

# Our Neighbor's Faith – Buddhism

## History and Description<sup>1</sup>

Buddhism is a way of life that dates back more than 2,500 years; it has changed a lot over the centuries, since it is open to the influence of other cultures and religions; and it has three major branches, as well as many other smaller ones. Because of these traits, today's lesson will focus on the very basics, and the background and teachings shared among the different varieties. This is a broad look, not a deep look.

Some forms of Buddhism pray to no gods; some pray to many; some teach that meditation is the path to follow; others say it's only faith. Whatever the school of thought and its origins, from India, Southeast Asia, China, Korea, Japan, or Tibet, they all share the same root: the life and teachings of Gautama Buddha. "Buddha" means "one who has been awakened" or "the Enlightened One." It can refer to any wise being, incarnate or celestial, but it usually refers to the rare individual who has a transcendent and transformative insight into the true nature of reality.

Gautama Buddha was born around the year 566 BCE as Siddhartha, a prince of the Sakya clan, in what is now Nepal near its border with India. His father belonged to a warrior caste and was a governor of the area, which meant that Siddhartha was raised in comfort. He grew up, was married, and had a son; but at the age of 29 he left his home and family to start a spiritual quest to understand the suffering he saw around him. He studied with religious teachers and learned severe lifestyles, which he followed for six years. However, after those six years, he realized that these practices were not leading him down the path to enlightenment, and he abandoned them.

Later, alone and meditating under a Bodhi tree, he reached enlightenment. His new name was Sakyamuni, or "sage of the Sakya clan." He went to Benares, India, where he preached his first sermon. For the next 45 years he preached and wandered in northern India, spending the annual rainy season (June-September) in a monastery. He attracted many disciples. He died peacefully at the age of 80.

The heart of the Buddha's teachings, and the core of all the forms of Buddhism, are the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths are: 1-Life is suffering (Happiness happens, but it's not permanent; disappointment is inevitable no matter who you are). 2-There is a reason for this suffering (Our constant desire and attachment to things are in conflict with the fact that you can't always get what you want. Life is change, so suffering is inevitable). 3- There is a way to end suffering. 4-The way to end suffering is the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path goes like this:

Wisdom

1. Right views: understanding Buddha's teachings, truth and reality.
2. Right aspirations - having high and noble aims.

Morality

3. Right speech: Kind words and truth; no lying, gossip, or verbal abuse.
4. Right conduct: Good morals, compassionate behavior.
5. Right livelihood: Having an honest living that does not cause suffering to others.

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<sup>1</sup> Honoring Our Neighbor's Faith, Augsburg Fortress, 2016, pp. 17-22.

Concentration

6. Right effort: Perseverance in goodness and clearing the mind
7. Right mindfulness: Attentiveness to reality and the present moment.
8. Right meditation: Concentration on Buddha and the Dharma (Buddha's teachings and the basic truth of things).

These elements are observed simultaneously, not sequentially, and they all reinforce and deepen one another. Following the Eightfold Path leads to Nirvana, which is the cessation of suffering. Some consider Nirvana to be a place; others, a state of consciousness: a perfect understanding of reality.

The Dharma are the teachings Buddha passed on shortly before his death, dealing with teachings for the laity, teachings for monks and their communities, and (written later) a more systematic collection of Buddhist teachings.

All people are thought to have a Buddha nature, or a spark of the divine within them. It's hard to tap into this Buddha nature which helps one to serve others purely, since one's own tendency is to be self-serving. The Truths and the Path and tools like meditation help one attain enlightenment, sort of like dispelling clouds that cover the sun. Enlightenment leads to wisdom and compassion. One branch of Buddhism teaches that the ideal person is a "bodhisatva," one who reaches enlightenment but remains in human form to teach and lead others to Nirvana.

Another term associated with Buddhism is "karma," the law of cause and effect. You sow what you reap: if you do good things, good things happen to you; if you do bad things, bad things happen to you. Some forms of Buddhism believe in reincarnation, being born again and again into different lives, even different species, to help balance the scales of karma when they aren't even in one life.

Another important aspect to Buddhism is mindfulness: paying attention to the present moment, seeing reality more deeply and clearly, outside of our own anxieties. In this respect, some forms of Buddhism teach that not only meditation, but any act done mindfully, can be a path toward enlightenment.

Whatever the practices associated with the different branches of Buddhism, they are not as important as long as the aims of the Truths and the Path are not lost.

The main branches of Buddhism are called Hinayana (Southern), Mahayana (Eastern), and Tantric (Northern). Other sects you may have heard of are Zen, Shin, Theravada, or Vipassana. Buddhism did not really arrive in America until the late 19th century with Chinese and Japanese immigrants, and has taken until the last seventy years or so to really spread.

Some reasons for Buddhism's growth and spread in North America are: an increased interest in spirituality in general; the Buddha's directive to test the teachings against one's own experience and not rely on tradition, dogma, or authority paralleled America's experiential and scientific worldviews; and a focus on the practical in an increasingly skeptical age.

Statistics: As of 2010, there were 991,683 practicing Buddhists in the United States, in 2,854 congregations. (For comparison, the ELCA was at 4,181,219 and 9,846.)

### Experience

There is so much variety in different Buddhist schools and practices, that it is difficult to point you in any one direction. Do some searching of your own, remembering to check your sources before getting too deep. There are around half a dozen Buddhist temples that show up on a quick search in the Richmond area, as well as one monastery.

Do you have any experiences with Buddhist practices or worship to share?

### Comparison with the ELCA<sup>2</sup>:

<u>Buddhism</u>	<u>ELCA</u>
1. Understand "God" as ultimate reality, the All. Not concerned with how universe was created.	1. Believe in personal, triune God – Father (creator), Son (redeemer), Holy Spirit (sanctifier).
2. See the goal of Buddhism is enlightenment (perfect understanding of reality, which leads to compassion for all beings) and Nirvana (cessation of suffering).	2. See Christian life as living in God's grace and loving God and others.
3. Believe in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, but are encouraged to test teachings against their own experience.	3. Believe God's will is revealed in the scriptures in law and gospel; though interpreted in everyday living, these teachings are unchanging.
4. Believe all people have a Buddha-nature, the potential to become a buddha or bodhisattva (Ie Gautama Buddha or Jesus).	4. Believe Jesus is the unique Son of God; we are encouraged to imitate his faithfulness. Our salvation was won through his death and resurrection.
5. Believe in karma, the law of cause and effect. Many Buddhists also believe in reincarnation.	5. Teach that although humans have freedom to disobey God and their actions have effects, all is under the umbrella of God's law and grace. Each human has one earthly life.
6. Worship varies according to the sect. The most common elements of worship are chanting, an incense offering, silent meditation, and a talk by a priest or monk.	6. Liturgical pattern based on the tradition of the Western church.
7. Governance varies. Some Buddhist sects are directed by teachers; others are less hierarchical.	7. Interdependent congregational, regional, national, and global expressions of the church are characterized by democratic decision making, strong ecumenical relationships, elected leadership, and an ordained ministry.

### What we Lutherans can learn...

Among other things:

1. Lutherans talk a lot about sin in terms of being "curved in on ourselves"; we could learn a lot about how to articulate that state of sin and deal with it, serving the needs of others instead, using some of the language and teaching of Buddhism.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

2. Buddhism is very open to learning from and being influenced by other religions and practices. The discussion in this series have been about that, too. Granted, we don't want to give up our core Christian (and Lutheran Christian) beliefs, but on the whole we can learn about being open to learning from the teachings of others who are different from ourselves.

Let's pray:

Almighty and eternal God, gather into your embrace all those who call out to you under different names. Bring an end to fighting between religions, and make us more faithful witnesses of the love made known to us in your Son; we especially pray today for our sisters and brothers in the community of Buddhism. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.