



**B**uddhism (a religion and ethical system) was founded in India by Prince Siddhartha Gautama, later known as Gautama Buddha ('Enlightened One'), who was born in Nepal over 2500 years ago. Buddhism began when the prince re-evaluated his privileged life after witnessing the Four Sights: an elderly, ailing man; an ill man; a deceased man; a wandering monk. Through his own Enlightenment – achieved while sitting under a bodhi tree – the Buddha discovered how to alleviate suffering. His teachings were written down after his death. Nowadays there are over 300 million Buddhists worldwide.

*Catherine Chambers guides you through the basic beliefs of the six core religions. This month: Buddhism*

## Main beliefs and practices

- Desire, greed, hate and delusion lead to unhappiness and condemn humans to the 'wheel of life' – the cycle of birth, suffering, death and rebirth. An individual's behaviour will determine the state into which they are reborn (the process of karma).
- Buddhists accept the belief that nothing in life is satisfactory; this is described in the word 'dukkha'.
- Achieving Enlightenment releases a person and leads to Nirvana (perpetual equilibrium and contentment).

Enlightenment requires:

- Accepting The Four Noble Truths: suffering; origin of suffering; extinction of suffering; the Noble Eightfold Path leading to the extinction of suffering.
  - Following The Noble Eightfold Path: right (correct) understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right attentiveness, right concentration.
  - Accepting The Three Jewels: The Buddha's wisdom; Dhamma (his teaching on natural law); Sangha (the Buddhist community).
- Buddhists follow 'The Middle Path' – midway between self-indulgence and self-denial. They also obey the Five Moral Precepts condemning: harming living things; stealing; adultery; lying and spiteful gossip; drink and drugs.
  - Buddhists live modestly, meditate in shrines at home and in the temple. Some 'practise' or perform sustained, formalised physical movements. See [www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/practices.htm](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/practices.htm) for more information.

## Language

- Sacred texts are written in Pali (very old language) and Sanskrit.
- The Pali Canon is authorised written teachings of the Buddha. It contains the Tipitaka (three baskets), which is the most important Buddhist teachings. The Tipitaka is three groups of writing, once written on long leaves sewn together and stored in baskets.
- The Dhammapada (collection of teachings) is recommended as an accessible part of the Tipitaka, with proverbs and discourses.

## Key dates and festivals

- Around 580BCE: the Buddha is born in Lumbini, Nepal.
- 400–350BCE: Buddhism spreads across northern India – then to Sri Lanka, Burma and China.
- The Buddha's life is celebrated on the first full moon in May.
- Festival practices can include offerings of food in shrines, temples and to the poor and monks; meditating; chanting; pageants and processions.

## Points to remember

- Buddhism does not reflect upon a supreme creator god.
- Buddha said: 'Hold firm to the truth as a lamp and a refuge, and do not look for refuge to anything besides yourselves.'
- The two main types of Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana, offer different

aspects of, and routes to, achieving Enlightenment – and are mostly practised in different parts of Asia.

- Gautama Buddha is accepted as the highest Buddha. Others are recognised by many Buddhists.
- In images, Gautama Buddha's countenance is benign but not smiling.

## Buddhism and music

Buddhist music includes chant, either unaccompanied or with hand bells, cymbals, gongs and discs. Conch trumpets, drums, harps and lutes have also been played. Chants include one that commits to The Three Jewels. See [www.dharmaresonance.com/buddhistmusic.htm](http://www.dharmaresonance.com/buddhistmusic.htm)

## Art and design

- Artforms vary according to region and type of Buddhism.
- The 'wheel of life' is universally depicted. Other Buddhist symbols include the lotus flower (meaning 'purity').
- Mandalas are elaborate, cosmic depictions of Buddhist philosophy.
- Tibetan thangkas are brightly painted or embroidered pictures or banners about the Buddha.
- For more information see [www.buddhanet.net/mandalas.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/mandalas.htm) ■

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# Buddhism