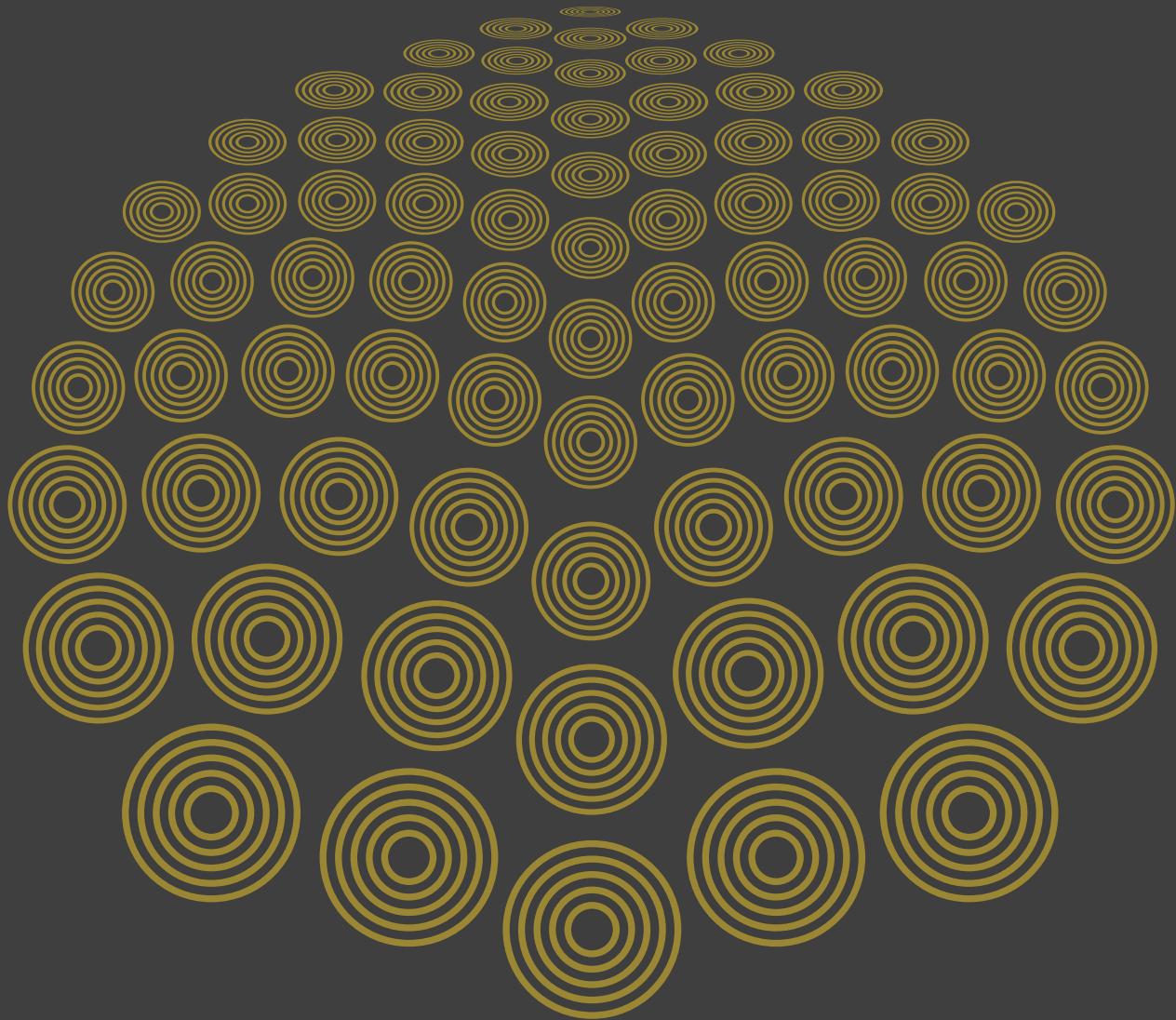


WITHOUT and WITHIN

Questions and Answers on the Teachings of Theravāda Buddhism



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By
Ajahn Jayasaro

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By Ajahn Jayasaro

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Foreword

Every religion has its unique quality, Buddhism included. Each Buddhist country has different practices, and this may sometimes be confusing to foreign visitors. This book is intended to provide a concise clarification of Buddhist practices in Thailand and to help foreign visitors enjoy their visit. If it leads to better understanding among different religions and countries, that would be a blessing.

Over the years, there have been several attempts to have books on Buddhism distributed to hotels in Thailand, but none is widely available at the moment. Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives Foundation (BIA), thus, began this project in 2012, to celebrate the 2,600 years of Buddha's enlightenment, the celebration of the 100th birthday anniversary of His Holiness Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand and the 84th birthday anniversary of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej. It is hoped that this book will continue to be distributed as long as it remains useful.

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Like all other publications, this book had gone through many obstacles and revisions. With the encouragement of the author, Ajahn Jayasaro, as well as the support of well-respected monks and individuals, we have been able to complete the book with much joy and little frustration. It is an honor and memorable experience for us to be able to serve this important cause.

Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives Foundation (BIA)
Bangkok, Thailand
August 2013

Words of appreciation

The publication of this book, which is to be made available at hotels and other accommodations, meets a long-standing need. There have been others in the past who have begun and then finally abandoned such a project. This book finally succeeds in remedying an important lack.

Ajahn Jayasaro has written this book in the form of questions and answers, making it interesting and not overly-academic in tone. Furthermore, he has drawn upon his extensive experience in both the study and practice of Buddhism, and also in teaching it to others, to select appropriate topics. He has observed and reflected on which matters are commonly of interest to people, and which matters would be good for them to understand. He also deals in the book with subjects that people tend to misunderstand and others in which important and useful aspects are often overlooked. Thus, Ajahn Jayasaro has chosen suitable topics, ones in which he answers the needs of people interested in Buddhism, remedies misunderstandings, and points to areas that repay attention. He explains and gives advice, enlightening readers on fundamental Buddhist concepts. One beneficial theme infuses every aspect of this book: the elegant, meticulous cultivation of all that is noble in the heart and mind.

Visitors to countries such as Thailand may encounter activities, customs, traditions, and behavior that reflect Bud-

dhist beliefs, and they may find them unusual or puzzling. This book will help them make sense of their experience. Not only will they enjoy their travels, but the understanding gained through reading this book may be life-enriching.

There may also be readers going through a difficult period in their life or experiencing some temporary unhappiness. The understanding or insights gained by reading this book may help to resolve some of their difficulties. At the least, when readers are back in their hotel rooms and looking to unwind, this book may provide a companion that can nourish their hearts and minds. Even if it is only picked up for relaxation, it may still provide a sense of peace, goodness and clarity.

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives for the effort and dedication its members have put into publishing this book by Ajahn Jayasaro called “without and within”, in order for it to become available in hotels and hostels. It is a gift of Dhamma that will disseminate knowledge, understanding, and righteousness, contributing to true and lasting happiness shared among people all over the world.

Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P. A. Payutto)
May 9, 2013

Introduction

It is not easy for people visiting Thailand to make sense of the Buddhist traditions that they encounter here. Few tour guides seem able to explain the principles of Buddhism with any great clarity, and Thai Buddhist friends tend to be similarly vague. This book is intended to provide an introduction to the teachings of the Buddha which will shed some light on a subject that, to non-Buddhists, can appear both unexpectedly rational and exotically strange.

This is not a text book. It is intended to be as concise as possible, and deals in one paragraph with certain topics that are dealt with elsewhere in books hundreds of pages long. Obviously, a great deal has been omitted. Readers interested in finding out more on particular points are referred to the list of resources found at the end of the book.

Many forms of Buddhism have evolved over the past 2,600 years. This book deals only with the teachings of the Theravāda tradition, and specifically the form of Theravāda found in Thailand (which differs in certain minor details from its expression in other ‘Theravadan’ countries such

as Sri Lanka or Burma). The book is also written from the perspective of one particular monk living within the Thai Theravāda tradition. I was born in England but have been living in the forest monasteries and hermitages of north-east Thailand since 1978. Inevitably, my background and training have influenced the interpretations found here. I have been fortunate enough to study with some truly wise masters and this presentation of the Dhamma owes much to them, in particular to two of the greatest monks of the modern era, Venerable Ajahn Chah and Phra Brahma-gunabhorn (P. A. Payutto). I would like to express my deep gratitude to both of them.

Janamāra Hermitage
March 2013

Blessings

Not to associate with fools.

To associate with the wise.

To pay respects where they are due.

This is the highest blessing.

To reside in a suitable location.

To have previously done meritorious deeds.

To have set oneself on the right path (to emancipation).

This is the highest blessing.

To have much learning.

To be skilled and knowledgeable.

To be restrained by a moral code.

To have beautiful speech.

This is the highest blessing.

To support one's parents.	To have patience.
To cherish wife and children.	To be easy to admonish.
To earn one's livelihood without difficulty.	Associating with monks.
This is the highest blessing.	To discuss the Dhamma at a suitable time.
	This is the highest blessing.
To be generous.	To practice austerities.
To live in accord with the Dhamma.	To lead the Holy Life.
To assist one's relatives.	Seeing the Noble Truths.
To do blameless actions.	The realization of Nibbanā.
This is the highest blessing.	This is the highest blessing.
To cease and abstain from evil.	A mind unshaken by contact with the world.
To refrain from intoxicants.	Sorrowlessness, stainlessness and secure.
Not to be heedless of the Dhamma.	
This is the highest blessing.	This is the highest blessing.
To be respectful. To be humble.	Having accomplished this
To be content. To have gratitude.	one is always unconquered,
To hear the Dhamma at the right time.	one goes everywhere in peace.
This is the highest blessing.	These are the supreme blessings.





I

The Buddha

*The Tathāgata is the Pure One, the Perfectly Enlightened One;
He is impeccable in conduct and understanding,
The Knower of the Worlds;
He trains perfectly those who wish to be trained;
He is Teacher of Gods and humans;
He is Awake and Holy.*

Who was the Buddha?

Some 2,600 years ago a child was born into the royal family of the Sakyā clan, a people living in a part of northeast India that now lies within the borders of Nepal. He was given the name of Siddhattha. At the age of 29, Prince Siddhattha renounced a life of ease and privilege to search for spiritual liberation. Six years later, after a momentous night of meditation sitting cross-legged under a bodhi tree, he realized ‘the unexcelled complete awakening’. By doing so he became “the Buddha”, “the Awakened One”.

Following his enlightenment, the Buddha devoted the remaining forty-five years of his life to revealing the *Dhamma*: the truth of ‘the way things are’, and the path leading to the realization of that truth. During this time the Buddha established a monastic order (*Sangha*) for those of his disciples, men and women, who wished to put aside all worldly tasks and devote themselves wholeheartedly to the study and practice of his teachings. 

What is enlightenment?

Enlightenment refers to liberation from suffering and the mental toxins or “defilements” that are its cause. It is the realization of the true nature of “the way things are”. An enlightened being understands the conditioned nature of impermanent phenomena and experiences Nibbāna¹, the unconditioned reality that lies behind it. The Buddha referred to this state as the “supreme happiness”. The enlightened mind is characterized by wisdom, compassion and purity. The Buddha taught that all human beings, male and female, are born with the potential for enlightenment.

The Buddha spoke of four stages of enlightenment, and thus four kinds of enlightened beings. The first of these beings is “the stream enterer”, the second is “the once returner”, the third is the “non-returner” and the final one is the fully enlightened “*arahant*”. Attainment of these stages is dependent on practice of the Buddha’s Eightfold Path. Their achievement is signalled by the complete and utter disappearance of certain toxic mental states from the mind. No regress is possible from such a state. One who reaches the first stage of enlightenment may be sure of reaching the final stage within seven lifetimes at most. He or she has entered the stream leading irrevocably to the ocean of Nibbāna. ☸

¹Nibbāna in Pāli = nirvana in Sanskrit

What does “Buddha” mean?

The word Buddha means “the awakened one.” The Buddha taught that the unenlightened human being lives in a state that may be compared to sleep or to a dream. Through the clear light of wisdom, and completely unaided, the Buddha is the one who has awakened from that dream to the true nature of existence. Guided by compassion, the Buddha is the one who has sought to share his understanding of the path to awakening with all beings who wish to follow in his footsteps. 

Was the Buddha a human being?

Prince Siddhattha was a human being. On the night that he realized supreme enlightenment he became a Buddha, and from that moment onwards was a human being—in the normal meaning of that term—no longer. To uninitiated eyes, the Buddha would have appeared as an immensely charismatic and commanding religious leader, one who died a normal human death at the age of eighty. Those with more developed faculties, however, were aware that no external appearance, no words, concepts or categories could come anywhere near to expressing the marvellous and undying nature of his Buddhahood. 



The Buddha lies right here in the heart.

Ajahn Mun

What proof is there that the Buddha existed?

- Archaeological evidence provides strong empirical proof of the Buddha as a historical figure.
- Many of the monasteries and cities mentioned in the Buddha's discourses have been located.
- Buddha relics have been recovered from sites mentioned in the texts.
- The independently-dated Buddhist emperor Asoka had carved and inscribed sandstone columns erected throughout his vast empire—a number of which survive to this day—that refer extensively to the Buddha.
- There is much circumstantial evidence in the primary texts.

- The cohesion and lack of inner contradiction in the Buddha's discourses, together with the finely detailed prescriptions for the ordering of the monastic body found in the 'Books of Discipline', point strongly to a single author.
- Of course, physical evidence and logic always leave room for doubt. On one occasion, the Buddha said: "Whoever sees the Dhamma sees me". In other words, verifying the truth of the teachings in one's own life is, in the Buddhist view, the most reliable confirmation of the Buddha's existence. ☸

Did the Buddha possess psychic powers?

The Buddha possessed many extraordinary psychic powers. Psychic powers may (but do not always) result from intensive training of the mind, and even today, there are advanced meditators who possess such powers. The Buddha used his psychic powers sparingly, usually as a teaching aid employed when all other methods would be ineffective, the most renowned example occurring in his meeting with the notorious murderer, Angulimāla. The Buddha considered that the faith people gained from seeing ‘miracles’ usually led them away from the path of wisdom rather than towards it. For this reason, he prohibited monks with psychic powers from revealing them to lay people. The possession of psychic powers can become intoxicating. The Buddha warned his disciples not to consider them as goals of the spiritual life. 

How many Buddhas are there?

According to the Theravāda tradition, there can only be one Buddha at any one time. However, there have been other Buddhas in the distant past and in the future there will be more. The interval between the arising of Buddhas is measured in *kalpas*. A kalpa is an extremely long-time. The Buddha gave the following definition:

'Suppose, bhikkhu, there was a great stone mountain ten miles (a yojana) long, ten miles wide and ten miles high, without holes or crevices, one solid mass of rock. At the end of every hundred years a man would stroke it once with a piece of fine cloth. That great stone mountain might by this effort be worn away and eliminated but the kalpa would still not have come to an end.' 

The Buddha never forced anyone to believe in him or to adopt his teachings.

Those who listened to and pondered over his reasoning, feeling satisfied and in agreement with it, became his disciples through inspiration and conviction.

Ajahn Thaté



What was the nature of the Buddha's relationship to his family?

The Buddha showed his appreciation for his family in the way most suited to him as a Buddha: by leading its members on the path to awakening. In the first year after his enlightenment, seven years after his departure, the Buddha returned to his former home in the city of Kapilavatthu. It was a visit that was to have a profound effect on the whole Sakyan kingdom, not least upon King Suddhodana, the Buddha's father; as a result of their initial meeting the king realized the first two levels of enlightenment. (Some years later the Buddha, realizing his father was reaching the end of his life, visited the old king for the last time and led him to arahantship, the highest stage of enlightenment). This visit to Kapilavatthu was also notable for the Buddha's first meeting with his seven-year old son Rāhula during which the young boy requested his inheritance. In response the Buddha allowed him to join the Sangha as the first boy novice.

The Buddha was unable to teach his mother in Kapilavatthu because she had died giving birth to him (legend has it that he later went to teach her in the heaven realm in which she resided); but he was able to give teachings to his stepmother and aunt, Pajāpati. It was she who formally requested the Buddha to establish a nuns' order, and when he agreed, became its most senior leader. The first generation of nuns included many other female relatives of the Buddha, including his ex-wife Yasodhara. It is recorded that Pajāpati, Yasodhara and the Buddha's son Rāhula all went on to realize the highest level of enlightenment.

Many of the Buddha's male relatives ordained as monks and some of them went on to be numbered amongst his greatest disciples. These include Anuruddha, Nanda, and most famously, his long-time attendant, Ānanda. ☸

Did the Buddha have a sense of humor?

The Buddha was aware that humor, judiciously employed, can point to the truth in delightful and disarming ways. Every now and again, the wit and language skills that the Buddha had developed during his royal education surface in his discourses to amusing effect. Puns, witty re-phrasing of terms, outlandish similes, and comical analogies may all be found in his teachings. Although there may be nothing in the Buddha's discourses that evokes outright laughter in modern readers, when reading some passages they may easily imagine the faces of the Buddha's listeners wreathed in wide smiles. ☩

II

Dhamma

*The Dhamma is well-expounded by the Blessed One,
Apparent here and now,
Timeless,
Encouraging investigation,
Leading onwards,
To be experienced by the wise.*



What does “Dhamma” mean?

Dhamma (Sanskrit: Dharma) refers to

- i) the truth of things, “the way things are”.
- ii) the Buddha’s teachings that illuminate that truth, and which detail the path leading to the direct experience of it. 

What are the Four Noble Truths?

All of the Buddha's teachings are encompassed within what are called the Four Noble Truths, in the same way, he explained, as the footprints of all the animals in the jungle fit into the footprint of the elephant. These Truths reveal the fundamental problem of our existence and its resolution.

1. There is *dukkha*

Dukkha is generally translated as “suffering”, but in fact has a far more profound meaning than is implied by that word. Dukkha refers to the chronic unsatisfactoriness of unenlightened existence. It covers the whole spectrum of experience, from severe physical and emotional pain to the subtlest sense of unease and lack.

2. There is a cause of dukkha

Dukkha is not our unalterable human predicament. It is dependent upon certain causes and conditions, in particular upon the cravings that arise through a fundamental misperception of our human nature.

3. There is a cessation of dukkha

There is a complete ending of dukkha, a state of liberation and true happiness.

4. There is a path leading to the cessation of dukkha

Dukkha is comprehended, its causes abandoned and its cessation realized through cultivation of the Noble Eightfold Path. This path involves an education or training of every aspect of our lives, inner and outer. The eight factors are as follows

1. Right View
2. Right Intention
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration 

Please explain the Eightfold Path in more detail

The Eightfold Path is the holistic education or training of body, speech and mind that culminates in awakening.

Right View refers to beliefs, views, ideals, values that are in harmony with the way things are. Initially its most important elements are confidence in i) the human capacity for enlightenment, and ii) the law of kamma.²

Right Thought refers to thoughts consistent with Right View. These are characterized by a freedom from all kinds of toxic thinking, in particular that which is i) sensual, ii) hostile or iii) cruel. Right Thought includes the aspiration to be free from all inner affliction, and thoughts of kindness and compassion.

Right Speech is true, useful and timely speech that is polite and kindly in intent. It is speech free from i) lying, ii) harshness, iii) slander and iv) idle chatter.

Right Action refers to actions that do not harm self or others. At its most basic it refers to refraining from i) killing, ii) stealing and iii) sexual misconduct.

Right Livelihood refers to livelihood that does not cause harm to self or others. Wrong livelihoods listed in the texts include the selling of i) weapons, ii) living beings, iii) meat and fish, iv) intoxicants and v) poisons.

Right Effort refers to the endeavor to:

- i) prevent unskillful thoughts and emotions that have not yet arisen in the mind from arising.
- ii) reduce and eradicate unskillful thoughts and emotions that have already arisen in the mind.
- iii) introduce into the mind skillful thoughts and emotions that have not yet arisen.
- iv) sustain and further develop skillful thoughts and emotions already present in the mind.

² *kamma* in Pāli = *karma* in Sanskrit

Right Mindfulness refers to maintaining an alert, even-minded and committed awareness of present experience, in particular:

- i) the physical body
- ii) the affective tone of experience: pleasant, unpleasant or neutral
- iii) the state of mind
- iv) mental phenomena as they relate to the Buddha's path of awakening

Right Concentration refers to the inner stability, clarity and peace experienced in four stages of “meditative absorption” or “*jhāna*”.

The first *jhāna* is characterized by five ‘*jhāna* factors’: an initial and sustained attention to the meditation object, zest, bliss and one-pointedness of mind. As the mind becomes more refined the coarser *jhāna* factors fade away. The second *jhāna* is reached with the shedding of initial and sustained attention. The disappearance of zest signals attainment of the third *jhāna*. With the loss of bliss the mind enters the fourth and most subtle level of *jhāna*, distinguished by unshakeable equanimity. 

What does taking refuge mean?

Life is full of difficulties, and never free from pain or at least its possibility. Feeling unsafe and in a chronic state of lack, human beings crave a sense of safety and security. Many seek it through the adoption of a belief system or the comfort of rituals. Equally popular is the path of distraction: pursuing sense pleasures, wealth, fame, power and status. In the Buddhist view none of these strategies achieves its aim. Sensuality and worldly success cannot satisfy the deepest human needs. Faith in dogmas and ritual observances cannot provide a true refuge. As long as human beings lack clear understanding of their lives, and continue to commit unwise actions, they can never be secure.

Taking refuge in the “Triple Gem” (The Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha) is considered to be the first step to liberation from suffering and its causes because it gives Buddhists a grounding and a direction for their efforts to reach that goal. Taking refuge signals the first step of commitment to the path of the Buddha. Buddhists declare that they seek refuge in the Buddha as their teacher and guide; in the Dhamma, his teachings, as their path; and in the Sangha, his enlightened disciples, as their inspiration on the path. ☸

Why are the Buddhist teachings often referred to as the Middle Way?

The “Middle Way” is a term used by the Buddha in two distinct contexts. Firstly, it characterizes his core teaching—that all things arise and pass away due to causes and conditions—as a middle way between the extremes of annihilationism (the belief that everything ends at death) and eternalism (the belief that death is followed by eternal bliss or eternal damnation).

Secondly, the Buddha presented the Eightfold Path as a middle way between the extremes of sensual indulgence and empty, “no pain no gain”, asceticism. It would be mistaken, however, to see this as simply a teaching of moderation. Rather, the Middle Way must be understood within the framework of the overall effort to abandon unskillful mental states, to cultivate skillful mental states and to find liberation from ignorance and delusion. The Middle Way is not to be found by seeking a midpoint between two extremes. Rather, at any moment, the middle way lies in whatever spiritual practice will provide optimum progress towards the goal of awakening. ☸

What does Buddhism teach about the nature of happiness?

Human beings can experience two kinds of happiness: that which is dependent upon an external stimulus and that which is not. The first kind of happiness is experienced at its most basic level in sensual pleasure: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching agreeable things. It also includes the positive emotions we experience through personal relationships, worldly accomplishment and social status.

The second kind of happiness is known through spiritual development. It is first enjoyed through the cultivation of generosity and moral discipline, but reaches its most profound levels through meditation. Seasoned meditators recognize the zest and bliss that arise in a focused mind as unquestionably superior to pleasures dependent upon the grosser senses. But refined meditative states do not constitute the highest happiness. It is in the gradual abandonment of toxic mental states—the root cause of suffering—that the practitioner discovers a stable and sublime sense of well-being. This is considered as a higher kind of happiness which is experienced as a natural expression of the cultivated mind, rather than as a transient experience subject to gain and loss.

Lay Buddhists are encouraged to pursue, in moderation, worldly happiness compatible with access to inner happiness; and to relinquish indulgence in worldly pleasures that turn the mind away from spiritual cultivation. 

The truth is always present like water beneath the ground. Those who say that the Dhamma cannot be realized in this day and age are like people who have never tried to dig a well, but still insist that there is no water to be found.

Ajahn Chah



Why do so few people seem truly happy?

The Buddha taught that all living beings are born with an instinctive wish to avoid suffering and to experience happiness. The problem is that lacking wisdom, we both continually act in ways that create the conditions for suffering, and also neglect acting in ways that create the conditions for happiness. We seek happiness in things that inevitably disappoint us; we avoid things that would lead to our long-term welfare. In short, we are our own worst enemy.

Few people have seriously considered the nature of happiness. Of those who have, even fewer commit themselves to systematically eradicating its inner obstacles and cultivating its supporting conditions. It is not surprising that so few people are truly happy.

One of the basic premises of Buddhism is that the more clearly we see the nature of things, the less we suffer, and the happier we become. Indeed, the Buddha referred to *Nibbāna*, the goal of Buddhist practice, as ‘the supreme happiness’. Worldly happiness is fleeting and unreliable. The happiness of a cultivated mind is a lasting refuge. ☸

Buddhists talk a lot about being in the present moment.

Doesn't that conflict with learning from past experiences and planning for the future?

Past and future meet in the present moment: the past as memory, the future as thought and imagination. Any assessment of past experience, any decision regarding the future, is a mental activity that must inevitably occur in the present moment—there is no choice, it is all we have. The problem is that being unaware of memory as memory and thought as thought, we easily become lost in them. When we lose our presence of mind in this way our life becomes a dreary shadow of itself.

The more we are grounded in the present moment, the more uncluttered our mind becomes, and the easier it is to learn from past experiences and plan wisely for the future. ☷

What is merit?

Merit (*puñña*) refers to the inner purification that occurs through virtuous acts of body, speech and mind. Meritorious actions elevate and ennable the mind, and are accompanied by a sense of well-being.

In Thailand the popular idiom “making merit” (*tham boon*) usually refers to making offerings to the monastic order. Such offerings, if given with the right motivation, may indeed be meritorious, but merit is not restricted to such acts.

Generous actions are meritorious because they reduce the power of selfish attachment, and teach us the joy of giving. Keeping precepts is meritorious because it weakens the compulsion to harm ourselves and others, and because it accustoms the mind to freedom from remorse and to feelings of self-respect. But the highest kind of merit arises from cultivation of

the Eightfold Path, particularly the practice of meditation. Practising meditation on a regular basis entails a commitment to the cultivation of life skills. It means taking direct responsibility for the abandonment of the causes of suffering and the cultivation of peace, wisdom and compassion. As meditation has the most profound transformative effect on the mind, it is the most powerful generator of merit.

The Buddha taught that the fruits of merit do not end at death, but contribute to a good rebirth. Although the Buddha emphasized the importance of liberation from the cycle of birth and death (*samsāra*), he also acknowledged that for those people unready for such a path, the accumulation of merit for benefits in this and future lives is an understandable (and a not unintelligent) path to follow. 

It is sometimes said that Buddhism is a science. What does that mean?

There are parallels between Buddhist contemplative practices and the scientific method, with the rejection of blind faith and the emphasis on unbiased investigation of phenomena essential to both modes of inquiry. However, there are also differences. In its investigations science is limited to the study of that which is publicly verifiable, can be measured, and can be repeated at will. Introspective inquiries carried on by Buddhist meditators are not. Most scientists today take as basic premises for their work a number of unproven assertions that Buddhists cannot agree with. Most notable among these is the belief that the mind is merely a phenomenon created by the workings of the brain.

Hypotheses and theories arise in the human mind. They are not embedded in the external world. Subjective experience is the central feature of our life. The Buddhist contention is that any search for abiding truths which depends on ignoring that fact can only ever be partially successful.

Despite these and certain other differences between Buddhism and science, it must be acknowledged that many Buddhists feel their views are more in tune with those of secular scientists than with the views of most other religious traditions. 

Is Buddhism a pessimistic religion?

Pessimism, in its most common usage, means “a tendency to see the worst aspect of things or believe that the worst will happen; a lack of hope or confidence in the future” and as a philosophical position “a belief that this world is as bad as it could be or that evil will ultimately prevail over good”.

Neither of these meanings applies to Buddhist teachings. The Buddha taught that all things arise and pass away in accordance with causes and conditions. If the causes and conditions for the worst to happen prevail in a particular situation, then the worst will happen; if the causes and conditions for the best possible outcome prevail, then the best outcome will emerge. He emphasized learning to see things clearly rather than adopting one-sided attitudes towards them.

The Buddha, understanding the causal nature of phenomena, did not posit absolute values of good and evil pitched against each other in an endless war. Thus the idea that he taught the ultimate triumph of one side of a struggle which he did not acknowledge to exist in the first place can be dismissed. Buddhists hold that if a cup of tea has a salty flavor, unpleasant as that might be, it is not evidence of an essentially malevolent universe. It is simply the result of someone mistaking the container holding the salt for the one with the sugar. ☸



The essence of kamma is intention. It is intention that propels us into relationships with things, and determines the nature of those relationships. Whether we take anything from situations, how we react to them, how we impose ourselves upon them lies within the power of intention. Whether we act upon unskillful mental states or skillful ones depends upon intention.

Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P. A. Payutto)

But isn't Buddhism all about suffering?

The Buddha said that all of his teachings, traditionally numbered as 84,000, could be reduced to just two: dukkha and the end of dukkha. Suffering, in its sense of physical or mental distress, is only the coarsest expression of dukkha. The relationship between the English word “suffering” and the Pāli concept of dukkha is comparable to that between bright red and color. Dukkha could also be translated as a chronic sense of lack, or a flaw or incompleteness of experience. In this sense, dukkha is experience seen as “not-Nibbāna”. For this reason, the most subtle and sublime mental states are still considered to lie within the realm of dukkha, because as they are conditioned phenomena, attachment to them cannot provide lasting peace.

Put most simply, dukkha might be expressed as “a lack of true happiness”.

The Buddha taught the path towards the cessation of suffering, but emphasized that freedom from suffering was only possible by facing up to it and fully comprehending its nature. In the First Noble Truth, the Buddha says that the life of the ordinary unenlightened being is characterized by dukkha due to the cravings that accompany ignorance of the way things are. ☸

Is it correct that Buddhism teaches us to give up all desires?

Buddhism distinguishes two kinds of desire: the first (*tanhā*) to be abandoned and the second (*chanda*) to be cultivated.

Tanhā is the desire that arises from a basic misunderstanding of the way things are: perceiving permanence, happiness and selfhood where they do not exist. Desire for the pleasures to be had through getting, getting rid of and becoming is tanhā. Tanhā leads to personal suffering and is the basis of almost all social ills.

Chanda is the desire that arises from a correct understanding of the way things are. At its heart lies the aspiration for truth and goodness. Desire to do well, desire to act well, desire to act kindly, desire to act wisely—all desires based on an aspiration for the true and good lead to personal fulfillment and healthy communities.

The distinction between chanda and tanhā is not philosophical but psychological. By looking closely at the raw experience of life the distinction between desires that lead to genuine happiness and those that do not becomes increasingly clear. ☸

What does it mean to “let go”?

The Buddha taught us to observe how we constantly create suffering for ourselves by grasping onto the body and its senses, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, emotions as being “me” or “mine”. Learning how to abandon that habit is learning how to “let go”. It is not possible through an act of will. Letting go occurs naturally when the trained mind is keen enough to perceive that there is nothing to be found in our direct experience which corresponds to the concept of “me” and “mine”.

“Me” and “mine” are not, however, mere illusions; they are extremely useful social conventions, and the Buddha taught that they should be respected as such. Although the body, for example, is strictly speaking “not mine”, that does not mean that it should be neglected. Letting go of the body

does not mean giving up on exercise, bathing and a healthy diet. It means not allowing one's life to be defined in terms of the body. It means freeing oneself from all the anxiety, insecurity and vanity, and all the fear of aging, sickness and death that accompanies an unwise relationship to the body.

"Letting go" is also an idiom used for intelligent effort. Knowing that no effort we make exists in a vacuum, that it will always be affected to some degree by conditions over which we have no control, we let go of our demands and expectations for the future. We create the best possible conditions for reaching our goals, and then let go of the results. ☸

How does one become a Buddhist?

Practically speaking, someone becomes a Buddhist when, having taken refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, they start to apply themselves to the study and application of the Buddha's teachings in their lives.

In Buddhist countries such as Thailand there have never been specific ceremonies in which people may formally affirm their devotion to Buddhism. This may be to some extent because Buddhism is not a religion based on the adoption of certain beliefs; and also partly because, there being no Buddhist proselytism, there have been few new converts. For better and worse, people have generally taken their Buddhist identity for granted, assuming that they were Buddhist from the day of their birth.

The situation is somewhat different in India. Over the past seventy years or so large numbers of the Dalit people (formerly the so-called “untouchables”) have converted to Buddhism following the example of their leader Dr. Ambedhkar. Huge conversion ceremonies have been conducted, featuring the formal acceptance of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha as refuges and a commitment to living by the five precepts. (This formula of requesting the refuges and the precepts from members of the monastic order is incorporated into almost every Buddhist ceremony in Thailand) 

What are defilements?

The untrained mind is prey to many mental states that sully its natural radiance. These include the various forms of greed, jealousy, anger, hatred and animosity, dullness and agitation, complacency, confusion, arrogance, contempt and conceit, and blind attachment to views and beliefs. Fortunately, none of these mental states is ‘hard-wired’ into the mind; every one may be eliminated through practice of the Eightfold Path. These negative, harmful mental states are called “*kilesa*” in the Pāli language, usually rendered in English as “defilements.”

In this book the term “toxic mental states” has been preferred to “defilement”. The reasons for this somewhat unorthodox rendering are that firstly, defilement is generally perceived to be irreversible but kilesa are not; secondly, because toxic is a familiar and powerful contemporary word that illuminates heedless attitudes towards kilesa, and thirdly, because it admits of gradation: we can speak of something as being mildly and something else as seriously toxic. 

Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy?

Buddhism can be puzzling for someone brought up within one of the great monotheistic traditions such as Christianity or Islam. Although Buddhist traditions give a place to devotion and ceremony, Buddhism has no dogmas, no single great book. It involves no worship of a god. What Buddhism does have is a mass of teachings that in other traditions would be considered to lie within the realm of philosophy or psychology. For this reason there has been much doubts as to whether Buddhism is a religion at all.

Buddhism certainly does not fit into the template for religion created in the Western world. Whether that signifies that Buddhism is not a religion at all, or that it is simply a different kind of religion, is a moot point. To put the argument for the second possibility, it might be said that whereas the religions that grew up in the Middle East are essentially belief systems, Buddhism is a system of education. 



The Buddha's teachings set upright what has been overturned; they reveal what has been hidden. They are like a bright light that shines out for people lost in the darkness.

Ajahn Bodhi Candasaro

Are there any Buddhist scriptures?

The *Tipiṭaka* (literally “three baskets”) is the collection of primary texts of Theravāda Buddhism preserved in the ancient Indian language of Pāli. In English translation the Tipiṭaka covers some 20,000 printed pages.

The Tipiṭaka is divided into three sections:

The Vinaya Piṭaka

The collection of texts containing the code of discipline for monks and nuns, and the instructions for governance of monastic affairs. The latter includes, for example, sections on monastic etiquette, ceremonies and the correct relationship to the “four requisites”: robe, alms-food, dwelling-place, and medicines, as well as procedures for ordination of new members and the resolving of disputes.

The Sutta Piṭaka

The collection of suttas or discourses. It includes all the recorded Dhamma teachings of the Buddha, together with a small number of discourses given by leading disciples. The Sutta Piṭaka is divided into five *nikāyas* or collections:

Dīgha Nikāya—the “long discourse collection”.

Majjhima Nikāya—the “middle-length discourse collection”.

Samyutta Nikāya—the “themed collection”.

Ānguttara Nikāya—the “numbered collection”.

Khuddaka Nikāya—the “miscellany”.

The Abhidhamma Piṭaka

A reworking and systematization of the core principles presented in the Sutta Piṭaka. 

What is the essence of Buddhism?

The Buddha answered this question with a powerful simile. He said that just as from whatever sea, whatever ocean, one were to take a sample of water, it would always have the same salty taste, so every one of the Buddha's teachings reveals the single taste of liberation. Liberation, freedom from dukkha and its causes, is the essence of Buddhism. 

What is the ultimate goal of Dhamma practice?

The results of Dhamma practice can be expressed both in the negative and the positive sense. In the negative sense, the result is freedom from all suffering and from all the causes of suffering, namely the toxic mental states rooted in greed, hatred and delusion. In the positive sense, it is the perfection of wisdom, compassion and inner freedom. 

Do Buddhists believe in God?

As the definition of the word “god” varies throughout the various religious traditions of the world, there is no straightforward answer to this question. Whereas the notion of a personal creator god is clearly incompatible with Buddhist teachings, some of the more abstract concepts of “god” may be reconciled with them to a certain degree. ☸

How much confidence can be placed in the authenticity of the Buddhist texts, given that for the first few hundred years after the Buddha's death they were transmitted orally?

The oral transmission of Buddhist texts may well have been a strength rather than a weakness. When texts are preserved by groups of monastics chanting them together at regular intervals, the likelihood of errors of omission or deliberate amendments is minimized. While it must be acknowledged that there can be no unshakeable evidence for the authenticity of ancient texts, there are nonetheless a number of good reasons to place confidence in them.

Firstly, as explained earlier there is an inner coherence and lack of contradiction in the Buddha's discourses which are remarkable over such a huge amount of material, hundreds of times more extensive than, for example, the Christian New Testament. The same collections of teachings preserved by different Buddhist sects in different languages show a very high degree of correspondence.

The Buddha's teachings do not stand or fall on particular historical events. They describe a system of education of body, speech and mind leading to awakening. Over the past centuries many men and women, monastic and lay, have put the teachings in these texts into practice, and proved for themselves their truth and effectiveness. Ultimately, it is for this reason that Buddhists have confidence in the authenticity of the Buddha's teachings that have been passed down to the present day. 

Is Buddhism too focused on the individual and lacking in its social dimension?

The term “Buddhism” is a modern usage. The Buddha himself referred to his teaching as Dhamma-Vinaya, with “Vinaya” referring to means by which the external environment can be ordered so as to create the optimum conditions for the study, practice and realization of Dhamma. Vinaya reaches its apogee in the rules and regulations governing the life of Buddhist monastics, but is also applicable to society at large. In the latter context, Vinaya takes the form of laws, customs, and conventions that support the reduction of greed, hatred and delusion in communities, and encourage the growth of justice, peace and harmony.

Students of the primary Buddhist texts find a great number of teachings dealing with the social dimension of the Dhamma. This area of Buddhism

has, perhaps been neglected by Western writers, who have been much more interested in the teachings on meditation. Desiring a Buddhism free from Asian “cultural baggage”, they have sometimes ended up with an incomplete and reductionist view of Dhamma-Vinaya.

To be fair, it must be admitted that the leaders of modern Buddhist nations have made the same mistake. In Thailand, the gods of the free market have come to exert far more influence than the principles of Vinaya. Short-term gains are generally seen as more practical and rewarding goals than long-term well-being. ☷



When you finally realize that this empty room you perceive yourself to be in can never be truly empty until you—the observer of its emptiness—depart from it, that is the moment when the fundamental delusion about your true self disintegrates and the pure delusion-free mind arises.

Ajahn Maha Bua

How long does it take to get enlightened?

This question may be answered with an old story:

A monk is walking through the countryside. He asks an old lady sitting by the side of the road how long it will take him to get to the mountain. She ignores him. He asks her again and she ignores him again. And so for a third time. The monk assumes that the woman must be deaf. As he walks on he hears her shout out: "Seven days!" The monk returns to the woman: "Grandmother, I asked you this question three times and you ignored me each time. Why did you wait until I had walked on by before shouting out the answer?" The old lady said, "Before I could answer I had to look at how fast you were walking and how determined you looked."

Buddhists who are convinced that there is such a thing as enlightenment and that they have the potential to realize it, and who are following the path to that realization, give little time to speculating on how long it will take. Seven days, seven months, seven years, seven lifetimes—however long it takes, there is no alternative route. 

What, in a nutshell, is the law of kamma?

The Buddha said that the essence of kamma is intention. The law of kamma (or in Sanskrit: karma) expresses the moral dimension of the law of cause and effect. Any intentional action performed through body, speech or mind produces results consistent with that intention. Put most simply: good actions have good results; bad actions have bad results. Actions provoked by toxic mental states rooted in greed, hatred and delusion contribute to future suffering. Actions flowing from wisdom and compassion contribute to future happiness. 

Is everything that happens in our life meant to be, or is there such a thing as free will?

The Buddha rejected the belief that everything in our life is fated, pre-ordained by a supernatural power. He also encouraged his disciples to see how the idea of an independent self exercising free will disappears with close analysis of the body and mind.

At each moment of our life, experience has a certain tone: pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Lacking mindfulness and wisdom, we react to the pleasant with grasping, the unpleasant with rejection and the neutral with dullness. In this way, our life is largely determined by habitual reactions to the raw material of experience. With mindfulness and wisdom, we recognize the affective tone of experience as just that, but make decisions based upon more intelligent criteria. In this way, a certain freedom from the given may be known. ☸

Please illustrate the workings of the law of kamma

Every day we perform so many volitional acts, our life is such a complex flow of volition, that the effect of any one particular act is rarely obvious. To use an analogy, if a bucket of acid were to be thrown into a river, we could be sure that it would reduce the pH level of the water to some degree. But the extent to which that change is observable would depend on what other substances had been introduced into the water. If the water was already very acidic or very alkaline, the effect might not be at all obvious.

Although the external effects of individual kammic actions may not be easily verified, internally it is a different story. We can easily observe that every time we indulge in anger, we increase the likelihood that we will indulge in the same way in the future. We create and feed habits and personality traits through a constant drip of volitional actions. Every time we act with a coarse intention, we immediately become a slightly coarser human being. Every time we act with kindness we immediately become a slightly kinder person. ☸

What does Buddhism say about rebirth?

In the early hours of the night on which Siddhattha Gotama became enlightened, he found himself capable of recollecting an immense number of past lives. In the middle part of the night he found himself able to follow the wanderings of beings through different realms over many lifetimes, and thus to verify the law of kamma. These unimaginably intense experiences so undermined the deep-seated foundations of toxicity in his mind, and so enhanced the power of his contemplations, that by dawn he had become a fully enlightened Buddha.

Throughout his teaching career the Buddha revealed information about other realms. He spoke on various occasions about the different realms of existence and the conduct that led to rebirth in them. It seems clear that he

felt knowledge of these realms gave a fuller context for spiritual endeavor. Even if this knowledge was as yet unverifiable by direct experience, he considered it a valuable support for all those following the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha made it clear that no realm is eternal, and that rebirth in heaven realms, no matter how sublime, is ultimately unsatisfactory and comes to an end. He taught that for the fully enlightened being, there can be no more rebirth. The cause for the beginningless wandering in temporal realms is a fundamental ignorance of the true nature of things. Once that ignorance has been destroyed, all that is founded upon it disappears. ☸

How important is it for Buddhists to believe in rebirth?

Buddhism is not a member of the belief-system family of religions. For this reason the Buddha's teaching on rebirth should not be seen as a dogma in which Buddhists must believe. Buddhists are encouraged to take the teaching of rebirth on trust, but to be constantly aware that acceptance of a teaching as making sense, as inspiring confidence, or as consistent with other teachings that one has proved to be true, is not the same as knowing its truth for oneself. The Buddha taught people to "care for the truth" by not claiming something must necessarily be true merely because they have a strong feeling that it is so. The vast majority of Buddhists have not, of course, been able to prove the truth of rebirth. They are taught to humbly acknowledge that they do not actually know if it is true, but to accept the teachings on rebirth as a working hypothesis for understanding their life and for following the Buddha's path of awakening. Through the practice of the Eightfold Path, confidence in kamma and rebirth grows in a natural, unforced way. ☯

What does Buddhism teach about heaven and hell?

Heaven and hell are considered to be two realms of existence. Birth in one of these realms occurs as the result of volitional actions. Although the life-span of one born into one of these realms is very long, it does ultimately come to an end. It is for this reason that the desire to be born in heaven after death is considered unwise. Heaven is a temporary respite from the rigors of birth, old age, sickness and death, not a liberation from them. 



Take care not to follow ignorant people
who say that Buddhism looks at the world
in an overly pessimistic way. Buddhism
teaches that suffering is to be seen, but
what is to be felt and realized is happiness.

Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P. A. Payutto)

Do Buddhists believe in spirits?

The Buddha confirmed the presence in the world of non-human beings invisible to the naked eye. The existence of these beings has been verified over the years by gifted meditators who have developed the faculties necessary to perceive them. The vast majority of Buddhists who are not able to verify the truth in this matter take it on trust. Others of a more skeptical disposition reserve their judgment.

Buddhist teachers consider that more important than arousing faith in the existence of such invisible beings is instilling wise attitudes toward them. The Buddha taught that all beings without exception are our fellow wanderers in the realm of birth and death, and as such they should not be worshipped or bribed with offerings. Buddhists are taught to cultivate an attitude toward non-human beings of respect and kindness. By doing so they become beloved of these beings and free of danger from them. And if there are cases where phenomena perceived as spirits are simply products of the human unconscious, the same kind attitude is the most healing. 

Why is impermanence given so much importance in Buddhism?

Impermanence is the central feature of existence. Everything changes. Nothing stays the same. Nothing lasts. Although this may seem a trite observation, close investigation reveals how many of our thoughts, emotions, perceptions, desires and fears occur precisely because the truth of impermanence is constantly forgotten. Continually reflecting on the impermanent conditioned nature of things prevents us from getting carried away and heedless when things go well, and from getting depressed and discouraged when things go badly. In meditation, the focused mind develops insight into its own nature through observing the moment by moment rise and fall of physical and mental phenomena. ☸

What is the meaning of not-self?

The unenlightened person assumes that there is a permanent independent entity behind our experience, and that this entity is our self, who we really are. We take for granted that this “me” is the one who sees, who thinks, who feels, who hears, who talks, who acts. The Buddha taught that this understanding of who we are is mistaken, based upon certain fundamental misperceptions, and is the root cause of human suffering.

Buddhism teaches that far from being the solid centre of experience, the sense of self is created moment by moment, by means of an instinctive identification with aspects of experience—our body, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, emotions, sense-consciousness. The Buddha encouraged us to look more closely at our experience in order to see if we can discover this self that seems so obviously to exist. Recognizing that life is a flow of phenomena, dependent on causes and conditions, but without an owner or controller, is the insight into ‘not-self’ or anattā.

One way of understanding this teaching is to consider the phrase “It is raining.” Here the word “it” is comparable to the sense of self. What does the word “it” refer to in this phrase? Is there actually an “it” that is raining, or in referring to “it” are we simply employing a linguistic convention?

The teaching of not-self is counter-intuitive and can only be realized in a stable and happy mind. For this reason emphasis is put on creating a solid foundation for this insight by practicing generosity, moral conduct and meditation. 

If there is no self, then what is reborn?

The teaching of not-self points to the fact that things exist as processes rather than as discrete objects. A candle flame provides the traditional analogy for illustrating the relationship between not-self and rebirth. What we call a candle flame is not a thing in itself, but the expression of a time-bound relationship between candle-wick and oxygen. If a new candle is lit from an old one it is only conventionally true to say that a thing called a flame has migrated from one candle to another; in fact a process has been maintained with the supply of a new material base. Similarly, there is not a thing called a self that is reborn at the death of the body, but a process that manifests in a new and fitting form. ☯

If there is no self, how can anybody be considered responsible for their actions?

Buddhism makes a distinction between reality and social convention. The idea of self is recognized to be a very useful, indeed indispensable, element of social life. In conversation, enlightened masters use the terms “I” and “you” in the normal way; they answer to a name. The difference is that they recognise a convention as a convention and do not confuse it with ultimate reality.

The majority of Buddhist teachings deal with life on the conventional level. Personal responsibility is given a central role. In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha says:

*One indeed is one's own refuge;
Who else could one's refuge be?
With oneself thoroughly tamed,
One obtains a refuge hard to gain.* 

III

Sangha



*They are the Blessed One's disciples who have practiced well,
Who have practiced directly,
Who have practiced insightfully,
Those who practice with integrity--
That is the four pairs, the eight kinds of noble beings--
These are the blessed one's disciples.
Such ones are worthy of gifts,
Worthy of hospitality,
Worthy of offerings,
Worthy of respect;
They give occasion for incomparable goodness to arise in the world.*

Ten subjects for frequent recollection by one who has gone forth

Monks, there are ten dhammas which should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

What are these ten?

I am no longer living according to worldly aims and values. This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

My very life is sustained through the gifts of others. This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

I should strive to abandon my former habits. This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

Does regret over my conduct arise in my mind? This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

Could my spiritual companions find fault with my conduct? This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me. This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

I am the owner of my kamma, heir to my kamma, born of my kamma, related to my kamma, abide supported by my kamma, whatever kamma I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir. This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

The days and nights are relentlessly passing, how well am I spending my time? This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

Do I delight in solitude? This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

Has my practice borne fruit with freedom or insight so that at the end of my life I need not feel ashamed when questioned by my spiritual companions? This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

Monks, these are the ten dhammas to be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

What does “Sangha” mean?

The word “Sangha” is used in two ways. Firstly, it is the name given to the monastic order, hence the phrase, “the Thai Sangha”. Secondly, it refers to the community of all those who have realized one of the four stages of enlightenment. The two categories overlap to a high degree: over the past 2,600 years the vast majority of those who have realized stages of enlightenment have been members of the monastic order. Nevertheless, monastic life is not a necessary condition for enlightenment. There have been many members of the enlightened Sangha who have lived (and live) as householders. ☩

Why do Buddhist monastics shave their heads?

Hair is a major focus of the human desire to beautify the body and project a particular image in the world. Monastics shave their heads as an expression of their aspiration to renounce personal vanity. Doing so serves as a reminder to themselves and others that now they have left the world. The sight of a Buddhist monastic in brown robes and shaven head is a memorable one. People seeing them may become curious or intrigued, feel uplifted, be reminded of the need to be alert and awake. Thus Buddhist monastics propagate the Dhamma in a very gentle way, simply by being seen.

Monastics shave their heads either once a month (the day preceding the full moon) or twice (adding the day before the dark moon). In Thailand, monastics also shave their eyebrows. ☸

Why do monks wear robes of different colors?

The bright yellow or orange-colored robes are usually worn by monks living in monasteries situated in the villages, towns and cities. The darker colored robes are usually worn by monks from forest monasteries.

Most monks nowadays wear robes made of synthetic material. These robes are produced commercially in a variety of colors, bought by lay Buddhists, and then offered to monks. In most monasteries a set color is prescribed, but in some monasteries monks are free to wear whatever colored robe is offered to them, provided it lies within acceptable boundaries.

In many forest monasteries monks still sew their own robes and dye them with color extracted from the heartwood of the jackfruit tree. The color of these robes varies according to the color of the wood used (which varies from a golden color through to orange-red), and to the age of the robe (which is only ever washed in a diluted solution of the dye, a weak astringent, and gets darker as it ages). 

What is the Vinaya?

The Vinaya is the name given to the compendium of training rules, protocols, procedures and duties laid down by the Buddha for the monastic order. The Vinaya is intended to maintain harmony within and amongst monastic communities, and to create the optimum conditions for the practice of Dhamma by each individual monk. The heart of the Vinaya is the *Pātimokkha*, the 227 rules which constitute the basic code of discipline.

The *Pātimokkha* is divided into a number of sections. The first consists of four expulsion offenses: sexual intercourse, stealing, killing a human being, making bogus claims of spiritual attainments. The second section consists of thirteen extremely grave offenses which constitute serious blots on the honor of a monk and, if committed, require a period of penance for purification. These include cases of gross sexual misconduct such as masturbation, touching a woman's body with lust, and sexually explicit flirting. All other offenses are confessed and purified in a short procedure preceding the twice-monthly meeting of the monastic community, the *Uposatha*, during which the entire *Pātimokkha* discipline is chanted by one of the monks. ☸

(In Buddhism) the most essential meaning of the word “study” is of the unceasing, dedicated observation and investigation of whatever arises in the mind, be it pleasant or unpleasant. Only one familiar with the observation of mind can really understand Dhamma.

Ajahn Buddhadasa



Is it not unnatural for monastics to be celibate?

Yes, if “unnatural” means acting in ways that override the most basic human instincts. But it is generally accepted that human civilisation has evolved to its present level precisely because of the human ability to go beyond the given, to be intelligently “unnatural”. It might also be argued that the human aspiration to govern basic instincts is experienced in the mind as naturally as the instincts themselves are experienced in the body. The sexual drive is perhaps the strongest human instinct and learning how to relate to it in a skillful way is a great challenge. In the Thai Sangha, monastics who find themselves unable or unwilling to sustain a celibate life return to the lay life without shame or criticism. ☸

What is the purpose of monastic celibacy?

The Sangha was established by the Buddha for those wishing to devote themselves single-mindedly to his path of awakening. The Buddha designed monastic life to be one of radical simplicity, with the minimum amount of unnecessary distraction. Romantic attachments, sexual relationships, and their usual outcome—parenting—are all incompatible with the training he devised. They would also compromise the symbiotic relationship between the mendicant order and society at large which the Buddha envisaged.

The Buddha discovered that the more subtle forms of happiness and the experience of true well-being are rarely accessible, and always unsustainable, while indulging in sense pleasures. He insisted that the Sangha be celibate in order to allow monastics the opportunity to investigate the sexual impulse as a conditioned phenomenon and learn how to relinquish identification with it.

The Buddha revealed that with spiritual maturity the sexual instinct finds no footing and fades away. As sexual desires, perceptions and thoughts are not only a hindrance to liberation, but owe their existence to a deep-rooted ignorance of the way things are which monastics are dedicated to eliminating, they choose to lead a celibate life. ☸

What is the purpose of almsround?

Buddhists consider that the work of monastics (the study, practice and teaching of Dhamma) is so important that they should be free to pursue it without concern for the basic material necessities of life. Householders believe much merit is acquired by offering material support to the Sangha.

The Buddha designed the monastic discipline in such a way as to prevent monks from completely cutting themselves off from the world. The training rules dealing with food play a major part in fulfilling this aim. One rule, for example, stipulates that monks may only eat food that has been formally offered to them by lay Buddhists on the morning that it is to be eaten. This ensures daily contact between the monastics and the laity, and means that even the more remote forest monasteries are established within walking distance of a village. Almsround is a daily expression of the symbiotic relationship between the Sangha and the lay Buddhist community. Walking through the local village, the monks receive their daily sustenance,

and the laity, in the act of giving to them, are reminded of moral and spiritual values.

Almsround is of spiritual benefit to both the monastics and the laity. For sincere monks, it is a humbling and often moving reminder of the generosity that allows them to lead their monastic life. It inspires them to express their appreciation of the faith placed in them by being diligent in performance of their duties. Almsround gives lay Buddhists the opportunity to begin their day with an act of generosity. They feel the joy of giving and the contentment of having contributed to the well-being of the monks they look up to. It is also an opportunity for them to dedicate the merit that arises from their goodness to departed loved ones. Many parents teach their children to put food in the monks' bowls from an early age, introducing the children to monastics in an activity that they find special, and which creates a sense of familiarity and connection. ☸



I dedicate my body and mind, my whole life,
to the practice of the Lord Buddha's teachings
in their entirety. I will realize the truth
in this lifetime... I will let go of everything and
follow the teachings. No matter how much
suffering and difficulty I have to endure I will
persevere, otherwise there will be no end to
my doubts. I must make this life as even and
continuous as a single day and night.
I will abandon attachments to mind and body
and follow the Buddha's teachings
until I know their truth for myself.

Ajahn Chah

Why did the Buddha allow monks to eat meat?

The first and most important reason is that eating meat is not, in itself, considered blameworthy. The Buddha allowed monks to eat meat if they had not seen, heard or suspected that any living beings had been killed specifically to make the dish for them. In such a case, having made no direct contribution to the death of the creature, monks made no kamma by consuming its flesh. The Buddha neither forbade monks to practice vegetarianism, nor did he praise it. His teachings on food focused on the importance of eating easily digestible foods in moderation, rather than on advocating any particular diet.

A second consideration underlying the Buddha's attitude to vegetarianism in the Sangha is the long-term welfare of the order itself. Monks are mendicants, dependent for all of their food needs on the generosity of householders: they are not allowed to grow, store or cook food; they may

not pick fruit from trees. If the Sangha was to become restricted to areas in which it could rely on vegetarian donors, its influence for good in society would be unnecessarily limited. The spirit of mendicancy would also be betrayed if monks were to request particular foods from donors, rather than being grateful for whatever is offered to them in good faith.

There have always been monks who choose to be vegetarians. In the case where they are offered meat on almsround, these monks do not refuse to accept it. They express appreciation for the act of generosity, but pass the meat on to others. ☸

Is it necessary to join the monastic order to realize enlightenment?

The Sangha was established by the Buddha specifically in order to provide the optimum conditions for those men and women wishing to commit themselves wholeheartedly to his path of awakening. For this reason, the Sangha is the most supportive vocation for those truly serious about Buddhist practice. However, not everyone is suited to monastic life, and many people serious about Buddhist practice have obligations that make ordination impossible. Fortunately for those who cannot or do not wish to lead a monastic life, following the path to enlightenment as a householder, although difficult, may lead to a satisfactory conclusion. Over the past centuries, many lay Buddhists have led exemplary lives and even reached stages of enlightenment, particularly the first level, known as “Stream Entry”. 

What does “tudong” mean? What is a “tudong monk”?

The term “tudong” is derived from the Pāli term “*dhutanga*” and refers to thirteen practices allowed to the Sangha by the Buddha that “go against the grain”. This list of ascetic practices includes eating one meal a day, eating all food from the almsbowl and living at the root of a tree, and concludes with the most demanding: abstaining from the posture of lying down. The tudong practices play a prominent role in the forest monasteries of northeast Thailand, and many are embedded in the daily life of the monastic communities. Monks take on particular tudong practices for limited periods in order to help them break out of their “comfort zone”, and to energize their minds when caught in a rut.

Outside monastic communities, the word “tudong” is most often used in reference to a practice in which monks walk through the countryside, spending the nights under their mosquito-netted umbrellas (*glots*). Tudong monks will sometimes determine to walk from one monastery to another; at other times they will choose a route that enables them to visit well-known teachers in order to request advice and encouragement. Many seek out remote areas in order to test themselves in unfamiliar and uncomfortable environments, facing up to their fears of spirits and wild animals, meditating in solitude on mountains and in caves. ☸

Do monastics take lifetime vows?

Entering the monastic order entails making a commitment to monastic training that is left open-ended. Privately, a monk might make a vow to remain in robes for the rest of his life, but it is not expected of him. In fact, the majority of those who enter the order eventually leave it.

Temporary ordination has long been a key feature of Thai Buddhism. Traditionally, young men have become monks for the three-month rainy season retreat (*vassa*), which is held between the full moons of July and October. The value of this custom lies firstly in the young man receiving an immersion in moral and spiritual values before taking on the challenges of marriage and career. Secondly, it provides them with a means to formally express gratitude to their parents for their upbringing (it is believed that by their ordaining their parents gain great merit). Thirdly, the custom creates bonds between lay Buddhists and monasteries (where either they or family members have been monks) that may last for generations.

Monks who joined the Sangha intending to remain in it for the rest of their lives often find it more difficult than they imagined, and after some time the pull of the lay life starts to reassert itself. Teachers will usually advise monks considering disrobing to wait for a while before making a firm decision, in order to see whether their intention changes. But if a monk does choose to leave the order he incurs no social stigma. On the contrary, lay Buddhist communities usually have particular respect and trust for men who have spent some part of their lives as monks. 



People's inner goodness may be observed
from the way they express themselves
externally through their actions and speech,
but only by a thorough investigation
conducted over a long period of time.
Somdet Phra Budhacarya (Kiew Upaseno)

What do monks do every day?

The daily life of monks depends on the kind of monastery they live in, and the stage of their monastic career. In the monasteries situated in the villages, towns and cities of Thailand, monks attend morning and evening services, go on almsround in the early morning, and spend the rest of their day in studying, teaching or performing ceremonial duties. Generally speaking, meditation practice does not constitute a major part of their life. Monks in these monasteries take two meals a day, the first after almsround and the second at around eleven a.m.

In forest monasteries monks rise at about three a.m. In some monasteries group chanting and meditation take place in the early morning and evening; in others the monks practice alone. At first light the monks set off on almsround into surrounding villages, on routes varying from around two to as much as ten kilometers in length. Forest monks only eat once a day, usually at around eight a.m. They spend much of the day practicing sitting and walking meditation. Book study takes a secondary role and is left to the individual. Perhaps two or four times a month they receive formal instruction from their teacher. In the afternoon monks usually work for one or two hours, mainly in cleaning the monastic buildings and sweeping the forest paths. In the poorer monasteries the monks will often do any construction work needed themselves. 

As monks lead such secluded lives, how qualified are they to give advice to lay people on their family and work problems?

People from every social class and livelihood, old and young, male and female, go to visit senior monks. People discuss their lives and problems with these monks in the same way that people in the West might talk to a priest or a therapist. As a result, such monks tend to have a good grasp of the kinds of issues facing their lay disciples.

A life devoted to understanding of the human mind means that senior monks, particularly the meditation masters, have gained deep insights into the way that the mind works, how it creates suffering and how it can be free of it. Through having looked profoundly at how their own minds work, these monks understand those of others. Although the situations provoking emotions may vary, the emotions themselves are universal. By addressing the thoughts, beliefs, desires and fears that underlie various problems, monks can get to the root of the matter at hand, without being hampered by a lack of personal experience of particular situations. ☸

Can women become monastics?

Yes, women can lead a monastic life, dedicating their lives to the study and practice of the Buddhist teachings, but not in quite the same way as the nuns of earlier generations. Unfortunately, the original nuns' order, the Bhikkhunī Sangha, became extinct more than a thousand years ago. The prevailing (although not unanimous) view in Theravāda Buddhist countries is that reviving the Bhikkhunī order is not possible, as the requirements for bhikkhunī ordination laid down by the Buddha can no longer be fulfilled. Theravāda being a tradition that defines itself by its conservative attitude to the texts, it is unsurprising that overriding the instructions given by the Buddha himself is considered by most monks to be unthinkable. As an alternative to bhikkhunī ordination, Theravāda countries have established their own quasi-monastic institutions for women with faith. In Thailand this institution is the white-robed *mae chee* order.

The orthodox view on the revival of the bhikkhunī order is not universally accepted. Over the past few years a movement to re-establish the bhikkhunī order, mainly instigated by Buddhist women from Western countries, has gathered pace. A growing number of women are now living as bhikkhunīs, a small number of whom are resident in Thailand. 

Has there ever been a Bhikkhunī order in Thailand?

By the time the first Thai kingdom was established in Sukhothai in the 12th century, the Bhikkhunī order had already become extinct. It is possible that a thousand or so years before that, in the first wave of Buddhist propagation in what is now central Thailand, bhikkhunīs played some part, but there is no reliable historical record of this. Certainly, there is no Thai cultural memory of a Buddhist “golden age” in which the Sangha consisted of both bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs. This perhaps helps to explains why the Thai attitude towards the revival of the bhikkhunī order has been lukewarm. 

Isn't it better to work to make society a better place than to leave it in order to become a monk or nun?

The monastic order is linked to society at large by a complex web of relationships. It might better be considered as one special part of society rather than a body outside of it altogether. Becoming a monastic does not entail cutting off all ties with the world, but of adopting a new relationship to it. Monastics uphold the integrity of the Buddha's teachings, preventing them from becoming diluted or distorted. They put the teachings into practice and through their lives seek to prove the value of doing so. Monastics transmit the teachings to lay Buddhists. They undertake a training that, if sincerely pursued, helps them to model qualities of peace, compassion and wisdom. In performing these functions it is believed that monastics are helping to uphold and disseminate the values that must underpin any attempts to make positive changes in society. 

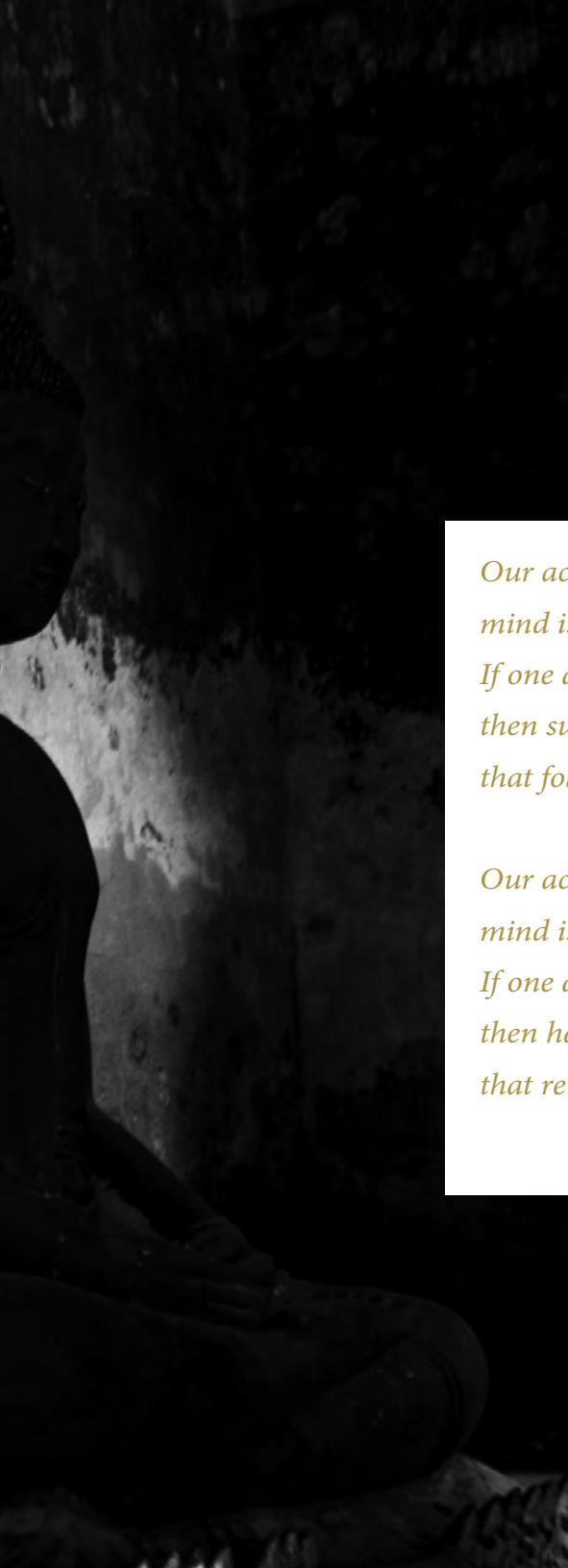
Why do monks in Thailand receive offerings from women on a piece of cloth rather than directly from their hands?

This practice was not laid down by the Buddha, and is not followed by monks in other Theravāda countries. It is a convention (possibly copied from Khmer court ritual) that was adopted by the Thai Sangha some hundreds of years ago in order to maintain the formality of relations between monks and laywomen. Giving, by its nature, creates a certain sense of intimacy between the one who gives and the one who receives. By accepting offerings on a cloth, the monk creates an artificiality and distance in the act of giving which is intended to serve as an aid to mindfulness and restraint for both the monk and the woman donor. 



IV

Buddhist attitudes



*Our actions are all led by the mind;
mind is their master, mind is their maker.
If one acts or speaks with a defiled state of mind,
then suffering follows like the cart-wheel
that follows the foot of the ox.*

*Our actions are all led by the mind;
mind is their master, mind is their maker.
If one acts or speaks with a pure state of mind,
then happiness follows like a shadow
that remains behind without departing.*

Dhammapada v.1-2

Why has so much blood been shed in the name of religion? Has Buddhism contributed to the carnage?

Human beings need their lives to make sense, to have meaning and purpose. Religions appear to meet this need. As a consequence, most people adopt a set of religious beliefs or dogmas as a framework within which to understand their lives. But as there are a number of belief systems, and each one tends to assert that it alone is the possessor of truth, the age-old conflict between belief systems and the passions they engender is inevitable. Despite all of the “religious” violence the world has seen, the nature of human needs makes it hard to imagine a world without people taking refuge in dogmatic beliefs.

Even determinedly secular or materialistic people have the same psychological needs for stability and meaning. Indeed, they may identify with their own views and beliefs as tenaciously as the more conventionally religious. It is not difficult to find present-day examples of political beliefs and even scientific theories taking on the trappings of dogma.

Buddhists are proud that in their texts not one phrase can be found that would justify shedding a single drop of blood. In some places, however, the texts remain unread and their lessons untaught. In the world today, a small minority of men wearing the robes of Buddhist monks use their authority to aggravate rather than placate ethnic and territorial disputes, while the rest of the Theravāda world looks on in dismay.

Nevertheless, the teachings of Buddhism do offer a way out of religious violence. They assert that the path to true security and meaning lies in our actions of body, speech and mind, rather than belief. Faith is placed in our capacity to change, which we can put to the test, rather than in dogma—which we cannot. In the effort to educate their behavior, emotions and understanding, human beings can find a purpose that does not create a sense of alienation from all those who do not share their commitment. 

What is the Buddhist attitude to women?

First and foremost, women are viewed as human beings subject to birth, old age, sickness and death: beings prone to suffering and with the ability and opportunity to transcend it. The Buddha made it very clear that the capacity for enlightenment is not gender-based. It is present by virtue of a human birth and women are viewed as having the same spiritual potential as men.

In light of this view of their spiritual capacity, the Buddha gave women who wished to devote themselves wholeheartedly to his training the opportunity to become monastics. He spent a great deal of time teaching women, both monastic and lay, and did not keep back any teachings from them on the grounds of their sex.

But the Buddha's assertion of women's spiritual equality did not lead him to advocate radical changes in the male-dominated social order. He reserved his social criticism for what seemed to him its most pernicious feature: the caste system. Interestingly, in the Sangha, the area in which the Buddha did have the power to establish conventions governing relationships between men and women, he did not opt for equality. The Buddha established relations between the two monastic orders such that the nuns' order, established after that of the monks, was considered its younger sibling. The Buddha judged that this kind of mild hierarchy, guarded against abuse by the built-in checks and balances of the Vinaya discipline, was the best way to govern renunciant communities, and the one most acceptable to society at large. ☸

What does Buddhism have to say about human sexuality?

As human sexuality is such a strong and potentially disruptive force in human relations, the Buddha taught that it needs to be governed wisely. Lay Buddhists undertake a moral precept requiring them to refrain from all illicit forms of sexuality; the precept emphasizes adultery, but includes rape and sexual harassment. Buddhists are encouraged to take care of their senses and not to indulge in sights, sounds, odors, tastes and touching that over-stimulate sexual desire. The desire for sexual pleasure can, when indulged in blindly, lead to much suffering, and in some cases may result in betrayals of trust, destruction of families, financial ruin or acts of violence. Wise people see sexual pleasure as highly addictive and cherish their freedom enough to prevent sex monopolizing their life, and unwisely influencing the choices they make.

Sexual desire is not seen as bad as such. It is, however, seen as being conditioned by ignorance of the way things truly are. For this reason meditators are encouraged to investigate its nature. In one of his analyses of sexual craving, the Buddha explains how the extent to which a woman is

obsessed with her own femininity conditions the degree of her attraction to the masculine; the degree that a man is obsessed with his own masculinity conditions the degree of his attraction to the feminine.

Buddhist teachings do not view same-sex relationships conducted between consenting adults as inherently evil. The Buddha's wise reflections on sexual desire are equally true and applicable whatever gender the object of desire might be.

Sexual desire diminishes with significant progress on the Eightfold Path, as the practitioner begins to experience more fulfilling sources of pleasure and relaxation. Universal feelings of loving-kindness and compassion supersede the desire for personal intimacy. The former strong draw towards sexual activity may now be seen as, in part, a displacement activity, fueled by a failure to recognize as such the deep-seated desire for inner liberation. The fully enlightened 'arahant' experiences no sexual desire at all, and yet lives with a supreme and unshakeable sense of well-being. ☸



The way to extinguish desire...is to become a giver.
Give regularly. The act of giving and the extinguishing of desire: they always happen simultaneously
Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, the Supreme Patriarch

How does Buddhism view love?

In Buddhist teachings love is looked at in terms of the toxic or nourishing mental states present in the minds of lovers and loved. A range of emotions may be distinguished. At its coarsest level love may be narcissistic and demanding; at its most sublime love is selfless and unconditioned. Personal love tends to oscillate from one end of this scale to the other. Buddhists are taught that the more their love inclines towards the selfish forms, the more they will suffer and the more suffering they will cause for their loved one; the more unconditional their love, the more it is based upon wisdom and understanding, the more happiness they will enjoy and the more they will be able to give to others. Buddhists are taught to cultivate their actions, speech, thoughts and emotions in such a way as to educate and purify the positive emotions. 

What is the Buddhist attitude to other religions?

The Buddha spoke in praise of those elements of other religions that were in harmony with his path to awakening; he was critical of beliefs and practices that increased the amount of superstition, cruelty and prejudice in the world. He advocated goodwill and respect for all fellow beings, irrespective of their beliefs.

Religious intolerance is alien to Theravāda Buddhism. Significantly, there is no word in the Thai language to express the concept. As Buddhism does not consider that there is a salvation dependent on belief in a particular set of dogmas, it does not find a diversity of beliefs offensive, and does not proselytize. Indeed, the monastic discipline forbids monks to teach any one at all, even lay Buddhists, without prior invitation.

Despite occasional cases of unethical evangelization of Buddhists in Thailand, discrimination by Buddhists against members of other religions is virtually unheard of. Although Muslim militants have long been targeting Buddhists in the south of the country, there has been no backlash against Muslim communities in other parts of the country. Buddhist principles can sometimes be difficult to recognize in contemporary Thai society, but a mature attitude to other religions is one bright light that remains undimmed. 

Did the Buddha have any views on economic affairs?

By including “Right Livelihood” in the Eightfold Path, the Buddha recognized the role of economic activity both in promoting individual well-being, and in developing a society in harmony with the principles of Dhamma. He taught that Buddhists should take moral and spiritual criteria into account when considering a livelihood, in particular by abstaining from livelihoods harming other people, animals or the environment.

The Buddha emphasized the importance of making one’s living honestly and with a healthy motivation. He pointed out how honesty leads to self-respect and helps to create an atmosphere of mutual trust in the workplace (which, as present-day Buddhist economists have pointed out, leads to significant reductions in transaction costs). When desire is focused on the rewards of work rather than on the pleasure of a job well done, short-term thinking and corruption are always likely to appear. When peoples’ minds are focused on the quality of their work itself rather than the material rewards it provides, they become more content, experience less stress, and do better work.

One kind of economic behavior that the Buddha often criticized was the hoarding of wealth. He said that while expenditure should not exceed income, wise people use their wealth for the welfare of themselves and their families; they are generous to relatives and friends, and offer support to the Sangha and to the needy. The Buddha referred to food, clothing, shelter, and medicine as the four requisites indispensable for a sustainable life. Lacking access to any of these requisites—or being in constant anxiety about losing access to them—is a major cause of human suffering and renders spiritual cultivation almost impossible. In cases where local conditions make it impossible for people to obtain the four requisites, the Buddha taught that the ruler or government should offer assistance. In Buddhist terms, the measure of an economy is not to be found in the number of millionaires it can produce, but in the degree to which it can ensure access to the four requisites for all. ☸

What was the Buddha's attitude toward politics?

The Buddha maintained an even stance towards political issues. He did not take up positions on particular political programs, and did not support one particular group in society against another. Although he avoided speaking in favor of any particular form of governance, he did speak on general principles of wise governance and the virtues and responsibilities of those in power. He taught what should be the guiding principles of a great monarch, and those underpinning a healthy republic. 

What is the Buddhist attitude to entertainments like cinema and sport?

The Buddha taught his disciples to consider in what ways their activities support the path of awakening, and in what ways they pull them away from it. He laid down a general principle that whatever activity increases the strength of toxic qualities in the heart and diminishes the strength of nourishing qualities is to be avoided. Any activity that increases the strength of nourishing qualities in the heart and diminishes the strength of the toxic qualities may be mindfully pursued. This is the principle applied to determine the correct relationship to all forms of entertainment, from the coarsest to the most refined.

The Buddha recognized the need that people leading stressful lives in the world feel for relaxation and enjoyment. For this reason he did not encourage lay Buddhists to abstain from such pleasures completely. He did, however, recommend a twice-monthly day of abstinence, (on the full and dark moon days). Apart from releasing more time for spiritual practices, this day allows householders to step back from their daily pursuits and re-assess to what extent their lives are in harmony with their goals and aspirations. 



The true nourishment we get from things is the joy we feel from being able to give them away.

Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo

Can the creation and enjoyment of art be considered a spiritual path?

Yes, but in the Buddhist view its spiritual benefits are relatively superficial. Great art may elevate the mind, and may illuminate the human condition in profound and emotionally satisfying ways, but it lacks the power in itself to induce the lasting transformation of consciousness provided by the practice of the Eightfold Path. Nevertheless, to the degree that the production and enjoyment of art involves the cultivation of nourishing mental states such as mindfulness and self-awareness, it may be seen as a support for the path of awakening. 



Buddhism teaches contentment. But if everyone was content with their life, how would human progress ever be achieved?

Virtues taught by the Buddha are to be understood within the overall context of his path to awakening. Whenever the Buddha spoke about contentment he paired it with an energetic quality such as diligence, persistence or industriousness. He was careful to make clear that contentment is in no way connected to laziness, and is not another word for passivity. Contentment, in its Buddhist sense, must be appreciated in the light of the central importance the Buddha gave to human effort. The Buddha roundly criticized philosophies promoting fatalism, and once compared heedless people to walking corpses. Contentment does not undermine effort, but ensures the best possible ground on which it can be made.

Unenlightened beings commonly feel that they are missing out, that things they don't possess would make them happier than the things they already have. Even when desire is fulfilled, the mind sated but the sense of lack found to be unchanged by the experience, this hope survives. Learning how to appreciate the merits of what we already possess allows us to let go of cravings, frustrations and jealousy. We set ourselves realistic goals and apply ourselves diligently to creating the causes and conditions for realization of those goals. But in the meantime, we enjoy, as far as possible, the present situation. For it would be a sad thing to put all our hopes for happiness into a future that never arrives. ☸

What does Buddhism teach regarding our relationship with the environment?

The Buddha had an astonishing memory of past lives, and although he could recall literally “aeons of universal contraction and expansion”, he declared that no beginning to this “wandering on” could be found. As a consequence, Buddhism does not subscribe to the idea that this world is the work of a creator god and does not give the natural world we live in any theological importance. It is seen as a phenomenon existing in its present state due to a flow of causes and conditions. Our challenge as a species is to relate to the physical world in a way that best sustains its capacity to sustain us.

For us to nurture the best possible kind of relationship with the physical world, Buddhism advocates an education conducted in three areas: conduct, emotion and intellect.

The education in conduct requires us to put the well-being of the planet above short-term economic needs. It means cultivating the will to refrain

from certain kinds of harmful activities, to adopt a simpler, less wasteful way of life. The changes needed on the level of conduct cannot be made by an educated elite; to be successful they need to be adopted by all. For this reason they need to be backed up by laws, customs and cultural norms.

The education in emotion requires us to instill within our cultures, and within each individual heart, a love and respect for the natural world which makes the destruction of the environment repugnant to us.

The education in intellect requires us to investigate the causes and conditions that underlie a sustainable future for the human race. It involves understanding the consequences of our smallest acts of consumption on the planet as a whole. It means seeing the drawbacks of our current path. 

Is there a Buddhist approach to conflict resolution?

Every society experiences conflicts of interest and view, both from within and from without. Buddhist teachings emphasize ways of preventing conflicts from arising in the first place, and of preventing those that have already begun from escalating. They seek to achieve this by instructing the people involved how best to educate their conduct, emotions and understanding of life.

In Buddhism, violence is considered the least intelligent reaction to conflict. Violence, whether physical or verbal, does not create lasting solutions to problems. The perpetrators of violence create heavy kamma through their actions, for which they eventually have to pay. The victims of violence or their families crave revenge. Cycles of violence are set in motion. The root causes of conflict remain unhealed.

The Buddha said that minds free from toxic mental states make the most intelligent long-term decisions. Greed, self-importance and prejudice arise within individual minds and, if unattended to, can have enormous consequences for communities and nations. The Buddha taught his disciples to constantly look within in order to establish the ways in which they contribute to external conflicts through their actions and speech, their desires and emotions, their beliefs, values and theories. He taught ways to let go of the destructive aspects of the human mind and ways to cultivate the constructive ones. Learning how to distinguish the causes and conditions of conflict, Buddhists are taught to apply effort in dealing with them in the best possible way. 

What is the best way to deal with stress?

Given our responsibilities and the pressures upon us, feeling a certain amount of stress is probably inevitable. It is not always a bad thing, and hard to imagine how making positive changes in our life, abandoning old unwise habits, could be possible without any stress at all. If we are unable to deal with stress or feel we should not have to deal with it, we may fail to realize important goals in our life.

Nevertheless, it is possible to radically reduce the amount of stress we experience. It helps to simplify our lives as much as we can and learn to slow down a little; trying to fit too much into a day is needlessly wearing. Bringing attention to the quality of our actions and speech reduces stressful interactions with others. A more judicial use of resources reduces stress over personal finances. Regular exercise, especially yoga and tai chi (because designed to affect the nervous system), alleviates much physical tension, and teaches us to breathe more naturally.

Regular meditation practice gives us the skill to recognize and let go of the toxic moods and thoughts that underlie chronic tension. Unrealistic expectations of ourselves and those around us, for instance, can be crippling. In daily life, taking regular short breaks to calm and center the mind prevents stress from gradually accumulating throughout the day. These breaks might take the form of a sixty-second breath meditation in front of a computer or simply taking a few deep grounding breaths before picking up a ringing phone. Developing the ability to come back to the present moment and re-establish a state of calm alertness on a regular basis throughout the day can make significant changes to the quality of our life. ☸

In Buddhism, how important is it to help others?

Altruism lies at the very heart of the Buddhism tradition. The blossoming of compassion is seen as the measure of an awakening mind. The two pre-eminent virtues possessed by the Buddha were wisdom and compassion. The Buddha was enlightened through wisdom and shared his path of awakening with others through compassion. In Buddhism, wisdom and compassion are considered to be inseparable, like the two wings of an eagle.

The wish to make others happy or to relieve them of their suffering is a wonderful jewel of the human mind. But for noble feelings to lead to effective action, wisdom is needed. People with good intentions but lacking sensitivity or respect for those they are determined to help can do more harm than good. Conceit, impatience, hesitation, saying the wrong thing, or saying the right thing at the wrong time—there are so many

lapses of judgment, so many character flaws, that can undermine the best efforts of the kindest person. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, people sometimes don't want to be helped or are not ready for it.

The Buddha taught that ripeness is all. The wise person understands that all beings are the “owners of their kamma”. In expressing the compassion that flows from wisdom and is informed by it, the wise try to help others when they can, never forgetting that there is no guarantee their efforts will be successful. As a result, they do not indulge in disappointment or despair when things do not work out. If they are frustrated in their efforts to help others they dwell in equanimity, ready to try again whenever the prevailing conditions allow. ☸

What is the Buddhist attitude to vegetarianism?

The first precept undertaken by lay Buddhists requires them to abstain from killing living beings or having someone else kill living beings on their behalf. All forms of intentional killing create bad kamma, with serious consequences for the one who kills. However, in the case where people buy and consume meat from a supermarket, for example, no kamma is incurred, as they have no direct involvement in the death of the particular animal that provides that meat. Nevertheless, many Buddhists adopt a vegetarian diet from a wish to avoid even an indirect connection to the killing of animals.

The Buddha also taught people to reflect wisely on their relationship to the environment in which they live. For this reason, reducing meat consumption or adopting a vegetarian diet might be considered an intelligent and Buddhist response to the grave threats posed to the environment by the huge and growing human demand for meat. 





V

Buddhism in Thailand

*I am of the nature to age; I have not gone beyond aging.
I am of the nature to sicken; I have not gone beyond sickness.
I am of the nature to die; I have not gone beyond dying.
Whatever is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise,
will become separated from me.
I am the owner of my (volitional) actions, heir to my actions,
born of my actions, related to my actions, abide supported by
my actions. Whatever actions I shall do, for good or for ill,
of those actions I shall be the heir.
Thus we should frequently recollect.*

Āṅguttara Nikāya, Book of Fives 57

There are many schools of Buddhism: what is the kind of Buddhism practiced in Thailand?

Theravāda, the “way” (*vāda*) of the elders, is the name of the school of Buddhism found in Thailand. It is the form of Buddhism that spread southwards from the “Middle Country” in the northeast of India, flourished in Sri Lanka and then spread across the Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia. Today, apart from its presence in Thailand, it is the Buddhism found in Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Laos and some parts of South Vietnam. Theravāda is a conservative tradition, distinguished by its view that the body of teachings given by the Buddha during his lifetime is complete without need for editing or embellishment. In Theravāda Buddhism the essential task is seen to be ensuring that the Buddha’s teachings contained in the Pāli Canon (Tipiṭaka) are preserved, studied, and put into practice so that their truth can be experienced, and where appropriate, shared with others. 

How did Buddhism arrive in Thailand?

Two hundred years or so after the Buddha's passing away, the great Buddhist emperor Asoka arranged for small groups of monastics to travel throughout the world, sharing the Dhamma with those interested in learning about it. One of these groups was sent to the region of Southeast Asia known as Suvannabhumi, an area that included what is now central Thailand. It is believed that a monastery was established on the site of the modern Thai city of Nakhon Pathom (later commemorated by a large stupa). This is the first report of Buddhism in Thailand, although historical evidence is scanty. There is however, a great deal of archaeological evidence pointing to the prominence of Buddhism some time later, in the Dvāravati period (6-11th century). Eventually the Dvāravati civilisation succumbed to the Angkor Empire and Theravāda Buddhism was largely supplanted, first by Brahmanism and later by Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Theravāda tradition re-established itself with the emergence of the independent Thai kingdom of Sukhothai in the 13th century. The first king of Sukhothai built a monastery for a community of forest-dwelling monks trained in Sri Lanka, who at that time had been living in the south of the country in Nakhon Si Thammarat. This signaled the beginning of the close relationship between the Thai nation and Theravāda Buddhism, which has continued until the present day. ☸

To a visitor, the way that Thai Buddhists practice their religion does not always seem to agree with classic Buddhist texts.

Why does such a disparity exist?

Buddhism is not a crusading religion and has never sought to convert or eliminate its rivals, but rather to live alongside them in peace. In Thai communities over the centuries this has included accommodating influences of Indian Brahminist and Chinese origin, as well as ancient animist practices. Wherever or whenever this tolerant attitude has not been accompanied by an accurate transmission of Buddhist teachings, the boundaries between the different traditions have tended to become confused. In this way a number of non-Buddhist beliefs have slipped into the Buddhist mainstream.

The latest challenge to be faced has been the huge social and cultural changes brought about by modern economic development. Worldly values have insinuated themselves into many parts of the Buddhist community. Some monasteries have grown rich and not used their wealth wisely. At the same time, a reaction to this rampant materialism is increasingly apparent and offers hope for the future. 

Thai Buddhists seem to bow a lot. Why do Buddhists bow to Buddha statues?

The Buddha was the Awakened One. His mind was liberated from all mental afflictions and perfected in wisdom, compassion, inner purity and peace. But these virtues—the essence of Buddhahood and the object of Buddhist devotion—are abstract qualities, and most people feel a need for a visible focus for their reverence and recollection. Buddha statues provide that focus.

Buddhists created their first statues inspired by those of Apollo erected in the Greek colony of Gandhara (an area covering parts of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan). Buddha statues are not intended to be realistic representations of the historical Buddha, but rather figures which evoke the inspiring qualities that made the Buddha unique. Bowing to the Buddha is firstly an act of devotion to a form representing the “Fully Self-

Enlightened One”, the “unsurpassed teacher of gods and human beings” or, as he is sometimes called, “the great physician”. It is also a humbling of the one who bows—expressed by the head touching the floor—before the virtues of the Buddha and a reminder of their own commitment to cultivating those virtues.

Buddhists bow to Buddha statues three times. The second bow is to the Dhamma, the truth and the Buddha’s teachings that lead to the realization of that truth. The third bow is to the Sangha, the community of his enlightened disciples. 



This world of ours—no matter how hot and
feverish it may get—still has the teachings
of the Buddha to cure its ailments.

Ajahn Maha Bua

Is chanting a kind of prayer?

As prayer is generally taken to involve a relationship with a deity, it would not accurately describe the Buddhist practice of chanting. The Theravāda Buddhist understanding of action and its results allows no place for prayers of supplication or thanks. However, there is some similarity between chants praising the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and the hymns of praise found in theistic traditions. Many people believe that a protecting power and auspiciousness arise in the heart through the chanting of such verses. ☸

What is the value of chanting?

Most of the more popular chants found in the Thai Buddhist tradition consist of passages selected from the Tipiṭaka. They include verses listing the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, discourses expounding key teachings, passages of wise reflection, and verses for radiating thoughts of kindness, and for sharing merits with all sentient beings.

For many Thai lay Buddhists chanting is their main spiritual practice. It particularly suits those of a more active disposition who find sitting meditation practices difficult. Some people choose to chant verses in the original Pāli language, without understanding the meaning, as an act of devotion and for the calming meditative effect it produces. But these days it is popular to chant in the modern style, whereby each line of Pāli is followed by its Thai translation. Here the benefit shifts more to the recollection of the meaning of the texts chanted.

In monasteries, the chanting of important discourses is a practice that goes back to the time of the Buddha. Before the teachings were written down they were preserved by communities of monks regularly chanting them together. Chanting also performs a social function in monasteries, where the morning and evening chanting session helps to create a sense of community and harmony. 

What do monasteries contribute to society?

Monastic communities are intended to provide moral, intellectual and spiritual guidance to the lay communities that support them. They provide the opportunity for lay Buddhists to make merit by offering material support to the monastic order, and to dedicate that merit to departed ones. They conduct funeral rites and cremations. They chant verses of blessing at important points in the lives of householders.

There are two main kinds of monastery: those situated in the forests and those situated in the villages and urban areas. This reflects the division in the monastic order between those whose lives are devoted mainly to meditation and those devoted to study and more “priestly” duties.

The presence of a forest monastery tends to have an uplifting effect on local communities. Forest monks lead a rigorous life, and many gain a spiritual prowess which is inspiring to lay supporters. Lay Buddhists go to

the monastery in the mornings in order to offer food and material support to the monks. While there they may ask questions or receive teachings from the abbot. Most forest monasteries offer free accommodation for lay men and women seeking a period of retreat in which to practice meditation. A growing number of monasteries arrange annual meditation retreats for their lay supporters.

The relationship between the monasteries built in the villages and cities and the local lay communities tends to be closer than in the case of the more remote forest monasteries. In the past such monasteries played a multitude of roles in Thai society, including those of social centers, schools, hospitals, hotels. Before many of their functions were taken over by the state, monasteries were the very hub of village life. Even today, the three pillars of a rural community are considered to be its village council, its school and its monastery. ☸

Are Buddhist monks allowed to be involved in politics?

Buddhist monks renounce all political activity when they leave the world. If monks were to be involved in politics, this would have detrimental effects on their peace of mind, be an unnecessary and worldly cause of conflict within monastic communities, and jeopardize the unique role of the Sangha in society.

The Buddha wanted the monastic order to stand aloof from political issues in order to maintain its role as a refuge to Buddhists of all political persuasions. A non-partisan Sangha may provide a binding and conciliatory presence in society, and this is a role it has performed well in Thailand for hundreds of years. If the Sangha as a whole were to become identified with a particular political party or program, those lay Buddhists in opposition to that party would feel alienated from the monastic order, and potentially the Buddhist religion itself. If a politically active Sangha backed the losing side in a political struggle it might be persecuted, leading to serious consequences for the long-term survival of the monastic body.

Buddhist monastics are expected to provide moral and spiritual guidance to society. If political programs conflict with Buddhist principles it is legitimate for monastics to speak of the importance of upholding those principles without referring to political parties or individuals by name. 

Is there any difference between a temple and a monastery?

In Thai there is only one word: *wat*. Early scholars translating Thai into English adopted a convention whereby wats in forested areas were referred to as “monasteries” and those in urban areas as “temples”. The reason for making this distinction was due more to non-Buddhist ideas about what a monastery is and is not, rather than to any fundamental difference between the two kinds of *wat*.

Nevertheless, there is a case to be made for referring to wats that make no provision for a resident monastic community as “temples”. Although such wats are extremely rare, one example familiar to almost every visitor to Thailand is the Emerald Buddha Temple in Bangkok. ☸

What are the benefits of visiting a monastery?

Ideally, a Buddhist temple or monastery is a place where lay Buddhists can temporarily put down their preoccupations and worries, worldly desires and fears. It is a place where they may expect to find tranquility, beauty and kindness. It is also a place where they may meet with like-minded friends, perform meritorious deeds and experience the joys of giving and service. It is a place where they may receive inspiration and wise reflections from senior monastics. Monasteries are also places in which lay Buddhists may participate in ceremonies marking the most important events of their lives: births, marriages, deaths.

Of course, monasteries vary greatly in the extent to which they live up to this ideal. The atmosphere in monasteries situated in urban areas is very different from that found in the forests and mountains. In countries such as Thailand lay Buddhists are fortunate to be able to choose the sort of monastery that suits their needs. ☸

The five precepts are considered to be the basic moral code for lay Buddhists. How is it that so few people who consider themselves Buddhists seem to keep these precepts?

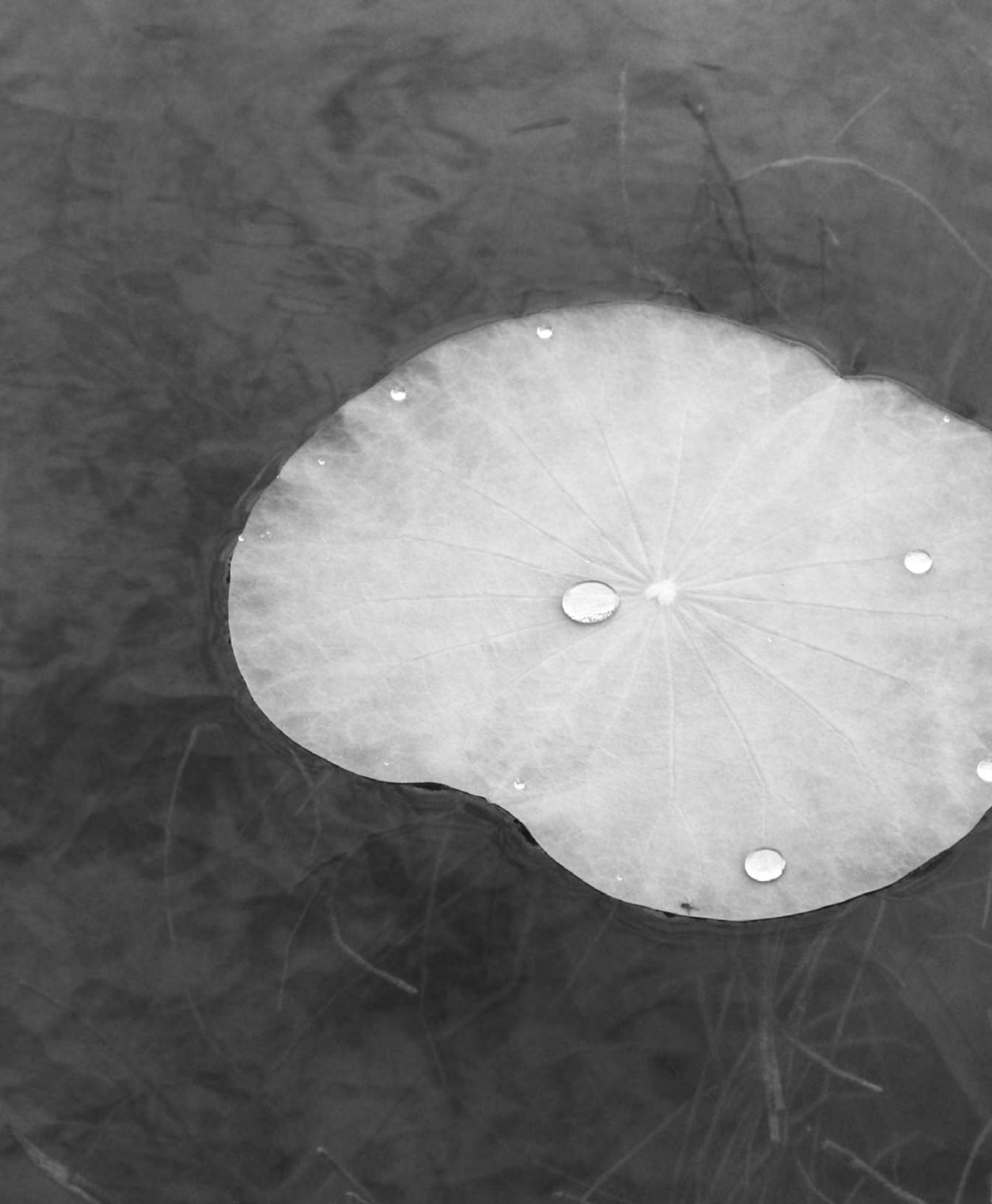
Sadly, it appears that many lay Buddhists do not consider their moral conduct to be a necessary condition of their Buddhist identity.

Buddhism rejects carrot-and-stick moral teachings in favor of an education of conduct. Unfortunately, when the nature of this education is not effectively propagated, lay Buddhists can become more heedless than those fired with a desire for divine reward and fear of eternal torment. ☸

Whoever is established in the five precepts
creates safety for all around them.

If everyone were to keep the five precepts
our society would be cool and peaceful.

Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P. A. Payutto)



What is the present state of Thai Buddhism?

It is difficult to gauge the health of Thai Buddhism. Abundant evidence of corruption and decline co-exists with growing signs of a renaissance.

Thai Buddhism certainly faces some difficult challenges. The monastic order is not in the best of health. It is generally accepted that its system of administration and provision of education need reform. Adherence to the Monastic Discipline is often lax. Very few monks observe the prohibition on accepting gifts of money. Until the money-based economy took firm grip in Thailand about fifty years ago, this was not a serious issue. But as society has grown richer, so donations have increased. Monks are faced with serious temptations and more than a few succumb. Rather than providing a critique of materialism and consumer values, some monasteries have embraced them. In the countryside there are many empty monasteries. With the drastic reduction in the birth rate and the pull of the city, there are fewer people joining the order. (A figure of some 300,000 monastics seems large but has remained stable for many years, while during the same period, the general population has doubled). Historically, the well-being of Buddhism has always been closely tied to the well-being of the Sangha. For this reason, there are serious causes for concern.

In the wider society, consumerist values spread their tentacles ever more widely. Huge numbers of the young and poor leave their homes in search of work in Bangkok or overseas. Working long hours in factories far from the support of family and monastery, they easily become alienated from Buddhist values. Life in the towns and cities is busy and stressful for almost everyone.

Fortunately, there are also many encouraging signs. Interest in meditation is at an all-time high. Monasteries and meditation centers that offer retreats to lay Buddhists are flourishing. Huge numbers of Buddhist books and dvds are sold and distributed freely every year. Over the past few years, Buddhist radio stations have been set up in almost every district, often run by monasteries, and are very popular. A great many people lacking the time to go to monasteries are involved in online forums, discussing the Dhamma, sharing teachings that have inspired them. Particularly heartening is the number of young people turning to Buddhist teachings and practice for inspiration in their lives. ☸

Does Buddhism play a part in the Thai education system?

Yes, a large number of public schools in Thailand are officially “Buddhist-method” (*withee Bud*) although there is still no real consensus as to what that term actually means. The Buddhist dimension to these schools tends to vary widely and be largely determined by the ideas of the staff. One of the most interesting developments in the past few years has been a small number of “Buddhist wisdom schools”. In these schools efforts are made to adapt the developmental principles embedded in the Buddha’s Eightfold Path into the life of the school, not only in the curriculum but in the relationships between teachers, pupils and parents. In the holistic system envisaged in these schools education is conceived of as being four-fold, namely an education of

- i) the child's relationship with the material world
- ii) the child's relationship with the social world
- iii) the child's ability to deal wisely with toxic mental states and cultivate uplifting mental states
- iv) the child's ability to think well and to reflect on experience

In addition to this, a number of monasteries in urban areas run Sunday schools based upon the Christian model. 

What are the main Buddhist holidays?

In Thailand three Buddhist holidays are celebrated: Māgha Pūjā, Visākha Pūjā and Asālha Pūjā. The dates of these holidays change from year to year, being determined by the lunar rather than the solar calendar. The holidays commemorate important events that took place on full-moon days in the time of the Buddha. Each holiday is dedicated to one of the three refuges: Māgha Pūjā to the Dhamma, Visākha Pūjā to the Buddha and Asālha Pūjā to the Sangha.

Māgha Pūjā is celebrated on the full moon of February. It commemorates the day on which the Buddha delivered the seminal Ovāda Pātimokkha discourse, in which he summarized the teaching of all the Buddhas. The occasion is considered especially auspicious as his audience consisted of 1,250 fully enlightened monks, all of whom had gathered at the monastery in which the Buddha was residing with no prior arrangement.

Visākha Pūjā is celebrated on the full moon of May. It is believed that it was on this day that the Buddha was born, became enlightened and

passed away. It is a day dedicated to the recollection of the Buddha and is considered the most important date in the Buddhist calendar.

Asālha Pūjā is celebrated on the full moon of July. It commemorates the day when the Buddha taught his first discourse, the Dhammacakkhapavattana Sutta, which “set in motion the wheel of Dhamma”. His audience consisted of the group of five former followers who had accompanied him through years of ascetic practices. At the end of the discourse one of these ascetics, Aññā Kondañña, realized the first stage of enlightenment and thus became the first member of the “community of noble ones” or Sangha.

On Buddhist holidays, lay Buddhists take part in many meritorious activities: offering food to the monastic order, taking renunciant precepts, listening to sermons, meditating. But the most popular activity is participating in the candlelit circumambulations around Buddha statues or reliquary stupas that most monasteries arrange at night time, once the full moon has risen. 

There appears to be a significant amount of crime and corruption in Thailand. How is this possible in such a thoroughly Buddhist country?

Crime and corruption are universal. Religious affiliation or a lack of it is only one factor amongst many determining the level of crime in a society. Poverty, for one, is a more reliable indicator. Nevertheless, it might be supposed that if a relationship were to be established between the problems faced by a society and its dominant religion, that relationship would be found in:

- a) people justifying harmful actions with religious teachings
- b) people justifying harmful actions by distorting religious teachings
- c) people acting in direct opposition to the teachings of their religion

Amongst Thais who consider themselves Buddhist, a) is unknown, b) is rare and c) is common.

It could also be argued that the degree of crime and corruption in Thailand is an indication of how little an attempt has been made by its political leaders to ensure that Buddhist values are upheld in a period of rapid social and economic change. 



Self-honesty is the basis of moral virtue.
Know yourself, accept your faults and work to
overcome them. Hide nothing from yourself.
Above all, don't lie to yourself.

Mae Chee Kaew

Thais often seem to have a great fear of ghosts. Is this a product of Buddhist teachings?

The Thais were animists for thousands of years before they became Buddhists. As a result, a sense of the immanence of an unseen world lies deeply embedded in Thai culture. In every age, a certain number of Buddhist meditators develop the ability to perceive beings from other realms. Their experiences ensure that even in the modern world, the belief in ghosts does not decline.

The Thais have always loved ghost stories and start hearing them at a young and impressionable age. With the advance in computer graphics, sophisticated films and television programs continue to keep the topic of ghosts in the forefront of peoples' minds.

The Buddha taught that recollection of the virtues of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha helps to remove fear from the mind, whatever its cause. He taught to develop the mindfulness that allows for the analysis of fear as simply a conditioned mental state that arises and passes away according to causes and conditions. 

What is the purpose of the spirit houses that are found in people's gardens?

Thais have always believed that most areas of land are overseen by a guardian spirit, and that anyone building upon the land should first ask permission from the spirit and always show respect towards it. Not everyone believes this, of course, but even those who don't tend to consider it better to be safe than sorry, and to follow the old tradition by setting up a small spirit house in an appropriate spot on their land. 

VI

The path of practice





Dāna (Giving)

Bhikkhus, if beings knew, as I know, the result of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would they allow the stain of meanness to obsess them and take root in their minds. Even if it were their last morsel, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared it, if there were someone to share it with.

Itivuttaka 18

Where does the Buddhist path begin?

The Buddhist path seeks to eliminate suffering and the mental toxicity that is its cause. The coarsest of the mind's toxic agents is selfish attachment to material possessions. For this reason the Buddhist path begins with the cultivation of generosity. Cultivating a habit of giving and sharing cleanses the mind of its narrow and jealous grasping onto things. Giving requires the giver to take the needs of others into account and so promotes empathy. The practice of giving creates joy in the giver and increases the feeling of warmth and mutual support in families and communities.



What determines the spiritual quality of giving?

Intention is key to all Buddhist practices. An act of generosity motivated by the desire for a reward, whether it be for some material advantage, or for more intangible gains—status, reputation, respect or love—has little power to purify the mind. Such giving is, in fact, little more than a form of exchange. Giving without expectations is empowering, reduces attachments and gives rise to self-respect and joy. 

Which is considered more praiseworthy: giving to monasteries or giving to charitable institutions?

One of the Buddha's great lay disciples, Anāthapindika, is seen as a role model for lay Buddhists. He was renowned for making a daily offering of alms to both the monastic order and the poor and needy. Buddhists are encouraged to support their local monastic communities, but not to neglect their duty to all those who are suffering and in need of assistance. 

Sīla (Morality)

Furthermore, you should recollect your own virtuous behavior as unbroken, flawless, unblemished, unblotched, liberating, praised by the wise, ungrasped, conducive to concentration. At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting virtue, his mind is not overcome with passion, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. His mind is simply straight, based on virtue. And when the mind is simply straight, the disciple of the noble ones gains a sense of the goal, gains a sense of the Dhamma, gains joy connected with the Dhamma. In one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calmed experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.

Aṅguttara Nikāya, Book of Threes 70

Is there a key feature of the Buddhist attitude to morality?

Yes, the emphasis on volition. The Buddha said that morality is volition. An act is determined to be moral or immoral according to the mental factors present when the act is performed. An act prompted by a toxic mental state is automatically bad kamma; the particular nature of the act—the justification for it—affects only the severity of the kamma created. The practice of present-moment awareness of one's intentions, and the cultivation of the mental states that enable one to refrain from harmful intentions, are vital features of Buddhist morality. 

What are the five precepts?

The five precepts constitute the most basic moral code in Buddhism. They consist of the determination to refrain from:

- 1 Taking life
- 2 Stealing and cheating
- 3 Sexual misconduct
- 4 Lying
- 5 Alcohol and all substances drugs.

Almost every ceremony presided over by members of the Sangha includes a passage in which the lay Buddhists present formally request the five precepts from the senior monk. The monk recites the precepts one at a time and the lay Buddhists repeat them after him. The wording of the precept is instructive: 'I undertake to refrain from taking life (stealing and cheating, etc.) as a means of educating my conduct.' 



What are the similarities and differences between the Buddhist moral code and those of the other main religious traditions of the world?

The actions referred to in the five precepts are dealt with in all of the world's most important moral codes, if not always in the same way. (The kind of life that is to be respected or definitions of sexual misconduct, for instance, vary from religion to religion.) The unique feature of Buddhist morality is that rather than being perceived as a matter of obedience to a list of commandments issued by a deity, it is seen as a kind of training or education of conduct. Only when precepts are understood in this way and taken on voluntarily do they provide a foundation for the more advanced training of the mind advocated by the Buddha.

In the Buddhist view, immoral actions produce results as naturally and consistently as those that come from putting one's hand in a fire. Just as

most people see the suffering that arises from the latter not as a divine punishment, but as a natural consequence of the nature of fire, the nature of skin and the lack of wisdom of the person who lets the two come into contact, so too does Buddhism understand the suffering that arises from actions that harm self and others.

One of the biggest challenges faced by human societies lies in finding ways to nurture families and communities that are grounded in mutual trust and respect, and in which all of their members feel safe and valued. The Buddha taught that voluntarily refraining from harmful actions and speech has a major part to play in this process. 



If the mind is full to the top with “I” and “mine”,
truth-discerning awareness cannot enter; if there
is truth-discerning awareness, the “I” and “mine”
disappears...Please keep making the effort to
empty your minds of “I” and “mine”.

Ajahn Buddhadasa

Are violence or killing ever justified?

The short answer to this question is no. The Buddhist teaching on this point is unwaveringly clear. Whatever justification may be made for killing, if the volition to kill was present in the killer's mind, then bad kamma has been created which will lead to unfortunate consequences. The reasons for killing determine only the severity of the kamma created. For instance, the premeditated killing of a benefactor out of desire or hatred would create much heavier kamma than killing an enemy to protect one's family, country or religion. There are no cases in which the Buddha advocated violence even as a last resort. In a famous verse the Buddha stated:

*Hatred never ceases through hatred in this world;
but through non-hatred it ceases.*

This is an eternal law. 

Are Buddhist countries completely pacifist?

Countries with predominantly Buddhist populations recognize—as do all countries—the need to defend their national interest. Whereas wars motivated by greed, jealousy or hatred are seen as clearly immoral, most Buddhists would consider a war of self-defense a necessary evil. Nevertheless, it is recognized that those involved in fighting such a war would not be free from bad kamma, as kamma inevitably occurs with the intention to kill, however compelling the reason for it might be. In this view the heroism of members of the armed forces would reside in their voluntarily taking on bad kamma and the future suffering that is its consequence for the sake of the nation. ☸

What is the relationship between keeping precepts and the practice of meditation?

Progress on the Buddha's path of awakening is possible only when there is harmony between the inner and outer life. If meditators allow their actions and speech to be influenced by toxic mental states, they find themselves strengthening the very same habits they are seeking to abandon during meditation. Failure to keep the precepts is a major cause for self-aversions, guilt and anxiety. It creates problems in relationships that make life stressful and complicated. Keeping precepts helps to maintain a safe and stable environment that is conducive to Dhamma practice. Keeping precepts frees the mind from remorse, imbues it with a sense of self-respect and general well-being, and prepares it for further progress on the path. ☯

Bhāvanā (Mental cultivation)

*There are these roots of trees, these are empty huts.
Meditate, monks, do not delay or you will regret
it later. This is our instruction to you.*

Why meditate?

Human beings want to be happy and do not want to suffer. Meditation is the most effective means of cultivating the inner causes of happiness and of eradicating the inner causes of suffering.

Meditation has numerous physical benefits. New technologies such as fMRI, for example, have revealed that regular meditation over many years has positive effects on both brain structure and function. Meditation reduces stress and by so doing strengthens the immune system, leading to a decrease in the frequency and severity of illnesses. The training of the mind develops the ability to let go of toxic mental states, thus reducing the psychosomatic factors involved in physical illness. Having cultivated the ability to calm the mind, meditators are better able to deal skillfully with the feelings of depression, anxiety and fear which often accompany illness. Such skill reduces the mental suffering attendant upon physical illness and accelerates the healing process. At the end of life, experienced meditators are able to leave the world in peace.

The first task for meditators is to learn how to sustain attention on an object. By doing so they expose the normal untrained behavior of the mind, and can learn how to identify and deal with distracting and confusing mental states, and how to cultivate nourishing ones. A valuable ability learned at this stage of meditation is impulse control, one of the most significant predictors of success in all walks of life. The calmness and sense of well-being that arise through meditation leads to an inner self-sufficiency. As a result, the urge to seek pleasure through the senses is much diminished, and harmful behaviors such as drug use are abandoned without regret. Noble thoughts of generosity and kindness arise in the mind naturally and with increasing frequency.

The mind that has been well trained in meditation possesses sufficient clarity and strength to perceive the true nature of things as a direct experience. Seeing things in this light allows one let go of the mistaken assumptions and attachments which are the root cause of human suffering. Ultimately meditation leads to awakening and complete liberation from suffering and its causes, and to a mind pure and unimpeded in its functions, replete with wisdom and compassion. 

When is the best time to meditate?

A great Thai master has said, “If you’ve got time to breathe, then you’ve got time to meditate.” That said, many people find the early morning to be the most productive period for a session of formal meditation. The body has been rested and the mind is reasonably free of its usual busyness. A meditation session is a wonderful way to start a new day. By observing the positive effects on their mental state during the day, particularly in the hours directly following the meditation session, meditators develop great confidence in the value of meditation to their life. 

Meditation is a way of cultivating the mind.
Cultivating it toward what end? Cultivating it
to the point that whatever occurs,
the mind no longer gives rise to mental impurities.

Ajahn Buddhadasa



What is the basic method of meditation?

Although certain fundamental principles inspire all forms of Buddhist meditation, there is great variety in the specific techniques employed to embody them. There is not one basic method of meditation but many. One particular approach is as follows.

Firstly, the meditator gives attention to the external conditions. It is helpful to have a particular space put aside specifically for practicing meditation. The meditator wears loose clothing and ensures reasonable ventilation: stuffy rooms induce dullness.

Sitting cross-legged is the best posture, as it produces feelings of stability and self-reliance which support the meditation practice. Most people find it helpful to use a small cushion as support for the lower back. The posture should be straight, but not rigid; the meditator looks for a balance between effort and relaxation (the free flow of the breath is a sign that this has been achieved). The meditator places the hands in the lap or on the knees and gently closes the eyes (they may be kept slightly open and unfocused if sleepiness threatens). If sitting cross-legged is not possible, the meditator sits on a seat, but if possible, without leaning against the backrest.

Meditators begin by spending a few moments of reflection recalling their motivation, the technique to be employed and the pitfalls to avoid. They then systematically pass their attention from the head down to the feet, identifying and relaxing any tension in the body. On discovering a knot of

tension, in the shoulders for example, the meditator consciously increases the tension for a second or two and then relaxes it. Physically prepared, meditators now focus on the particular meditation object which they have chosen. Here we will discuss breath meditation, the most popular form in the Buddhist tradition: the meditator trains to be present to the sensation of the breath at the point in the body in which it is felt most clearly. For most people this point will lie in the area around the tip of the nose. It is unwise to force the breath in any way. The meditator is merely aware of the present sensation as it appears.

To help sustain attention on the breath, a two-syllable mantra may be recited mentally, first syllable on the in-breath, second on the out-breath. The most common word used by Thai Buddhists is Bud-dho, but reciting ‘in’ on the inbreath, and ‘out’ on the outbreak would also work. Counting the breaths may also be used to sustain the connection between the mind and the breath. The simplest form of counting the breath is to count in cycles of ten, taking one inbreath and outbreak as 1, and then continuing up to 10 and then back to 1.

Whatever technique is adopted, the mind will wander. Just as in learning to play a musical instrument or learning a language, the meditator must be patient and committed, and have faith that in the long run meditation is worth the time and effort. Gradually the mind will settle down. 

What is the purpose of walking meditation and how is it practiced?

Walking meditation provides both a supplement and an alternative to sitting meditation. Some meditators prefer it to sitting and may make it their main practice. Walking meditation is a particularly useful option when illness, tiredness or a full stomach make sitting meditation too difficult. Whereas in sitting meditation mindfulness is developed in stillness, in walking meditation it is developed in movement. Practicing walking meditation in combination with sitting thus helps the meditator to develop a flexible all-round awareness that can be more easily integrated into daily life than that which is developed by sitting meditation alone. As an added bonus, walking meditation is good exercise.

To practice walking meditation, a path of some 20-30 paces long is determined, with a mark placed at the mid-point. Meditators begin by standing at one end of the path with hands clasped in front of them. Then they begin walking along the path to its other end, where they stop briefly, before turning around and walking back to where they started. After another brief halt, they repeat this, walking back and forth along the path

in this way for the duration of the walking meditation session. Meditators use the beginning, the end and the mid-point of the path as check-points to ensure that they have not become distracted. The speed at which meditators walk varies according to the style of meditation being practiced and to individual preference.

In the initial effort to transcend the five hindrances to meditation a variety of methods may be employed. One popular method, similar to that mentioned in the discussion of sitting meditation, is to use a two-syllable meditation word (mantra): right foot touching the ground mentally reciting the first syllable; left foot touching the ground, the second. Alternatively, awareness may be placed on the sensations in the soles of the feet as they touch the ground. As in sitting meditation, the intention is to use a meditation object as a means to foster enough mindfulness, alertness and effort to take the mind beyond the reach of the hindrances, in order to create the optimum conditions for the contemplation of the nature of body and mind. ☸

What are the chief obstructions to meditation?

Meditators come face to face with a number of deeply ingrained mental habits that prevent their minds from experiencing inner peace and from cultivating insight. The Buddha pointed to five in particular. Whatever meditation technique meditators employ, their immediate task is to go beyond the reach of these five “hindrances” (*nivāraṇa*).

- The first hindrance to meditation is delight in the pleasures derived from visible forms, sounds, odors, tastes and physical sensations. In sitting meditation, memories and imagination based upon topics meditators find enjoyable entice their minds away from the work at hand. The most powerful expression of this hindrance is sexual fantasy, but it may also appear as trains of thought linked to food, entertainments, sport, political issues—anything, in fact, that the meditator enjoys thinking about.
- The second hindrance is ill-will. In meditation, ill-will may vary from intense feelings of hatred and prejudice at one end of the spectrum, to a subtle turning away from experiences felt to be unpleasant at the other. Ill-will may be focused on oneself, on others or on the surroundings.

- The third hindrance is sloth and torpor. This hindrance includes laziness, boredom and mental dullness. In its coarsest manifestation, the meditator falls asleep or enters a dark state devoid of awareness. In its more subtle forms, the hindrance is felt as a slight stiffness or unwieldiness of mind.
- The fourth hindrance has two aspects. The first is mental agitation—the “monkey mind”—in which the mind jumps restlessly from one thought to another just as a monkey jumps from branch to branch with no particular goal. The second is indulgence in worry, anxiety and guilt.
- The fifth hindrance is that of mental wavering and indecision, a form of doubt. As a recognition of a lack of information necessary to make a good decision, doubt is rational. Doubt becomes a hindrance when meditators possess all the information needed to proceed but are unable to commit themselves to any one path of practice. This hindrance asks questions like “But what if this is wrong?”, “What if it’s a waste of time?”, and expects the answers before putting in the effort that would supply them. 

If you neglect to cultivate your inherent
mindfulness and wisdom, striving half-heartedly,
indifferent to the truth about yourself,
the obstacles in your path will grow and multiply
until they block all sight of the way, leaving
the end of the road forever in darkness.

Mae Chee Kaew



How long should a session of meditation last?

At the beginning meditators should not push themselves to sit for longer periods than they are ready for. Such initial over-exertion can often lead to a reaction some way down the line that results in them giving up altogether. It is better to begin with five minutes, and then gradually increase the time to around half an hour, and then little by little to forty-five minutes or an hour. Experienced meditators may sit for two or even three hours at a stretch, but it is the quality of the time rather than its quantity that counts. 

What is mindfulness?

Most simply, mindfulness is not-forgetting. Mindfulness (*sati*) is the mental faculty that brings to mind and bears in mind. If you bring to mind all you need to remember in a given situation and don't become distracted from it, then you have *sati*. Crucially, this includes bearing in mind the moral dimension of one's actions: a safe-cracker might know how to focus on his task in the present moment but he would not possess *sati*. In meditation, *sati* manifests as awareness of the object.

Sati must be accompanied by alertness and appropriate effort. Those adept at the practice of *sati* are aware of their body, feelings, thoughts, emotions and senses in the present moment as simply that: body, feelings, thoughts, emotions and senses, without identifying with them. They know how to protect their mind from toxic states, and how to deal with toxic states that have already arisen. They know how to create nourishing mental states and how to nurture those that have already arisen. 

How are the hindrances to meditation overcome?

The first strategy meditators employ in dealing with hindrances is straightforward. They simply recognize a hindrance as a hindrance, release their interest in it, and mindfully return to the meditation object without indulging in thoughts of discouragement, frustration or disappointment. By patiently returning to the meditation object again and again and again, meditators develop the ability to sustain awareness in the present moment. As a result, hindrances arise less often, they are recognized more quickly and abandoned more easily.

In the case where a particular hindrance has reached a chronic level and does not respond to the simple technique of withdrawal of interest and return to the object, specific antidotes are applied. Reflection on the unattractive aspects of the physical body opposes and undermines intoxication with its attractive aspects. Generating thoughts of loving-kindness and compassion opposes and undermines entrenched thoughts of ill-will. Wise reflection on death can lead the mind out of the slough of laziness and complacency.

Hindrances are overcome temporarily by the cultivation of an unbroken stream of mindfulness. When the hindrances are no longer present, the mind enters a stable calm state characterized by an effortless awareness, a strong sense of well-being and a readiness for the work of *vipassanā*. Through the development of *vipassanā* the meditators may eventually reach a point at which hindrances no longer arise in their minds.

Notwithstanding the various techniques available for dealing with hindrances in formal meditation sessions, the transformative effects of meditation only become apparent when meditators put effort into applying Dhamma principles in their daily life. People who lead heedless or overly busy lives find that their way of life feeds the hindrances to such an extent that meditation techniques are powerless to overcome them. The inner and outer elements of cultivation must be in harmony for progress to occur. For this reason, dedicated meditators take care of the quality of their actions and speech, and they simplify their lives as much as possible. 

What is the meaning of *samatha* and *vipassanā*?

Samatha (literally ‘even-ness’) refers to:

- i. meditation practices aimed at temporarily overcoming toxic mental states by systematically cultivating nourishing mental states, in particular the qualities of mindfulness, alertness and effort.
- ii. the bright and stable calmness of mind that results from such practices (here it is a synonym for *samādhi*).

Vipassanā (literally ‘clear-seeing’) refers to:

- i. meditation practices aimed at permanently removing toxic mental states by uprooting the attachments that underlie them. In *vipassanā*: meditators investigate the three characteristics of conditioned existence: impermanence, dukkha and not-self.

- ii. the insight into the three characteristics of existence which produces liberation from attachment.

The relationship and relative importance of these two kinds of meditation has been a source of much debate amongst Buddhist meditators. Here, suffice it to say that a successful meditation practice requires a balance between the two approaches. Samatha without vipassanā can lead to indulgence in blissful mental states; vipassanā without samatha can become dry and superficial. One great teacher has compared samatha to the weight of a knife and vipassanā to its cutting edge. ☸

Is any one kind of meditation technique considered most effective?

No one particular technique is considered universally effective. The usefulness of a technique varies according to physical and psychological factors that vary from person to person. That said, focusing on the breathing process has always been the most popular meditation technique in the Buddhist tradition, and was a method used by the Buddha himself, and highly praised by him. The technique for meditating on the breath is straightforward and the object is always available. The way in which the breath changes in response to the attention paid to it allows meditators to develop both inner calm and an understanding of the relationship between body and mind. ☸

What is the key to a successful long-term meditation practice?

The most important thing is not to stop. As long as meditators keep putting effort into their meditation, come what may, they are accumulating the conditions for success. As soon as they stop they are closing the door to peace and wisdom.

Constancy and regularity of practice are extremely helpful. Although meditation is not a race, the steady-paced tortoise mind will always have the advantage over the hare. Short bursts of determined meditation (usually in response to a life crisis) followed by long periods of neglect will not produce lasting results. ☸



Wherever you go you always take with you
six teachers: forms, sounds, odors, tastes,
physical sensations and mental activity.

Ajahn Chah

How important is it to have a teacher?

The ideal conditions for spiritual progress are experienced by those living in a community led by an enlightened teacher, but few people, including monastics, are given such an opportunity. Receiving instructions from a qualified teacher, taking them away to put them into practice, and then meeting with the teacher every now and again to relate progress and to receive advice and encouragement, is both a workable and beneficial approach. The ability of the teacher to point out weak areas, blind spots and the student's tendency to get sidetracked means that regular contact with him or her is truly valuable. Occasional periods of retreat with the teacher tend to be especially fruitful.

Another approach is to take advantage of the multitude of teachings on meditation now available through the various media. Reliable information may be found in books and dvds and on the internet. In Thailand many Dhamma programs are broadcast on radio and television. This can be a great opportunity, but at the same time can encourage superficiality: some people end up sampling a number of different techniques without making the necessary commitment to any one in particular. Progress in meditation requires taking one method as a vehicle and applying it consistently over a long period of time. 

How useful is it to attend a meditation retreat?

A meditation retreat provides meditators with the opportunity to apply themselves to meditation practices for many hours a day under the guidance of a qualified teacher, and to benefit from the support of a group of like-minded people. Having withdrawn from their usual surroundings, responsibilities and problems, for a retreat of seven or ten days meditators can build up a momentum of practice that may allow for experiences of calm and insight normally unattainable in their daily lives.

Retreats have a rejuvenating effect on long-time meditators and give self-confidence to new ones. Novice meditators can prove to themselves that meditation is not just a matter of struggling with sore knees and a restless mind, but that it does have results, and that they are capable of experiencing those results.

It is difficult for most people to establish a regular meditation practice at home. Attending a meditation retreat gives meditators a foundation on which to build, and the faith in the value of meditation that will help to sustain them through periods of doubt and discouragement. 

Is it possible to meditate while listening to music?

Music can certainly be therapeutic. The emotions aroused by listening to music can quickly and effectively relieve physical tension. Attention to music can temporarily replace toxic mental states. However, someone listening to music is not cultivating the particular qualities of effort, mindfulness and alertness that distinguish Buddhist meditation. It might best be considered a preliminary to more formal meditation.



Is it possible to meditate while jogging or swimming?

Buddhist meditation techniques can easily be applied to most kinds of repetitive physical exercise. Mindfulness of a mantra or of particular body sensations—for instance, the sensations in the soles of the feet—may be usefully applied while jogging or swimming. ☸

Can meditation be dangerous?

Meditating for a few minutes a day is not at all dangerous. However, for people suffering from serious psychological problems, especially any requiring medication, longer periods of unguided meditation are usually unadvisable. When people are suffering from intense mental obsessions, Buddhist teachers may caution against sitting meditation altogether and instead encourage them to focus on the practices of giving and helping others. At this point in their lives, the joy to be found in service and kind actions, together with the self-respect gained by keeping precepts, may have a much more healing effect than the application of meditation techniques. ☸

Are there any specific spiritual goals for lay Buddhists?

Buddhism can be understood as a system of voluntary education. The level of commitment to this education is left to each individual to decide. Many lay Buddhists are content with the most basic level of commitment: trying to lead a good and moral life, fulfilling family responsibilities and practicing generosity, bolstered by the faith that such blameless actions will bear good results in this and future lives.

But although the Buddha recognised the reasonableness of such a path, he considered that ultimately, it fails to take full advantage of this precious human birth. He encouraged lay Buddhists to practice the Eightfold Path in its entirety. Although spiritual development as a householder is more difficult than in a monastery, it is nevertheless possible and, to whatever level it is taken, truly beneficial. Indeed, over the past two thousand six hundred years a great many lay Buddhists, male and female, have realized the first level of enlightenment, “stream entry”. It is stream entry that is held up as the spiritual goal appropriate for the sincere lay Buddhist.

On one occasion, to convey the momentous importance of stream entry, the Buddha said that if all the suffering that we have experienced in our many lives is comparable to all the soil in the world, then the suffering remaining for the stream enterer is comparable to the dirt that may be found under a fingernail. 

Can meditation be practiced in daily life?

Taking a minute or two a few times a day to re-establish mindfulness by focusing on the breath is an excellent way to prevent the accumulation of stress. In daily life situations the meditator needs to be flexible in applying meditation techniques. No one technique will be effective or even appropriate. The meditator develops a number of “skillful means” and then learns how to apply them in different situations. The underlying principle of practice in daily life is provided by the principles outlined in the path factor of “Right Effort”. The meditator seeks to prevent unarisen toxic mental states from arising and to let go of those already arisen; to introduce into the mind nourishing mental states as yet unarisen, and to further cultivate those that have already arisen. 



VII

Buddhist resources

The Metta Sutta: The Buddha's words on loving kindness

*This is what should be done
By one who is skilled in goodness,
And who knows the path of peace:
Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech.
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied,
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,
Not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.
Wishing: in gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be,
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,*

*The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to be born –
May all beings be at ease.
Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.
Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;
Radiating kindness over the entire world:
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.
By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense-desires,
Is not born again into this world.*

Can you recommend any good websites for learning about Buddhism?

www.buddhanet.net

www.accesstoinsight.org

www.forestsanghapublications.org

www.buddhistteachings.org

www.suanmokkh.org

www.bia.or.th

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>

www.wanderingdhamma.org

<http://online.sfsu.edu/rone/Buddhism/Buddhism.htm>

www.buddhistchannel.tv 

Can you recommend any books for learning about Buddhism?

There are many excellent ebooks available for free download. The first three websites on the left hand side have a large selection.

Many of the books in the following list are also available in ebook formats and from online booksellers. 

Discourses of the Buddha

The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi

The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi

The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi

The Long Discourses of the Buddha translated by Maurice Walshe 

General overview

All books by Bhikkhu P. A. Payutto

The Life of the Buddha by Bhikkhu Nyanamoli

Great Disciples of the Buddha by Helmut Hecker

The Foundations of Buddhism by Rupert Gethin

Buddhist Religions, by Robinson/Jordan/Thanissaro 

Meditation

Works by the great Thai Masters, e.g. Ajahn Maha Bua, Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Buddhadasa are available for free download, as are those of leading Western monks in the Thai tradition such as Ajahn Sumedho and Thanissaro Bhikkhu. 

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Yesterday is a memory.

Tomorrow is the unknown.

Now is the knowing.

Ajahn Sumedho





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