

CULTURE AND RELIGION



Buddhism

Introduction

Australia is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural society. Religious freedom and mutual respect for different religions is an integral part of our shared culture and is an important underlying principle of multiculturalism and democracy.

Buddhism is the fourth-largest religion in the world, and after Christianity is the second-largest religion in Australia. It has become one of Australia's fastest growing religions especially over the past thirty years due to migration from Buddhist countries and an increasing numbers of western converts.

Buddhism has had a presence in the Northern Territory since the 1870s with the Chinese gold miners at Pine Creek. Darwin's International Buddhist Centre was established in 1983 by members of the Buddhist Society of the Northern Territory and offers a place for all traditions of Buddhism to practice in a range of languages, including English. There are in addition, independently established Thai, Cambodian and Tibetan groups. The peak Australian Buddhist body is the Federation of Australian Buddhist Councils.

What is Buddhism?

The name Buddhism comes from the word *bhudi* which means 'to wake up' and thus Buddhism can be said to be the philosophy of awakening. This philosophy has its origins in the experience of the man Siddhattha Gotama, known as the Buddha who was himself awakened at the age of 35. Buddhism is now 2,500 years old and has 380 million followers worldwide¹. Defining Buddhism, however, is no simple task and debate continues as to whether it is best described as a philosophy, a religion, a way of life or a code of ethics². It certainly includes all of these.

Background and Origins

Siddhattha Gotama was born as a prince in what is now Southern Nepal over 2500 years ago- the conventional dates for his life are 566-486BCE. Seeing that life's pleasures fade quickly, he set out in search of lasting happiness. After six years of mainly solitary practice committed to cultivating and purifying the mind, he discovered the timeless truth of existence and realised enlightenment: the complete cessation of greed, hatred and delusion, which are at the root of all discontent deep within the mind.

Hence forth known as the Buddha, he devoted the remaining 45 years of his life to teaching and helping others to attain the same sublime happiness of liberation that he had discovered. He died at the age of 80. Buddhists traditionally focus on certain key events in the Buddha's career as the most important and commemorate them in various ways in literature, myth and ritual and pilgrimage to the sites where they took place. The four most important events are his birth, enlightenment, first sermon and death.

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There are three main strands of Buddhism:

1. Theravada Buddhism, traditionally predominant in the eastern Asian nations of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia and Singapore;
2. Mahayana Buddhism (including Zen), traditionally predominant in India, the northern Asian nations of China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam; and
3. Vajrayana Buddhism, traditionally predominant in the Himalayan nations of Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan as well as Mongolia.

Buddhism of one or other of these traditions is now also established in most countries of the world. The social organisation and devotional practices of Buddhism varies from one culture to another, and it has demonstrated great flexibility in adapting to the existing cultures in those regions where it has flourished.

Key Beliefs

- All of the many teachings of the Buddha centre on a set of truths about reality known together as '**The Four Noble Truths**'. The four truths are: that our ordinary existence is unsatisfactory, that this is caused by our ignorance and craving, that we *can* overcome the suffering we experience, and that there is a pathway and means for us to do this and achieve happiness and freedom³.
- Buddhism teaches that to be a truly balanced individual you must develop both **wisdom and compassion**. Freeing the mind from prejudices and preconceived ideas, developing awareness and having an uncluttered and tranquil mind all assist in developing of wisdom. The Buddha also taught that there is a close connection between ethical behavior and wisdom. Like wisdom, compassion is a uniquely human quality of emotions and feelings. All the best in human-beings, all the Buddha-like qualities such as sharing, readiness to give comfort, sympathy, concern and caring – all these are manifestations of compassion. In practice, compassion takes the form of avoiding harm to any other living beings or oneself, but instead striving to bring happiness to all beings, including oneself⁴.
- Thus Buddhists try to live by a moral code based on a **principle of non-harm** expressed through the **Five Precepts**:
 1. Avoid intentionally harming or killing any living being;
 2. Avoid stealing;
 3. Avoid sexual misconduct;
 4. Avoid lying or defamation; and
 5. Avoid alcohol and other intoxicants or (non-medicinal) drugs

The fundamental spirit in taking the Five Precepts is to refrain from trespassing and harming others. The action of taking precepts is considered a summation of our morality.

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- Taking refuge in the **Triple Gem** is to take refuge in our own Buddha, Dharma and Sangha Natures as Buddha had once said “all sentient beings possess the Buddha Nature, and they are all capable of becoming Buddha’s.” Buddha is an enlightened sentient being and all sentient beings are Buddha’s waiting to be enlightened.
 - To take refuge in the Buddha is in fact to take refuge in our own self nature.
 - To take refuge in the Dharma is to take refuge in the truth
 - To take refuge in the Sangha is to take refuge in Buddha’s teaching

By taking refuge in the Triple Gem, we are relying on Buddha’s guidance to learn about ourselves and to affirm our own strength.

- **Rebirth:** In accordance with the law of cause and effect, Buddhist teachings propose that any being born into this (cyclic) universe is the result of something that has gone before. In turn, when any being dies he, she or it creates the causes for the birth of a new being. All beings, then, are not living separate lives, individual lives, but are links in an endless causal chain that reaches back into the beginningless past and forward into the endless future⁵. Beings may be reborn in one of several kinds of realms including as a human being in the human realm. This belief shapes Buddhists’ attitudes to both life and death.
- **Law of Karma:** The word *karma* means ‘action’. The Buddha taught that every intentional action modifies our consciousness, thus building our character and so influencing our behavior, our experience and ultimately, our destiny. Karma is one of the most misunderstood Buddhist beliefs. It is not fatalism since it is understood to be a “work-in-progress” such that individuals may also resist previous conditioning and establish new patterns of behavior, creating the causes for future positive results including a good rebirth. In times of distress, Buddhists may seek to do good works to alleviate continuing negative conditions.
- Buddhism is not based on the notion of a single, eternal creator God, who is the source of salvation for human beings. It teaches instead that each human being is both precious and important, and has the potential to develop into a Buddha – a perfected human being. Buddhists often use statues of the Buddha in various forms (e.g. Sakyamuni, Kuan Yin, Maitreya, Amitahba, Chenrezig) or other icons in their temples and houses and pray in front of them. These images are meant to prompt reflection, and generate inspiration; they are also regularly used as a focus for aspirations i.e. praying.
- Buddhism does not demand absolute belief in a specific set of doctrines (e.g. rebirth). The Buddha encouraged his followers to measure the claims of all religious teachers against the evidence of their own experience of the truth and value of the teachings. Buddhism also does not deny scientific understandings of the world, such as evolution, the ‘Big Bang’, genetics and so on.

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Religious Festivals and Days of Significance

There are many religious festivals and significant cultural commemorations observed by all the different Buddhist traditions. The use of different calendars in different regions means there may be several celebrations at different times of the same event (e.g. Wesak, New Year) as well as different names for similar events.

- Wesak is the full moon of 'May'. It commemorates the birth, Enlightenment, and final passing away of the Βυδδηα. It is a major Buddhist festival of the year.
- The Bathing of the Buddha held during the Wesak period dates back as far as the 220-280AD and is mostly celebrated by the Chinese Buddhists. Bathing the little Buddha with fragrant water is a symbol of inner purification.
- The Rains Retreat (Vassavassa, or Vassa) is approximately from the full moon of July to the full moon of October. During this time Theravada monks and nuns devote more time to meditation and study and do not travel for long from their monastery.
- The Kathina Ceremony follows the monks' three-month annual retreat (sometime in October/November depending on individual monasteries). Monastic supplies are offered.
- New Year (various dates) is celebrated enthusiastically and is a time for recollection and re-dedication
- The Ancestral Ceremony held in mid July of the lunar calendar is an Asian tradition dedicated to family members and is celebrated by the community irrespective of religious background.

Demographics

According to the 2006 Census, Buddhists in Australia comprise 2.1% of the population, amounting to 418,719 people. This represents an increase of 60,936 persons (17.0% increase) compared to the 2001 Census results. Buddhists comprise 1.5% of the population in the Northern Territory.

Greetings

- A common Buddhist greeting is to join the palms of the hands together and raise them to the chin, while bowing the head slightly. Traditional forms of greeting may also include going to the ground in front of a monastic and making a similar obeisance with the hands.
- It is inappropriate for some Buddhist monks and nuns to shake hands, especially with members of the opposite sex
- Many Buddhist monastics and lay-people are also comfortable with the usual handshake.

Names and Titles

- Buddhist monks and nuns can generally be *addressed* using the title 'Venerable', although all traditions have specific equivalent terms (e.g., 'Roshi', 'Ajahn', Lama, Sifu, Geshe, 'Bhante, Ani, SuCo). There are also terms related to positions of authority and respect. In addition there may be specific (personal) ordination names which identify the individual. For clarity it is best to ask how particular monastics prefer to be both addressed and/or referred to.

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Seating

The following sensitivity needs to be observed in seating arrangements for interview purposes or hosting official functions:

- Some Buddhist monks and nuns may not sit next to or in close proximity to members of the opposite sex. There may also be other requirements in relation to seniority and/or authority. This should be checked beforehand.

Lay Buddhists tend not to be regulated in this way although this also may vary according to context including the situation, Buddhist tradition and cultural background.

Dress

- Buddhist monks shave their heads and wear a robe that is usually brown/tan, orange, red, maroon, grey or black. Buddhist nuns also shave their heads and wear a robe which is usually brown, maroon, white, grey or pink.
- Lay Buddhists dress as they like and are indistinguishable from the majority.
- The appropriate dress for visiting a Buddhist temple or monastery is similar to that you would observe in any religious place i.e. dress modestly (avoid revealing clothes) and behave mindfully.

Body Language and Behaviour

Non-verbal communication has a powerful effect on relationships and effective service provision and practices/signals acceptable in one culture may be completely unacceptable or even offensive in another.

- On entering a temple or monastic building, and in many cases a Buddhist home, shoes and any head covering should be removed.
- At monasteries, temples and shrines in homes, Buddhists will usually bow three times before a statue of the Buddha, as a means of paying respect to the example of the Buddha, to his teachings, and to the Enlightened monks and nuns. Non-Buddhists are not expected to bow.
- Lay Buddhists will often bow as a mark of respect to monks, nuns, and in some cultures to elders.
- Buddhist monks and nuns are generally circumspect with members of the opposite gender, avoiding any direct physical contact
- When sitting on the floor do not sit with feet pointed towards statues of the Buddha, monks, nuns, or people in general, this is considered very impolite.
- Touching the head of a person is also impolite. The only exceptions relate to special circumstances, such as during medical treatment, in which permission should be sought and will readily be granted.
- Police, soldiers or anyone else, should not carry weapons into a Buddhist temple or monastery.

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Language and Communication

- It is the policy of the Northern Territory Government to provide an interpreter where clients require assistance in English. Agency staff can contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on telephone number 13 14 50.

Counselling/interviews

- Refer to the sections on 'Body Language and Behavior', 'Language and Communication' and 'Seating'.
- Buddhist monks, nuns and some lay spiritual leaders are highly regarded by their communities and are often called upon for counseling and advice.

Food, Drink and Fasting

When hosting people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, as a matter of good practice, always serve a selection of vegetarian and meat on separate trays. A variety of non-alcoholic drinks should also be available at any official function.

- Buddhist traditions and Buddhist practitioners themselves vary in regard to eating meat and vegetarianism. Because the Buddhist code of ethics includes compassion to all living beings, many Buddhists are vegetarian, however they do not take offence at others eating meat.
- Similarly, some monks and nuns are vegetarian others are not.
- Some Buddhist practitioners have strictly regulated meal times, particularly monks and nuns of the Theravada traditions, who have one main meal per day before midday; they do not eat again until dawn of the next day.

Family and Marriage

- Most Buddhist monks and nuns do not perform marriage ceremonies but often give a blessing after the civil ceremony.

Medical

- Where possible, doctors, nurses, and other medical service providers treating Buddhist monks or nuns should be of the same gender.
- A Buddhist hospital patient may also request a visit from a monk or nun; if possible ask whether the patient requires a particular tradition and/or gender.

Death and Related Issues

Death and the grieving process are particularly significant for all religious communities. Some sensitivities include:

- A Buddhist would help a dying person attain a good rebirth by ensuring that the quality of their final moment of consciousness is as peaceful and free of fear as possible (see above, 'Key Beliefs'). If visitors can stay serene and calm, it assists the dying person to establish a positive mind in preparation for dying.
- Often a dying Buddhist will ask to see a Buddhist monk or nun of their own tradition to give him or her encouragement, spiritual support and/or chant Buddhist scriptures or blessings.

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- Dying Buddhists may request that all pain killing or other drugs, which impair clarity of mind, be withdrawn shortly before death.
- Buddhists would usually have no objection to an autopsy, though most Buddhists would prefer that the body be left in an undisturbed state for as long as possible to allow the consciousness to finally leave the body.
- After a Buddhist has died, his or her relatives will often perform acts of generosity or religious observance in their name and dedicate the power of that goodness to the well being of the deceased.
- Buddhism does not prescribe any particular preparation of the corpse or type of funeral so this will vary depending on cultural traditions although cremation is common. The ashes of the deceased may be dispersed at particular places, kept, or enshrined in a Buddhist temple or monastery.
- Buddhist funeral services are normally performed by Buddhist monks or nuns.

Further Enquiries

With the support of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, the Buddhist Society of the NT has adapted this information sheet from one originally written by the Buddhist Society of Western Australia. For further information please contact the Buddhist Society of the NT (the International Buddhist Centre located at 37 Parkside Crescent, Leanyer) on Ph: (08) 8945 3028. Links to other Buddhist organisations can also be found on www.ntbuddhist.org

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¹ S. Dhammika Good Question Good Answer. 4th rev ed 2006, Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society, Singapore
² Damien Keown Buddhism A very short introduction 1996, Oxford University Press
³ S. Dhammika A guide to Buddhism A-Z 2cd rev ed 2007, Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society, Singapore
⁴ S. Dhammika Good Question Good Answer. 4th rev ed 2006, Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society, Singapore
⁵ J.Snelling The elements of Buddhism 1990 Element Books