

Buddhist Identities

Followers of the teachings of the Buddha are called Buddhists. Buddhist staff and students form a substantial part of the La Trobe community. Acknowledging and respecting Buddhist identities at La Trobe therefore requires, in part, a basic understanding of what Buddhism and being a Buddhist is about.

Buddhists in Australia

- Buddhism was first introduced to Australia in the mid to late 1800s with the arrival of Chinese, Sri Lankan and Japanese gold miners, pearl divers and sugar plantation workers.
- The first Buddhist monastery in Australia was set up in 1971 in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales.
- The establishment of Centres to study and practice Buddhism were established in the late 1970's and early 1980's. eg. Wat Buddharangsee, Wat Buddha Dhamma and the Chenrezig Institute, as well as smaller general Buddhist associations, Zen groups and Tibetan groups. There are many Centres throughout Australia today that represent the various traditions of Buddhism.
- During the 1990s, immigration from Southeast Asia expanded Buddhist numbers considerably. In the 1996 Census approximately 199,000 people identified as Buddhist. In the 2001 Census, the number had increased by about 79% to 360,000. In the 2006 Census, 2.1% of the total population identified as Buddhist.
- People from various Asian backgrounds such as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia and Tibet have set up Buddhist communities in Australia

About Buddhism

Buddhism began in India during the sixth century BCE from the teachings of a prince named Siddhartha Gautama who later came to be known as the Buddha, meaning 'enlightened one'. In Sanskrit (ancient Indian language), the term Buddha means 'The Awakened One'. A Buddha is a person who is self-aware, and has wisdom and compassion. Buddhists therefore celebrate and revere the Buddha as an enlightened human being rather than as a god or an incarnation of God.

The main source of faith and practice for Buddhists is the Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha).

Buddhists believe:

- in the 'Four Noble Truths' and follow the 'Eightfold Path';
- nothing in the world is fixed or permanent;
- everyone is influenced by past actions (karma);
- in rebirth that can occur in human form, animal form, as a ghost, in a blissful state or in a state of woe.



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Schools of Buddhism

There are different traditions in Buddhism but the central teaching is common – the teaching of Buddha Sakyamuni. The differences between the schools of Buddhism rest on the emphasis they place on particular aspects of the teachings and the interpretation of rules governing the conduct of the sangha (Buddhist spiritual community).

Theravada

The Theravada School adheres strictly to the original teachings of Buddha as contained in the Pali canon (scripture) and emphasises the goal of personal salvation for the individual follower. The importance of the community of monks is also characteristic of the Theravada tradition. Theravada countries include Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos.

Mahayana

The Mahayana School is not as strict as the Theravada School in its interpretation of the monastic code of conduct. The importance of followers becoming bodhisattvas for the salvation of living beings is emphasised.

Zen Buddhism, a branch of Mahayana Buddhism, strongly emphasises the practice of meditation. Mahayana countries include Tibet, northern India, Nepal, China, Japan, Vietnam and Korea.

Vajrayana

The Vajrayana School's interpretation of the teachings is essentially the same as the Mahayana School but differs in that it emphasises the importance of a personal guru (teacher) who initiates his followers into what has been called 'secret teachings' (tantra). Meditation and special sayings known as mantras are also characteristic of the Vajrayana tradition. Vajrayana countries include Tibet, Mongolia, northern India and Nepal. The Dalai Lama is the spiritual head of the Tibetan branch of Buddhism.

The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path

The central teachings of all schools of Buddhism are based on the Four Noble Truths:

- 1 Life is subject to mental and physical suffering and frustration (dukkha).
- 2 The origin or cause of dukkha can be attributed to selfishness and desiring/craving things for oneself, for example, sensual pleasures, wealth and power.

Buddhist Religious Observance

Place and style of worship

The main place of worship for a Buddhist is the temple, which often includes a shrine and a statue of Buddha. Buddhists make offerings of flowers, light candles and incense and engage in meditation.

Worship is commonly in the form of chanting Buddha's teachings, meditation and mantras (single sounds such as Om or Aum repeated constantly).

Buddhist symbols

The most popular symbol of Buddhism is the Buddha statue. Other symbols of Buddhism include the eight auspicious symbols such as the Dharma wheel with its eight spokes that refers to the Eightfold Path. There is the lotus flower which often represents the inherently pure potential of the mind. Stupas or temples which have tiered, domed shaped rooves with a golden spire at the top, represent the steps to the enlightened mind of a Buddha. The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion that is being built near Bendigo is an example of this.

Buddhist dress code

- Buddhism has no prescribed dress code for lay Buddhists, except that they wear clothing that covers the shoulders and legs.
- Buddhist monks and nuns shave their heads and wear a robe that is usually brown, tan, orange, red, maroon or grey (depending on the tradition).

Dietary requirements and restrictions

Regulations governing food depends on which branch of Buddhism is practised and in what country.

- Meat and fish are generally not eaten by the Theravada and Mahayana traditions because it is considered bad karma (since animals can be reincarnated as humans and vice versa).
- Some followers of the Mahayana and Theravada tradition are also vegans.
- Buddhists from China and Vietnam usually do not eat onion, garlic or leek. Commonly referred to as 'five pungent spices', these foods are believed to increase one's sexual desire and anger.
- Buddhist monastics fast from all food on the new and full moon of each lunar month.
- Buddhists generally abstain from mind altering substances such as alcohol.

- 3 The overcoming of dukkha is known as nirvana – a state of mind that transcends desire and suffering.
- 4 One attains the state of nirvana by following the Eightfold Path:
 - Right Understanding – knowledge that the Four Noble Truths lead to overcoming dukkha.
 - Right Thought – genuinely wishing to break free from desire.
 - Right Speech – controlling one’s speech so that it does not harm others, for example, avoiding lying, gossip and slander.
 - Right Action – avoiding actions considered harmful to oneself or any other living creatures.
 - Right Livelihood – earning a living in a way that does not cause harm or suffering to others, for example, avoiding occupations that involve the selling of intoxicants, firearms or animals for slaughter.
 - Right Effort – exerting a constant attentiveness to lifestyle.
 - Right Mindfulness – constant awareness about the effects of one’s actions so as to avoid harmful actions.
 - Right Concentration – attaining serenity by cultivating the mind through meditation.



Significant Buddhist Festivals and Celebration Dates

Buddhist festivals provide an opportunity for celebrating and expressing devotion and appreciation of the Buddha and his teachings. The dates and the way that festivals are celebrated vary between countries and Buddhist traditions. With the exception of Japan, most Buddhists use the lunar calendar.

For specific dates, see the Cultural Diversity calendar at: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/cdip>

Buddha Day

Considered the most important festival of the Buddhist year, Buddha Day commemorates the birth and enlightenment of Buddha in Mahayana Buddhist countries. In Theravada countries, Buddha Day is also known as Wesak Day. It differs from Mahayana Buddhism in that it celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha. Buddha Day is commonly celebrated with the ‘Bathing of Buddha’ whereby water is poured over the shoulders of the Buddha as a reminder of the need to purify the heart and mind.

Dancing dragons, lanterns made out of paper and wood, releasing caged birds and making origami paper crane decorations are others ways in which Wesak Day is celebrated across different traditions. Offerings of food to monks and flowers/incense for shrines and temples are also made as signs of respect.

Buddha Day is celebrated on the first full moon day in May except in a leap year when it is held in June.

Dharma Day (Asalha Puja Day/Buddhist Teaching)

The teachings of the Buddha are known as the Dharma. This is celebrated on Dharma Day. Dharma Day is often celebrated with readings from Buddhist scriptures, providing an opportunity to reflect on their contents. Collective ritual celebrations in a ceremonial manner are also common.

Dharma Day is celebrated on the full moon day of July.

Sangha Day (Magha Puja Day/ Spiritual Community)

The second most important Buddhist Festival is Sangha Day which celebrates the community of followers of the teachings of Buddha. The Sangha specifically includes those who have left home to follow the spiritual path such as monks and nuns, but can also include lay followers of the teachings of Buddha. Sangha Day has become a prominent festival amongst Western Buddhists and is considered a traditional time for the exchange of gifts.

Parinirvana Day (Nirvana Day/Death of the Buddha)

This is a Mahayana Buddhist date that celebrates the passing away of Buddha. It provides an opportunity to reflect on one's own future death and on people who have recently died. Meditations are conducted for those recently deceased, providing them with help and support. Parinirvana Day is also known as Nirvana Day. This festival is celebrated in January by Vietnamese Buddhists.

Further Reading

ABC Religion and Ethics: Buddhism:
<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s796474.htm>

Buddhanet: Buddha Dharma Education
Association Inc.: <http://www.buddhanet.net/>

Buddhist Council of Victoria:
<http://www.bcvic.org.au/>

Buddhist Festivals:
<http://www.fwbo.org/festivals.html>

Faith and Food Fact Files: Buddhism
<http://www.faithandfood.com/Buddhism.php>

The Buddhist Society:
<http://www.thebuddhistsociety.org/>

Local Bendigo contact:
www.atishacentre.org.au

Tibetan tradition: www.talkingbuddhism.com

Mayana tradition: www.fpmt.org