

CUSH

INTRODUCTION

What is Buddhism?

Buddhism is one of the major religious traditions of the human race. It was estimated¹ that in the nineteenth century, Buddhism was a major influence on 40% of the world's population, and even after the upheavals of the present century, its adherents are estimated at about 500 million. Historically speaking, as far as this particular world is concerned, the Dharma (truth, teaching) was first proclaimed 2,500 years ago in India, where it continued to be a major influence until the twelfth century CE.² Countries where Buddhism has been traditional include Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Vietnam. Several of these countries, such as Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Sikkim and Bhutan, still have a majority of the population loyal to Buddhism. In Japan, Buddhism flourishes alongside other religions, and even in the countries which have become communist there is evidence that the religion is still important to many people, for example in China, Laos and Tibet. In this century, especially the second half, people in 'Western' countries (ie America, Europe and Australasia) have taken an interest in Buddhism, and the number of adherents in these countries is growing year by year. 'Buddhism' is a Western term; it means the religion of the *Buddha* (enlightened one), a person who has woken up to the truth about life. Buddhists themselves usually describe their religion as the *Dhamma* (teaching) or *Buddha-dhamma*.

Buddhism is unique among the major world religions in that it is not based upon belief in a personal God, but on human experience and human potential. It is usually counted as a religion because it puts forward a goal for human life which transcends the material world that we perceive with the senses and presents life as having meaning and purpose that implies certain truths and ways of behaving. It is a very rich and varied tradition and has never had a set creed or list of beliefs to which all Buddhists subscribe, or centralised authority to enforce them. It has never been tied up with one particular nationality or culture and as it has spread to different countries and cultures, it has adapted and developed a variety of forms suited to a particular time and place. It has never demanded sole allegiance, and

in many Buddhist countries followers of Buddhism also continue practices and customs from local religious traditions. In the opinion of Guy Claxton, 'Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Buddhism in Tibet, and Buddhism in Japan are as different on the surface as Christianity, Judaism and Islam'.³

This rich diversity of Buddhism reflects the attitude of the Buddha and his followers to what religion is for. It is not a matter of doctrines and commandments, but of finding practical ways for enabling spiritual progress to be made, by different people in different circumstances and at different rates. The Buddha stressed that his teaching was not to be taken as something sacred in itself, but as a means to an end. In one passage, he compares the *Dharma* (Buddhist teaching) to a raft that serves to carry a person from one side of a dangerous river to another, but which has then served its purpose and should be left behind. 'Using the analogy of a raft, I have shown you the Dharma as something to leave behind, not to take with you' (*Majjhima Nikaya* 1.134). The Buddha also stressed that any teachings, including his own, were not to be blindly accepted with faith and reverence, but should be tested out in experience. 'Do not go by hearsay, what is handed down by others, by what people say, or by what is stated in traditional teachings. Do not go by reasoning, or inferring, by argument, nor by reflection on an opinion, nor from respect for a holy teacher...' (*Anguttara Nikaya* 1.188). In other words, religion is not just something to believe in or discuss, but something to try out to see if it works, if it makes you a better person or takes you nearer to your spiritual goal. The Buddha's invitation was to come and see for yourself (*ehipassiko*). In the rich variety of teachings and practices that make up what we call Buddhism, the true teaching is to be distinguished as follows 'if these teachings lead to dispassion, detachment, decrease of materialism, simplicity, contentment, solitude, energy, and delight in good not evil... of these teachings you may affirm "this is the Dharma, the Master's message"' (*Vinaya* 2.10).

It might be helpful, before entering the complexities of the Buddhist tradition, to give a brief summary of the basics that most Buddhists share, and the major divisions into which Buddhism falls. This is bound to be oversimplified, but it is offered in the spirit of the raft - something that might help you to begin your understanding of Buddhism, but which should be thrown away once you've made further progress. In fact this applies to the whole of this book!

Some Basic Teachings of Buddhism

- * Buddhism is about the quest for true happiness and peace for all beings.
- * Life as most people live it is unsatisfactory, there is much suffering in the world, and nothing lasts.
- * Much suffering is caused by the ignorance and selfishness of people, who are filled with greed for things that neither last nor bring real happiness, with hatred and with deluded beliefs.
- * Like other things, human beings are continually changing. One of the deluded beliefs is in a 'real me' (self or soul) that never changes. This constant change applies from minute to minute, day to day and life to life.
- * While we remain ignorant and deluded, when one life ends, another life will begin in the world of suffering. Thus most Buddhists believe in rebirth.
- * The developments in our lives, and from life to life are the results of our own thoughts and actions. We make our own happiness and unhappiness.
- * There is a way out of rebirth into an unsatisfactory world. If we can eliminate greed, hatred, delusion, selfishness and ignorance, by acting morally, training the mind and discovering the truth, there is an alternative state, nirvana, of perfect wisdom and peace. This is very difficult to imagine, and is understood and described in different ways by Buddhists, but basically involves perfect happiness and peace, understanding of life and unselfish love. It is the state Buddhists believe was achieved by the Buddha in the experience known as 'enlightenment'.

You may or may not feel, already, that some of these teachings relate to your own experience of life.

Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

For convenience, people tend to divide the rich variety of Buddhism as it exists today into two main categories *Theravada* (pronounced Teravada) and *Mahayana*.

Theravada (the way of the elders) is followed in the more southern countries of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. It is thus sometimes called 'Southern Buddhism' or 'Pali Buddhism', after the language of its scriptures. Mahayana (the great vehicle) is an overall term for the many varieties of Buddhism practised in the more

northern and far-eastern countries. These can be usefully subdivided into Northern or Tibetan Buddhism, followed in Tibet, Mongolia, Sikkim, Bhutan, and North-Western China; Eastern Buddhism, followed in the rest of China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. Tibetan Buddhism is represented in four main tradition - Nyingma, Sakya, Kargyu and Gelug. Among the better known varieties of Eastern Buddhism are *Zen*, *Pure Land* and *Nichiren* Buddhism. 'Western' Buddhists tend either to follow one of the traditional Southern, Northern or Eastern varieties or else choose what they find helpful from the various traditions, forming their own variety of Buddhism (e.g. the Western Buddhist Order). This follows the pattern that occurred as Buddhism spread from India to other countries and cultures in the past (e.g. China), and reflects the practical orientation of Buddhism.

Buddhist technical terms exist in many different languages, including Sanskrit, Pali (the two classical scriptural languages) Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan. I tend to use the term which has become most common amongst Western and specifically English Buddhist usage eg the Sanskrit 'nirvana' rather than the Pali 'nibbana', but the pali 'anatta' rather than the Sanskrit 'anatman'. As you can see from these examples, the two classical languages are sufficiently similar for an accurate guess to be made when coming across an unfamiliar spelling. To avoid confusion, in the text and glossary, technical terms will be followed in the Glossary, and where appropriate in the text, by a letter or letters to indicate their language of origin as follows:

C = Chinese	P = Pali	E = English
S = Sanskrit	J = Japanese	Sn = Sinhalese
K = Korean	T = Tibetan	M = Mongolian
Th = Thai		

1. by Rhys Davids in 1877, quoted by Bechert and Gombrich (1984)
2. The letters CE and BCE which appear after dates in this book denote Common Era and Before Common Era. These are considered preferable in Religious Studies to AD and BC as they avoid the specifically Christian claims contained in these abbreviations.
3. Claxton 1989