

A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM

(or Buddhism in eight words)

Dukkha – suffering

The central question that Buddhism addresses is the existence of suffering. The Buddha taught that all things have the potential for suffering in them and wanted to know how it could be overcome. He later said that “I teach only two things: suffering and the ending of suffering”. Related to this, he also pointed out that everything is impermanent (*anicca*).

Ehipassiko – come and see

The Buddha said that all teachings, including his own, should be tested against experience and only accepted once they had been shown to lead to good results. People should not put their faith in tradition, authority or scripture, or accept a teaching only because it appeals to them or fits with what they already think, or because it is logically consistent. Therefore he described his teaching method as ‘come and see’.

Kamma (Karma) – conditioning

The Buddha believed that he had found the source of suffering in our mental habits and patterns. One very important feature of our mental and emotional lives is that they are conditioned by past actions and experiences. These past actions affect our habitual reactions to things and the thoughts and feelings that arise within us, often at an unconscious level. In general, ethical, positive actions condition positive thoughts and feelings and negative actions condition negative ones.

If we live our lives heedlessly, the conditioned thoughts and feelings that arise drive our actions, leading to a self-reinforcing cycle of habitual thought and action. If we pay attention to what is going on in our minds we can choose to act otherwise and break these cycles.

Taṇhā – craving

When he summarised the cause of suffering in one word, the Buddha called it ‘craving’, which means desire for things based on deluded expectations. This leads to *upādāna* or clinging. Clinging can take all sorts of forms, including clinging to material things, relationships, ideas and identities.

The Buddha taught that our ideas about the world can only ever be approximations of reality, so whenever we refuse to accept that our beliefs might be wrong or to change our beliefs in the light of experience we are suffering from clinging.

Magga – path

Fortunately, the Buddha also taught that craving, clinging and the resulting suffering can be ended. The way to do this is by following a path of practice. Buddhism is not a religion or a philosophy but a path. This is important because we can only benefit from a path if we actually follow it and no-one can do it for us. Simply believing or giving up responsibility for our lives to someone else will not work.

Sīla – ethical behaviour

The first step of the Buddhist path is ethical behaviour, which is taken on not in an effort to be good or to please some higher power, but because it is the essential foundation of a happier life.

Buddhism provides ethical guidance in the form of the ‘five precepts’, which mean avoiding harming sentient beings, stealing, sexual coercion or dishonesty, lying and intoxication. However, no set of rules can cover all eventualities, so it is up to us to develop our own moral sense and judgement.

Buddhism often uses the terms ‘skilful’ and ‘unskilful’ (*kusala* and *akusala*) instead of right and wrong to describe ethical action in order to reflect this.

Samādhi – meditation

Buddhism recognises that the human mind is complex and that simply wanting to change something does not necessarily make it happen. Meditation helps to integrate the conscious and unconscious minds and to work with the way that our minds work instead of against them. The Buddha taught a programme of meditation that helps to cultivate qualities such as calmness, energy, compassion and insight. Many of these meditations have now been adopted in mental health and personal growth contexts in the West.

Metta – goodwill

Once we see the root of our own suffering, we see that other beings also want to be free of suffering but are trapped in cycles of conditioning and unskilful action. The basic attitude to others in Buddhism is goodwill or compassion – of solidarity with other beings who are in the same position as us. The Buddha taught that trying to be happy at the expense of others will not work.