

THE BUDDHIST HANDBOOK

Dharma for the Millions no. 8

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1. Who is a Buddhist?

A Buddhist is one who:

- (1) accepts the Buddha as the highest ideal in his life.
- (2) follows the Buddha's teaching as his method of personal development.
- (3) shares fellowship with others, learning from every situation, and works in a manner that harms neither himself, others, nor the environment.

The true Buddhist, however, is one who walks the path to awakening (like the Buddha and the early saints).

An **aspiring Buddhist** is one whose every action is inspired by the possibility of attaining awakening in this life itself, that is, the overcoming of suffering.

To be awakened means to see things as they really are and to be completely capable of coping with the world and its ways.

Whether we already have a religion or do not believe in any, we can still **be Buddhist** (not merely a Buddhist, a statistical member) but a true practitioner, all by ourself to study, practise and realize the Buddha Dharma for ourself. Practice here of course also means meditation.

2. How do I become a Buddhist?

In the Buddha's time, those who are inspired to be his disciples recited the three refuges.

A Buddhist-to-be usually recited the three refuges after a monk or a nun. However, you may recite them by yourself - preferably every day.

The Refuge formula is usually given in Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese or other Asian languages, but in English, it is as follows:

"To the Buddha for refuge I go.
To the Dharma for refuge I go.
To the Sangha for refuge I go.

For the second time, to the Buddha for refuge I go.
For the second time, to the Dharma for refuge I go.
For the second time, to the Sangha for refuge I go.

For the third time, to the Buddha for refuge I go.
For the third time, to the Dharma for refuge I go.
For the third time, to the Sangha for refuge I go."

Dharma (English, from Sanskrit) or **Dhamma** (in Pāli), means the Buddha's teaching, **Saṅgha** refers to the spiritual community of the Buddha's disciples, who are awakened, or on the path to awakening).

3. What are my duties as a Buddhist?

A **Buddhist** is one who makes a pledge to keep the 5 precepts, which are actually the basic Buddhist code of conduct. The English version of the precepts is:

I take upon myself the training rule to avoid the following:

- harming life, especially the destruction of human life.
- taking what is not given (with the intention of stealing).
- sexual misconduct: disrespecting the person, freedom and dignity of others.
- lying: falsehood, harsh words, gossip and slander.
- intoxication: being drunk and falling into addictive behaviour.

4. But these are things I should "not" do as a Buddhist. What about those things which I "should" do?

There are the 5 virtues which you should practise:

1. With deeds of lovingkindness, I purify my body.
2. With open-handed generosity, I purify my body.
3. With stillness, simplicity, and contentment, I purify my body.
4. With truthful communication, I purify my speech.
5. With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.

5. What should I do next if I would like to progress I the true Buddhist way of life?

So far, we have mentioned mainly the social development of a Buddhist. At this point, you should go on to the practice of mental development – cultivation of the mind. This stage is sometimes called "meditation".

6. What is meditation?

In Buddhism, meditation means "mental development" or "spiritual cultivation".

There are 2 important aspects of Buddhist meditation: the "stop" aspect and the "realize" aspect.

(1) The "stop" aspect

In this aspect of Buddhist mental development, you train yourself to control and overcome such "spiritual hindrances" as lust, hate, laziness, anxiety, and doubt. In other words, you meditate to get rid of the "negative emotions". As a result you will attain a state of calmness.

(2) The "realize" aspect

Once you have learnt how to be calm, you should then be able to see the true nature of existence and you will realize the truth which the Buddha himself had discovered. This, in fact, is the wisdom aspect of Buddhist meditation – and is the most important aspect of Buddhism!

7. Could you elaborate on the "wisdom" aspect of Buddhism – especially, what do you mean by "the nature of existence"?

We are dealing with the very heart of the Buddhist experience, that is, the experience of the true nature of things (or things as they really are and not what they appear to be).

Through the experiences of our six senses, we construct our own views of the world, and live in a very private limited virtual reality.

In the rush and stress of our daily lives, our minds are always clouded up with various negative qualities (such as greed, hate, delusion and fear). We tend to see things through "colored glasses".

Very often, we know that there is something good within ourselves, but we find it very difficult to experience or express this inner goodness. We fear that other people will misunderstand,

ridicule or even exploit us if we were to reveal our true self. Unfortunately, we have to content ourselves by wearing "social masks"—our false self! As such we rarely dare to reveal our true selves.

8. How do I get out of such negative state of affairs?

The first step is to recognize the fact that all existence is impermanent. As such, we should not have a false sense of security in "collecting" things, but rather in living a rich and full life of "doing" things. Live now!

The second step is to understand that the universal conflict we see and experience arise from our own craving — that is, the insatiable "collecting" of experiences which bring false promises of pleasure, power and security, and the unthinking "rejection" of that which is ugly and unpleasurable. This means that we have to learn to accept things as they are, at least initially. If we want to improve ourselves we have to start off by acknowledging our own weaknesses first, and deal with them. Then we should go on to look for our strengths and cultivate them. In this quest, we will discover that all things are mind-made.

The third step is to appreciate the fact that we cannot exist alone in this world - indeed, all things in this universe exist in relation to one another. What we do affect others, and what others do affect us in turn. As such, see that our actions will not harm others in any way - do not do to others what we would not have them do to us. Remember that good begets good; evil begets evil.

This is not so much about reward and punishment—much less luck or destiny—but that karma is the kinds of action we do, especially habitually, and these actions shape us: we *become* our karma!

When we understand the true nature of reality, we begin to see beyond this duality, and live in harmony with everyone and everything.

9. You have said so much about what I should do as a Buddhist and what Buddhism has to offer me. But could you give me some kind of simple guidelines by which I can remember all that you have said?

There is a beautiful verse from the well known Buddhist Scripture known as the Dhammapada which runs like this:

Avoid bad;
Do good;
Purify the mind -
This is the teaching of the Buddhas. (Dh 183)

“Bad” here means whatever that brings you physical and mental pain without any benefit of learning more about who or what we really are.

“Good” means whatever that helps us to see deeper into the true reality of life, and bringing out our better qualities or cultivating them.

“Purifying the mind” means learning methods of mindfulness and stillness leading to mental clarity leading to the vision of true reality and liberation.

The benefit of this practice is that we become emotionally independently, that is, the source of true happiness comes from our inner stillness and clarity. In this way become more wholesome and effective members of the community.

10. You mentioned suttas. What are they?

Suttas refer to Pali texts that record what we know as the oldest authentic records of the historical Buddha's teachings over 2500 years ago. These teachings have been "edited" like transcripts of taped recordings and given helpful details, like names of the audience, the location, and other interesting narrative details so that we have a clearer idea of what the teaching is or what happened in the Buddha's time.

11. How do I know what is taught by the Buddha is authentic?

When the Buddha was alive, he was the one true source of authentic Dharma. He himself changed the lives of numerous people to become saints, especially arhats (those awakened just like him, and do not need any more enlightenment). After the Buddha has passed away, his teachings and awakening stories are carefully in the suttas [question 10] for our benefit.

When we carefully study these suttas—starting with just the parts that we like—and then study them again a few months or years later, we will see our understanding has grown. These teachings prepare us for mindfulness and meditation, to calm and clear our mind settling it in joy. Then, when we look at the suttas again, we understand even more deeply their meaning.

The authenticity of the suttas is not only in the words, but more when we practise the Buddha's teaching preserved therein. As our understanding deepens and focuses, we see these suttas as ancient signboards and pointers in the direction of the path of awakening. We begin to understand the nature of IMPERMANENCE. When we reflect deeper and more constantly on the impermanence of everything, we build the foundation for the first step of our awakening, that is, as a streamwinner—we do down into a Dharma-boat on the stream of the noble path and start our journey for nirvana in this life itself. [Question 12]

12. Can I awaken in this life itself? How?

We should try our best to awaken in this life itself. For, if we are reborn in one of the subhuman planes, it would be very difficult to know Dharma, much less walk the path to awakening. Carefully read the Okkanta Samyutta (ch 25 of the Samyuta Nikaya) where the Buddha advises us to practise the perception of impermanence.

You can choose your method of practice from any of the 10 suttas there. An easy one is the very first, **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25).¹

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¹ Download from the Dharmafarer website: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/16.7-Anicca-Cakkhu-S-s25.1-piya.pdf>.