

*An article that explains the history of Buddhism, its basic principles, and its influence and spread through Asia.*

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## **An Overview of Buddhism**

Buddhism is a natural religion, for it does not violate either mind or body. Its ethics closely approximates the Natural Law. Buddhism is also classified as an atheistic religion, for it does not consist in God and Soul theories which can neither be proved by self-experiment nor by intuition. It concerns only self-evident facts of suffering and can be experienced by every man in himself and the surrounding world.

Buddhism is a teaching of the Buddha who was born a prince of Kapilavastu, in an area of the Himalaya mountains near the border of Nepal in 623 B.C. He married and had a son. Although surrounded by all the Court's glamour and luxuries, the sight of a decrepit old man, sick man, dead man and mendicant monk, these "four signs" left such a deep impression upon His mind that, at the age of 29, He decided to leave His palace and enter "the homeless life" of a monk to seek the truth and find a way to salvation for all sentient beings. In His search for salvation among the teachers, He surpassed them and found that their doctrines were insufficient, not leading to Awakening, to Extinction and to Enlightenment and Insight. He departed those teachers and turned to practice self-mortification for six years with great zeal and effort. He met five ascetics or Panca Vaggiya who offered their services to Him. Finally, the Buddha realized that the ascetic exercises were not the right way to attain salvation. He had practiced self-mortification to the limit of His endurance and felt very weakened without achieving anything. So, He partook of food, regained strength and began to practice meditation which finally led to His enlightenment under the Holy Bodhi tree near the town of Uruvela, the present Buddha-Gaya when he was only 35 years old.

Through His deep contemplation upon Himself, the Buddha became cognizant of how men are born and die according to their good and evil will actions, according to their self-created Karma (or the consequence of meritorious and demeritorious deeds.) By the same intuition, He became cognizant of the "Five Aggregates of Existence" or the Panca Khandha that are Rupa (Body), Vedana (Feeling), Sanna (Cognition), Sankhara (Impression) and Vinnana (Consciousness), that man is only an embodiment of these five aggregates, or in other words man is made up of Khandha, none of which belongs to anyone, and the clinging to each or to the whole, will only result in the conception of the new life and the round of existence (Samsara.) This creates the "Delusion of Self", and He discovered the "Four Noble Truths" which lead to the cessation of all sufferings and of rebirth.

Finally, the Lord Buddha out of compassion to all beings, was determined to reveal His Teachings. He proclaimed for the first time the Dhamma in a discourse to the five ascetics. This discourse is universally known as the "Four Noble Truths" and contains the essence of the Buddha's Doctrines. The Lord Buddha taught His Doctrines for nearly 45 years, walking up and down from town to town and from village to village, in Northern India. At the age of 80, He fell ill and died in Kusinara in the country of the Malas on the Visaka, on the full moon day of the sixth lunar month in the year 543 B.C.

There are lots of historical proof of the Buddha's real existence, such as the Asoka-Pillar erected in Lumbini park at Kapilavatthu (near Nepal) in remembrance of the Birth of the Lord, by King Asoka (262 - 222 B.C.) and discovered in 1890, contemporary Indian literature, the Pali-Canon Tripitaka, that is the collection of Discipline (Vinaya), of Discourses (Suttanta) and of Philosophical (Abhidhamma), the Sanskrit Canon, the records of two Chinese travellers to India, Fahian (394 - 441 A.D.) and Yuan Tshang (630 - 644 A.D.) and lastly the Buddha's Doctrine itself, which is based on true facts of actuality, the truth of which can be experienced by Insight by anyone himself with sufficient intelligence and patience.

The Teaching of the Buddha was not written down by Himself. Immediately after his death, the first Council of his disciples took place in 477 B.C. and all his Discourses were fixed and the ground plan was laid for the Pall-Canon. There was a second Council and third Council (377 and 343 B.C.) and the discourses were sorted into different collections called Pitakas, namely the Sutta Pitaka which contains the discourses of the Buddha, the Vinaya Pitaka which contains the rules and regulations of the Holy Brotherhood, and many centuries later the Abhidhamma Pitaka was added which contains expositions of a scholastic nature of the two first Pitakas.

From the "Asoka Pillars" we learn that King Asoka of India sent forth his missionaries to all provinces of the Empire and then to the neighboring Kingdom of Ceylon, Kashmir and Tibet in the North, to Persia, Antioch and Egypt and Greece in the West. King Asoka called a council which was the Third Council, and the Pali-Canon was revised and confined. After his death, Buddhism split into two different schools, namely Hinayana or the Lesser Vehicles and the Mahayana or the Greater Vehicles. Hinayana is the orthodox, based upon the Pali scripture. This school tries to preserve the original doctrines, and nowadays is practiced in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. While, Mahayana is an enlargement and further development of the original doctrine and based on the Sanskrit scripture translated from the Pali Text and modifies some doctrinal principles in order to adapt its teaching to local environment and to interpret Buddhism by laying a stress on some philosophical points of view. This is believed in Tibet, Korea, Japan, Sikhim, Bhutan, Mongolia, and Vietnam.

Buddhism was first introduced into Thailand as Hinayana Buddhism in about 329 B.C., later in about 700 A.D., Mahayana Buddhism came. However, in 1000 A.D. Hinnayana was again re-introduced from Burma. In 1253 A.D., Thai Buddhist Monks went to Ceylon and brought back with them the Pali scripts. They also invited the Ceylonese

Monks to Thailand. Ever since then all Kings of Thailand embraced Hinayana Buddhism which then became the National Religion.

Lord Buddha formulated his Doctrine of Misery and Salvation from it in four theses, called the Four Noble Truths. They are:

1) The Noble Truth of Suffering: Rebirth, old age, disease, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair, association with objects we dislike, separation from objects we love, not to obtain what one desires cause suffering. There are also many happy hours and pleasure in a man's life-time, but according to the law of nature, they are impermanent and these last only for a short time and vanish into nothing. Only sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are left by them behind.

2) The Noble Truth of The Arising of Suffering: The Threefold Cravings lead every being from birth to birth and is accompanied by joy and lust, seeking its gratification here and there, namely: Sensual Craving, Craving for Existence and Craving for Wealth and Power. There is also a sixfold craving, namely, the eye craves for forms, the ear craves for sounds, the nose craves for odors, the tongue craves for taste, the body craves for objects, and the mind craves for nouns, dreams or illusions. These Cravings and ignorance of the law of nature are the condition of origin of individual sufferings.

3) The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Sufferings: The condition of cessation of suffering is the complete fading away and extinction of this three fold craving, forsaking it and giving it up, the liberation and detachment from it. The condition of mind of a person who has been giving up this threefold cravings or this sixfold craving together with ignorance can realize Nibbana (or the Extinction of the Cravings.)

4) The Noble Truth of The Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering: It is the Noble Eightfold Path (or the Middle Path because it avoids the two extremes of sensual pleasure and self-mortification), that leads to the Cessation of Sufferings.

To weed out cravings and ignorance, these two chief evil-doers of individual existence and to overcome rebirth, old age, disease, death, sorrows, lamentation, pain, grief and despair, to make an end of this whole mass of misery and thus to attain Nibbana, Liberation and Salvation one should practice the Noble Eightfold Path (or the Middle Path)

The Noble Eightfold Paths are:

1) Right Knowledge, which means an intellectual grasp of the Teaching of the Dhamma, the Four Noble Truths and the Law of Karma;

2) Right Intention, which involves the elimination of all ambitions, revenge, hatred, greed lust and violence;

- 3) Right Speech, which means stamping out all lies, controlling speech, being courteous, considerate, scrupulously true, no evil words escape from lips, compassionate and full of sympathy, with a heart full of loving-kindness and free from secret malice;
- 4) Right Action, which means the avoidance of destruction of any living being, of taking what has not been given, indulging in sensuality, slander and intoxicating liquor or drugs;
- 5) Right Livelihood, which means pursuing a trade or occupation compatible with the above;
- 6) Right Effort, means to prevent new evil entering one's mind, to remove all evil already there, to develop such good in one's mind and to maintain a good and meritorious state of mind that has already arisen;
- 7) Right Attentiveness, which means the continual recollection of all phenomena about bodily structure, all parts of the human body, all states of health, all impurity and purity of mind, contemplation of various states of mind and all kinds of temperaments;
- 8) Right Concentration, which is the threshold of Nibbana, consists of the Four Great Efforts, namely, the effort to avoid and to overcome evil states of mind, and the effort to develop and to maintain good states of mind. It is also a composed state of mind which is accompanied by Right Knowledge, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort and Right Attentiveness. The purpose of attaining Right Concentration is to develop the eye of wisdom.

However, the most simple teaching which the Buddha taught, was to do good, to avoid evil and purify the heart. According to the Buddha, the hearts of ordinary men are not pure. They are filled with greed, ill will and delusion. Greed and hatred are impurities caused by desires which ignorance is the cause of delusion, especially delusion of self. Ignorance, in fact, is the cause of desire itself and thus the primary cause of all suffering and of rebirth. The Lord taught, purifying the heart: 1. by practicing self-control, and self restraint; 2. by meditating upon oneself; and 3. by following the Holy Eightfold Path that leads to the cessation of all sufferings.