

Theravada Buddhism

Southern Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism is strongest in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Burma (Myanmar). It is sometimes called 'Southern Buddhism'.

The name means 'the doctrine of the elders' - the elders being the senior Buddhist monks.

This school of Buddhism believes that it has remained closest to the original teachings of the Buddha. However, it does not over-emphasise the status of these teachings in a fundamentalist way - they are seen as tools to help people understand the truth, and not as having merit of their own.

Theravada beliefs

- The Supernatural: Many faiths offer supernatural solutions to the spiritual problems of human beings. Buddhism does not. The basis of all forms of Buddhism is to use meditation for awakening (or enlightenment), not outside powers.
 - Supernatural powers are not disregarded but they are incidental and the Buddha warned against them as fetters on the path.
- The Buddha: Siddhartha Gautama was a man who became Buddha, the Awakened One - much in the same way as Jesus became Christ. Since his death the only contact with him is through his teachings which point to the awakened state.
- God: There is no omnipotent creator God of the sort found in Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Gods exist as various types of spiritual being but with limited powers.
- The Path to Enlightenment: Each being has to make their own way to enlightenment without the help of God or gods. Buddha's teachings show the way, but making the journey is up to us.

Theravada life

Theravada Buddhism emphasises attaining self-liberation through one's own efforts. Meditation and concentration are vital elements of the way to enlightenment. The ideal road is to dedicate oneself to full-time monastic life.

The follower is expected to "abstain from all kinds of evil, to accumulate all that is good and to purify their mind".

Meditation is one of the main tools by which a Theravada Buddhist transforms themselves, and so a monk spends a great deal of time in meditation.

When a person achieves liberation they are called a 'worthy person' - an Arhat or Arahant.

Despite the monastic emphasis, Theravada Buddhism has a substantial role and place for lay followers.

Monastic life

Most Theravada monks live as part of monastic communities. Some join as young as seven, but one can join at any age. A novice is called a samanera and a full monk is called a bikkhu.

The monastic community as a whole is called the sangha.

Monks (and nuns) undertake the training of the monastic order (the Vinaya) which consist of 227 rules (more for nuns). Within these rules or precepts are five which are undertaken by all those trying to adhere to a Buddhist way of life. The Five Precepts are to undertake the rule of training to:

- Refrain from harming living beings
- Refrain from taking that which is not freely given
- Refrain from sexual misconduct
- Refrain from wrong speech; such as lying, idle chatter, malicious gossip or harsh speech
- Refrain from intoxicating drink and drugs which lead to carelessness

Of particular interest is the fact that Theravadan monks and nuns are not permitted to eat after midday or handle money.

Meditation

Meditation is impossible for a person who lacks wisdom. Wisdom is impossible for a person who does not meditate. A person who both meditates and possesses wisdom is close to nibbana.

The Theravada tradition has two forms of meditation.

- Samatha: Calming meditation
- Vipassana: Insight meditation

Samatha

This is the earliest form of meditation, and is not unique to Buddhism. It's used to make the mind calmer and take the person to higher *jhanic states*. (Jhanic states are hard to explain simply; 'states of consciousness' is probably the closest easily understandable definition.) The effects of Samatha meditation are temporary.

Vipassana

This form of meditation is used to achieve insight into the true nature of things. This is very difficult to get because human beings are used to seeing things distorted by their preconceptions, opinions, and past experiences.

The aim is a complete change of the way we perceive and understand the universe, and unlike the temporary changes brought about by Samatha, the aim of Vipassana is permanent change.

Lay people and monks

The code of behaviour for lay people is much less strict than that for monks. They follow the five basic Buddhist principles that have already been mentioned.

A strong relationship

The relationship between monks and lay people in Theravada Buddhism is very strong. This type of Buddhism could not, in fact, exist in its present form without this interaction.

It is a way of mutual support - lay people supply food, medicine, and cloth for robes, and monks give spiritual support, blessings, and teachings.

But this is not a tit for tat situation. Monks are not allowed to request anything from lay people; and lay people cannot demand anything from the monks. The spirit of it is more in the nature of open-hearted giving.

The system works well and is so firmly established in most Theravadan countries that monks are usually amply provided for, depending on the wealth or poverty of the local people.

Ceremonies and commemoration days

There are numerous ceremonies and commemoration days which lay people celebrate, such as Wesak which marks the birth, enlightenment, and parinibbana (passing away) of the Buddha, and for these events everyone converges on the local temples.

Retreats

Monasteries often have facilities for lay people to stay in retreat. The accommodation is usually basic and one has to abide by Eight Precepts (to abstain from killing, stealing, engaging in sexual activity, unskillful speech, taking intoxicating drink or drugs, eating after midday, wearing adornments, seeking entertainments, and sleeping in soft, luxurious beds).

Texts

The fundamental teachings were collected into their final form around the 3rd century BCE, after a Buddhist council at Patna in India.

The teachings were written down in Sri Lanka during the 1st century CE. They were written in Pali (a language like Sanskrit) and are known as the Pali canon. It's called the Tipitaka - the three baskets. The three sections are:

- the Vinaya Pitaka (the code for monastic life)
 - These rules are followed by Buddhist monks and nuns, who recite the 227 rules twice a month.
- the Sutta Pitaka (teachings of the Buddha)
 - This contains the whole of Buddhist philosophy and ethics. It includes the Dhammapada which contains the essence of Buddha's teaching.
- the Abhidamma Pitaka (supplementary philosophy and religious teaching)
 - The texts have remained unaltered since they were written down. Buddhist monks in the Theravada tradition consider it important to learn sections of these texts by heart.

Although these texts are accepted as definitive scriptures, non-Buddhists should understand that they do not contain divine revelations or absolute truths that followers accept as a matter of faith. They are tools that the individual tries to use in their own life.

Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism is strongest in Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Mongolia.

Mahayana Buddhism is not a single group but a collection of Buddhist traditions: Zen Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism are all forms of Mahayana Buddhism.

Theravada and Mahayana are both rooted in the basic teachings of the historical Buddha, and both emphasise the individual search for liberation from the cycle of samsara (birth, death, rebirth...). The methods or practices for doing that, however, can be very different.

The Bodhisattva

Mahayana talks a great deal about the bodhisattva (the 'enlightenment being') as being the ideal way for a Buddhist to live.

Anyone can embark on the bodhisattva path. This is a way of life, a way of selflessness; it is a deep wish for all beings, no matter who they are, to be liberated from suffering.

The Bodhisattva Vow

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

However inexhaustible the defilements are, I vow to extinguish them.

However immeasurable the dharmas are, I vow to master them.

However incomparable enlightenment is, I vow to attain it.

The Trikaya - the three bodies of Buddha

Mahayana Buddhism says that there are three aspects of Buddhahood, which it describes by regarding Buddha as having three bodies (trikaya):

- Dharmakaya: Buddha is transcendent - he is the same thing as the ultimate truth.
- Sambhogakaya: Buddha's body of bliss, or enjoyment body.
- Nirmanakaya: Buddha's earthly body - just like any other human being's body.

KOREAN ZEN BUDDHISM

Son Buddhism - Korean Zen

The Korean word for Ch'an or Zen is *Son*.

Buddhism is highly significant in Korea. The latest figures (1991) show 26 Buddhist sects and 9,231 temples with more than 11 million followers in Korea.

The largest Son sect today in Korea is the Chogye Order which includes about 90% of Korean Buddhists.

The name 'Chogye' is significant in that it was named after the mountain in south China where the great Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng, had his temple. Koreans say that their tradition is derived directly from Hui-Neng.

History

Buddhism arrived in Korea in the 4th century CE. It spread widely and became the state religion when the three kingdoms that made up the country were united in 688 CE.

Son was introduced there in approximately the 7th century CE by a Korean monk named Pomnang, said to have studied under the fourth Chinese patriarch, but little is known of him or of these early times.

During the 9th century CE, Son Buddhism became the dominant form of Buddhism in Korea as a result of a steady stream of Korean masters going to China to study Ch'an Buddhism and returning to Korea to teach.

The 13th century monk Chinul

One of the most outstanding figures in the history of Son was a man by the name of Chinul.

As a young monk he passed examinations necessary to bring him into the monastic hierarchy, but rejected such a lifestyle and instead retreated to the mountains. He devoted himself to study and contemplation, deeply penetrating the Buddhist texts.

In 1190, at the age of 32, Chinul formed a community called the Concentration and Wisdom Community which remained together in retreat for 7 years. Gradually, other monks joined him attracted by the seriousness of the group.

The community grew and moved to a place (later renamed Mount Chogye) in about 1200 CE, enlarging a small hermitage into a monastery complex. This temple, Songgwang Sa, exists to this day as an active and thriving Son community.

Buddhism retreats

Son remained significant in Korea until 1392 CE, when a revolt replaced the pro-Buddhist government with one that favoured Confucianism and regarded Buddhism as an un-Korean influence.

Buddhists were still allowed to practise, but official oppression drove them from the centres of power into remote mountain monasteries, changing Buddhism in Korea from a people's religion into a largely monastic practice.

This also changed the nature of Buddhism, and the Son tradition moved away from textual study to focusing on meditation practice with the aim of reaching the same state that the Buddha had reached.

The essence of Son

The following hints at the Buddha's truth to which they aspired:

"Heaven and earth cannot cover its body, mountains and rivers cannot hide its light. Nothing of it accumulates on the outside or the inside. Even the 80,000 texts cannot contain or make a record of it. No scholar can describe it, the intellectuals cannot know it, the literati and writers cannot recognise it. Even to talk about it is a mistake, to think about it is an error."

Nevertheless, Son Buddhists see a basic unity between truth as described in Buddhist doctrine and truth as experienced through meditation. In other words, they find the true meaning of the texts through personal experience.

Son Buddhism focuses on the enlightenment of a sudden awakening, but even if a person achieves the realisation that they are innately Buddha, that doesn't mean they cease to practise. On the contrary, the sentiment is "sudden

enlightenment followed by gradual practise" -- the practice of enlightenment, or of being Awakened.

NICHEREN BUDDHISM

Individual empowerment

Nichiren Buddhism is a Japanese Buddhist movement in the Mahayana tradition. It is also popular in the West and has a fast growing membership in the UK.

Nichiren Buddhism differs from other schools of Buddhism in focusing on this world, and in its view that it is the only correct tradition. It also emphasises the importance of individuals taking responsibility for improving themselves.

Although it can be seen as a highly self-focused religion, followers of Nichiren Buddhism believe that individual empowerment and inner transformation contribute, in turn, to a better and more peaceful world.

The singer Tina Turner is one of its most high profile followers. In the 1993 movie *What's Love Got to Do with It*, an autobiographical film about Turner's rise to stardom and her relationship with her abusive husband, she chanted the Buddhist *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* mantra.

Beliefs: instant enlightenment

This is one of the key elements of Nichiren Buddhism. It teaches that enlightenment is available to everybody. One writer has encapsulated this idea as a "shortcut to salvation".

The essence of enlightenment is opening a person's innate Buddha-nature in this world.

Triple refuge

Triple refuge means the Buddha, the dharma or law, and the sangha or community.

In Nichiren Buddhism, Nichiren himself is regarded as the Buddha, while the dharma is in the chant and the gohonzon.

The Nichiren Shoshu school of Buddhism teaches that the sangha is the priesthood alone, while Soka Gakkai does not restrict the sangha in this way.

Ten principles

Nichiren Buddhists believe in ten basic principles as fundamental to human make-up. These are:

- Hell - a condition which appears when someone feels in despair or desperate.
- Hunger - when someone constantly wants something, for example, to be like someone else rather than accept their own life.
- Animality - is governed by instinct and may lead someone to prey on those more vulnerable. For example, a power hungry boss may abuse his position and treat his/her staff like slaves.
- Anger - encompasses traits of selfishness, competitiveness, and arrogance.
- Tranquillity - is a calm state of life.
- Rapture - is the pleasures one feels when one's desires are fulfilled.
- Learning - appears when someone seeks new skills.
- Absorption is a condition based on knowledge and wisdom.
- Bodhisattva - means 'disciple of the Buddha' and is a state where people have strong concern for others which ultimately helps them to overcome their challenges.
- Buddhahood - is the ultimate state to be in as it includes compassion, wisdom, and humaneness.

Development

Nichiren Buddhism began in medieval Japan. It has its roots in the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin (1222-1282), a 13th century Japanese monk who tried to reform Buddhism and Japanese society. In many ways he was a Buddhist Martin Luther who lived centuries before the great Protestant reformer.

His teaching was based on the Mahayana sutra (scripture) known as the Lotus Sutra.

The book of 28 chapters of poems and stories is the main scripture of Nichiren Buddhism. The Lotus Sutra was probably compiled over 200 years and completed around 50-150 CE.

Nichiren came to regard the Lotus Sutra as a supremely authoritative scripture. He taught that it should always be read and applied to the contemporary context -- to the time and place in which the reader happened to be.

The Lotus Sutra has influenced Japanese Buddhism in general, and not just Nichiren Buddhism.

Seeking enlightenment

Nichiren came to believe that he was living in a degraded age, an age of mappo (very similar to the English term "end times") where Buddha's teachings were misinterpreted and as a consequence many bad things were happening.

Nichiren followed the Lotus Sutra in his teaching that all living beings could attain enlightenment on earth and could do this through chanting and 'human revolution'.

Nichiren emphasised the Lotus Sutra to the extent that he taught that it was the only way that could lead to true Buddhahood, and create a truly good world.

He taught that other Buddhist practices no longer provided a road to enlightenment, and that it was the neglect of the Lotus Sutra that was responsible for the evils of his time; including such things as earthquakes.

Nichiren was not just a scripture scholar, he was an activist. Having worked out what was wrong with contemporary Buddhism he did something about it. He engaged in shakubuku. This Japanese word means "to break and subdue".

Exile and execution

Nichiren not only embarked on missionary work for his own cause, but also on energetic disparagement of rival Buddhist views, to the extent of warning that those who followed them were going to hell. This made him extremely unpopular with other Buddhist teachers.

Nichiren also rebuked the rulers of Japan for allowing rival Buddhist schools of thought to promote "erroneous teaching". The job of the government, he said, was to promote the Lotus Sutra and look after the monks who taught it. Unless the government did this, Nichiren and his monks were duty bound to oppose the rulers of Japan. Loyalty to the Lotus Sutra was more important than loyalty to country or secular authority.

He was exiled twice by the government and some of his disciples were executed. He refused to compromise his principles and continued to challenge the established schools of Buddhism.

During his second exile on Sado Island he wrote letters of encouragement to his disciples which later formed some of his most important works.

In 1274, he was freed and the government cleared him of any wrongdoing. He died on October 13 1282, surrounded by his closest disciples.

Today there are many schools of Nichiren Buddhism. The largest are the Soka Gakkai, Nichiren Shoshu and Nichiren Shu.

The Soka Gakkai is the only Buddhist group in the West that has attracted a significant multi-racial membership. With 8,000 active members in the UK, the movement is unusual in the Buddhist tradition. It has many centres throughout Britain run by the Soka Gakkai movement.

Unlike other schools of Buddhism, its members actively proselytise. Similarities can still be drawn between Nichiren practice and other forms of Buddhism.

Nichiren Buddhists meet weekly or fortnightly in their own homes. Members of the practice are given a Gohonzon (scroll), so that they can practice at home rather than going to a temple.

People are divided into groups based on their location and will appoint an overall leader of the group, a men's and women's leader and a youth division leader. This is a very structured arrangement which can be reproduced universally.

Pilgrimages are made to the head temple of the Nichiren Shoshu school of Buddhism at Taisekiji, near Fujinomiya City in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan, where the Dai-Gohonzon is kept, together with the ashes of Nichiren Daishonin.

Soka Gakkai

Value Creating Society

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism was passed from generation to generation in Japan for 700 years giving rise to over thirty different Nichiren denominations in Japan.

In 1930 a lay society known as the Soka Gakkai (Value Creating Society) started to spread its teachings.

Soka Gakkai was founded by the educators Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, who had found parallels between Nichiren's teaching and their philosophy of education.

They followed in Nichiren's political footsteps, challenged the militaristic government during World War Two and were imprisoned for opposing government interference in religion. Makiguchi, who was the society's first president, died in jail on November 18 1944.

After the war, the Japanese constitution allowed freedom of religion for the first time. Toda reconstructed the Soka Gakkai as a movement for people in all aspects of society, not just in education.

By the time he died on April 2 1958 the organisation had reached more than 750,000 households and some of its members had been elected to the Japanese Parliament.

Daisaku Ikeda became the third President on May 3 1960, aged only 32. Under his leadership the organisation grew rapidly and expanded abroad.

In 1975 Soka Gakkai International was established and he became its first president. There are now more than 12 million members in 188 countries worldwide.

In the early 1990s there was a serious split between Soka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shoshu Head Temple. Soka Gakkai objected to various issues

concerned with the roles played by the temple priests and was eventually rejected by the Temple organisation.

Soka Gakkai principles

Soka Gakkai is a distilled form of Nichiren Buddhism, and its teaching that spiritual (and perhaps material) happiness for an individual are achievable in this world through a simple spiritual practice has gained great popularity.

Although this teaching sounds egotistical, Soka Gakkai members are greatly concerned with others, and believe that world peace can be attained by people developing basic principles of altruism, supporting others, non-violence and self development.

Nichiren Shoshu

Conflict

Followers of Nichiren Shoshu believe that they belong to the true school of Nichiren Buddhism.

This belief is disputed by other schools of Nichiren Buddhism.

The dispute hinges on the interpretation of two documents Minobu sojo and Ikegami sojo. These documents state that Nikko (1246-1333) is the successor of Nichiren Daishonin, the founder of Nichiren Buddhism.

Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists argue that Nichiren was the divine reincarnation of Buddha Sakaymuni (563-483 BCE).

Nichiren Shu, however, teaches that Nichiren was not a Buddha but a priest. This is the main doctrinal difference between these two schools of Buddhism.

Other beliefs and practices

Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists believe that personal enlightenment can be achieved in one lifetime.

The fundamental object of worship is the Gohonzon, believed to have been inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin himself on October 12, 1279.

Nichiren Shoshu practitioners revere the Gohonzon as being at the heart of Nichiren's enlightenment. Each successive Nichiren Shoshu High Priest produces and consecrates a new Gohonzon. Every worshipper or Nichiren Shoshu household owns a smaller transcription of this scroll. New believers are issued with a copy at their initiation.

Every morning and evening, Nichiren Shoshu practitioners renew their faith by performing Gongyo - the recitation of certain chapters of the Lotus Sutra and the chanting of Nam Myoho Renge Kyo.

Split with the Soka Gakkai

The Soka Gakkai is based on Nichiren Shoshu teachings. The two organisations split in 1991 and now work as separate bodies.

Nichiren Shu

Oldest sect

Nichiren Shu (or 'Nichiren Faith') is the oldest of the Nichiren Buddhism sects.

Smaller and less well known than the other schools, Nichiren Shu is still seen as being the most mainstream of the Nichiren sects.

This is because followers of Nichiren Shu have maintained links with non-Nichiren Buddhist traditions.

Believers are allowed to take part in other Buddhist spiritual practices, such as silent meditation or Sho Daigyo. They also study the foundational concepts of Buddhism such as the Four Noble Truths and Taking Refuge.

They do not accept Nichiren Shoshu teaching that Nikko was the sole successor of Nichiren Daishonin, the founder of Nichiren Buddhism.

Historical links

As the oldest Nichiren tradition, Nichiren Shu has access to Mount Minobu where Nichiren lived in seclusion and was buried.

The Nichiren Shu also owns some of the founder's most important personal possessions.

Unlike the Soka Gakkai, followers of the Nichiren Shu have not actively evangelised in the West. However its membership has grown in countries across the globe. The Nichiren Shu now ordains non-Japanese speaking priests and has expanded its temples throughout the western world.

Practices

Chanting

The main practice of Nichiren Buddhists is chanting, primarily the mantra *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* which means 'I devote my life to the law itself'.

Chanters repeat this mantra to enter more deeply into the spiritual tradition of the Lotus Sutra.

Mantra: A mantra is a powerful phrase repeated over and over again with profound faith, concentration and feeling. Nam Myoho Renge Kyo is both the

heart and title of the Lotus Sutra, which teaches the enlightenment of all living beings.

Believers also recite sections of the Lotus Sutra as part of their daily practice.

The chant is performed in front of a scroll called the Gohonzon.

Chanting is usually performed for about 30 minutes night and morning and is believed to bring about changes in a person's life and reverse bad karma.

What is Karma? Buddhists believe that our lives are conditioned by our past actions. Actions have consequences: good actions have positive consequences and selfish and unkind actions have negative consequences.

Nichiren Buddhists specifically believe that everyone can change their destiny and bring about the effects they desire. Followers are encouraged to write their personal goals down on a piece of paper and have it in front of them while chanting.

The aim of the practice is to establish high states of self-development. As Yukio Matsudo writes, it "works as a regular and constant inspiration to manifest the qualities of the Buddha in one's daily life."

Matsudo also writes:

[To chant] means to activate the innate Buddha-nature. The activated Buddha-nature... will then appear in one's life as enforced life power and wisdom to live like a 'lotus flower in a muddy pond'. Yukio Matsudo, Protestant Character of Modern Buddhist Movements, Buddhist-Christian Studies, 2000

Chanting versus prayer: This chanting tradition is very different to the tradition of chanted prayer in many other religions. Those who practice it believe that the chant is "an influence at work in the metaphysical economy" and actually changes the force and action of karma.

Practitioners also believe that chanting works not by inviting some supernatural being or power to intervene and change karma, but by affecting karma directly (almost mechanically).

Origin of the chanting practice

The practice originated from Nichiren's teaching that the five characters that formed the title of the Sutra encompassed all the teachings of all the Buddhas.

The Sutra itself tells the reader that reading it is sufficient to achieve enlightenment (and also earthly benefits) - and the character it uses for reading implies reading aloud.

This simple recitation of the title in an act of homage is understood as opening the reciter to the infinite treasure house contained in the Lotus Sutra, and destines such a person to supreme enlightenment, not to mention assuring untold merit and worldly benefit. Ruben L.F. Habito, Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 1999

Gohonzon

This Japanese word means 'supreme object of devotion or worship'. In Nichiren Buddhism it is a paper replica of a scroll originally inscribed by Nichiren. The original was carved on camphor wood and is preserved in the Taisekiji temple.

Followers keep their gohonzon in a small home altar, and face it during their daily chanting.

There have been disputes between the Soka Gakkai (Value Creating Society), and the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood over who has the power to create authentic gohonzons.

Other Practices

Study is an important part of the practice, as followers believe Buddhist study to be fundamental in illuminating one's path in life.

They also read Nichiren's writing in a book called the 'Gosho', which expounds his beliefs and insights through letters and stories.

Working for peace

A number of Nichiren Buddhist organisations are active in working for world peace. These include the monastic order Nipponzan Myōhōji which has built over sixty 'Peace Pagodas' in Japan, and Soka Gakkai which has a major peace education initiative.

Pure Land Buddhism

Pure Land Buddhism offers a way to enlightenment for people who can't handle the subtleties of meditation, endure long rituals, or just live especially good lives.

The essential practice in Pure Land Buddhism is the chanting of the name of Amitabha Buddha with total concentration, trusting that one will be reborn in the Pure Land, a place where it is much easier for a being to work towards enlightenment.

Pure Land Buddhism adds mystical elements to the basic Buddhist teachings which make those teachings easier (and more comforting) to work with.

These elements include faith and trust and a personal relationship with Amitabha Buddha, who is regarded by Pure Land Buddhists as a sort of saviour; and belief in the Pure Land, a place which provides a stepping stone towards enlightenment and liberation.

Pure Land Buddhism is particularly popular in China and Japan.

History

Pure Land Buddhism as a school of Buddhist thinking began in India around the 2nd century BCE.

It spread to China where there was a strong cult of Amitabha by the 2nd century CE, and then spread to Japan around the 6th century CE.

Pure Land Buddhism received a major boost to its popularity in the 12th century with the simplifications made by Honen.

A century later Shinran (1173-1262), a disciple of Honen, brought a new understanding of the Pure Land ideas, and this became the foundation of the Shin (true) sect.

Pure Land Buddhism took off in Japan when the monk Honen (1133-1212) simplified the teachings and practices of the sect so that anyone could cope with them.

He eliminated the intellectual difficulties and complex meditation practices used by other schools of Buddhism.

Honen taught that rebirth in the Pure Land was certain for anyone who recited the name with complete trust and sincerity. Honen said that all that was needed was...

saying "Namu Amida Butsu" with a conviction that by saying it one will certainly attain birth in the Pure Land.

The result was a form of Buddhism accessible to anyone, even if they were illiterate or stupid.

Honen didn't simplify Buddhism through a patronising attitude to inferior people. He believed that most people, and he included himself, could not achieve liberation through any of their own activities. The only way to achieve buddhahood was through the help of Amitabha.

The Shin Sect

A century after Honan, one of his disciples, Shinran (1173-1262) brought a new understanding of the Pure Land ideas. Shinran taught that what truly mattered was not the chanting of the name but faith. Chanting on its own had no value at all.

Those who follow the Shin school say that liberation is the consequence of a person achieving genuine faith in Amitabha Buddha and his vow to save all beings who trusted in him.

Amitabha in context

The Pure Land sect emphasises the important role played in liberation by Amitabha (which means Immeasurable Light) who is also called Amitayus (which means Immeasurable Life).

People who sincerely call on Amitabha for help will be reborn in Sukhavati - The Pure Land or The Western Paradise - where there are no distractions and where they can continue to work towards liberation under the most favourable conditions.

The nature of Amitabha is not entirely clear. Encyclopedia Britannica describes him as "the great saviour deity worshiped principally by members of the Pure Land sect in Japan." Another writer says "Amitabha is neither a God who punishes and rewards, gives mercy or imposes tests, nor a divinity that we can petition or beg for special favours".

The mystical view of Amitabha regards him as an eternal Buddha, and believes that he manifested himself in human history as Gautama, or "The Buddha".

Amitabha translates as "Amito-fo" in Chinese and "Amida" in Japanese.

The story of Amitabha

Once there was a king who was so deeply moved by the suffering of beings in the world that he gave up his throne and became a monk named Dharmakara.

Dharmakara was heavily influenced by the 81st Buddha and vowed to become a Buddha himself, with the aim of creating a Buddha-land that would be free of all limitations.

He meditated at length on other Buddha-lands and set down what he learned in 48 vows. Eventually he achieved enlightenment and became Amitabha Buddha and established his Buddha-land of Sukhavati.

His most important vow was the 18th, which said:

"If I were to become a Buddha, and people, hearing my Name, have faith and joy and recite it for even ten times, but are not born into my Pure Land, may I not gain enlightenment."

Since he did gain enlightenment, it follows that those who do have faith and joy and who recite his name will be born into the Pure Land.

Nembutsu

This means concentration on Buddha and his virtues, or recitation of the Buddha's name.

No special way of reciting the name is laid down. It can be done silently or aloud, alone or in a group and with or without musical accompaniment. The important thing is to chant the name single-mindedly, while sincerely wishing to be reborn in the Pure Land.

Scripture

The Pure Land scriptures include The Infinite Life Sutra, The Contemplation Sutra and The Amitabha Sutra.

Chanting

Chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha does not do anything at all to help the person to the Pure Land. Chanting is nothing more than an expression of gratitude to Amitabha Buddha and an expression of the chanter's faith.

But it's not possible to do away with the chanting: Shinran wrote "the True Faith is necessarily accompanied by the utterance of the Name".

Faith

Shin Buddhists say that faith in Amitabha Buddha is not something that the believer should take the credit for since it's not something that the believer does for themselves. Their faith is a gift from Amitabha Buddha.

And in keeping with this style of humility, Shin Buddhists don't accept the idea that beings can earn merit for themselves by their own acts; neither good deeds, nor performing rituals help.

This has huge moral implications in that it implies (and Shinran quite explicitly said) that a sinner with faith will be made welcome in the Pure Land - even more welcome than a good man who has faith and pride.

Popularity

The sect's teachings brought it huge popularity in Japan, since here was a form of Buddhism that didn't require a person to be clever, or a monk, and that was open to the outcasts of society.

It remains a popular group in Buddhism - and the reasons that made it popular 700 years ago are exactly the same ones that make it popular today.

Understanding Pure Land

Is this a new understanding of Buddhism?

On the surface Pure Land Buddhism seems to have moved a very long way from the basic Buddhist ideas, and it's important to see how it might actually fit in. The way to do this is to tackle each issue and see what's really going on.

Amitabha Buddha is treated as if he were God

On the surface, yes. But perhaps chanting Amitabha Buddha's name is not praying to an external deity, but really a way of calling out one's own essential Buddha nature. However some of Shinran's writings do speak of Amitabha Buddha in language that a westerner would regard as describing God.

The Pure Land appears to be a supernatural place

On the surface, yes. But perhaps the Pure Land is really a poetic metaphor for a higher state of consciousness. Chanting the name can then be seen as a meditative practice that enables the follower to alter their state of mind. (This argument is quite hard to sustain in the face of the importance given to chanting the name in faith at the moment of death - when some supernatural event is clearly expected by most followers. And the chanting is not regarded solely as a meditative practice by most followers. However gaps between populist and sophisticated understanding of religious concepts are common in all faiths.)

There is no reliance on the self to achieve enlightenment

On the surface, yes. But in fact this is just a further move in the direction that Mahayana Buddhism has already taken to allow assistance in the journey to liberation. And the being still has much work to do when they arrive in the Pure Land. (Shinran however taught that arriving in the Pure Land was actually the final liberation - the Pure Land was nirvana.)

Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism is a religion in exile, forced from its homeland when Tibet was conquered by the Chinese. At one time it was thought that 1 in 6 Tibetan men were Buddhist monks.

The best known face of Tibetan Buddhism is the Dalai Lama, who has lived in exile in India since he fled Chinese occupation of his country in 1959.

Tibetan Buddhism combines the essential teachings of Mahayana Buddhism with Tantric and Shamanic, and material from an ancient Tibetan religion called Bon.

Although Tibetan Buddhism is often thought to be identical with Vajrayana Buddhism, they are not identical - Vajrayana is taught in Tibetan Buddhism together with the other vehicles.

History

Buddhism became a major presence in Tibet towards the end of the 8th century CE. It was brought from India at the invitation of the Tibetan king, Trisong Detsen, who invited two Buddhist masters to Tibet and had important Buddhist texts translated into Tibetan.

First to come was Shantarakshita, abbot of Nalanda in India, who built the first monastery in Tibet. He was followed by Padmasambhava, who came to use his wisdom and power to overcome "spiritual" forces that were stopping work on the new monastery.

Groups within Tibetan Buddhism

- Nyingmapa: Founded by Padmasambhava, this is oldest sect, noted in the West for the teachings of the Tibetan Book of the Dead.
- Kagyupa: Founded by Tilopa (988-1069), the Kagyupa tradition is headed by the Karmapa Lama. Important Kagyupa teachers include Naropa, Marpa, and Milarepa.
- Sakyapa: Created by Gonchok Gyelpo (1034-1102) and his son Gunga Nyingpo (1092-1158).
- Gelugpa: (The Virtuous School) Founded by Tsong Khapa Lobsang Drakpa (also called Je Rinpoche) (1357 - 1419), this tradition is headed by the Dalai Lama.

Special features of Tibetan Buddhism

- the status of the teacher or "Lama"
- preoccupation with the relationship between life and death
- important role of rituals and initiations
- rich visual symbolism
- elements of earlier Tibetan faiths
- mantras and meditation practice

Tibetan Buddhist practice features a number of rituals, and spiritual practices such as the use of mantras and yogic techniques.

Supernatural beings are prominent in Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhas and bodhisattvas abound, gods and spirits taken from earlier Tibetan religions continue to be taken seriously. Bodhisattvas are portrayed as both benevolent godlike figures and wrathful deities.

This metaphysical context has allowed Tibetan Buddhism to develop a strong artistic tradition, and paintings and other graphics are used as aids to understanding at all levels of society.

Visual aids to understanding are very common in Tibetan Buddhism - pictures, structures of various sorts and public prayer wheels and flags provide an ever-present reminder of the spiritual domain in the physical world.

Tibetan Buddhism is strong in both monastic communities and among lay people.

The lay version has a strong emphasis on outwardly religious activities rather than the inner spiritual life: there is much ritual practice at temples, pilgrimage is popular - often including many prostrations, and prayers are repeated over and over - with the use of personal or public prayer wheels and flags. There are many festivals, and funerals are very important ceremonies.

Lay people provide physical support to the monasteries as well as relying on the monks to organise the rituals.

Aspects of faith

Lamas

A lama is a teacher. They are often a senior member of a monastic community - a monk or a nun - but lay people and married people can also be lamas. They are very often reincarnations of previous lamas.

As well as being learned in Buddhist texts and philosophy, lamas often have particular skills in ritual.

The Dalai Lama

Dalai is a Mongol word meaning ocean, and refers to the depth of the Dalai Lama's wisdom.

The first Dalai Lama to bear the title was the 3rd Dalai Lama, Sonam Gyatso. (The two previous incarnations were named "Dalai Lama" after their deaths.)

The current Dalai Lama (2002), Tenzin Gyatso, was born in Amdo, Tibet in 1935 and is the fourteenth Dalai Lama.

The Karmapa Lama

Karmapa means "one who performs the activity of a Buddha". The current incarnation (2002) is the 17th Karmapa. Two individuals have been declared the 17th Karmapa; Orgyen Trinley Dorje is generally and officially recognised as the official 17th Karmapa, however a rival Buddhist group give their allegiance to Trinlay Thaye Dorje.

Tantra

Tibetan Buddhism was much influenced by Tantra, and this has brought in a wealth of complex rituals and symbols and techniques.

Tantra originated in India and appears in both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. It brings Tibetan Buddhism a magical element and a rich portfolio of heavenly beings. It also brings a wide variety of spiritual techniques such as mantras, mandalas, ceremonies, and many varieties of yoga.

Rituals

Rituals and simple spiritual practices such as mantras are popular with lay Tibetan Buddhists. They include prostrations, making offerings to statues of Buddhas or bodhisattvas, attending public teachings and ceremonies.

Tibetan temple ceremonies are often noisy and visually striking, with brass instruments, cymbals and gongs, and musical and impressive chanting by formally dressed monks. It takes place in strikingly designed temples and monasteries.

Advanced practices

Tibetan Buddhism also involves many advanced rituals. These are only possible for those who have reached a sophisticated understanding of spiritual practice.

There are also advanced spiritual techniques. These include elaborate visualisations and demanding meditations. It's said that senior Tibetan yoga adepts can achieve much greater control over the body than other human beings, and are able to control their body temperature, heart rate and other normally automatic functions.

Living and dying

Tibetan Buddhism emphasises awareness of death and impermanence. Everything is always dying - the cells of our bodies are dying even while we live, reminding us of our own impermanence. And all the living things around us are dying, too.

This awareness should not produce sadness or despair, nor should it cause a Buddhist to start a frantic pursuit of the impermanent pleasures of life. Instead, it should lead the Buddhist to see the value of every moment of existence, and be diligent in their meditation and other religious practice.

Awareness of death, combined with the understanding of the impermanence of everything, leads the Buddhist to realise that only spiritual things have any lasting value.

Preparing for death

Tibetan Buddhists use visualisation meditations and other exercises to imagine death and prepare for the bardo. They work towards a holistic understanding and acceptance of death as an inevitable part of their journey.

Another way of preparing for death is to take part in helping those who have died through their experience in the bardo. This not only aids the dead, but enables the living practitioner to gain a real experience of the bardo, before they themselves enter it.

Even those who cannot gain the spiritual awareness to have a consciousness of the bardo are helped by achieving a greater experience of the impermanence of everything.

Tibetan Book of the Dead

This is one of the great texts of Tibetan Buddhism, and a big seller in the west. The English title is not a translation of the Tibetan title - the book's true name is *Great Liberation through hearing during the intermediate state*, commonly known in Tibet as *Liberation through hearing*.

The book deals with the experiences of a person as they pass between death and rebirth.

Bardo

Bardo is the state between death and rebirth. The different schools of Tibetan Buddhism have different understandings of this state which is regarded as lasting for 49 days.

The experience of a person during bardo depends on their spiritual training during life. An untrained person is thought to be confused as to where they are, and may not realise that they have died. People are often unwilling to give up attachment to their previous life - and their negative emotions - may cause their rebirth to be less good than it would otherwise have been.

In traditional Tibetan Buddhism, the dead person is helped through bardo by a lama who reads prayers and performs rituals from the Book of the Dead, advising the deceased to break free from attachment to their past life and their dead body. In some schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the lama will actively help the dead person to transfer their consciousness from their body, in preparation for rebirth.

Many Tibetan Buddhists believe that it is possible for those left behind to assist the dead person on their journey by doing spiritual work that increases the merits of the deceased and thus helps them to a better rebirth.

During the 49 day period the dead can see clearly into the minds of those left behind, which allows the living to help the dead by thinking good thoughts, meditating on Buddha and other virtuous beings, and engaging in spiritual practices.

Zen Buddhism

Zen in its own words

A special transmission outside the scriptures
Without reliance on words or letters

Directly pointing to the heart of humanity
Seeing into one's own nature.

Zen Buddhism

Zen Buddhism is a mixture of Indian Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism. It began in China, spread to Korea and Japan, and became very popular in the West from the mid 20th century.

The essence of Zen is attempting to understand the meaning of life directly, without being misled by logical thought, or language.

Zen techniques are compatible with other faiths and are often used, for example, by Christians seeking a mystical understanding of their faith.

Zen often seems paradoxical - it requires an intense discipline which, when practised properly, results in total spontaneity and ultimate freedom. This natural spontaneity should not be confused with impulsiveness.

Zen - the word

'Zen' is the way the Chinese word *Ch'an* is pronounced in Japan. 'Ch'an' is the Chinese pronunciation of the Sanskrit word *Dhyana*, which means (more or less) meditation.

Zen - the essence and the difficulty

Christmas Humphreys, one of the leading pioneers in the history of Buddhism in Britain, wrote that "Zen is a subject extremely easy to misunderstand." He was right.

Zen is something a person does. It's not a concept that can be described in words. Despite that, words on this site will help you get some idea of what Zen is about. But remember, Zen does not depend on words - it has to be experienced in order to 'understand'.

Enlightenment is inside

The essence of Zen Buddhism is that all human beings are Buddha, and that all they have to do is to discover that truth for themselves.

All beings by nature are Buddhas,
as ice by nature is water.
Apart from water there is no ice;
apart from beings, no Buddhas. Hakuin Ekaku

Zen sends us looking inside us for enlightenment. There's no need to search outside ourselves for the answers; we can find the answers in the same place that we found the questions.

Human beings can't learn this truth by philosophising or rational thought, nor by studying scriptures, taking part in worship rites and rituals or many of the other things that people think religious people do.

The first step is to control our minds through meditation and other techniques that involve mind and body; to give up logical thinking and avoid getting trapped in a spider's web of words.

History

Zen Buddhism was brought to China by the Indian monk Bodhidharma in the 6th century CE. It was called Ch'an in China.

Zen's golden age began with the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng (638-713), and ended with the persecution of Buddhism in China in the middle of the 9th century CE. Most of those we think of today as the great Zen masters came from this period. Zen Buddhism survived the persecution though it was never the same again in China.

Zen spread to Korea in the 7th century CE and to Japan in the 12th century CE. It was popularised in the West by the Japanese scholar Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870 - 1966); although it was found in the West before that.

Zen in practise

Learning Zen

If you're a westerner you may find it hard to shake off the intellectual and dualist ways of thinking that dominate western culture: these can make it difficult for westerners to come to Zen.

Zen Buddhists pay less attention to scripture as a means of learning than they do to various methods of practising Zen. The most common way of teaching is for enlightenment to be communicated direct from master to pupil.

Zen practices are aimed at taking the rational and intellectual mind out of the mental loop, so that the student can become more aware and realise their own Buddha-nature. Sometimes even (mild) physical violence is used to stop the student intellectualising or getting stuck in some other way.

Students of Zen aim to achieve enlightenment by the way they live, and by mental actions that approach the truth without philosophical thought or intellectual endeavour.

Some schools of Zen work to achieve sudden moments of enlightenment, while others prefer a gradual process.

Clues to the meaning of Zen

Because Zen is so hard to explain here are some quotations that may help you get an idea of it:

- The essence of Zen Buddhism is achieving enlightenment by seeing one's original mind (or original nature) directly; without the intervention of the intellect.
- Zen is big on intuitive understanding, on just 'getting it', and not so hot on philosophising.
- Zen is concerned with what actually is rather than what we think or feel about what is.
- Zen is concerned with things as they are, without trying to interpret them.
- Zen points to something before thinking, before all your ideas.
- The key to Buddhahood in Zen is simply self-knowledge.
- To be a human being is to be a Buddha. Buddha nature is just another name for human nature - true human nature.
- Zen is simply to be completely alive.
- Zen is short for Zen Buddhism. It is sometimes called a religion and sometimes called a philosophy. Choose whichever term you prefer; it simply doesn't matter.
- Zen is not a philosophy or a religion.
- Zen tries to free the mind from the slavery of words and the constriction of logic.
- Zen in its essence is the art of seeing into the nature of one's own being, and it points the way from bondage to freedom.
- Zen is meditation.

The New Kadampa Tradition

Kadampa Buddhism

The New Kadampa Tradition is one of the fastest growing Mahayana Buddhist traditions in the West, with 900 meditation centres in 37 countries. Founded by the Tibetan-born meditation master, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, supporters claim it offers local access to Buddha's teachings, meditation practice and an alternative view to life that promotes peace and harmony.

Kadampa Buddhism was founded in 11th Century Tibet by the Indian Buddhist Master Atisha (982 - 1054 CE). He was invited by King Jangchub Ö, a ruler of Ngari region of Tibet, to reintroduce Buddhism to Tibet. It had first been introduced by Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita 200 years earlier, but was largely destroyed by the anti-Buddhist purges of the Tibetan king, Lang Darma, who was a follower of Bön, the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet.

Atisha did revive Buddhist practice in Tibet, and founded what is now the tradition of Kadampa Buddhism. Ka means word and refers to the teachings of the Buddha and dam refers to Atisha's special presentation of them, known as

Lamrim or stages of the path to enlightenment. Lamrim literally means Stages of the Path and encompasses all Buddha's teachings. Atisha showed how the paths of Sutra and Tantra were not separate and could be practised together.

Three centuries later (in the 13th century) the Tibetan Buddhist master Je Tsongkharpa, one of Tibet's saints, developed and promoted Kadampa Buddhism throughout the country. He reformed the monasteries, emphasizing the practice of moral discipline, systematic study and meditation, which characterize the three Kadam lineages. He also wrote commentaries to many sacred Buddhist texts, clarifying their meanings, and taught the union of Sutra and Tantra. His life was an example of purity in body, speech and mind. His followers became known as New Kadampas or Gelugpas (The Virtuous Ones) who strived to become great Bodhisattvas and Buddhas themselves, so they could help release others from the suffering of cyclic existence.

The New Kadampa Tradition in the West

In 1976 Geshe Kelsang was invited to teach in the UK by Lama Yeshe, the headteacher of the FPMT, Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition.

He taught at FPMT-Centre Manjushri Institute which was based at Conishead priory, Ulverston, Cumbria, England (now called Manjushri Kadampa Meditation Centre) with the blessing of the Dalai Lama.

In the late 1970s Geshe Kelsang took the controversial decision of opening his own Buddhist Centre in York. He was asked to resign his post at Conishead Priory but resisted pressure to leave after a group of his closest students pleaded with him to stay.

Critics claim this was the beginning of a rift between Kelsang and the FPMT. They also accuse Kelsang of starting a breakaway movement and argue that the New Kadampa Tradition, as it is known today, is not part of the ancient Kadampa Tradition but a split from the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism.

Despite the popularity of the New Kadampa Tradition - often known as the NKT for short - the organisation was involved in a public dispute with the Dalai Lama which began in 1996.

The problem centres on the emphasis placed on the Dharma Protector Dorje Shugden by Kelsang.

According to the NKT's website: "A Dharma Protector is an emanation of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva whose main functions are to avert the inner and outer obstacles that prevent practitioners from gaining spiritual realizations, and to arrange all the necessary conditions for their practice".

Kelsang teaches that the deity Dorje Shugden is the Dharma protector for the New Kadampa Tradition and is a manifestation of the Buddha.

The spirit Dorje Shugden is described by some as a "wrathful, sword-waving deity with big ears and menacing fangs" or as "a ...warrior figure, riding a snow lion through a sea of boiling blood".

The New Kadampa Tradition offers this description: "In his left hand he holds a heart, which symbolises great compassion and spontaneous great bliss... His round yellow hat represents the view of Nagarjuna, and the wisdom sword in his right hand teaches us to sever ignorance... Dorje Shudgen rides a snow lion ...and has a jewel-splitting mongoose perched on his left arm, symbolising his power to bestow wealth on those who put their trust in him... His wrathful expression indicated that he destroys ignorance, the real enemy of all living beings, by blessing them with great wisdom."

The NKT venerates Dorje Shugden as its protector deity. The Dalai Lama, however, has rejected and spoken out against this practice. He has described Shugden as an evil and malevolent force, and argued that other Lamas before him had also placed restrictions on worship of this spirit.

After the Lama made these statements public in 1996 some followers of Dorje Shugden protested against the Dalai Lama in London, accusing him of suppressing their religious freedom.

Today members of the New Kadampa Tradition continue to worship Dorje Shugden.

Although some Buddhists and non-Buddhists regard the NKT as outside the mainstream tradition, the organisation has continued to grow.

Based on Lama Tsongkhapa's influential works, Geshe Kelsang has written 20 books in English, and these have in turn been translated into other languages. The proceeds of these books are fed into the 'NKT International Temples Project', a Buddhist charity building temples dedicated to world peace.

Alongside this Kelsang has set up study programmes to encourage a Western audience to understand the Buddha's teachings.

Geshe Kelsang has also been the driving force behind the building of the first New Kadampa Buddhist temple at the Manjushri Centre in Cumbria, England.

A second temple was opened in Glen Spey, New York in 2005. Work is underway on a third temple near Sao Paulo in Brazil, which will be known as the Centro de Meditacao Kadampa do Brasil. Plans are afoot for additional temples at Tara Centre in Derby, England and in Melbourne, Australia.

NKT members hope to build a Buddhist temple in every major town and city in the world. This project is known as the International Temples Project for World Peace.