buddhism says, however, that wisdom should not be confused with knowledge or cleverness. There are many examples in the past and present of leaders whose great mental abilities, through selfishness and lack of compassion, have created enormous suffering for the rest of society.

Ideally Buddhism is a belief in peace: peace of mind, peace between people, and peace in the world. There is no justification for war, in pure Buddhist thought, although decisions which cause suffering to a few people might be made if the leader has the wisdom to see that the action will prevent suffering to the many. Acts of nations motivated by greed and hostility create bad karma for all their citizens, and benevolent acts create good karma. The group creation of karma is called collective karma. If a government has oppressed and exploited other nations in the past, then that country creates negative karma for its future and, similarly, its acts of compassion will bring future rewards.

Buddhism continually stresses the similarity of all human beings in order to help people recognise the pointlessness of hostility. The Buddhist view of human suffering is that it is caused by people trying to find happiness through selfish actions. Only by respecting others and upholding human rights, can people have respect for themselves and avoid suffering.

However, particularly in the late twentieth century, Buddhists also recognised that there was a need to move beyond prayer and meditation to act practically to help the world and become involved in social action including demonstrations against war, abuse of human rights and environmental degradation. This movement is called Engaged Buddhism and its adherents believe that social action intended to protect the natural environment, encourage respect for all races, creeds and cultures and to promote a healthy, safe and harmonious social environment will inevitably have positive results in the future for this or future lifetimes, following the law of karma.

Gender Roles

As far as basic Buddhist teaching is concerned, women and men should be equal. Both are taught the same Dharma, both should pursue the same path and both should reach the same goal of nirvana. However, in practice, women have largely been denied positions of authority over men. There have even been suggestions that a woman could not reach nirvana without first being reborn as a man. However these attitudes are more related to the religious philosophy of a particular society and culture than entrenched in the original teachings.

At the time of the Buddha the role of women in society was essentially a domestic one. It has been argued that women were not seen as necessarily inferior to men but different, although the reality was
that often women had little real power inside or outside the home. As in the West until relatively recent times both men and women generally agreed that the ideal woman was a good wife and mother. If a woman wanted to lead a spiritual life then she had to be very single-minded and resistant to all the pressures of socialization that surrounded her although, according to historical records, female ascetics have existed in most past societies, including Buddhist ones.

According to the scriptures, it was only after some time that the Buddha himself was persuaded by Ananda to allow an order of nuns. Furthermore, the story recounts that eight special rules were placed upon them that make it clear that they are subservient to the order of monks; for example, a nun must never correct a monk, while a monk may correct a nun. Nuns must be ordained by both monks and nuns, while a monk's ordination requires only monks. Modern feminist research argues that the Buddha's original teachings may have been more liberal, but the huge length of time over which the rules attributed to him were encoded, make it difficult to prove. Although the Buddha taught that anyone who wished to could become enlightened, in Indian society there still continued a strong dominant male influence which limited women and prevented them from having equal status with men. Many Buddhist scholars argue that the Buddha's words have not been accurately recorded, and that the eight additional rules for nuns were a compromise which enabled women to lead a spiritual life, but complied with the Indian social system. Many women took up the spiritual life and the Buddha is also said to have protected them from exploitation by monks by saying that the nuns should not be called upon to sew, dye or weave for the monks. Neither could the monks take for themselves donations made to the nuns.

Mahayana Buddhism in particular has a female deity called Tara who made a vow that "There are many who desire Enlightenment in a man's body, but none who work for the benefit of sentient beings in the body of a woman. There, until samsara is empty, I shall work for the benefit of sentient beings in a women's body."

In some cultures, for example Sri Lanka, widows and women with no education and without financial support often become nuns as a sort of social security, a place of safe shelter where their old age can be provided for. This in turn has led to social attitudes that devalued the role of nuns in that society because they were not seen as spiritually motivated or even literate. Some western nuns have tried to redress these perceptions by setting up nunneries with strong spiritual and educational practices in that country.

According to Buddhist philosophy, when a person becomes enlightened there is no more division between male and female.

As a result of westernization and the cultural changes inherent in modernization, the status of women is slowly changing in many countries, even traditionally Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachers today recognize that western women no longer accept subservience, and recent teaching and books address women equally with men. In the West a point of view that insists that lay women and men are as capable of becoming enlightened as ordained women and men is developing, but it is still the monastic orders which are recognized as the most dedicated spiritual communities. Many women, particularly western women, have become respected spiritual leaders and have helped to convince male leaders like the Dalai Lama to support women's spiritual practice and leadership.

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Continuity and Change

The core ideas or doctrines of Buddhism can never be said to really change; these are the teachings of the Dharma, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the precepts. They are central to all the versions of Buddhism and have been passed down in Pali and in translation, virtually unchanged, since the death of the Buddha. Indeed, in a universe of change the Buddha maintains that only three
things are changeless – The Buddha (enlightenment), the Dharma (the path to enlightenment) and the Sangha (a body of people engaged on the path to enlightenment).

In traditional Buddhist countries there are many cultural practices that are common and have continued since the founding of Buddhism. For example, the tradition of entering a monastery and the rituals around that type of lifestyle are similar. The lay community supports the monks in all necessities, believing that merit is thereby accumulated. This concept of merit is very much attached to the idea of karma (cause and effect), and rebirth that is commonly found in Hinduism and Buddhism. Some variations on the idea of rebirth and reincarnation can be found, one of the most particular is the Tibetan tradition of lamas being reincarnated as specific individuals who can be identified.

Many Buddhists are vegetarian because of the first precept is to refrain from killing. However, in some traditional cultures lay people do eat meat, often where non-Buddhists are available to slaughter and butcher animals, and only monks and nuns are vegetarian. In Tibet a meat diet was necessary for everyone because fruit and vegetables were not varied or plentiful enough to maintain health. Buddhists believe in the middle way and this means not following such an extreme or ascetic regime that one's health is endangered.

There are many common festivals and practices held throughout Asia and in the West, for example Vesak, which celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of Buddha, said to have occurred on the same date, and the Rains Retreat. Then there are festivals and practices that are specific to a particular culture, for example Tet in Vietnam. Marriage and other rites of passage will also tend to vary in form and ritual from culture to culture because Buddha did not lay down particular rules, but the underlying concepts remain fundamentally the same.

The fact that there is no creator God in Buddhism, or any didactic revelatory texts have made Buddhism an ethical and moral philosophy palatable to many western thinkers. The counter-culture which took hold from the 1960s, sought answers away from consumerism, mainstream "conservatism" and Christianity and found some new perspectives in Eastern religions including Buddhism. Global upheavals like the Vietnam War created Buddhist refugees who, coming to Australia for example, have helped make Buddhism one of the fastest growing religions according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Buddhist places of worship, festivals and practice are increasingly common in Australian society. Thus differences in the type of society that now includes Buddhism has made many subtle and some important changes to the way it is practiced and some of the ideas that have traditionally underpinned it.

An important change resulting from globalisation and westernisation has been to emphasise the commonalities between the various versions of the religion and the different philosophical schools, rather than the differences. As the emphasis in popular Buddhist practice has been on tolerance and acceptance rather than conflict, there is a continued dialogue and bringing together of ideas and, in a city like Sydney, they can often be found sharing the same physical and cyber space.

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Tradition and cultural heritage

What do Buddhist's believe and how have those beliefs shaped Buddhist society and culture?

According to Theravada Buddhists the Buddha is not a divine being, but a human who achieved enlightenment and taught a way for others to become enlightened also. He was not interested in questions of other worlds, gods and spirits, saying that speculation about such was merely a distraction. This is a very different and challenging philosophy compared to many of the world's religions.
Eventually Mahayana Buddhism developed very complex beliefs about other worlds, gods and spirits (devas), so that new and combinations of new and old traditions were created in the societies that adopted it. However, the more sophisticated practitioners believe that these supernatural beings and their lands are also impermanent and another part of the wheel of samsara. Some would even regard them as something akin to psychological/spiritual states that eventually will not be required by the fully enlightened.

Some Buddhist beliefs come from Hindu philosophy, particularly the ideas of rebirth, karma and samsara. Rebirth sees every living being, after death, returning to the world in animal, human or divine form, according to past actions (karma). This cycle of birth, death and rebirth is called the wheel of Samsara. Karma means that every human action has a consequence, good actions tend to have good consequences and bad ones bad consequences, both in this life and the life to come. While developing good karma may produce better rebirths, it will not allow one to escape the wheel of samsara. It was the Buddha who discovered a way to do this.

Through his own experience, the Buddha gained knowledge that he made open to all. It is summarised in the Four Noble Truths:

The Truth of Suffering, dukka or unsatisfactoriness
The Truth of the Cause of Suffering – attachment, greed etc
The Truth of the Removal of Suffering – non-attachment
The Truth of the Path Leading to the End of Suffering – the Noble Eightfold Path

The Noble Eightfold Path:

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<th>Wisdom</th>
<th>1. Right Understanding</th>
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<td>2. Right Thought</td>
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<td>Conduct</td>
<td>3. Right Speech</td>
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<td>5. Right Livelihood</td>
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<td>6. Right Effort</td>
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<td>Meditation</td>
<td>7. Right Mindfulness</td>
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<td>8. Right Concentration</td>
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The goal and supreme religious experience of Buddhism is the attainment of nirvana. The Buddha refused to describe the experience, but it is certainly not a place nor does it entail an encounter with a divine being, although some schools use the image or idea of a teacher as a guide in meditation. Nirvana is often described as emptiness or spaciousness, a sense of letting go. It is like a flame going out when the fuel (karma) is exhausted. It has been explained that what remains is pure, non-ego driven consciousness, without attachment or suffering and full of compassion.

This represents the fundamental Buddhist religious experience and is the total concern of the Theravada school, but Mahayana Buddhism emphasises a middle stage - a religious experience of a heavenly Buddha or Bodhisattva. Through a process of visualisation of these supreme beings, creating and contemplating mandalas (symbolic pictorial images), and the reciting of mantras (repeated sounds, words or phrases), progress towards nirvana is made.

In most Buddhist cultures the journey to individual enlightenment through intensive practice is undertaken by monastics only. Ordinary, lay Buddhists show their devotion to Buddha through popular religious practices. These can include pilgrimages to sacred places, visiting local temples, making offerings to the monks and making offerings to the Buddha images of their own home shrines.

All Buddhists try to follow the Five Precepts, to undertake the rule of training:

* To refrain from harming any living thing
* To refrain from taking that which is not given
* To refrain from misuse of the mind or body through intoxicants
* To refrain from harmful speech or untruths
* To refrain from unlawful or disloyal sexual behaviour

Monks must follow a further five precepts, and different orders of monks may, and usually do, have a number of additional rules.

Buddhist philosophy naturally determines the forms of rituals and rites of passage in the human life cycle. Marriage and funerary ceremonies are generally left to the customs and cultural traditions of a particular society because there is no formal and specific Buddhist marriage or funeral ceremony, although a monk or nun may take part in giving a blessing.

Whether marriages are arranged or not will depend on the cultural background.

The Buddha did talk about the responsibilities of men and women in marriage.

The ideal husband would fulfill his responsibilities to his wife by:

* Treating her with respect
* Behaving in a courteous manner towards her
* Being faithful
* Sharing authority in family matters
* Showing his appreciation by giving her presents.

The ideal wife would show her love for her husband by:

* Managing the household well
* Being hospitable to his family as well as her own
* Being faithful
* Taking care of the family's belongings
* Skillfully and industriously completing her jobs.

When a marriage does fail and there seems to be no way of avoiding separation, then it is inevitable that everyone involved will suffer pain. Buddhism would say that the only way of dealing with divorce is to go about it as sensitively as is possible. Hurting others can never bring satisfaction and happiness, according to Buddhist teachings.

Sexual permissiveness is seen as a cause of suffering. Like all desire, sexual desire needs to be controlled to avoid causing suffering to others and loyalty in a relationship is seen as a positive virtue. Tantric Buddhism is a method of unifying male and female energies in order to attain a perfect balance of the two, and reach spiritual completeness. Sexual symbolism can be used in meditation to help the practitioners realise their inner potential.

Immorality is seen as a choice one makes that has consequences for one's own karma and spiritual future. Celibacy is usually only practiced by those who are ordained because monks and nuns want to free themselves from distractions and desires which are the attachments that hinder them on the path to enlightenment.

The Buddha's code of social ethics for a layperson or householder is called the Sigalavada Sutra and covers the six sets of ideal social relationships:

* Parents
* Teachers
* Wife [partner] and children
* Friends and companions
Family life should be extremely important to the lay Buddhist. In the Sermon on Blessing, the Buddha defined the highest blessings that lead to happiness, now and in the future. Those concerning marriage and the family are contained in the following verses:

To support one's father and mother,
To care for one's wife and children,
And to have a peaceful occupation
This is the highest blessing.
Generosity, good conduct,
Helping relatives,
And blameless action.
This is the highest blessing.

Because Buddhist philosophy emphasises the rarity and therefore the precious nature of rebirth as a human, an ideal human existence for a Buddhist is not to waste it but to live a life that strives towards enlightenment. An important aspect of such a life is mindfulness, being aware of what you are doing at every moment and, where possible, the likely consequences. Because every action has karmic consequences that may not be immediately discernible, it is important to be especially aware of aspects of ones nature and behaviour that could produce bad karma and to practice skilful behaviour in their place. Control does not necessarily mean repression, for example the energy of extreme anger can be turned into something positive if it means righting a wrong non-violently. Of course all of this is an ideal only, but Buddhist societies generally tend to be non-violent.

In terms of crime and punishment Buddhism recognises the need to protect people from criminals, and at the same time to protect criminals from creating more bad karma for themselves. A punishment, which deliberately hurts or destroys another being implies that there is no other way that person can develop and learn from their mistakes. A bad person is someone who has not yet discovered his or her potential for good. Understanding karma helps people to lessen their insecurity and fear within a violent society, the logic being that the only lasting security from being harmed that anyone has is in not harming others. Retaliation, revenge and punishment may make someone feel better temporarily, but eventually, if they have had the intention to harm another, the karmic cycle will continue.

With regard to suicide and euthanasia, because of karma, no one can escape pain and suffering by killing their current body. If the karma created has not been fully extinguished then it will follow the individual into a future life. Mindfulness and meditation are usually the only way to make the right choice in a difficult situation.

In terms of livelihood a Buddhist would seek to avoid working in a job that was inherently violent or had the potential to cause suffering, such as:

* Weapons
* Animals for slaughter
* Slavery
* Intoxicants
* Poisons and harmful drugs.

Right livelihoods would include the helping careers such as nursing, social work and teaching.

Buddhists generally don't try to convert others to their religion. In order to really hear the teachings a person must first be ready of their own accord. Buddhists believe that all humans should be respected for their varying thoughts and beliefs and that there are many different spiritual methods, which can fulfill that wish. Indeed the Dalai Lama usually exhorts people to try and find a spiritual path within
their own cultural and social context.

Since the community of monks (the Sangha) is so important in Buddhism, the ritual of joining the Sangha is probably one of the most significant rites of passage. In fact, ordination is the oldest Buddhist ritual. It is not always for life. One might intend either to stay in the Sangha permanently or to remain only for a limited period of time. In Thailand, young men often join the Sangha for three months after they leave secondary school.

The ritual of ordination in Thailand, for example, is very simple. The candidate comes before the assembled monks and requests entry to the Sangha from the president of the assembly. He brings with him his robes and the alms bowl in which he will collect food offerings from the people and he is questioned to see that he has the right intention. The assembled monks remain silent if they approve of his ordination. Then the candidate states that he takes refuge in the Buddha, his teaching (Dharma) and the order of monks (Sangha), and that he will abide by the rules that govern a monk's life. He then begins his life as a monk.

Monks do not eat after midday and every morning they walk through the neighborhood collecting food in their alms bowl. The lay community gain considerable merit from giving the monks food and other necessary items and it is an important part of daily life. The lack of this tradition in the West is one reason why it is often hard for monks to follow a strict practice somewhere like Sydney unless they have access to a substantial Buddhist ethnic community.

Even though some of the Buddha's disciples were women, nuns have been rare in traditional Buddhist societies. However, with the increasing adoption of Buddhism in western societies and the westernisation of traditional Buddhist societies the number of nuns is increasing, although they usually defer to monks in matters of ritual.

Meditation is the main religious practice of Buddhism. The Buddha included training in meditation as part of the Noble Eightfold Path, and every school of Buddhism has devoted its attention to developing skill in this practice.

Chanting often precedes meditation and sometimes a mantra is repeated. Usually meditation begins with concentration, leading to calm and insight. In Tibet prayer wheels are turned and prayer flags hung outside. Often mandalas of various sizes and materials are constructed.

When entering a Buddhist shrine or temple one usually removes ones shoes and then performs the three refuges: putting hands together one bows down three times before the image of the Buddha saying "I go to the Buddha for refuge; I go to the Dharma for refuge; I go to the Sangha for refuge". On the shrine there is usually an image of the Buddha, a lighted candle to dispel darkness, incense to represent the all pervading fragrance of the Buddha's teaching and flowers that are both an offering and a reminder of impermanence. After meditation or ritual practice a monk or lay teacher often gives a Dharma talk.

In Zen Buddhism the idea that enlightenment or satori can be achieved suddenly through a moment of insight has given rise to some different techniques. Usually these seek to break away from logical thought and the most famous is the koan, a riddle or story that the master poses to his student. The student meditates on this until insight is achieved.

Images of the Buddha are probably the most important and enduring traditional symbols, there are strict traditional guidelines for such representations. They can represent different aspects of the Buddha's life, teaching and enlightenment. These are shown in the body's posture, attire and by the hands, which are usually in a specific movement or mudra. For example, hands resting in one another with the thumbs touching indicate meditation. In the years after his death the Buddha was always represented in a non-figurative way, for example by a tree or footprints, but after the Greek sculptural influence that spread to India as a result of Alexander the Great's empire, human representations
became the preferred form.

Another common symbol is the wheel with eight spokes representing the Noble Eightfold Path; this also symbolises the wheel of doctrine that the Buddha's preaching set in motion. Mandalas are also constructed and used in meditation, particularly in the Tibetan tradition, and pictures of the Wheel of Life represent both a traditional Buddhist cosmology or, for non-traditional practitioners, psychological states in the process of meditation.

**The Impact of Technology**

As long as one does not become attached to the products of modernisation, but uses them mindfully and without causing harm to other living beings, Buddhism has little problem with technology. Indeed it has benefited from developments in communication and transport by facilitating the spread of knowledge about its philosophies and practices.

There are many Buddhist sites on the internet and the ability of Buddhist teachers to travel easily across the world as well as communicating on line and through various forms of media has meant that the various schools and orders have acquired students from all over the world, not just in traditionally Buddhist countries. Books, TV programs and films have disseminated Buddhist teachings to an ever-widening audience. International attention on Tibet is continually being refocused through the media, in films as well as worldwide recognition of the Dalai Lama.

Buddhism has few ethical problems with developments in medical technology, as long as no being suffers unnecessarily, but is quite opposed to weapons manufacture and related industries.

**The Impact of Globalisation**

All belief systems have been affected by globalisation. This has meant that the ideologies of various belief systems have been spread by various methods: conquest; missionary activity; mass migration; mass media and other forms of technology.

Buddhism has spread rapidly and has become popular through the promotion in the media of both its doctrines and its leaders. The Dalai Lama is an internationally respected and loved world leader and the issue of Tibet has become a very topical in many western countries with a range of celebrities promoting its cause.

Before the Second World War Buddhism was a religion known only to a few in the West and much of its practice was misunderstood. Zen Buddhism started to become popular in the United States with the "Beat" generation in the fifties. As young people began to travel in Asia it became one of a range of Eastern philosophies explored and adopted in the sixties and seventies by the "counter culture". Unlike many of those other philosophies however, its popularity has remained steady and continues to grow in many societies.

Some Christian sects, for example the Jesuits, have established strong ecumenical links with Buddhism and joint meditation retreats have been undertaken in centres like Assisi in Italy.

A series of books and films have promoted Buddhism. Increasing international travel has also brought a wider variety of people into contact with Buddhist cultures. In addition, the affluence of westerners has also allowed them to spend time pursuing Buddhist beliefs and to lead a monastic life without the need of a supporting general community.

Buddhism is able to adapt to and accommodate different cultures and because it does not evangelize
or actively seek converts it is seen as non-threatening. It also sits well with non-religious belief systems and with the advances of science and technology because it accepts change and practices non-attachment to ideals or ideas or concepts.

**Change and resistance to change**

Change, and the concept of impermanence, is central to Buddhist philosophy, therefore Buddhists try not to fear change, because to fear it is to be attached to it and thus to suffer. Buddhism also embodies tolerance and respect for the ideas of others, and it is a religion very open and flexible to the needs and opinions of others. Indeed the history of Buddhism shows it continually adapting to, and absorbing, the cultures it encountered as it spread out from India. It is perhaps for these reasons that there is no fundamentalism within the Buddhist religion (yet!) and why it has adapted so well to a modernised, westernised world.

Like many other belief systems Buddhism has had to confront the ethical dilemmas and moral issues raised by today's modern world with its rapid technological and social changes. In most areas its leaders have been able to give clear teachings on abortion, birth control products, euthanasia, human rights, the environment, war and international relations. It does not reject westernisation, globalisation and technology, instead it encourages mindfulness and skillfulness in what we accept or reject, arguing that as long as we act from compassion for others and avoid causing suffering for them and for ourselves, it is possible to manage the modern world.

There are probably two significant areas where traditional Buddhists have resisted change. One was the invasion and colonization of Tibet by the Chinese and the attempt by that regime to break down its society and culture. The Tibetans, and increasingly other Buddhists, have continued to resist that change, first inside and then as exiles in other countries but, at least after the initial invasion, without violence. The second area of resistance to change has been by the male dominated monastic culture towards the ordination of women. While more women are being ordained there remains strong argument, often based on scripture, against the practice.

In Western Buddhism there have had to be changes made, especially in the conduct of monastic life, that are unavoidable. For example there is often no lay community to support monks and nuns so that they must do things that their Asian counterparts do not, such as handle money and drive in cars. There is also a tendency to interact more with the lay community on a more regular and intimate basis, for example in counseling and in meditation instruction.

In the West there is also a vigorous debate being conducted over how much Buddhism should accommodate western values and philosophies along with a liberal western lifestyle. This may extend from western practitioners disputing in learned argument the actuality of reincarnation, to others trying to marry a serious meditation practice with family and career, to yet others trying to find loopholes in the doctrines so that they are enabled to have a glass of red with their non-vegetarian meal. There are clear divisions amongst those western Buddhists who believe that the Asian model should be preserved and followed in as unchanged a form as possible, and those who assert that Buddhism has always adapted to its host culture and that as a living belief system it must change to suit the times and expediency. Even within this latter group there are further divisions along the lines of extent. How much of the doctrine and practices can, or should be altered?

Finally the concept of Engaged Buddhism, was really developed in the West as many westerners felt that traditional Buddhism seemed to hold itself aloof from world problems and human suffering. Prisoners on the Burma Railway in World War Two had been disturbed by the apparent indifference of the Burmese (Theravada) monks to their plight. This was based, in part, on the doctrine that all experiences result from past karma and can only be remedied by the individual changing his or her
behaviour. Mahayana doctrine had already established the idea of the bodhisattva, and so it was not a huge leap for western Buddhists to argue for a more proactive, karma-enhancing attitude to current world issues on the part of a Buddhist adherent. No doubt the Tibetan experience along with terrorism and other experiences has seen an acceptance of the concept of Engaged Buddhism across the religion.

Impact on the Wider Society at a National and Global Level

Buddhism is one of the fastest growing religions amongst non-Asian residents in Australia today. Beyond people who state it as their religion on the national census, there is a wider part of the community that practices meditation, attends retreats at various centers and has positive regard for it as a philosophy. Many include Buddhist artifacts in their home for spiritual as well as aesthetic reasons. Buddhism is essentially seen not only as non-threatening but a positive influence in society.

This view is probably true of many other societies around the world. The only people who would see any potential threat or danger in the acceptance of Buddhism are usually to be found in the fundamentalist sects of Christianity and Islam and some cults.

Buddhism has been the subject of a variety of books, films and documentaries. Buddhist temples, centers, monasteries and monastics are now commonly found in many western nations. Monks and nuns provide counseling and welfare roles in places like prisons and hospices. Many psychologists and therapists use Buddhist techniques in their practice and artists have turned to its themes for inspiration. Buddhist terms are used in everyday speech and artifacts are found in a variety of contexts, from art galleries to gardens.

Buddhist monks in South Vietnam protested against their government during the Vietnam War by setting fire to themselves rather than hurting another person, an image that had a profound effect on those observing that conflict. Buddhism has also impacted on global society through the exile of Tibetan Buddhists and the promotion of their cause. Governments are constantly pressured by the Chinese regime not to meet with the Dalai Lama and by pro-Tibetan activists to speak out on human rights in Tibet.

The Future

Current trends would suggest that Buddhism should continue to grow as a popular religion. Its philosophies are compatible with scientific developments and give practical, realistic methods for managing moral and intellectual development in an ever changing, selfish and consumerist world. The popularity of figures like the Dalai Lama, especially through his books, will also continue to contribute to Buddhism's general popularity.

One result of globalization has meant that the different forms of Buddhism are interacting in the West in a way that they never did historically. Current trends would also suggest that both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism will continue to emphasise the similarities between them rather than their differences as they re-explore each other through improved communication. Western students will also continue to synthesise the traditional schools of thought into something appealing to and manageable in western society.

Especially within the context of western society the equality between men and women will be emphasised and strengthened and powerful women teachers will gain influence.

The main conceivable threat to Buddhism would be the misunderstanding and intolerance of other religions and belief systems (e.g. The communist regime in China in invading Tibet), in particular
those with evangelical and fundamentalist divisions. The non-violent nature of Buddhists makes them especially vulnerable to those without compunction or compassion. In the last Vietnam war, rather than harm others, Buddhist monks burnt themselves to death in protest, and while they have become enduring images of that war it is not clear how effective their actions really were or how well this was understood in the West.

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