

# 1.15

## Theravada Buddhism

### Theravada Buddhism

**Theravada Buddhism** is one of the oldest schools of Buddhism, and is known as 'the school of the elders'. (In Pali, which is the main language used in Theravada texts and chanting, 'thera' means 'elder' and 'vada' means 'school'.) Today, Theravada Buddhism is practised mostly in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar.

Theravada Buddhism is sometimes regarded as classical or orthodox Buddhism, with a high degree of uniformity in how it is practised. The school emphasises ordination in the monastic community. While some women have been ordained within Theravada Buddhism, full ordination is primarily reserved for men (see page 89).

The Buddha is seen as the main focus of commitment and is one of the three refuges. He is a guide, an example for others to follow and a teacher, but he is not considered to be a god.

Theravada monastics devote their whole lives to following the path of enlightenment, and promise to follow a number of rules, including not to own anything, not to have any sexual relationships, and never to be offensive to anyone.

Theravada monastics focus in particular on meditation. They believe that commitment to the Buddha and the Eightfold Path will bring good merit or kamma. Their goal is to achieve enlightenment and reach nibbana.

Some Theravada Buddhists believe it is possible to share their own good fortune with other people, by transferring the merit they have gained to someone else. This transfer of merit becomes particularly important when someone has died. When this happens, the family and friends may gather round whoever has died and transfer their merit to him or her, in the hope that this will help the dead person to have a favourable rebirth. (This practice is less common among Western Buddhists.)

### The human personality in Theravada Buddhism

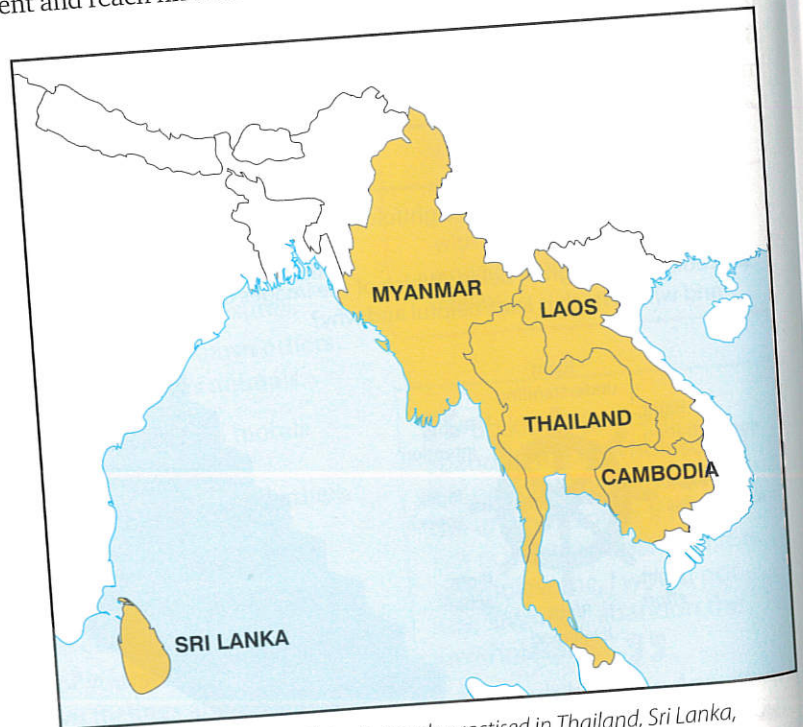
On page 25, we saw how the Buddha taught that people are made up of five parts, called the **five aggregates** (skandhas). Theravada Buddhists in particular believe that these five parts

#### Objectives

- Know the main features of Theravada Buddhism.
- Understand how the five aggregates make up the human personality.

#### Key terms

- **Theravada Buddhism:** 'the school of the elders'; an ancient Buddhist tradition found in southern Asia
- **the five aggregates:** the five aspects that make up a person



▲ Today, Theravada Buddhism is mostly practised in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar





▲ *Theravada monks at a temple in Thailand*

interact with each other to make up a person's identity and personality. The five aggregates are:

1. **Form:** this refers to material or physical objects (such as a house, an apple, or the organs that make up a person's body).
2. **Sensation:** this refers to the feelings or sensations that occur when someone comes into contact with things. They can be physical (such as a sensation of pain after tripping over), or emotional (such as a feeling of joy after seeing a friend).
3. **Perception:** this refers to how people recognise (or perceive) what things are, based on their previous experiences. For example, you might recognise what the feeling of happiness means because you have felt it before; you recognise what a car is because you have seen lots of other cars in the past.
4. **Mental formations:** this refers to a person's thoughts and opinions – how they respond mentally to the things they experience, including their likes and dislikes, and their attitudes towards different things.
5. **Consciousness:** this refers to a person's general awareness of the world around them.

Here is a simple example to show how the five aggregates interact (all of these things happen more or less at the same time):

- **Form:** you enter a room and see a slice of cake (a physical object).
- **Sensation:** seeing the slice of cake gives you a feeling or sense of anticipation.
- **Perception:** you recognise that it's a slice of cake, from having seen other slices of cake in the past.
- **Mental formations:** you form an opinion of the cake and decide whether you want to eat it or not.
- **Consciousness:** all of these things are connected by your general awareness of the world.

## Research activity



Use the internet to find out what daily life is like for a Theravada monk. Write a list of activities that might happen in a typical day. Explain how these activities, and the way the day is structured, support religious practice and the well-being of the community.

## Activities

- 1 To become a Theravada monk, a person has to be healthy, solvent (without any debts) and free of family responsibility. Why do you think Theravada Buddhism insists on these rules for people who want to become monks?
- 2 List the five aggregates and then write down your own example of how these interact with each other.
- 3 What do you think of the idea that you can transfer your own merit to someone else? How do you think that this action of passing on your merit to others might in fact earn you more merit for doing so? Explain your views.

## ★ Study tip

It is useful to know some of the differences between Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism, which is discussed on the next page.

### Summary

You should now be able to give an overview of Theravada Buddhism. You should also be able to explain how the five aggregates interact to make up the human personality.



# 1.16 Mahayana Buddhism

## ■ Mahayana Buddhism

**Mahayana Buddhism** is a term used to describe a number of different traditions that share some overlapping characteristics. A few of the main traditions that come under the Mahayana umbrella are Pure Land Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism and Nichiren Buddhism. Today, Mahayana Buddhism is mainly practised in China (including Tibet), Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Mongolia and Bhutan.

Theravada Buddhists view the Buddha as a purely historical figure. They believe it is no longer possible to meet or interact with him in the world. In contrast, Mahayana Buddhists believe that the Buddha remains active and can influence the world. He can be encountered through visions and meditation, and he can manifest himself in many different forms, times and places.

Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists emphasise different beliefs and practices. One difference is how enlightenment can be achieved. Some of these differences are discussed on pages 40–41, and we will look at a few of the others below.

## ■ Sunyata

An important concept in Mahayana Buddhism is **sunyata**, which is often translated as 'emptiness'. For Mahayana Buddhists, understanding sunyata is essential for achieving enlightenment.



▲ Today, Mahayana Buddhism is mostly practised in China (including Tibet), Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Mongolia and Bhutan

## Objectives

- Know the main features of Mahayana Buddhism.
- Understand the concept of sunyata.
- Understand the idea of achieving Buddhahood by realising a person's Buddha-nature.

## Key terms

- **Mahayana Buddhism:** an umbrella term to describe some later Buddhist traditions, including Pure Land Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism and Zen Buddhism
- **sunyata:** emptiness; the concept that nothing has a separate, independent 'self' or 'soul'
- **Buddha-nature:** the idea that everyone has the essence of a Buddha inside them
- **Buddhahood:** when someone achieves enlightenment and becomes a Buddha

## Activities

- 1 Using a different example to the one of the computer given on page 39, explain how the concept of sunyata teaches that everything is interdependent, interrelated and impermanent.
- 2 Use the internet to pick two contrasting images of a Buddha: one from China and one from India. What are the main differences between the images? Try to suggest reasons for the differences.



Sunyata could be understood as a restatement of anatta (see pages 24–25). It emphasises that not only do human beings not have a fixed, independent, unchanging nature, but that in fact all things are like that. Nothing exists independently but only in relation to, and because of, other things. A wave, for instance, cannot be separated from the sea.

The example of the chariot on page 24 helps to explain the concept of sunyata. For another example let's think about a computer. A computer does not have a 'soul' – a separate, independent bit that forms the essence of the computer. A computer is instead made up of lots of different parts, such as wires, a plastic case, a cooling fan, a graphics card and so on, which rely on each other and work together to form the whole computer. The computer relies on other people to make those parts and put them all together, and to keep them working. When the computer breaks down, it might be taken apart and bits of it reused to help repair other computers. This makes the computer interdependent and interrelated. It is also impermanent: the computer will eventually break down and stop working.

For Buddhists, realising that everything depends on, and interlinks with, everything else can lead to trust, compassion and selflessness. Realising that everything is impermanent is important for reducing the suffering that results in becoming too attached to things. These realisations are important for achieving enlightenment.

## ■ Buddha-nature and attaining Buddhahood

**Buddha-nature** is an important concept in some Mahayana traditions. At a basic level, it refers to the idea that everyone has the seed, even the essence (or nature) of a Buddha already inside them. Sometimes it is even said that, deep down, every person is *already* enlightened. But because a person's Buddha-nature is hidden by desires, attachments, ignorance, and negative thoughts, it is not realised. Only when people truly come to understand the Buddha's teachings – and therefore understand the nature of themselves and reality around them – do they experience the Buddha-nature that was always there.

One example given in traditional Buddhist scripture to help explain Buddha-nature is that of honey surrounded by many bees. The honey is sweet and tasty but as long as it is surrounded by bees, it isn't possible to get to the honey, even though it's been there all the time. The only way to experience the honey is to get rid of the bees.

Mahayana Buddhists aim to achieve **Buddhahood**: to become a Buddha (an enlightened being). They believe that everyone has the potential to do this and to become a Buddha because of their inherent Buddha-nature.



▲ Zen Buddhist monks meditating

## Research activities

- 1 Look up the well-known Parable of the Burning House from the *Lotus Sutra*, an important Mahayana scripture. What is the message of the parable? What does it teach Buddhists?
- 2 Create a chart to show the differences between Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. Include the information you have learned from this chapter, then use the internet to find some further differences.

## ★ Study tip

Another example to illustrate Buddha-nature is a seed in an apple. The seed has the potential to become a great tree if all the right conditions for its growth are met.

## Summary

You should now understand some of the main differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. You should also be able to explain the meaning of the terms sunyata, Buddha-nature and Buddhahood, and be able to say how they relate to each other.



# 1.17

## The Arhat and the Bodhisattva

### ■ Becoming an Arhat

For Theravada Buddhists, an **Arhat** is a 'perfected person' who has overcome the main causes of suffering – the three poisons of greed, hatred and ignorance – to achieve enlightenment. When someone becomes an Arhat, they are no longer reborn when they die. This means they are finally freed from the suffering of existence in the cycle of birth and death (samsara), and they can attain nibbana. This goal is achieved by following the Eightfold Path and concentrating on wisdom, morality and meditation.



▲ Statues of Arhats at the Grand Temple of Mount Heng in China

During the Buddha's lifetime, many of his disciples became Arhats. Among them were the first five monks the Buddha was with and the Buddha's own father, Siddhodana.

“ I have no teacher, and one like me  
Exists nowhere in all the world ...  
I am the Teacher Supreme.  
I alone am a Fully Enlightened One  
Whose fires are quenched and extinguished. ”

The Buddha in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, vol. 1, p. 171

Mahayana Buddhists sometimes use the term Arhat to refer to someone who is far along the path of enlightenment but has not yet become enlightened. However, for Mahayana Buddhists the ideal is to become a **Bodhisattva** rather than an Arhat.

### Objectives

- Consider two different goals of human destiny in Buddhism.
- Understand the differences between an Arhat and a Bodhisattva.

### Key terms

- **Arhat:** for Theravada Buddhists, someone who has become enlightened
- **Bodhisattva:** for Mahayana Buddhists, someone who has become enlightened but chooses to remain in the cycle of samsara to help others achieve enlightenment as well

### Links

To read about a person who became an Arhat, look at the story of Kisa Gotami on page 23.

### Discussion activity

Look at the statements below and decide which ones you agree with and which ones you disagree with. Discuss as a whole class.

- 1 Bodhisattvas should not have a god-like status because that is not what Buddhism is all about.
- 2 Buddhists should not rely on others to help them because the Buddha said that people should seek out their own path for themselves.
- 3 Seeking enlightenment just for yourself shows vanity.
- 4 Arhats do not need to be compassionate and generous to others.



## ■ Becoming a Bodhisattva

A Bodhisattva is someone who sees their own enlightenment as being bound up with the enlightenment of all beings. Out of compassion, they remain in the cycle of samsara in order to help others achieve enlightenment as well. The ultimate goal for Mahayana Buddhists is to become Bodhisattvas.

Bodhisattvas combine being compassionate with being wise. Mahayana Buddhists believe that the original emphasis of the Buddha's teachings to his disciples was to 'go forth for the welfare of the many', and Bodhisattvas aim to do just this.

“ However innumerable sentient beings are; I vow to save them. ”

A Bodhisattva vow

A person becomes a Bodhisattva by perfecting certain attributes in their lives. There are six of these that Mahayana Buddhists focus on (called the six perfections):

1. generosity – to be charitable and generous in all that is done
2. morality – to live with good morals and ethical behaviour
3. patience – to practise being patient in all things
4. energy – to cultivate the energy and perseverance needed to keep going even when things get difficult
5. meditation – to develop concentration and awareness
6. wisdom – to obtain wisdom and understanding.

Mahayana Buddhists believe there are earthly and transcendent Bodhisattvas. The 'earthly' ones continue to be reborn into the world, to live on Earth, while the 'transcendent' ones remain in some region between the Earth and nibbana as spiritual or mythical beings. However, they remain active in the world, appearing in different forms to help others and lead them to enlightenment. Mahayana Buddhists pray to these Bodhisattvas in times of need.

### Activities

- 1 Read the statements below and decide whether you think they are true or false. Give reasons for your answers.
  - a An Arhat is someone who is close to enlightenment but has not yet achieved it.
  - b Arhats wish to stay in the cycle of samsara.
  - c There are five perfections that Bodhisattvas are trying to achieve.
  - d Bodhisattvas put off their own enlightenment to save others.
- 2 Give three differences between Arhats and Bodhisattvas.



▲ The Bodhisattva Maitreya is considered to be the future Buddha, who will return to Earth at some point in the future to teach the Dhamma

### Links

Read more about the six perfections on pages 72–73.

### Research activity

Look up the Buddhist story of 'The Hungry Tigress'. Try to work out how this story shows compassion and wisdom in action.

### ★ Study tip

Try to remember the differences between what Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists believe about achieving enlightenment.

### Summary

You should now understand what Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists believe are the goals of human destiny. You should be able to explain what an Arhat and Bodhisattva are, and how Buddhists aim to become one.



# 1.18 Pure Land Buddhism

## ■ Pure Land Buddhism

**Pure Land Buddhism** is part of the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism. It began in China as early as the second century CE, then developed and spread throughout China and into Japan. Today, Pure Land Buddhism is the main type of Buddhism practised in Japan.

Pure Land Buddhism is based on faith in **Amitabha Buddha**, in the hope of being reborn in the paradise where Amitabha lives. Amitabha was a king who renounced his throne to become a monk.

Mahayana scriptures tell how when he achieved enlightenment and became a Buddha, he created a pure land called **Sukhavati**, which is a land that can be found far to the west, beyond the boundaries of our own world. Amitabha created this perfect paradise out of his compassion and love for all beings. Pure Land Buddhists believe that if they are reborn into this land, they will be taught by Amitabha himself and will therefore have a much better chance of attaining Buddhahood (becoming a Buddha). In the pure land, there is no suffering, and none of the problems that stop people in our own world from attaining enlightenment.



▲ *Amitabha Buddha in the pure land*

“ [Sukhavati] is rich in a great variety of flowers and fruits, adorned with jewel trees, which are frequented by flocks of birds with sweet voices ... And all the beings who are born ... in this Buddha-field, they are all fixed on the right method of salvation, until they have won nirvana. For this reason that world system is called the 'Happy Land.' ”

*The Larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra, sections 16–24*

## ■ How to reach the pure land

T'an-luan is considered to be the person who founded Pure Land Buddhism in China. He encouraged believers to follow five types of

### Objectives

- Understand the main features of Pure Land Buddhism.
- Understand how Pure Land Buddhists believe they can reach Buddhahood.

### Key terms

- **Pure Land Buddhism:** a Mahayana form of Buddhism based on belief in Amitabha Buddha
- **Amitabha Buddha:** the Buddha worshipped by Pure Land Buddhists
- **Sukhavati:** the paradise where Amitabha Buddha lives, and where Pure Land Buddhists aim to be reborn





▲ Thousands of Pure Land Buddhists in Vietnam worshipping Amitabha

religious practice: reciting scriptures, meditating on Amitabha and his paradise, worshipping Amitabha, chanting his name, and making praises and offerings to him. Of these five he taught that the most important is to recite Amitabha's name. If a person follows these practices, they will be reborn in the paradise of Sukhavati.

Pure Land Buddhism focuses on having faith in Amitabha, and believing that he will help Buddhists to be reborn in Sukhavati. Faith in Amitabha is more important than a person's own actions and behaviour. This is quite different to other schools of Buddhism. For example, Theravada Buddhism teaches that enlightenment can only be achieved through a person's own thoughts and actions, and they cannot rely on any outside help to achieve enlightenment. The fact that it is seen to be easier to reach enlightenment in Pure Land Buddhism, with Amitabha's help, has allowed this school of Buddhism to gain popular appeal.

“ Even a bad man will be received in Buddha's land, how much more a good man? ”

Honen (twelfth century Japanese Pure Land teacher)

“ Even a good man will be received in Buddha's land, how much more a bad man? ”

Shinran (a student of Honen)

### Activities

- 1 Describe the land that Amitabha created when he became enlightened.
- 2 Why do Pure Land Buddhists believe it will be easier to achieve enlightenment in Sukhavati?
- 3 Imagine that a murderer was able to call on Amitabha's name and gain salvation in Sukhavati. Do you think this is fair? Should everyone be given the same chance to achieve enlightenment regardless of what they have done? Give reasons for your answer.

### Discussion activity

Discuss with a partner whether you think Pure Land Buddhism sounds easier to follow than other types of Buddhism.

### Research activity

Research Shinran, one of the most important figures in Pure Land Buddhism. Write a biography of him that explains his contributions to Pure Land Buddhism.

### Extension activity

Honen and Shinran were two important figures in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism. Research their lives and note down some of the similarities and differences in their beliefs.

### ★ Study tip

Most traditions of Buddhism do not expect a Buddha to actively help people to achieve enlightenment. Pure Land Buddhism is different in that Pure Land Buddhists have faith that Amitabha Buddha will respond to their requests to be reborn in the pure land.

### Summary

You should now have a basic overview of Pure Land Buddhism, and understand how Pure Land Buddhists believe they can achieve enlightenment.