1.3 The Buddha’s ascetic life

Living as an ascetic

After he left the palace, Siddhartha tried various methods to learn how to overcome the problem of suffering. He had been impressed by the sense of peace that he felt coming from the holy man – an ascetic – that he met before he left the palace, so he decided to follow ascetic practices for six years. He rejected anything that would give him pleasure and practised extreme self-discipline. He met and studied with various holy men. In particular, he began to practise meditation with two ascetics, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaṇḍuta. They used pain and hardship to discipline their minds. It is said that the meditation gave Siddhartha a feeling of bliss, but did not offer him a permanent solution to the suffering that people experienced.

Siddhartha then began to ignore his appetite. He fasted for long periods of time, becoming increasingly hungry and weak. Stories say that his body became so thin that his legs were like bamboo sticks, his backbone was like a rope, his chest was like an incomplete roof of a house, and his eyes sank right inside his skull, like stones in a deep well. He looked like a living skeleton, and suffered from terrible pain and hunger.

Traditional stories also say that Siddhartha lived in dangerous and hostile forests, which were too hot during the day and freezing at night. He slept on a bed of thorns as part of his ascetic practices. He was frightened when the animals came but he never ran away.

Key terms
- ascetic: living a simple and strict lifestyle with few pleasures or possessions; someone who follows ascetic practices
- meditation: a practice of calming and focusing the mind, and reflecting deeply on specific teachings to penetrate their true meaning

Discussion activity
Many people have found simplicity helpful in living a religious life. Discuss with a partner why some people have taken this further, ignoring the needs of the body. What are the dangers of this?

Activities
1. In your own words, explain what an ascetic is.
2. Give three different methods that Siddhartha tried in order to resolve the problem of suffering.
3. Explain why the meeting at the River Nairanjana was important for Siddhartha.

Turning away from asceticism

One day, Siddhartha was bathing in the River Nairanjana. When he got out of the water he saw a girl who was looking after a herd of cows for her father. The girl offered Siddhartha a bowl of milk and rice. He accepted the food because he had by this point become too weak even to meditate. Siddhartha’s strength was restored by the food and he decided to stop his ascetic practices, because he was no closer to the truth of why people suffer and how to get rid of this suffering. His ascetic practices taught him discipline and willpower, but they did not provide a cure for suffering. Neither luxury nor an ascetic lifestyle had given Siddhartha any real answers. This led him to develop a ‘middle way’ between the two extremes that he had experienced.

Extension activity
Carefully read the quotation from the Jataka on this page. Rewrite the quotation in your own words, showing that you have understood what the Buddha did and why, after six years, he decided to give up his ascetic life.

Study tip
When learning about the choices that the Buddha made during his life, consider why he made them, and how they helped him in his search for enlightenment.

Summary
You should now be able to explain what happened to Siddhartha after he left the palace and decided to live as an ascetic. You should also be able to understand why Siddhartha wanted to become an ascetic, and why he decided to stop following ascetic practices.

"And the Bodhisattva ["One aspiring to Awakening"] himself, who was determined to practise austerities in their most extreme form began to subsist on one grain of sesame or rice a day. He even took to complete fasting … When the Great Being was practising severe austerities for six years it was to him like a time of intertwining the sky with knots. Realising the practice of such austerities was not the path to Enlightenment he went about gathering alms in villages and townships in order to revert to solid food, and he subsisted on it.

The Jataka, vol. 1, p. 67"
1.6 The concept of dependent arising

What is dependent arising?

Dependent arising (paticcasamuppada) expresses the Buddhist vision of the nature of reality. It says that everything arises, and continues, dependent upon conditions. Nothing is permanent and unchanging. Dependent arising is often expressed in this simple formula:

- when this is, that is
- from the arising of this, comes the arising of that
- when this is not, that is not
- when this ends, that ends.

This basically expresses the view that life is an interdependent web of conditions. For example, a tree depends on soil, rain and sunshine to survive. Everything else also depends on certain conditions to survive. Nothing is independent of supporting conditions, which means that nothing is eternal, including human beings. Everything is a constant process of change.

The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, explained dependent arising like this:

All events and incidents in life are so intimately linked with the fate of others that a single person on his or her own cannot even begin to act. Many ordinary human activities, both positive and negative, cannot even be conceived of apart from the existence of other people … in reliance upon the existence of others it becomes possible for the media to create fame or disrepute for someone. On your own you cannot create any fame or disrepute no matter how loud you might shout. The closest you can get is to create an echo of your own voice.

Tenzin Gyatso (the Dalai Lama)

The Tibetan Wheel of Life

The Tibetan Wheel of Life illustrates the process of dependent arising in relation to human life, death and rebirth. The outer circle of the wheel is made up of 12 links or stages (nidanas). The 12th link (old age and death) leads directly into the first link (ignorance). This represents the Buddhist teaching about rebirth: many Buddhists believe that intentions lead to actions, which in turn lead to consequences. In the cycle of life, good intentions lead to good actions. Good actions can lead to a more favourable rebirth. Kamma is a specific example of dependent arising that explains how a person’s actions create the conditions for their future happiness or suffering.

For Buddhists, the ultimate aim is to break free of the cycle of samsara, because this is what causes suffering. The cycle is broken by following the Buddhist path but, more specifically, through breaking the habit of craving (tanha). For this reason, Buddhist practice focuses on the relationship between feeling and craving. When someone has an unpleasant feeling, they want to escape it, and when they have a pleasant feeling they become attached to it. Buddhism teaches that this kind of automatic response is what leads to suffering. Through breaking this response, and coming to understand the Buddha’s teachings in other ways as well, Buddhists may achieve nibbana: a state of liberation, peace, and happiness.

Activities

1. In your own words, explain what dependent arising means.
2. Analyse the existence of your school in terms of dependent arising. What conditions are necessary for it to continue?
3. How can kamma affect a person’s future?

Key terms

- dependent arising: the idea that all things arise in dependence upon conditions
- the Tibetan Wheel of Life: an image that symbolises samsara, often found in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and temples
- nidanas: 12 factors that illustrate the process of birth, death and rebirth
- samsara: the repeating cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth
- kamma (karma): a person’s actions; the idea that skilful actions result in happiness and unskilful ones in suffering
- nibbana (nirvana): a state of complete enlightenment, happiness and peace

Objectives

- Understand what is meant by the concept of dependent arising.
- Understand the Tibetan Wheel of Life as an example of dependent arising.
The Arhat and the Bodhisattva

Becoming an Arhat

For Theravada Buddhists, an Arhat is a ‘perfected person’ who has overcome the main causes of suffering – the three poisons of greed, hatred and ignorance – to achieve enlightenment. When someone becomes an Arhat, they are no longer reborn when they die. This means they are finally freed from the suffering of existence in the cycle of birth and death (samsara), and they can attain nibbana. This goal is achieved by following the Eightfold Path and concentrating on wisdom, morality and meditation.

During the Buddha’s lifetime, many of his disciples became Arhats. Among them were the first five monks the Buddha was with and the Buddha’s own father, Suddhodana.

I have no teacher, and one like me Exists nowhere in all the world …
I am the Teacher Supreme.
I alone am a Fully Enlightened One
Whose fires are quenched and extinguished.

The Buddha in the Majjhima Nikaya, vol. 1, p. 171

Mahayana Buddhists sometimes use the term Arhat to refer to someone who is far along the path of enlightenment but has not yet become enlightened. However, for Mahayana Buddhists the ideal is to become a Bodhisattva rather than an Arhat.

A Bodhisattva

A Bodhisattva is someone who sees their own enlightenment as being bound up with the enlightenment of all beings. Out of compassion, they remain in the cycle of samsara in order to help others achieve enlightenment as well. The ultimate goal for Mahayana Buddhists is to become Bodhisattvas.

Bodhisattvas combine being compassionate with being wise. Mahayana Buddhists believe that the original emphasis of the Buddha’s teachings to his disciples was to ‘go forth for the welfare of the many’, and Bodhisattvas aim to do just this.

However innumerable sentient beings are; I vow to save them.

A Bodhisattva vow

A person becomes a Bodhisattva by perfecting certain attributes in their lives. There are six of these that Mahayana Buddhists focus on (called the six perfections):

1. generosity – to be charitable and generous in all that is done
2. morality – to live with good morals and ethical behaviour
3. patience – to practise being patient in all things
4. energy – to cultivate the energy and perseverance needed to keep going even when things get difficult
5. meditation – to develop concentration and awareness
6. wisdom – to obtain wisdom and understanding.

Mahayana Buddhists believe there are earthly and transcendent Bodhisattvas. The ‘earthy’ ones continue to be reborn into the world, to live on Earth, while the ‘transcendent’ ones remain in some region between the Earth and nibbana as spiritual or mythical beings. However, they remain active in the world, appearing in different forms to help others and lead them to enlightenment. Mahayana Buddhists pray to these Bodhisattvas in times of need.

I have no teacher, and one like me Exists nowhere in all the world …
I am the Teacher Supreme.
I alone am a Fully Enlightened One
Whose fires are quenched and extinguished.

The Buddha in the Majjhima Nikaya, vol. 1, p. 171

Key terms

- Arhat: for Theravada Buddhists, someone who has become enlightened
- Bodhisattva: for Mahayana Buddhists, someone who has become enlightened but chooses to remain in the cycle of samsara to help others achieve enlightenment as well

Objectives

- Consider two different goals of human destiny in Buddhism.
- Understand the differences between an Arhat and a Bodhisattva.

Discussion activity

Look at the statements below and decide which ones you agree with and which ones you disagree with. Discuss as a whole class.

1. Bodhisattvas should not have a god-like status because that is not what Buddhism is all about.
2. Buddhists should not rely on others to help them because the Buddha said that people should seek out their own path for themselves.
3. Seeking enlightenment just for yourself shows vanity.
4. Arhats do not need to be compassionate and generous to others.

Activities

1. Read the statements below and decide whether you think they are true or false. Give reasons for your answers.
   a. An Arhat is someone who is close to enlightenment but has not yet achieved it.
   b. Arhats wish to stay in the cycle of samsara.
   c. There are five perfections that Bodhisattvas are trying to achieve.
   d. Bodhisattvas put off their own enlightenment to save others.
2. Give three differences between Arhats and Bodhisattvas.

Summary

You should now understand what Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists believe are the goals of human destiny. You should be able to explain what an Arhat and Bodhisattva are, and how Buddhists aim to become one.

Links

- Read more about the six perfections on pages 72–73.

Research activity

Look up the Buddhist story of ‘The Hungry Tiger’. Try to work out how this story shows compassion and wisdom in action.

Study tip

Try to remember the differences between what Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists believe about achieving enlightenment.

Links

- Read more about the six perfections on pages 72–73.

Study tip

Try to remember the differences between what Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists believe about achieving enlightenment.

Summary

You should now understand what Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists believe are the goals of human destiny. You should be able to explain what an Arhat and Bodhisattva are, and how Buddhists aim to become one.
2.7 Ceremonies and rituals associated with death and mourning

**Buddhist beliefs about death**

Buddhist tradition teaches that when a Buddhist dies, their kammic energy leaves their body and is reborn in a new one. Death therefore is not seen as an end, only a transition from one form to another. While Buddhists will naturally grieve the loss of people they loved, they also bear in mind what the Buddha taught about impermanence being a natural part of life. Funerals are a valuable reminder of this teaching of impermanence. Nothing lasts, and people suffer less if they are able to accept this fact.

Funeral customs differ between the various Buddhist traditions and from one country to the next. Some funerals can be very elaborate and even noisy rituals, while others are simple, reflective and calm.

**Theravada funerals**

In Theravada communities, very little money is usually spent on a funeral. Instead the family and friends may donate to a worthy cause and transfer the merit to the deceased. (We saw on page 36 how some Theravada Buddhists believe it is possible to transfer the kamma created by your own good actions and deeds to someone else. In this case, the good kamma that is created by donating to a worthy cause is transferred to the dead person, to help them have a more favourable rebirth.)

Rituals that transfer merit to the deceased may also be performed by family members or other mourners. For example, they might offer cloth to make new robes to a senior monk of a nearby monastery on behalf of the deceased person.

At the hour of death, the king and the beggar are exactly equal in that no amount of relatives or possessions can affect or prevent death. But who is the richer at the time of death? If the beggar has created more merits, then although he looks materially poor he is really the rich man.

Thubten Zopa Rinpoche (Nepalese Buddhist monk)

A shrine may be set up to display the deceased’s portrait, along with offerings to the Buddha of candles, incense and flowers. An image of the Buddha is usually placed beside or in front of the shrine. Monks will offer a funeral of a lay person. They may give a sermon and transfer the merit to the deceased. (We saw on page 36 how some Theravada Buddhists believe they can transfer merit to another person. Explain what this means, and how this belief can be seen in a Theravada funeral.

A Buddhist funeral in Thailand with a shrine to the deceased person

A shrine can be set up to display the deceased’s portrait, along with offerings to the Buddha of candles, incense and flowers. An image of the Buddha is usually placed beside or in front of the shrine. Monks will offer a funeral of a lay person. They may give a sermon and transfer the merit to the deceased. (We saw on page 36 how some Theravada Buddhists believe they can transfer merit to another person. Explain what this means, and how this belief can be seen in a Theravada funeral.

A Buddhist funeral in Thailand with a shrine to the deceased person

**Activities**

1. Read the following statements. Which do you think Buddhists would agree with and which do you think Buddhists would disagree with? Give reasons for your answers.
   a. ‘There is no life but this one. When you die, that’s it. What is important is making the most of this life because it’s all you’ve got.’
   b. ‘I believe life is the same as all energy; it never ends but rather passes from one living thing to another.’
   c. ‘My Nan died five years ago but somehow I feel that she is still with me at times. Your spirit has to live on after death.’
   d. ‘I know that I believe in a heaven. I want to go there when I die. I can pray to God and he will take me there at my death.’
2. Some Theravada Buddhists believe they can transfer merit to another person. Explain what this means, and how this belief can be seen in a Theravada funeral.
3. Write out a script for a radio interview with a Buddhist monk. What questions about death and mourning would you like to put to this monk, and what answers do you think he would give?

Do you think that Buddhist teachings about the naturalness of impermanence could make it easier to accept the fact that someone you love has died?

Research what Buddhists believe about death and mourning. How did he die, and what was his view of an afterlife?

Theravada funerals

**Objectives**

- Understand Buddhist teachings about death.
- Know about different Buddhist ceremonies and rituals associated with death and mourning.

**Summary**

You should now have some understanding of Buddhist teachings about death and impermanence. You should also have some idea of the variety of rituals and ceremonies associated with death and mourning in Theravada Buddhist belief systems.
Worship and festivals – summary
You should now be able to:
✔ explain the nature, use and importance of Buddhist places of worship, including temples, shrines, monasteries (viharas), halls for meditation or learning (gompas) and their key features including Buddha rupa, artefacts and offerings
✔ explain how Buddhists perform puja in the home and in the temple, including chanting, mantra recitation, and the use of malas
✔ explain the aims, methods and significance of different types of meditation, including samatha meditation, vipassana meditation, and the visualisation of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas
✔ explain the practice and significance of different ceremonies and rituals associated with death and mourning in Theravada Buddhism, and in Japan and Tibet
✔ explain how Buddhists celebrate the festivals of Wesak and Parinirvana Day, including their origins and significance; understand the importance of festivals and retreats to Buddhists in Great Britain today.

Buddhist ethics – summary
You should now be able to:
✔ explain Buddhist teachings about kamma (karma) and rebirth, compassion (karuna) and loving-kindness (metta)
✔ explain Buddhist teachings about the five moral precepts
✔ explain Buddhist teachings about the six perfections in the Mahayana tradition.

Sample student answer – the 4-mark question
1. Write an answer to the following practice question:
   Explain two contrasting types of Buddhist meditation.
   [4 marks]
2. Read the following sample student answer:
   “Some Buddhists practice samatha meditation, which is all about focusing on one thing, like your breathing. The purpose is to clear the mind of emotions and thoughts and just focus your attention on one thing. This helps Buddhists to learn how to concentrate, and also to calm the mind.
   A different type of meditation is called metta or loving-kindness meditation, where a Buddhist will try to think loving thoughts firstly to family, then acquaintances, then strangers and even enemies, which would be very hard to do.”
3. With a partner, discuss the sample answer. Is the focus of the answer correct? Is anything missing from the answer? How do you think it could be improved?
4. What mark (out of 4) would you give this answer? Look at the mark scheme in the Introduction (AO1). What are the reasons for the mark you have given?
5. Now swap your answer with your partner’s and mark each other’s responses. What mark (out of 4) would you give the response? Refer to the mark scheme and give reasons for the mark you award.

Sample student answer – the 5-mark question
1. Write an answer to the following practice question:
   Explain two reasons why temples are important in Buddhist worship.
   Refer to Buddhist teaching in your answer.
   [5 marks]
2. Read the following sample student answer:
   “Buddhists can worship at home with a personal shrine, or they can go to a temple where they can be with fellow Buddhists. This is one of the reasons why temples are important for Buddhist worship, because all the focus is there with the right atmosphere for worship with like-minded followers.
   Another reason is so that a lay Buddhist can meet a monk and ask for help and guidance with their meditation. They might feel that they can only gain this specialist help at a Buddhist temple.”
3. With a partner, discuss the sample answer. Is the focus of the answer correct? Is anything missing from the answer? How do you think it could be improved?
4. What mark (out of 5) would you give this answer? Look at the mark scheme in the Introduction (AO1). What are the reasons for the mark you have given?
5. Now swap your answer with your partner’s and mark each other’s responses. What mark (out of 5) would you give the response? Refer to the mark scheme and give reasons for the mark you award.
6 Religion, peace and conflict

6.1 Peace, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation

Right from the beginnings of humanity, people have attempted to gain territory or settle disputes through fighting. Even today, somewhere in the world, it is likely that people will be injured, killed or displaced as a result of war. While all countries have laws against murder, the rules of war are different – in war, killing is generally considered to be acceptable.

Buddhism is very much a religion that promotes peace. Buddhist teachings say there are no justifiable reasons for war. War is wrong because it expresses and encourages hateful and greedy attitudes and behaviour, which result in suffering. Buddhism teaches that people cannot relieve their own suffering through making others suffer.

Peace

One definition of peace is the absence of war. The intention of those fighting in a war is to create peace once the war is over. But this is often difficult to achieve, because the instability and resentment left after a war often leads to fighting breaking out again.

The Buddha also taught that peace comes from within, and that it is important for Buddhists to try to develop a sense of peace. The Buddha said that violence comes from people’s minds, so to stop violence people must begin by developing a sense of peace within themselves. This idea is echoed in the constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which states that:

Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.

Buddhist teachings agree with this statement. The Buddha taught that if people have peaceful minds, this will lead to peaceful speech and peaceful actions. If people’s minds are at peace then the world will be at peace. Many Buddhists therefore focus on developing this sense of peace within themselves. Some Buddhists also take part in campaigns that further global peace, because creating peace through non-violent means is an important goal in Buddhism.

Justice

Justice is often linked with equality. If people are not given the same opportunities, this may be seen as unfair and could create resentment. This could lead to conflict, especially if more privileged parts of the world are seen to be the cause of inequality. Many wars are fought to try to create justice.

Buddhism teaches that inflicting suffering on people through war is not the way to create a just world, because it simply causes more suffering. Most Buddhists think it is better to use non-violent means to accomplish this goal, while practising generosity and letting go (non-attachment).

Forgiveness

Buddhism teaches that forgiveness is important, both to prevent war in the first place and to establish peace after a war has ended. Forgiveness is also important in reducing suffering, because it allows people to let go of the hatred and anger that they feel.

Buddhists believe that forgiveness can be developed through meditation. It is often a part of loving-kindness meditation, where a Buddhist might think forgiving thoughts towards themselves as well as other people. For Buddhists, people who have wronged them provide them with the opportunity to develop patience and forgiveness. Buddhism teaches that all beings want to be happy, but if someone has done something wrong, they will suffer as a consequence. It is therefore better to develop compassion for them rather than hatred or resentment.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation follows conflict. It is when two people or groups who have disagreed or fought with each other make up. This requires more than just words. It involves a conscious effort to rebuild a relationship, and to work to ensure there is no more conflict. Both sides have to play an active part in this.

In order to bring about reconciliation, Buddhist teachings stress the importance of letting go of blame and resentment, because these attitudes prevent a person from developing a more harmonious relationship with others. They also contribute to the person’s own suffering.

Once forgiveness and reconciliation have taken place, a relationship is much stronger, because the two parties have learned to appreciate and accept each other for what they are. Forgiveness and reconciliation do not mean denying the difficulties of the past, but learning from the past to build a better, more peaceful future.

Key terms

- war: fighting between nations to resolve issues between them
- peace: an absence of conflict, which leads to happiness and harmony
- justice: bringing about what is right and fair, according to the law, or making up for a wrong that has been committed
- forgiveness: showing compassion, and pardoning someone for what they have done wrong
- reconciliation: when individuals or groups restore friendly relations after conflict or disagreement; also a sacrament in the Catholic Church

Objectives

- Understand war as a way of resolving differences.
- Explain the concepts of peace, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Discussion activity

Is the best way to achieve peace to encourage everyone to develop a peaceful state of mind? Discuss with a partner.

Study tip

Remember that the four concepts of peace, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation are linked. When writing about one of them, it is likely that you will need to refer to at least one other.

Activities

1. Explain how the four concepts of peace, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation link together in the context of a war and what happens after a war.
2. Imagine that you have been ordered by your government to take part in a war. Write a letter to the government explaining why you do not want to take part, referring to Buddhist teachings and beliefs.

Links

Read more about loving-kindness meditation on pages 68–69, and more about forgiveness on pages 150–151.

Summary

You should now understand how the concepts of peace, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation are linked to each other, particularly in the context of war. You should also be able to explain Buddhist attitudes towards these concepts.