

Foundational Beliefs, Concepts, and Ideas

Three Jewels or Treasures

The following three aspects of Buddhism are considered to be core components of Buddhism.

Buddha: This can mean the historical (Gautama) Buddha; or the state of Buddha-hood, as it has occurred again and again in individuals over countless millennia; or Buddha-nature, the pure, conceptually ineffable wholeness of reality and our experience of it as our ultimate true nature.



Figure 27: Nuns in mandala offering mudra (symbolic or ritual gesture), Tharlam Tibetan Buddhist Monastery porch, Boudha, Kathmandu, Nepal

Dharma: As well as the words and teachings of Gautama Buddha as passed on in *sutras*, it can also mean the wisdom of Buddhism from the Buddha's teachings more generally.

Sangha: Originally meaning just the male ordained followers of the Buddha, this term is now understood more widely to include all members of a Buddhist order, all followers of a particular school whether ordained or lay practitioners, or indeed all Buddhists and enlightened beings. All Buddhists go for refuge to the *Buddha*, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*, and many schools use this as the formal entry point into Buddhism in a ceremony.

Origins of the Universe

Buddhism does not attribute the existence of the world or universe to a powerful creator, god, or gods. The explanation offered is that everything depends on everything else. What is the present was caused by the past and it will become the cause of the future.

From a Buddhist perspective, the beginning of this universe and of life in it is inconceivable as it has no beginning and no end. The Buddhists beliefs and understanding of the universe are similar to and draw on the traditions of its Indian roots. Indian religions, such as Hinduism, generally conceive of space and time as cyclical, so that world-systems come into being, exist for a time, eventually are destroyed, and then are reborn or remade. According to Buddhism, world systems always appear and disappear in the universe. From a Buddhist perspective, this cycle of birth, existence, destruction, and rebirth of worlds occurs naturally and not because of the intervention of a god or gods.

Thus, the universe is infinite in time and space, and filled with an infinite number of worlds.

Buddha did not speculate about the origin of the universe and living things. He was largely silent on this issue. The reason for his position was that the issue has no religious value as it does not lead to gaining spiritual wisdom. From a Buddhist perspective, it is not necessary to theorize about the origins of the universe and living things to live a righteous way of life and to shape one's future life.

Buddhist Cosmology

This sections provide a summary of some of the Buddhist concepts and ideas with respect to the nature of the universe and world. For most Buddhists, they may be understood to be metaphorical and for some, even mythological. However, these concepts and ideas are often reflected in many Buddhist texts and practices, and so it is important for those studying Buddhism to be familiar with them.

There is no one system of Buddhist cosmology. Generally, every school or sect within the Buddhist tradition addresses cosmological issues from its particular perspective. But all see the universe as the stage for a drama of escaping *samsara* and realizing enlightenment but from the view of its own particular philosophical and theological beliefs. Buddhist systems are related not only to other Indian systems, for example, Hindu and Jain, but also to Western beliefs as well.

Nature of the Universe

As indicated earlier, Buddhists follow the traditions of their Indian origins, and see the universe as infinite in time and space, and filled with an infinite number of worlds similar to our own.

Buddhist cosmology is discussed in commentaries and works of *Abhidharma* in both Theravada and Mahayana traditions, and is the result of an analysis and reconciliation of cosmological comments found in the Buddhist *sutra* and *vinaya* traditions. The nature and entire structure of the universe is described in a collection of several *sutras* in which The Buddha describes other worlds and states of being, and other *sutras* describe the origin and destruction of the universe.

The image of the world presented in Buddhist cosmological descriptions should not be taken literally. That image is one that contradicts or is not in accord with astronomical data that were already known in ancient India. As well, it is not meant to be a description of how ordinary humans see their world. Buddhist cosmology describes the universe as seen by the “divine eye” (*diviyacaksus/dibbacakkhu*) by which a Buddha or an *arhat* has cultivated this ability or faculty. Through their divine eye they can “see” all of the other worlds and the beings experiencing *samsara* within them, and can tell their prior state before being reborn and their future state into which they will be reborn. Buddhist cosmology has also been considered symbolical or metaphorical.

Buddhist cosmology can be divided into the two following elements:

- temporal cosmology, which describes how worlds come into existence and how they pass away
- spatial cosmology, which describes the structure or position of the various worlds within the universe

Temporal Cosmology

The notion of a single-world system that is particularly prominent in the oldest Buddhist texts pictures the cosmos as a flat disk with heavens and meditation realms above and hells below. Although the oldest tradition apparently limited its interest to a single-world system, a grandiose cosmic structure developed on the perimeter of this single universe.

Traces of themes associated with multiple-world systems appear in texts of the Pali canon. A ten-thousand-world system is mentioned in the *Jatakas*, though with little elaboration, and in a more systematic way in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*. These, and other similar cosmologies, are variants of the *sahasra* cosmology, or "cosmology of thousands." They focus on themes of cosmic time and belong to the Theravada schools of Buddhism.

The cosmology of the *Mahayana*, characterized by innumerable world systems distributed throughout the ten regions of space, can be characterized as an *asamkhyeya* cosmology (cosmology of innumerables).

Time in Buddhist cosmology is measured in *kalpas*. A *kalpa* is an extensive period of time. Traditionally a *kalpa* was estimated to last 4,320,000 years. During a *kalpa*, the world comes into being, exists, is destroyed, and a period of emptiness ensues. Then it is reborn or remade and the cycle starts again.

Spatial Cosmology

Spatial cosmology describes the various and numerous worlds embedded in the universe. Spatial cosmology may also be conceived as describing this universe in two different ways. The vertical (*cakravada/devanagari*) cosmology describes the structure of worlds as arranged in a vertical pattern, with some being higher and some lower. While the horizontal (*sahasra*) cosmology describes the grouping of these vertical worlds into sets of thousands, millions, or billions.

Mount Meru and Vertical Cosmology

Buddhist texts and teachers sometimes refer to Mount Meru (*Sumeru* in Sanskrit or *Sineru* in Pali). Mount Meru appears in Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain belief systems. It is a sacred mountain considered to be the centre of the physical and spiritual universe. Many famous Buddhist (and also Hindu and Jain) temples have been built as symbolic representations of Mount Meru.

In the Buddhist tradition, Mount Meru exists simultaneously in time in both the physical and spiritual planes. Mount Meru is described in the Buddhist Abhidharma literature of the 4th–5th century composed by the Buddhist scholar Vasubandhu. It is described as being at the centre of the Buddhist world system.

From a Buddhist perspective, our world extends around Mount Meru. Above the peak of Meru is the realm of The Buddha fields (or heavens). On the upper slopes you find the gods. The titans live on the lower slopes. Animals and humans live on the plains around the mountain. Hungry ghosts live on or just below the surface while hell is located deep under the earth. All this is surrounded by a great ocean.

Vertical Cosmology

According to Buddhist beliefs as set out in the *Abhidharma*, *samsara* functions on thirty-one planes, levels, or realms (*loka*) of existence that are stacked one upon the next in layers. Each world corresponds to a mental state or a state of being; however, a world is not defined as a specific physical location but by the beings which compose or comprise it. Each world is sustained by the *karma* of the beings that inhabit it and, if the beings in that world all die or disappear, that world will also disappear. Similarly, a world comes into existence when a being is first put into it. Different beings may live in different worlds located in the same physical space or location because they live in different mental states. Therefore, even though humans and animals to some degree share the same physical environments, they still belong to different worlds because their minds perceive and react differently to those environments.

For Buddhists, there are at least thirty-one basic classes or types of beings that experience the cycle of rebirth, and any being may be born at any one of these levels or realms. (Depending on the school, there may be more than 31 realms). It is conceivable that many beings have, during the course of their wandering through *samsara*, at some point in time or another possibly been born into all of these realms, with the exception of the five realms known as The Pure Abodes. Beings born in one of the five Pure Abodes, such as the Great Brahmās of the realm of the Supreme Gods, have reached a condition in which they will inevitably attain *nirvana* and thus escape *samsara*.

The thirty-one realms are divided into several categories of realms as follows:

1. First there is the world of the five senses, or realm of desire (*Kamadhatu-loka*). The common characteristic of all beings in these realms is that they are all endowed with consciousness and the five physical senses. This category consists of sixteen (for some schools up to twenty-seven) realms, ranging from the realms of hell and 'The hungry ghosts', through the realms of animals, jealous gods, and human beings, to the realms of the lower gods.
2. Above this there is 'The world of pure form' (*Rupadhatu-loka*) which is occupied by various higher gods collectively known as *Brahmas*. These are

refined beings, who have consciousness but only two senses—sight and hearing. This category consists of sixteen (or seventeen) realms, the highest of which are the five realms of Pure Abodes that were mentioned earlier.

3. Lastly, there is ‘The formless world’ (*Arupadatu-loka*) occupied by a further class of *Brahmas* who have only consciousness. There are four realms in this category.

Sometimes all of the beings born in the *Arupyadatu* and the *Rupadatu* may be classified as “gods” or “deities” (*devas*), along with the gods of the *Kamadhatu*, even though the deities of the *Kamadhatu* differ more from those of the *Arupyadhātu* than they do from humans. In Buddhism, the term gods, deities, or *devas* should be understood as being imprecise terms referring to any being living a more blissful state than humans and generally living longer than humans. The majority are not “gods” as per the common understanding of the term, as they have limited or no concern with the human world and rarely or even never interact with it. Only the lowest deities of the *Kamadhatu* should be understood as corresponding to the concept of the gods as described in many polytheistic religions.

The term *brahma* may be used both as a name for a specific *deva* and as a generic term for one of the higher *devas*. Used broadly, it may refer to any of the inhabitants of the *Arupyadhātu* and the *Rupadhātu* realms. Used in a narrower sense, it may be used to refer to an inhabitant of any one of the eleven lower planes of the *Rupadhātu* or, in the most restricted sense, to the three lowest worlds of the *Rupadhātu*.

A significant number of *devas* use the name *Brahma*, such as Brahma Sahampati, Brahma Sanatkumara, and Baka Brahma. It may not always be clear which world they belong to; however, it must always be one of the worlds of the *Rupadhātu*.

What determines in which realm a being is born? The short answer is *karma* (*Pali kamma*): a being’s intentional ‘actions’ of body, speech, and mind—whatever is done, said, or even just thought with definite intention or volition. In general, though, with some qualification, rebirth in the lower realms is considered to be the result of relatively unwholesome (*akusala*), or bad (*papa*) *karma*, while rebirth in the higher realms is the result of relatively wholesome (*kusala*), or good (*punya/puñña*) *karma*. Correspondingly, the lower the realm, the more unpleasant and unhappy one’s condition; the higher the realm the more pleasant, happy, and refined one’s condition.

One should note, however, that this hierarchy does not constitute a simple ladder which one, as it were, climbs, passing out at the top into *nirvana*. In fact, *nirvana* may be obtained from any of the realms from the human to the highest of the Pure Abodes and the four formless realms, but not from the four lowest realms. Yet, rather than attaining *nirvana*, beings generally rise and fall, and fall and rise through the various realms, now experiencing unhappiness, now experiencing happiness. This precisely is the nature of *samsara*: wandering from life to life with no particular direction or purpose.

The diagram below depicts the various categories of realms and their order vertically.



Figure 28: Depiction of Mount Meru and the Buddhist universe.

Buddha and Buddhist Deities

Buddhists venerate a number of divine beings, gods, or *devas* in various ritual and popular contexts. Initially, these include primarily Indian and Hindu deities, but later they also come to include other Asian spirits and local gods. Buddhist deities range from enlightened Buddhas to regional spirits adopted by Buddhists.

As Buddhism spread to various countries, it began to incorporate aspects from countries such as China and Japan into its collection of deities. Buddhism

now includes many devas that reflect aspects taken from those cultures. For example, Saraswati is a Hindu Deva from Gandhara and the *kami* are considered, by many Japanese Buddhists, to be local, Japanese *bodhisattvas*.

Some of the actors in the Buddhist texts, stories, and mythology include

- Brahma Sahampati: The leading god or supreme deva, who appeared before Buddha and was instrumental in convincing Gautama Buddha to teach once The Buddha attained enlightenment but was unsure if he should share his insights with anyone.
- Sakra (Indra): Sits on top of Mount Meru and is a major *deva* and defender.
- Mara: Another *deva* who is associated with death and blockages to enlightenment. Buddha recounts being tempted by Mara under the Bodhi tree.
- Yama: The king who rules over the 21 hells.
- Nagas: A great serpent, dragon, or water creature; the king of the Nagas protected Buddha from a fierce storm.
- Gandharvas: Angelic beings who entertain and provide the gods with music.

Mahayana and Vajrayana Concepts of Buddhahood

A Buddha is a being who is fully awakened, and has fully comprehended the Four Noble Truths. Different schools of Buddhism recognize and venerate different Buddhas in addition to Gautama Buddha/Buddha Shakyamuni.

In the Theravada tradition, there is a list of past Buddhas of which the historical Buddha Shakyamuni is the only Buddha of our current era and he is generally not seen as accessible or as existing in some higher plane of existence.

Mahayana Buddhists venerate several Buddhas, including Maitreya and Amitabha. These Buddhas are seen conceptualized as beings of great wisdom and power who preside over pure lands that one can travel to after death.

In Tantric Buddhism (Vajrayana), there are five primary Buddhas: Vairocana, Aksobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, and Amoghasiddhi. Each Buddha is associated with a different consort, direction, aggregate (or, aspect of the personality), emotion, element, colour, symbol, and mount. Other Buddhas besides these five include Bhaisajyaguru, The Buddha of medicine, and Nageshvara Raja, the king of the Nagas.

Buddhist tradition also includes the idea of the first Buddha, the Adi-Buddha. This is the first being deemed to have attained Buddhahood. Various names as Vajradhara, Samantabhadra, and Vairocana, the first Buddha is also associated with the concept of Dharmakaya.

There are several female Buddhas within Buddhist Tantra traditions such as Tara, who is the most popular female Buddha in Tibetan Buddhism. There

are different and many forms and colours of Tara, each representing different characteristics or attributes. Other female Buddha figures include Vajra Yogini, Nairatmya, and Kurukulla.

In Mahayana and especially in Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism, the idea and nature of Buddhahood evolved into a more elaborate system called the *Trikaya*. The doctrine of *Trikaya* states that a Buddha has three *kayas* or bodies.

1. *Dharmakaya*: The Truth Body. The teachings of Gautama Buddha and the true nature, law, and order of the Buddha. The embodiment of the principle of enlightenment has no limits or boundaries.
2. *Sambhogakaya*: Body of Bliss: Buddhas in their heavens, that resulted from their accumulated merit. Buddhas exist in a state of bliss and or clear light.
3. *Nirmanakaya*: Buddha incarnation or emanation. The earthly Buddhas (and Bodhisattvas), especially as personified by Gautama Buddha. In Tibet, these include intentional human embodiment of a reborn master.

In Tibet, they also refer to the body, speech, and mind of a master and they are represented by the *mudra*, the *mantra*, and the *mandala*, respectively.

Transcendent (or Dhyani) Buddhas

Vajrayana Buddhism developed the idea that the world is composed of five cosmic elements and they are symbolized by five Dhyani Buddhas. Unlike historical Buddhas such as Gautama Buddha, they are transcendent beings who represent intangible forces and divine principles.

They are important because they are seen as being able to act as spiritual guides to help people face the negative forces they will encounter on their path to enlightenment. It is believed that meditating on the Five Dhyani Buddhas and what they represent can be an effective way to learn self-restraint, and avoid self-indulgence and self-denial.

Although the concept of the five elements is metaphysical, there was a desire to represent them in art and architecture. Traditionally, in a temple, four of the Dhyani Buddhas would have been placed facing the four cardinal directions and one would have been in the centre of the shrine. Each of the Dhyani Buddhas were represented sitting on a lotus, each had one face and two hands, and all were wearing an image of their clan on their crown.

The five Dhyani Buddhas have been given diverse attributes and have been used in various ways by different people over the centuries. Brief descriptions follow that describe their foundational aspects.

Vairochana symbolizes *rupa* (shape or form). He is represented with white skin colour and sitting in the centre. He is usually found meditating on a lotus seat, teaching the *Dharma* (law) so as to combat ignorance in the world.

Akshobhya is represented with blue skin colour and sitting in an earth-touching pose facing in the east direction. His symbol is a thunderbolt (*vajra*)

and his domain is water. His role is to provide wisdom and knowledge to the mortal, create humility, and reduce aggression. He also symbolizes winter.

Ratnasambhava is represented with gold or yellow skin colour and sitting on earth sitting in a south direction. He is bestowing blessings (*Varada mudra*) in one hand, providing enrichment, pride, joy, and calmness to the mortal. He also symbolizes autumn.

Amitabha is represented with red skin colour and sitting in a meditation pose with both hands laid upon his lap. He is facing in the west direction. His role is to help one define one's self, and to provide the gift of wisdom of observation. With the ability to overpower and conquer mortals, he can be found in fire. His symbol is a lotus.

Amoghasiddhi is represented with green skin colour and sitting in a meditation pose, depicting a gesture of fearlessness in the north direction. He holds a double thunderbolt (*vajra*) to eradicate fear, envy, and jealousy. His role is to further protect the world and its creation, as well as provide mortals with courage and wisdom. He also symbolizes summer.

Bodhisattvas and Earthly Buddhas

A *Bodhisattva* is a being that has aroused *bodhicitta* (awakening mind) and is working towards full *Buddhahood*. *Bodhisattvas* are seen as powerful and highly advanced and are venerated in both Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. One of the most popular *Bodhisattva* is Avalokiteshvara who is the *bodhisattva* of compassion.

There are also female *Bodhisattvas*. One of the earliest is Prajnaparamita, who is venerated as the personification of the perfection (*paramita*) or wisdom (*prajna*). Other female *Bodhisattvas* include Vasudhara and Cundi.

In Buddhism there are five “earthly” Buddhas, each associated with one of the five ages (*Kala*) of the world.

Below, is a list of five *Bodhisattvas* and five earthly *Buddhas*.

Bodhisattvas	Earthly Buddhas
Samantabhadra	Krakucchanda
Vajrapani	Kanakamuni
Ratnapani	Kashyapa
Avalokiteshvara (Kuan Yin)	Shakyamuni (Siddhartha Gautama)
Vishvapani	Maitreya (the future Buddha)

Dependent Origination or Chain of Causation

One of the stories told by The Buddha in the *Agganna Sutta* describes the process of recreation described earlier. The story begins at the point where an old world has just been destroyed, and a new world has been created. The

inhabitants of the prior world are reborn in the new world. At first, they are simply spirits who float above Earth, luminescent and without a body/form, name, or gender.

The new world in the early stages is without light or land, covered only by water. At some point, however, Earth appears and the spirits come to know, taste, and enjoy it. Their greed causes their spirit bodies to solidify and differentiate into male and female, attractive and not. The sun and moon come into being as the spirits take human form and they lose their luminescence. Gradually, the inhabitants develop additional bad or wicked habits and, in so doing, cause them and Earth itself to become less pleasant.

Through this story, The Buddha appears to be saying that desire, greed, and attachment not only cause suffering for humans but also shapes the world we know and experience. Thus, the imperfect physical world and suffering we experience in it are the result of what Buddhists called dependent origination, chain of causation, or *pratitya-samutpada* in Sanskrit and *paticca-samuppda* in Pali. The Buddha taught that dependent origination is a 12-stage cyclical process, a circular chain of stages. Each stage in the cycle gives rise to the one directly after it. The 12 stages are as follows:

1. Ignorance: the inability to see the truth, usually depicted as an image of a blind man or person
2. Willed action: the actions that shape our emerging consciousness, usually depicted as an image of a potter moulding clay
3. Conditioned consciousness: the development of habits, blindly responding to the impulses of karmic conditioning, usually depicted as an image of a monkey swinging about aimlessly
4. Form and existence: the body comes into being to carry our karmic inheritance, usually depicted as an image of a boat carrying men
5. The six sense-organs: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body (touch)—and mind, the way sensory information passes into us, usually depicted as the doors and windows of a house
6. Sense-impressions: the combination of sense-organ and sensory information, usually depicted as an image of two lovers
7. Sensation: the feelings we get from sense-impressions, which are so vivid that they blind us, usually depicted as an image of a man shot in the eye with an arrow
8. Craving (*tanhā*): the negative desires that can never be satisfied, usually depicted as an image of a man drinking
9. Attachment: grasping at things we think will satisfy our craving, usually depicted as an image of someone reaching out for fruit from a tree
10. Becoming: worldly existence, being trapped in the cycle of life, usually depicted as an image of a pregnant woman
11. Birth: usually depicted as an image of a woman giving birth
12. Old age and death: the grief, suffering and despair, which are the direct consequences of birth, usually depicted as an image of an old man

Samsara, Rebirth, and Reincarnation

From a Buddhist perspective, the purpose of a religion is to guide one in this life and future lives until liberation is gained. For The Buddha and his followers, the world is nothing but *Samsara*—the cycle of repeated births and deaths. For Buddhists, the beginning of the world and the end of the world all occur within this *Samsara*. Since elements and energies are relative and inter-dependent, it is meaningless to single out anything as the beginning. While we can speculate about the origin of the world, there is no absolute truth revealed by such speculation.

Thus reincarnation is a fundamental belief of Buddhism, which is the concept that people are reborn after dying. In fact, most individuals go through many cycles of birth, living, death, and rebirth. A practicing Buddhist differentiates between the concepts of rebirth and reincarnation. In reincarnation, the individual may recur repeatedly. In rebirth, a person does not necessarily return to Earth as the same entity ever again. This is like a leaf growing on a tree. When the leaf dies, withers, and falls off, a new leaf eventually replaces it. This new leaf is similar to the old leaf, but not identical to the one it replaced.

As indicated earlier, Buddhism has six sub-realms into which a soul may be reborn within *Kamadhatu*, the realm of desire. The six realms to which one may be reborn are the gods (heaven), human, demigods/titans/angry gods (*asuras*), hungry ghosts (*preta*), animal, and hell realms. Earlier texts referenced five realms instead of six realms as in such cases the god realm and demigod realm were considered to be a single god's realm.

These six realms are usually further categorized into two or three higher (good or fortunate) realms and three or four lower (evil or unfortunate) realms. The three higher realms are the realms of the gods, humans, and demigods. The three lower realms are the realms of the animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings. In East Asian literature, six realms are further subdivided into thirty one levels.

Buddhist texts describe the six realms in the following way:

1. *Deva* or Gods realm (heaven): The home of the gods (*devas*) is the most pleasant of the six realms. In this realm the inhabitants enjoy blissful long lives. One later text subdivided this realm into another twenty-six sub-realms of increasing happiness. A rebirth in this heaven-like realm is believed to result from the great accumulation of good *karma*. Unfortunately, the pleasures of this realm lead to attachment (*Upadana*) and result in a lack of spiritual pursuits which impedes the achievement of *nirvana*. This realm in Southeast and East Asian Buddhism include gods found in the Hindu traditions such as Indra and Brahma, and concepts in Hindu cosmology such as Mount Meru.
2. *Manusya/Manussa* (human) realm: According to Buddhist beliefs, a person reborn in this realm will have superior physical endowments and moral nature because of their past *karma*. Although humans suffer, this is considered a very fortunate state because humans have the greatest chance of enlightenment and reaching the end of the cycle of *Samsara*.

3. Asura (demigods, titans, and angry gods) realm: The demigods or asuras realm is the last of the good or fortunate realms of Buddhist existence. Asura are believed to be angry and may possess some supernatural powers. They wage war with the *devas* (gods), and make life for the *manusya* (humans) difficult by causing illnesses and natural disasters. The demigod realm is in some cases categorized as one of the evil realms due to the stories of the Asura wars against the Gods. They accumulate *karma* and are reborn.
4. *Preta/Petta* (hungry ghosts) realm: These beings, hungry ghosts and other restless spirits or *preta*, live in a state of unhappiness because they are unable to satisfy their craving, as often symbolized by images which show them with huge bellies and tiny mouths. They are reborn in this realm because of excessive cravings and attachments. They do not have a physical body, are invisible, and constitute only “subtle matter” of a being. Buddhists in Asia traditionally care for the hungry ghosts on annual ritual days by leaving food and refreshments in the open to feed any hungry ghosts that may be nearby. When the angry ghosts’ bad *karma* runs out, they are reborn into another realm. Views on the nature of this realm vary among Buddhist schools. Some see this realm to be the mildest of the bad or unfortunate realms others believe it to be more intense than the animal realm.
5. *Tiryagyon Ttiracchanayoni* (animal) realm: This realm is state of existence of a being as an animal or *tiryag*. To be reborn into this realm is undesirable because animals are exploited by humans, and do not possess the required self-awareness to achieve liberation. This realm is traditionally believed to be similar to a hellish realm, because animals are believed to be driven by impulse and instinct, they prey on each other and suffer. Some Buddhist texts place plants in this realm and believe them to have primitive consciousness.
6. *Naraka/Niraya* (hell) realm: Beings are reborn in this realm because of the accumulation of bad and evil *karma* from stealing, lying, and committing adultery and others failures. Buddhist texts differ in their description of this realm. People in this realm are horribly tortured in many ways, but only until their bad *karma* expires. Buddhists beliefs about this realm include the existence of numerous hellish regions, each with their own form of intense suffering, all in proportion to the evil *karma* accumulated by the individual. These include the following:
 - eight extremely hot and eight extremely cold regions
 - regions where one may be partially eaten alive, be severely beaten, and experience other forms of physical torture and violence

The beings in this realm may be reborn in another realm after their evil karma has expired, they die, and they get another chance. Some compare this realm to the concept of afterlife hell in Christianity, but since in Buddhism there is no realm of final damnation and eternal existence, a being's presence in this realm is also a temporary one.

These six realms are not separate realms. They are all interlinked as is consistent with Buddhist philosophy that mind and reality are both linked. For example, humans and animals live in the same world, but the implications of being born as a human or as an animal are very different and, therefore, they are represented as two separate realms. Similarly, human beings may experience elements of heaven when happy, or the lower states when hateful, greedy, and ignorant or in pain. Humans who are masters of meditation may experience progressively higher heaven realms.

Wheel of Life

The realms, or states of reincarnation, of the Buddhist universe are often represented in a diagram known as the *Bhavacakra*, the Wheel of Life, or the Wheel of Becoming, as shown on the following page. A description of the diagram and the significance of each part follows.

- The wheel itself is a circle, symbolizing *Samsara*, the endless cycle of existence and suffering.

Buddhist Devas or Gods/Deities

In some instances all of the beings born in the *Arupyadhatu* and the *Rupadhatu* are informally classified as gods or deities (*devas*), along with the gods of the *Kamadhatu*; however, they differ in some ways. For example, the *deva* of the *Kamadhatu* realm have more in common with human beings that they do with the *devas* of the *Arupyadhatu*.

The term *deva* is an imprecise one, which may be used when referring to any being living in a longer-lived and usually more blissful state than humans. In Buddhism, *deva* are not immortal and they do not play a role in the creation of the universe or world. Most of them are not gods in the common sense of the term, having little or no concern with the human world and rarely if ever interacting with it. Only the lowest deities of the *Kamadhatu* correspond to the gods described in many polytheistic religions.

Devas are elevated beings who were reborn in the celestial planes because of their good words, thoughts, and deeds. Generally, they too are subject to delusion and desire as are human beings, and they too need guidance from the Enlightened.

In Buddhism, the term *Brahma* is used both as a name and as a generic term for one of the higher *devas*. When used in a generic sense, it can refer to any of the inhabitants of the *Arupyadhatu* and the *Rupadhatu*. In more restricted senses, it may refer to a being in one of the eleven lower worlds of the *Rupadhatu* or, even more narrowly, to beings in the three lowest worlds of the *Rupadhatu* (Plane of Brahma's retinue).

There are a number of *devas* that use the name *Brahma* (e.g., Brahma Sahampati, Brahma Sanatcumara Baka Brahma, etc.); therefore, it may not always be clear which world they belong to, although it will always be one of the worlds of the *Rupadhatu*. According to the *Ayacana Sutta*, Brahma Sahampati, who begged The Buddha to teach Dhamma/Dharma to the world, resides in the *Suddhavasa* worlds.

- The centremost circle in middle of the Wheel depicts the Three Fires of greed, ignorance, and hatred, represented by a rooster, a pig, and a snake. These cause all suffering and are shown together, each biting the other's tails, and reinforcing each other.

- Moving outward from the centre, souls are shown ascending and descending as dictated by their *karma*.

- The next ring moving outwards consists of six segments showing the six realms: gods, humans, and Titans in the top half, and hungry ghosts, animals, and those tortured in hell in the bottom half.

- The last or outer ring depicts the twelve segments called *nidanas* (illustrations of Buddhist conception of dependent origination or chain of causation which was described earlier).

- Lastly, the *bhavacakra* is held by Yama, the Lord of Death, who symbolizes the impermanence of everything. The beings he holds are trapped in eternal suffering by their ignorance of the nature of the universe.



Figure 29: Yama holding the Bhavacakra or Wheel of Life, from a temple in China

Karma

The concept of *karma* is not unique to Buddhism and it is a foundational belief in several Eastern religions, although with different meanings and nuances.

This important Buddhist doctrine teaches that all things are interconnected and guided by the law of *karma*, the means by which we create a world of suffering for ourselves and others, or conversely, the way to live our lives that reduces suffering for all, and leads to liberation.

Buddhist teachings about karma indicate that our past actions have affected us, either positively or negatively, and that our present actions will affect us in the future. Buddhists often use the agricultural metaphor of sowing seeds to explain *karma*. If we sow good seeds (act in a good or moral way) we will reap

good food or fruit. If we sow bad seeds (act in a bad or immoral way) we will reap bad food or bad fruit.

Early Buddhist writings suggest that not everything we experience is solely the result of past actions, and may be the result of natural events of some kind. However, later Tibetan teachings, suggest that all the good and bad things that happen to us are the result of past actions.

While there might be doubt, or differing opinions, about why we experience some form of suffering or misfortune, there is shared belief that the only way we can resolve any suffering in the present moment is through mindfulness and action based upon good motives.

Beyond this Life

Buddhists believe that *karma* has implications beyond this life. Bad actions in a previous life can follow a person into their next life and cause bad effects or misfortune. Even Buddha was not free from the effects of past *karma*. In one story, Buddha's cousin tried to kill him by dropping a boulder on him. While the cousin was not successful and Buddha lived, one of his feet was injured. Buddha explained that this injury was karmic retribution for once trying to kill his step-brother in a previous life.

On a larger scale, *karma* also determines one's rebirth and status or position in their next life. Good *karma* can result in one's birth in one of the heavenly realms. While bad *karma* can cause one to be reborn as an animal or insect, or to be reborn and tormented in one of the hell realms.

Consequently, Buddhists try to accrue good *karma* and avoid bad *karma*. Ultimately, however, the goal of Buddhism is to escape the cycle of death and rebirth altogether, not simply to acquire good *karma* and be born into a better or more pleasant state. These pleasant states, while preferable to human life, are impermanent, as even gods eventually die.



Figure 30: Each prayer wheel contains a Buddhist scripture. Spinning a wheel gives you good karma.

Self-Determined

The word *karma* means action. *Karma* is determined by one's own actions and, in particular, by the motives behind intentional actions.

Actions that lead to good karmic outcomes flow from actions that are motivated by generosity, compassion, kindness and sympathy, and clear mindfulness or wisdom. Conversely, bad *karma* is the result of actions motivated by greed, aversion (hatred), and delusion.

For Buddhists, *karma* is not an external force. It is not a system of punishment or reward adjudicated and meted out by a god. The concept is understood as a natural law similar to gravity. Buddhists believe that our ultimate fate is in our control. Unfortunately, most of us are ignorant of this fact, which causes suffering. The purpose of Buddhism is to take conscious control of our behaviour.

Moral Habits

The Buddha taught that one's life can be determined by our karmic conditioning, that is a process by which a person's nature is shaped by their moral actions. From this perspective, every action we take now contributes to our characters in the future. Thus, positive and negative aspects can become magnified over time as we fall into habits. All of these cause us to acquire *karma*. This is why Buddhists place high importance on being mindful of every action they take.

Getting Rid of Karmic Conditioning

As acting on karmic habits increases their potency, Buddhists seek to gradually weaken or counteract any negative thoughts and impulses that they experience by allowing them to arise and depart naturally without acting on them. By doing so, one's bad karmic habits can be broken and replaced with good habits

Buddhist Path

Nirvana (Nibbana)

Nirvana (*Nibbana* in Pali), the escape from *Samsara*, the achievement of enlightenment and liberation is a central concept in Buddhism, and it is the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice. There are many different explanations of what *nirvana* and enlightenment mean among the three Buddhist traditions.

The moment of one's awakening or enlightenment is a single moment of profound spiritual insight which one may experience. To be enlightened is to be awake to a reality that is already present, but which most persons do not perceive. Enlightenment is a precondition necessary for the achievement of *nirvana*.



Figure 31: A symbol of the Eightfold Path "Arya Magga" (the noble path of the dhamma) in early Buddhism

Nirvana, or *nibanna* in Pali, comes from the Pali word meaning "to be extinguished," as one may do with a fire. The 'fire' that Buddhists seek to extinguish is the fire of suffering and *samsara*. *Nirvana* is not a place. Like freedom, it is a state of being.

The Buddha believed that *nirvana* is impossible to describe to somebody who has not achieved awakening themselves, but spoke of *nirvana* as freedom from suffering and attaining a true and lasting sense of happiness and bliss. For Buddhists, the nature of *nirvana* is not as important as the path one takes to achieve it. Freedom from suffering is the purpose of the Buddhist path.

Reaching *nirvana* or being liberated does not mean one does not experience unpleasant phenomena. Instead, one ceases to create suffering in our lives and the lives of others. The Buddha himself is known to have experienced unpleasant things after his awakening, but did not suffer. As such, *nirvana* is a state of ceasing to cling to life as it is known, relinquishing aversion, and finding clarity into the nature of reality.

It is important to keep in mind that The Buddha never denied that life, even an unenlightened life, offers the possibility of many aspects and experiences of great beauty and happiness. Nonetheless, he also recognized that the kinds of happiness to which most of humans are accustomed cannot, by their very nature, give truly lasting satisfaction. If one is genuinely interested in one's

own and others' welfare, one must sometimes be willing to give up one kind of happiness for the sake of something much better. This understanding lies at the very heart of the Buddha's method. Whether instructing a lay person on the blessings of treating one's parents and relatives with respect, or instructing a monk or nun on the finer points of meditation, the Buddha's system of gradual training consistently encourages the disciple to move on to a deeper level of happiness: one that is greater, nobler, and more fulfilling than what they had previously known. Each level of happiness has its rewards, but each also has its drawbacks—the most conspicuous of which is that it cannot, by its very nature, endure.

The highest happiness of all, and the one to which all the Buddha's teachings ultimately point, is the lasting happiness and peace of the transcendent, the deathless, *nirvana* (*nibbana*). Thus, the Buddha's teachings are concerned solely with guiding people towards the highest and most expansive happiness possible. In the words of one teacher, "Buddhism is the serious pursuit of happiness."



Figure 32: Arhat statues at Bai Dinh, representing Buddhists who have reached Nirvana. There are hundreds.

The Buddha claimed that the Awakening he rediscovered is accessible to anyone willing to put forth the effort and commitment required to pursue the Noble Eightfold Path to its end. It is up to each of us individually to put that claim to the test.

Nirvana is not a place one goes to: it is a state of being that is beyond existence and non-existence. The early sutras speak of nirvana as being the "liberation" and "unbinding" of a person from the cycle of birth and death. *Nirvana* is freedom from needless suffering and being fully alive and present in one's life.

Theravada Buddhism conceptualizes two kinds of *nirvana* (or *nibanna* in Pali). An enlightened being first experiences a kind of provisional *nirvana*, or "*nirvana* with remainders." The person is still aware of pleasure and pain but is not bound to them. The enlightened individual enters into parinirvana, or complete nirvana, at death. In Theravada, then, enlightenment is spoken of as the door to *nirvana*, but not *nirvana* itself.

Mahayana emphasizes the ideal of the *bodhisattva*, the enlightened being who vows to not enter *nirvana* until all beings are enlightened. This suggests enlightenment and *nirvana* are separate; however, Mahayana also teaches that

nirvana is not separate from *samsara*, the wheel of birth and death. When we cease to create *samsara* with our minds, *nirvana* naturally appears. *Nirvana* is the purified true nature of *samsara*.

Achieving Nirvana in Buddhism

Buddhism, like most world religions, comprises many different traditions and schools of thought and practice. Nonetheless, most Buddhist traditions share a common set of fundamental beliefs about the path of liberation and the eventual achievement of *nirvana*.

For many Buddhists and non-Buddhists, Buddhism goes beyond a traditional religion and may be more accurately described as a philosophy or 'way of life'. Philosophy 'means love of wisdom' and the Buddhist path is founded on wisdom and a way of living. This includes the following:

THREE UNIVERSAL TRUTHS

1. Everything in life is impermanent and always changing.
2. Because nothing is permanent, a life based on material possessions or possessing persons does not make you happy.
3. There is no eternal, unchanging soul and "self" is just a collection of changing characteristics or attributes.

FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

1. Human life is characterized by a lot of suffering.
2. The cause of suffering is greed and other vices.
3. There is an end to suffering.
4. The way to end suffering is to follow the Middle Path.

Buddha taught his followers to not to worship him as a god. Instead they should take responsibility for their own lives and actions. Their liberation and freedom from *samsara* was to be the Middle Way. This was the true path to liberation or *nirvana*. The Middle Way is not simply escaping a life of luxury and indulgence but also limiting too much fasting and hardship. There are eight guides for following the Middle path.

Eightfold Path

1. Right understanding and viewpoint (based on the Four Noble Truths)
2. Right values and attitude (compassion rather than selfishness)
3. Right speech (don't tell lies, avoid harsh, abusive speech, and avoid gossip)
4. Right action (help others, live honestly, don't harm living things, and take care of the environment)
5. Right work (do something useful, avoid jobs which harm others)
6. Right effort (encourage good and helpful thoughts, discourage unwholesome and destructive thoughts)
7. Right mindfulness (be aware of what you feel, think, and do)
8. Right meditation (calm your mind, practice meditation which leads to nirvana)

The Noble Eightfold Path is commonly broken up into three sections to better understand the path, although each factor is intimately interwoven with others.

1. *Sila*—virtue, good conduct, and leading a moral life, morality or right conduct. *Siila* comprises three stages along the Eightfold Path—right speech, right action, and right livelihood—and is based on the following two fundamental principles:
 - a. The principle of equality by which that all living entities are equal.
 - b. The principle of reciprocity: This is similar to the “Golden Rule” in Christianity to do onto others as you would wish them to do onto you. It is found in many religions.
2. *Samadhi*—to be mindful and aware of all our thoughts and actions, concentration, meditation, and mental development. Developing one's mind is essential to forging a path to wisdom, which in turn will lead to personal freedom and liberation. Mental development serves to strengthen and control our mind and thereby helps one to maintain good conduct.
3. *Prajna*—to develop wisdom and understanding, discernment, insight, wisdom, and enlightenment. This is the core of Buddhism. Wisdom will emerge if one's mind is pure and calm.

Meditation: an Essential Pathway to Enlightenment and Nirvana

For Buddhists, meditation is the means to transform the mind. Buddhist meditation practices vary, but all are techniques that encourage and develop concentration, clarity, emotional positivity, and a calm that allows one to see the true nature of things and life. For Buddhists, meditation is part of the path toward enlightenment (liberation/awakening) and eventually *nirvana*.

The closest words for meditation in the classical languages of Buddhism are *bhavana* (mental development) and *jhana/dhyana* (mental training resulting in a calm and luminous mind).

There are different Buddhist meditation forms and techniques. Some examples include the following:

- *Asubha bhavana*—reflections on repulsiveness or the foul/unattractive—it includes two practices: cemetery contemplations and *Patikkūlamānasikāra*, reflections on repulsiveness.
- *Anussati* (recollections)—reflection on recollection, contemplation, remembrance, and mindfulness: it refers to specific meditative or devotional practices, such as recollecting the sublime qualities of The Buddha or *anapanasati* (mindfulness of breathing), which lead to mental tranquility and abiding joy.
 - *Sati* (mindfulness) and *satipatthana* (establishment of mindfulness) is an important quality to be cultivated by a Buddhist meditator is mindfulness (*sati*). Mindfulness is a polyvalent term which refers to remembering, recollecting, and “bearing in mind”. It also relates to remembering the teachings of The Buddha and knowing how these teachings relate to one’s experiences. The Buddhist texts mention different kinds of mindfulness practice; “observations of the positions of the body” and the four *satipatthānas*, the “establishment of mindfulness,” which constituted formal meditation.
 - *Anapanasati*, mindfulness of breathing is a core meditation practice in Theravada, Tiantai, and Chan traditions of Buddhism as well as a part of many mindfulness programs.
- *Dhyana/Jhana* (developing an alert and luminous mind) is central to the meditation of Early Buddhism. The oldest Buddhist meditation practices are the four *dhyanas*, which lead to the destruction of the *asavas* as well as the practice of mindfulness (*sati*). The practice of *dhyana* may have constituted the core liberating practice of early Buddhism, because in this state all “pleasure and pain” had waned.
- *Brahma-viharas* (loving-kindness and compassion). Another important meditation in the early sources are the four *Brahmavihāra* (divine abodes) which are said to lead to *cetovimutti* (liberation of the mind). The four *Brahmavihāra* are
 - Loving-kindness is active good will towards all.
 - Compassion, which results from *metta*, is the identification of the suffering of others as one’s own.
 - Empathetic joy is the feeling of joy because others are happy, even if one did not contribute to it. It is a form of sympathetic joy.
 - Equanimity is even-mindedness and serenity, treating everyone impartially.

These techniques aim to develop equanimity and *sati* (mindfulness); *samadhi* (concentration), *samatha* (tranquility), and *vipassana* (insight); and are also said to

lead to *abhijna* (supramundane powers). These meditation techniques are preceded by and combined with practices which aid this development, such as moral restraint and right effort to develop wholesome states of mind.

While these techniques are used across Buddhist schools, there is also significant diversity. In the Theravada tradition, reflecting developments in early Buddhism, meditation techniques are classified as either *samatha* (calming the mind) or *vipassana* (gaining insight). Chinese and Japanese Buddhism preserved a wide range of meditation techniques, which go back to early Buddhism, most notably *sarvastivada*. In Tibetan Buddhism, deity yoga includes visualizations, which precede the realization of *sunyata* (emptiness). In Kampada meditation, the mind is pointedly focused on a virtuous object, whose function is to make the mind peaceful and calm. There are two types of meditation: analytical meditation and placement meditation.

Meditation takes many forms.

- It can be sitting quietly beside a beautiful arrangement of rocks, contemplating beauty.
- It can be practicing a martial art such as karate or aikido since they require mental and physical control, and strong concentration.
- It can mean focusing on a riddle such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”
- It can be contemplating a haiku or short poem that captures a moment in time.
- It can be in a meditation room of a monastery.
- It can involve chanting.
- It can involve the use of a mandala to focus attention to the invisible point at the centre of interlocking triangles.
- It can involve quietly noticing one’s breath as it goes in and out.
- It can happen anywhere at any time.

Five Precepts

Even though each form of Buddhism took on its own identity, all Buddhists make a commitment to follow a set of moral guidelines for daily life involving body, speech, and mind called the Five Precepts. These are as follows:

- Body
 - to abstain from killing or taking life
 - to abstain from stealing or taking what is not given
 - to abstain from sexual misconduct or exploitation
- Speech
 - to abstain from lying or from false speech
- Mind
 - to abstain from all drugs and intoxicants which may cloud the mind