

Spirituality

[Revised edition of fb171228 on Facebook]

With better information on Buddhism which is more widely and freely available, and with greater freedom of choice today, we are able to choose what kind of Buddhism that will really and truly help us. With informed choice, we are more likely to make the right one.

The most vital tip we must remember when choosing Buddhism for our study and practice is to understand the difference between “religion” and “spirituality.” Very simply but helpfully, we can say that “**religion** is belief in someone else’s experience; **spirituality** is growing through our own experience.”

With tongue in cheek, we can also say: Religion is for those who are afraid of falling into hell, whether they believe it or not. Spirituality is for those who have been there, and so understand it better.

Here are 8 characteristics of Buddhist spirituality we should understand that can help us with growing freedom and happiness, no matter what religion we follow or none at all. These are 8 aspects of **the spirit of Buddhism**, the essence of the Buddha’s teachings. We only need to add them to our waking life and water them with our experience of the moment, and in time we will see the path of awakening.

(1) NO NEED FOR ANY GOD-BELIEF

The main problem with the God-idea is that it is an “idea,” especially of the dominant individual or group. It is a power-based idea, which means that it demands belief, and we will be in some way punished or deprived if we do not believe. To believe means to accept another’s word without any verification on our part.

For that reason, God-belief usually comes with the idea that we are “evil,” “sinners,” etc. As such, it is a psychologically unhealthy idea. It causes emotional issues and promotes intolerance. Because there are many and many kinds of God-believers, and every God-believer thinks his God is the one and only true God, they disagree among themselves.

The Christian Encyclopaedia says that they all swear by the same God and swear at each other by the same God, too! Understandably, most mass violence we see today are rooted in God-belief, rightly or wrongly (often the latter).

A Friend on the Early Buddhism FB page quipped: “Thank God he doesn’t exist!”

(2) OUR MIND IS THE REAL CREATOR

There are many forms of Buddhism, some of which seem to have God-belief. However, the Buddha clearly teaches that there is no need whatsoever for belief in a God-idea. Hence, this reflection is based on early Buddhism.

One of the key ideas of early Buddhism is that the MIND is our real creator. Not only that, but the mind is behind all our bad or good. In short, our mind decides and defines us. Hence, when we understand our own mind, we have more control over our actions, and this allows us to see the true nature of reality within and without us.

“The mind comes before all things.” (Dhammapada 1+2)

(3) WE CAN AND MUST HELP OURSELF

God-religions work with some kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: you are evil, but we can save you. Believers think of God as a life-saver. But isn't it better when we are all taught how to swim and how to avoid dangerous waters, rather than depend on the One and Only Life-saver on the crowded beach of life?

The key practice in early Buddhism is about understanding our own mind. It teaches us between “knowing” (views) and “understanding” (wisdom). Knowledge arises from our physical senses (the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body), but our senses are not always right. We also often have problems with our attention. Not only is our attention often short, but it races about among the senses without really fully experiencing the reality of the moment.¹

This attention is **the mind** that needs to be tamed and focused. Hence, the key practice in early Buddhism is that of **meditation** or “mental cultivation.” This is about knowing the mind, taming the mind, freeing the mind. Our free mind is not only able to “see,” but it also sees good and feels joy. We become creative in the best artistic sense of the word. Our free mind is the source of truth and beauty.

(4) THE UNIVERSAL PROBLEM: SUFFERING

No one likes suffering: this is just the point, and very 1st “noble” truth taught by the Buddha. Simply, this means that we, as a rule, feel that something is missing in our life. The 2nd noble truth explains the reason for this: craving. This means that we mostly think in terms of “having.” If we think of ourself in terms of what we have, and we lose what we have—what are we?

The point is that whatever we have will be lost. Nothing in this world really belongs to us. We may use them, but that's about it. “Having” (craving) is a delusion that makes us feel we never have enough no matter how much we have. Thinking in this way is only to invite suffering and keep it as our house guest for life.

Our breath is the most essential thing in our life. Yet when we breathe in, we must breathe out again. This is life. We take in what we can, and we must give it back—the air is not really ours.

Yet, we ARE but the air that we have breathed in and absorb into our system. We are but the earth: our body of flesh, blood and bones stand on earth. We drink a lot of liquid: we take it in, we give it back. We are water, too. We are fire: we take in heat and give back heat. This is the natural law of change that we are and that is all around us.

(5) TO CHANGE, UNDERSTAND CHANGE

Early Buddhism, then, is a path of internal change and growth. This is the 3rd noble truth: everything in the world changes; we must change, too. First, we must accept **impermanence** so that we can understand that our body and speech grow and

¹ See [Sabba Sutta](#) (S 35.23), SD 7.1.

change—or, in a word, evolve. If we understand change, then, it is easier to evolve into a better individual.

When we appreciate our physical change, it is easier to see that our mind changes, too. Our mind comprises feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. **Feeling** is our mind's response to sense-experiences. **Perception** is how we “value-add” these experiences by projecting our memories of what is pleasant or unpleasant onto the experiences. **Formations** are how we act and react to these projections and their effects upon us. **Consciousness** is the basic functioning of our mind, how we are aware of things. They all are changing.

(6) FAITH OR WISDOM

God-belief, because it cannot really be proven, must rest only on faith. However, in early Buddhist practice, we start with what is both before and inside us. We reflect on impermanence as a reality check. The truth and reality of impermanence can be accepted with **faith** or understood with **wisdom**, depending on our personality (faith-type or wisdom-type). It works the same for both.

The benefits of the reflection of impermanence is that we are in touch with reality itself. We see everything inside us and all around us changing. When we lose loved ones, when things break or break down; even our body, thoughts and feelings, change—we see this reality and do not fear them. In fact, the Buddha teaches us that this practice, properly done, brings us to the first step on the noble path: we become “streamwinners,” we reach the stream that flows towards nirvana. [3]

(7) ATTITUDE, NOT AFFILIATION

Like many religions, we may join a Buddhist organization, and call ourself Buddhists. But to be a Dhamma practitioner, we must study and understand at least some key teachings—such as **the perception of impermanence**—so that we change into a better individual.

There is no club or group we can join to really better our life or attitude. We can only do it ourself. However, we may join a group that teaches early Buddhism or is friendly to Buddha Dhamma so that we are able to help one another in the process of personal development or **individuation** by way of the Buddhist training mentioned above.

If we like, we may even remain at home (especially for those living in areas without any direct contact with early Buddhism) and study the suttas from the numerous online sutta sites (such as <http://dharmafarer.org>). Dhamma teachings are generally self-explanatory for the average person. The idea is to read the various sutta translations and their explanations by practising teachers.

The suttas are best reflectively read or heard. Then, with an inspired heart and calm mind, we go on to spend daily or habitual quiet moments with our peaceful breath for as long as we like.

They are not like newspapers (which we read and then discard). They are more like computer programmes we must run and work with regularly. Each time we read the suttas, no matter how simple, we will discover something new about true reality.

Knowing leads to views, which limits our seeing. **Understanding** frees us from views, which helps us see ourselves better. To know is to accumulate facts. To understand is to live what we know—to see impermanence in us and everything around us.

(8) BUDDHIST SPIRITUALITY IS FOR ALL

In significant ways, we can easily become a Buddhist (by joining a group or guru). Better still, we should simply become **Buddhist**: only then, we can really evolve into a “spiritual Buddhist” or dhammafaraer.²

Not all “Buddhists” are spiritual Buddhists. As a dhammafaraer, we regularly practise the reflection on impermanence so that we will see the noble path in this life itself, if not certainly at our last breath. This is guaranteed by the Buddha.³

This also means that we do not have to call ourselves Buddhist to commit ourselves to the Buddha’s training of self-awakening. We may belong to any religion or none. As long as we respect life, we respect other’s property, we do not violate others, we love truth, and we cultivate an unintoxicated mind that is calm and clear—these are called the 5 precepts—we are keeping to the Buddha’s way of inner peace, self-awakening and spiritual freedom.

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² See reflection, “[Be Buddhist, not a Buddhist](#),” R342.

³ See [\(Anicca\) Cakkhu Sutta](#) (S 25.10), SD 16.7.