

8

Religion, human rights and social justice

8.1

Social justice

What is social justice?

Social justice exists when people in a society are treated equally under the law, and have equal rights and opportunities. It means that no one is exploited, resources and wealth are shared fairly, and care is taken of the least advantaged members of society.

Many people around the world campaign for greater social justice in their countries. In some countries, people are denied the freedom to follow the religion of their choice or express opinions about the actions of government. Other societies suffer because of a breakdown of law and order, or from violent attacks from terrorists. Some people live in societies where the rich are very rich and the poor struggle to survive. Those who campaign for social justice wish to see a world where people are treated more fairly and given equal opportunities, whatever their gender, sexual orientation, religion, politics, ethnicity, disability or age.

Buddhism and social justice

The common image of Buddhists is of quiet, meditative, peaceful people who have withdrawn from the world's problems. It is true that the Buddha encouraged monks and nuns to withdraw from society in order to have more time and space for meditation and study. However, he also criticised monks who failed to look after the sick and he talked to kings seeking advice. It has always been the case that most of his followers have been lay people active in society, not monks or nuns.

The Buddha taught that suffering is an inevitable part of life, and that on a fundamental level the world is unsatisfactory – it cannot be made perfect. People will suffer if they keep expecting life to be completely satisfying. Buddhists try to improve their understanding of suffering to help them to accept life's disappointments.

However, this does not mean that Buddhists think it is pointless to try to relieve suffering or make the world a better place. The Buddha taught again and again the importance of kindness, compassion, generosity and unselfishness as a way of bringing communities together. As always in Buddhism, the middle way is best, accepting imperfection while doing what one can to make a better world.

Objective

- Understand Buddhist teachings about social justice.

Key terms

- **social justice:** ensuring that society treats people fairly whether they are poor or wealthy; protecting people's human rights
- **Engaged Buddhism:** a movement in Buddhism that is particularly concerned with applying the Buddha's teachings to matters of social and environmental injustice



▲ Taking part in peaceful protest is one way that people can try to create a more just world

Engaged Buddhism

Engaged Buddhism is a term that was first used in the 1990s by Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. It is used by Buddhists who want to tackle social issues, including injustice, through the application of Buddhist teachings.

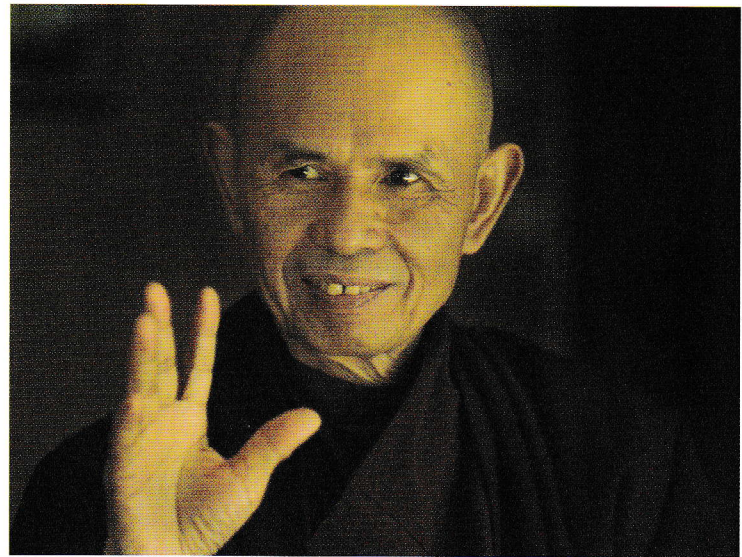
Engaged Buddhists can be found within all Buddhist traditions and countries, among lay people, monks and nuns. They might be helping people to recover from drug and alcohol addiction, or caring for people with AIDS. There are Buddhist projects working with the homeless in New York City, teaching mindfulness meditation in prisons, and helping those living with chronic pain and illness.

Projects dealing directly with social injustice include the Sarvodaya movement in Asia, which has focused on the fair distribution of land among the poor. However, perhaps the world's largest and least-known Buddhist social justice movement has taken place in India. Since the 1950s, millions of Dalit people, at the bottom of India's caste system, have converted to Buddhism, following their leader, Dr Ambedkar. These 'new Buddhists', having transformed their own lives, do a great deal of social work helping India's poorest people (not just Buddhists) to escape from poverty. Much of the money for this is raised by the Karuna Trust, a British Buddhist charity. Karuna's Buddhist fundraisers walk around British cities, knocking on doors and inviting people to give money to help the poor in India.

The term Engaged Buddhism seems to be used less frequently now, perhaps because the message of Engaged Buddhism has been so successfully communicated that many people now assume that being a Buddhist automatically means caring about social issues. For example, the UK's Network of Engaged Buddhists closed down in 2014, saying that this was probably a sign not of failure but of success. People didn't need it anymore because so many British Buddhist groups were now more socially engaged anyway.

Activities

- 1 The Buddha taught that suffering is inevitable and the world will always be unsatisfactory. Does this mean that Buddhists do not care about trying to make the world a better place? Give reasons for your answer.
- 2 Give some examples of how Engaged Buddhists try to improve social justice.
- 3 'Improving society begins with improving oneself.' Evaluate this statement. Include more than one point of view, and refer to Buddhist teachings and beliefs in your answer.



▲ Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist monk from Vietnam

Discussion activity

What do you think are some of the best ways to get rid of social injustice? How might some Buddhists agree or disagree with your ideas?

Research activity

Use the internet to find out about the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and some of the work that they do.

★ Study tip

Remember that even though Buddhism teaches that the world will always contain suffering, many Buddhists still think it is important to try to make the world a better place.

Summary

You should now be able to explain Buddhist attitudes towards social justice, and give specific examples of how Buddhists are working to overcome social injustice.

8.2

Human rights and responsibilities

■ What are human rights?

In 1948 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, a document setting out the basic **human rights** everyone in the world should be entitled to. These include rights such as the right to an education, the right to be treated fairly by the law, the right to follow a religion of your choice, and the right to free speech. This declaration has helped to shape the law in most countries around the world. In the UK, it helped lead to the creation of the Human Rights Act, which sets out the basic rights that everyone in the UK is entitled to.

■ Rights and responsibilities

It is easy to see that not everyone in the UK has access to basic human rights. For example, celebrities are often denied the 'right to respect for private and family life', and victims of human trafficking have been denied the right that 'no one shall be held in slavery or servitude'.

Why are human rights denied? One of many reasons is that it is not possible to have basic human rights for everyone without acknowledging the **responsibility** that people have to help make those rights available. This includes the responsibility to respect other people's rights, and the responsibility to help create access to those rights.

Nobody can insist on their own rights without also acknowledging that other people have the same rights. This means there are sometimes limits to what any one person can do. For example, if someone uses their right of free speech to encourage violence, this threatens other people's right to live without fear.

People also have a responsibility to help make sure everyone has access to human rights. For example, a right to education involves many people being willing to pay taxes to pay for schools, as well as the responsibility of pupils and students to be willing to learn.

■ Buddhism and human rights

Being committed to reducing suffering, most Buddhists recognise the great importance of human rights in society. Some Buddhists work very actively for human rights, for example supporting the work of charities such as Amnesty International. British Buddhists are part of the European Buddhist Union, which sends a representative to the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commission. In 2014 the Commission elected this representative, a French Buddhist, as its president for three years.

However, Buddhists would probably say that rights are of relatively limited use unless everyone takes personal responsibility for cultivating

Objectives

- Consider basic human rights and the need to act responsibly to protect them.
- Understand Buddhist teachings and attitudes about human rights and responsibilities.

Key terms

- **human rights:** the basic rights and freedoms to which all human beings should be entitled
- **responsibility:** a duty to care for, or having control over, something or someone

“ All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. ”

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Activities

- 1 Give three examples of ways in which individuals and governments would have to behave in order to ensure everyone could exercise their right to free speech.
- 2 The Buddha said that people should be aware of their duties towards each other. Why is this important for ensuring that everyone has access to basic human rights?

wisdom and compassion. The Buddha spoke on different occasions about the duties that people have towards each other. For example, he advised rulers to put other people first, and to be honest, kind, free from anger and patient. He also said a ruler should respect differing points of view, and rule for the benefit of their people and according to the will of the people. The Buddha understood that everyone needs to take responsibility for helping people to have access to human rights.

A Buddhist approach to freedom of speech

Human rights include the right to freedom of speech. This means the right to speak or write publicly about what one thinks, even if it includes criticising those in government. But what if someone is criticising your religion, or your culture, or you personally?

The Buddha talked a great deal about the importance of speaking kindly and truthfully, even if the truth is sometimes painful to hear. He said some of the greatest harm is committed in communication, and each person has a responsibility for what they say and how they say it.

Yet he also said that ethical communication involves responsibility on the part of the person listening. They need to accept that if they are offended by what is said, that is their responsibility. If they get angry, blame the speaker and hit back, all that is also their responsibility. With training in awareness, it is quite possible to hear difficult things without reacting, so reaction is a choice.

Tibet and human rights

Many British people, including Buddhists, have campaigned for the human rights of the people of Tibet. Tibet is a largely Buddhist region that was invaded by the Communist Party of China in 1959. China sees Tibet as being part of China, but the people of Tibet would prefer it to be an independent country.

Since 1959, thousands of Tibetans have been killed or put in prison. Many monasteries and temples have been destroyed. Tibetans are required to speak Chinese instead of Tibetan, there are limits on their right to practise Buddhism, and they are not free to disagree with the actions of the government.

When Tibet was invaded, its government moved to northern India, along with its leader, the Dalai Lama. Although he had to leave his home and his people have suffered greatly, he continues to teach the importance of non-violence. Not all Tibetans agree with him, and some have tried to fight back against the Chinese government.



▲ A march in London against the Chinese occupation of Tibet

Discussion activities

- 1 Thinking about the way you and your friends communicate online, what do you think about the Buddha's claim that some of the greatest suffering is caused by what we say (or write)?
- 2 What would your school be like if everybody demanded their own rights but refused to do anything to support the rights of other people?

★ Study tip

You should aim to understand why it is not possible for people to have access to basic human rights if people do not also take responsibility for providing them.

Summary

You should now be able to explain what human rights are, and understand how people have to take responsibility for providing them. You should also be able to explain Buddhist attitudes towards rights and responsibilities.

8.3

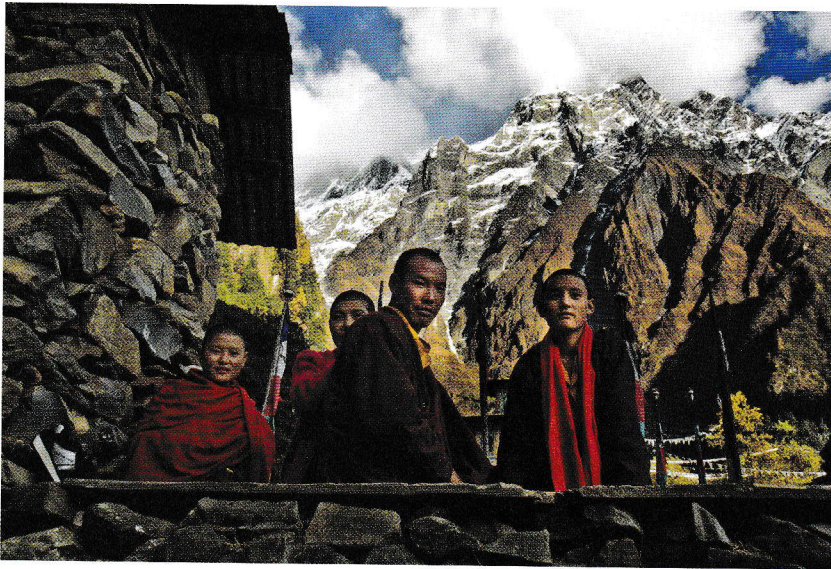
Religious freedom

Religious freedom in the UK

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that everyone should have the right to **freedom of religion** or belief. In the UK, the Human Rights Act guarantees the protection of this right. Each person has the freedom to choose to belong to any religion they wish, or to have no religious belief at all. They also have **freedom of religious expression** – the right to practise and express their faith however they want to. For example, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs in the UK are allowed to worship as they choose. Organisations like the Inter Faith Network for the UK work to promote good relations, understanding and cooperation between people of different faiths.

Buddhist attitudes towards religious freedom

The Buddha often talked to people who had met other religious teachers with different ideas. Sometimes these people asked the Buddha how they should decide whose teachings to follow. He encouraged them to listen to him and others with respect, and then decide which teachings did, in their own experience, lead to greater happiness and wellbeing.



▲ In Tibet, Buddhists may be persecuted and even jailed for expressing their religious beliefs

Very few Buddhist traditions try to persuade others that they should become Buddhists.

The Buddha's teachings are his description of reality as he saw it, and a series of suggestions for the kind of life which leads to greater happiness and a profound understanding of reality. It is entirely up to the individual whether they wish to follow this. Buddhism teaches that if a Buddhist breaks one of the precepts then nobody will punish them, but they will

Objectives

- Understand freedom of religion as a basic human right.
- Examine Buddhist teachings and attitudes about freedom of religion.

Key terms

- **freedom of religion:** the right to believe or practise whatever religion one chooses
- **freedom of religious expression:** the right to worship, preach and practise one's faith in whatever way one chooses

Discussion activity

Discuss the following statement with a partner or in a small group: 'People should have the freedom to say whatever they want about religion.'

“ I always say that every person on this earth has the freedom to practise or not practise religion. It is all right to do either. ”

Tenzin Gyatso
(the Dalai Lama)

experience the consequences of their actions, just like anyone else. In Buddhism there is no God to be held accountable to. This means there is quite a lot of freedom within Buddhism to decide how to practise the faith.

■ Religious freedom in Buddhist countries

In traditionally Buddhist countries in Asia, the culture and law may be strongly influenced by Buddhism, but individuals are free to practise Buddhism with as much or as little commitment as they like. Buddhism is a path of personal transformation, rooted in the wish to end suffering by developing wisdom and compassion, so it is not possible to force someone to be Buddhist.



▲ A Buddhist and a Muslim walk together through the city of Yangon in Myanmar, to show their disapproval of the violence between the two religions

However, there are places in some Buddhist countries where it is not easy to be Hindu or Muslim. In recent years many Buddhists around the world have been shocked by the violence and hatred shown by a small number of Buddhists towards religious or ethnic minorities in countries including Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bhutan. For example, in Myanmar in 2013, there were a series of violent riots and clashes where both Muslims and Buddhists were killed. The reasons for such violence are complex, but are usually rooted in disputes over land, as well as a fear of foreigners.

Concerned by the violence, a number of respected Buddhist leaders (including Thich Nhat Hanh) wrote an open letter to their ‘brother and sister Buddhists in Myanmar’, asking them to remember Buddhist teachings, and to act compassionately towards everyone in Myanmar:

“ Buddhist teaching is based on the precepts of refraining from killing and causing harm. Buddhist teaching is based on compassion and mutual care. Buddhist teaching offers respect to all, regardless of class, caste, race or creed.

It is only through mutual respect, harmony and tolerance that Myanmar can become a modern great nation benefiting all her people and a shining example to the world. ”

Activities

- 1 What did the Buddha say to people who couldn't decide whether to follow Buddhism or another religion?
- 2 Why are so many Buddhists shocked by the violent behaviour of some Buddhists in Myanmar?

Contrasting beliefs

Like Buddhism, Christianity teaches that freedom of religious expression is a fundamental human right. Most Christians believe that Jesus taught about the importance of tolerance and freedom of religion. They also believe that God gave people the free will to choose whether to follow Christianity, another religion or no religion.

Find out more about Christian teachings on freedom of religious expression. Do Christian beliefs agree or contrast with Buddhist beliefs on this issue?

★ Study tip

Learn about the difficulties for religious minorities in Myanmar or another country, so you can use it as an example when discussing religious freedom.

Summary

You should now be able to explain Buddhist attitudes towards freedom of religion and religious expression.

8.4

Prejudice and discrimination

Equality

Many people consider **equality** to be hugely important for creating a fair and just world, and for overcoming social injustice. Many Buddhists care deeply about this too, as an expression of their commitment to kindness and relieving suffering. As we have seen, they also believe that people need to accept that life, by its very nature, is ultimately unfair and unsatisfactory. Still, it is important that they do what they can to avoid adding unnecessarily to life's difficulties through their own actions.

Not treating people equally can lead to **prejudice** and **discrimination**. Prejudice means thinking less of someone because of their ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and so on. It is an opinion which has been formed without good reason, knowledge or experience. Prejudice can lead to discrimination, which means treating someone or a group of people differently. Usually this is unfair, and can lead to people feeling worthless, hated and very vulnerable.

Gender prejudice and discrimination

While gender discrimination has been illegal in the UK since the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, it still occurs in a number of different situations. For example, on average women are still paid less than men, and while women make up roughly half the workforce, men hold a higher proportion of senior positions.

There are examples of gender discrimination within religion in the UK as well. For example, the Catholic Church does not allow women to become priests, and only men can lead the worship in Orthodox Jewish services. But there are also examples where religions are changing to promote greater equality. For example, the Church of England decided to allow ordination for women in 1993, and in 2014, Libby Lane became the first female bishop in the Church of England.

As we saw on pages 88–89, there is gender discrimination in Buddhism. There are also traditions where women and men are ordained equally. Two examples in Britain are the Triratna Buddhist Order and the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. Many leading Buddhist teachers in America are women.

Homosexuality

Buddhist scriptures say very little about **homosexuality**. Though some Asian Buddhist teachers, such as the Dalai Lama, have said it is inappropriate for Buddhists to have same-sex relationships, most Buddhists in the West simply think that the moral precepts apply to any couple, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

There are no Buddhist teachings that say same-sex relationships are simply wrong, because there is no God who could decide such a thing.

Objectives

- Explore attitudes towards prejudice and discrimination, including the treatment of women and homosexuals.
- Understand views on racial prejudice and discrimination.

Key terms

- **equality**: the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, and opportunities
- **prejudice**: unfairly judging someone before the facts are known; holding biased opinions about an individual or group
- **discrimination**: actions or behaviour that result from prejudice
- **homosexuality**: being sexually attracted to members of the same sex
- **positive discrimination**: treating people more favourably because they have been discriminated against in the past or have disabilities

★ Study tip

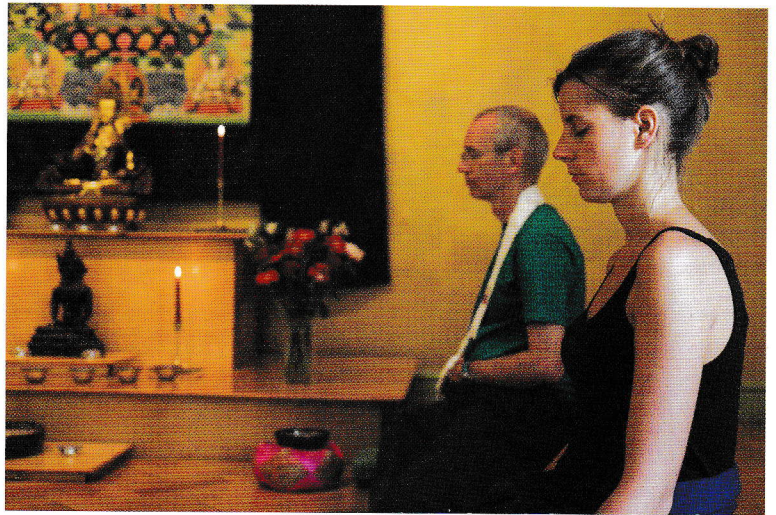
Make sure you understand the difference between prejudice and discrimination.

Contrasting beliefs

Find out more about Christian beliefs and teachings about the status of women. Do Christian beliefs agree or contrast with Buddhist beliefs on this issue?

Buddhist ethics are about noticing and deciding for oneself what actually causes harm. This contrasts for example with the teaching of the Catholic Church, which states that homosexual people should remain celibate.

In general, Western Buddhists tend to see same-sex relationships as a normal part of everyday life. There are lots of homosexual British Buddhists, including ordained teachers. Views vary, however. Some Asian Buddhists are less likely to accept same-sex relationships, but this is more a reflection of local culture than Buddhist teaching.



▲ The Triratna Buddhist Community has ordained men and women equally since its foundation

■ Racial discrimination

If someone shows racial prejudice, this means they have a negative attitude towards another person based on the ethnic group to which they belong. This is often linked to the colour of a person's skin, which is one of the more obvious indicators that a person belongs to a different race. Various Acts have been passed that make racism illegal in the UK. Despite this, it still occurs regularly. For example, some football supporters shout abuse during matches, particularly at black players. 'Show Racism the Red Card' is a campaign in England that uses top footballers to combat this, and aims to educate people about the negative effects of racism.

Racial discrimination can be 'positive' as well as 'negative'. **Positive discrimination** happens when, in an attempt to counteract negative discrimination, people who have previously been discriminated against are given preferential treatment. An example might be employing someone from an ethnic minority partly in order to help make the workplace more racially diverse. Some people think positive discrimination is important to help rectify centuries of negative discrimination. Others think that despite the good intentions behind the idea, it is still a form of discrimination, and it would be better to try to treat all people equally.

As a form of unkindness which causes suffering, racism is not in keeping with the Buddha's teaching. Most Buddhists are completely against it and would say they are not racist themselves.

However, Buddhists are imperfect human beings like everyone else. Black and Asian Britons who become Buddhists often feel they don't quite fit in at the Asian temples, where perhaps everything is in Chinese or Sinhala, or follows Thai or Tibetan tradition. They may prefer to attend centres and temples run mostly by white Buddhists, even though they may feel invisible there. The white teachers may unconsciously behave as if everyone is white, always referring to white culture in their teaching, never using readings from black authors, and so on. While there are rarely if ever instances of overt racism in Buddhist centres in the UK, some might argue that more could be done to help minorities feel welcomed.

Research activity

Soka Gakkai International (SGI-UK) is probably the most ethnically diverse Buddhist movement in Britain today. Use the internet to find out about SGI-UK.

Discussion activity

Black and Asian Britons may say they don't feel they fit in at traditional Asian British or mostly white-run Buddhist temples. Are these feelings indications of racism? What do you think is the problem, and how do you think people need to behave in order to overcome it?

Summary

You should now be able to explain the terms prejudice and discrimination, and discuss Buddhist attitudes towards equality, prejudice and discrimination with reference to gender and sexuality.

8.5

Buddhist teachings about wealth

■ How much wealth should a Buddhist have?

Many Buddhists think it is important to earn enough for a simple but dignified life that leaves time to concentrate on spiritual practice.

However, there are no restrictions on how much wealth a Buddhist should have, unless, perhaps, they are a monk or nun. There are some rich Buddhists around the world, and some of them use their money to do a great deal of good. For Buddhists, what matters is how people get their money, how they relate to it, and what they do with it.

For example, even without committing crime, it is possible to get rich while not paying your workers properly or looking after their health, or from an industry that harms the environment. It is also common for people to rely on being rich for a sense of self-worth, and to use money to gain power over others. Buddhists tend to see such uses of wealth as being unhelpful in developing wisdom and compassion.

According to legend, the Buddha grew up in a palace with everything he could possibly want, but abandoned this life of luxury to search for enlightenment. He then tried living as an extreme ascetic. While he eventually gave this up, realising that hunger made it impossible to develop wisdom and compassion, he continued to live very simply all his life.

For the Buddha, true happiness did not come from having everything he wanted. Being desperately poor and hungry didn't bring happiness either. The Buddha realised that the important thing was to have enough for one's needs, and if one had more than that, to use every opportunity for generosity.

Traditionally, when a man became a monk in the Theravada tradition, he chose to live with just a handful of possessions including a bowl, a robe, a needle and thread (to mend the robe) and a razor (to shave his head and face). Though other monastic Buddhist traditions may not require quite such simplicity, all encourage a letting go of attachment to material possessions.

Buddhists who are not monks or nuns need to be able to earn a livelihood and provide for their family if they have one. Everyone needs clothing, food and shelter. Without them, spiritual life is a luxury.

■ Valuing wealth

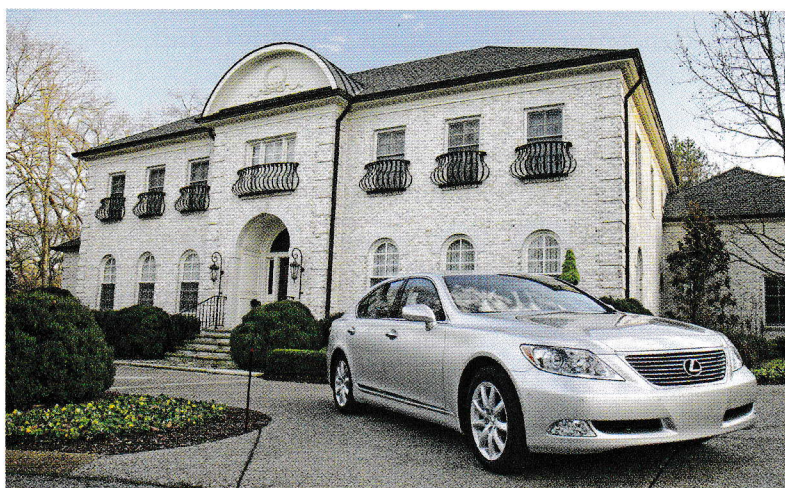
Buddhism teaches that a person's worth does not depend on how much

Objective

- Understand Buddhist teachings about wealth and its uses.

Discussion activities

- 1 How do you feel about yourself when you have money? How do you feel about yourself when you don't?
- 2 In the Triratna Buddhist Community in Britain there are ethical businesses where people are paid according to what each person needs. This means people get different amounts of money for the same job. How do you think you would feel about working in a place like that?



▲ For Buddhists, a person's worth does not depend on how much money they have, but on how it is used

wealth they have, and that money in itself is not good or bad. Used well, money can do a great deal of good in this world.

Craving or greed is one of the three poisons, which the Buddha saw as the main cause of suffering. He advised that true happiness does not come from an accumulation of wealth fuelled by greed and an attachment to material possessions.

“ By action, knowledge and Dhamma, by virtue and noble way of life – By these are mortals purified, not by lineage or wealth. ”

The Buddha in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, vol. 3, p. 262

■ Using wealth

The Adiya Sutta lists three main benefits of wealth. It suggests that a person can use their wealth to:

1. provide pleasure and satisfaction for themselves, their family and their friends
2. keep themselves safe
3. make offerings to monks, nuns or the poor.

Buddhism does not condemn using wealth for one's own entertainment and enjoyment, as long as it does not also create suffering through attachment and craving.

However, Buddhism also places much value on using wealth generously for the benefit of others. Giving to monasteries and to charity is important for many Buddhists. Giving without expecting to receive anything in return is a central part of Buddhist ethics.

In Buddhist tradition, someone who put his wealth to good use was Anathapindika, a lay disciple of the Buddha. An extremely wealthy banker, he used his wealth to purchase a park and then build a monastery in it for the Buddha and his followers. He provided daily meals for the monks and their visitors, including the sick and other local people. When he had almost nothing left, he still continued to give what he could to others.



▲ Buddhist monks usually live a simple lifestyle, and rely upon offerings from the local community

Contrasting beliefs

Christians also believe it is important to use wealth to help others, as Jesus taught them. Many believe that wealth is a gift from God, to be used in his service and to help carry out his work on Earth.

Find out more about Christian teachings on the uses of wealth. Do Christian beliefs agree or contrast with Buddhist beliefs on this issue?

★ Study tip

Remember that most Buddhists are not monks or nuns, so you should be able to explain how lay Buddhists might think about their relationship with money, and the way they earn it and spend it.

Activities

- 1 'Money is important for Buddhists.' Evaluate this statement. Include more than one point of view, and refer to Buddhist teachings and beliefs in your answer.
- 2 If you were rich, how would you use your money to make the world a better place? Give three examples.
- 3 Give some examples of how a person might accumulate wealth in a way that Buddhists would disapprove of.

Summary

You should now understand Buddhist attitudes towards wealth, including how to use it.

8.6

Exploitation of the poor

■ Fair pay

An important way to stop **exploitation** of the poor is to make sure they are paid fairly for the work they do. There are many poor people in the world today who are not paid fair wages. This is often because large international companies pay their workers in developing countries tiny wages in order to make large profits for their shareholders. This practice helps to prevent the poor from escaping **poverty**, because working long hours for tiny wages means they do not have the time or money to gain an education, and acquire the skills they need to find better-paid work.

One example of this type of exploitation in Thailand (a primarily Buddhist country) is in the shrimp-processing industry. Hundreds of thousands of workers are forced to work almost like slaves in the shrimp-processing factories, being paid very little while working long hours in poor conditions. Sometimes workers' passports or identity cards are confiscated so they cannot find work elsewhere.

In the UK, the introduction of the National Minimum Wage Act in 1998 made an important difference to fair pay. This set the lowest amount of money an employer can legally pay a worker per hour in the UK. This law was designed to protect workers at the lowest end of the pay structure from exploitation. Another important initiative has been the Fair Trade movement. This aims to improve working conditions and wages for farmers and workers in developing countries.

Many Buddhists consider it very important to balance profit with ethics. Taking workers' time and energy without paying them a reasonable wage goes against the second Buddhist precept, to avoid taking what has not been freely given. Many Western Buddhists try to avoid buying their clothes from Western companies believed to treat their Asian factory workers very badly.

A number of British Buddhist places of worship promote Fair Trade. For example, Taraloka Buddhist Retreat Centre for Women in Shropshire is an official 'Fairtrade Temple'. This means that the centre uses Fair Trade products in its meals as much as possible.

■ Excessive interest on loans

People with poor credit ratings or bad financial histories are often not allowed to borrow money from mainstream banks or money lenders. Instead they have to borrow money from organisations that charge very high rates of interest on their loans. Interest rate figures are usually given as percentages that show how much extra money a person will owe over the

Objectives

- Understand how the poor can be exploited, including issues related to fair pay, excessive interest on loans and human trafficking.
- Examine Buddhist attitudes towards exploitation of the poor.

Key terms

- **exploitation:** misuse of power or money to get others to do things for little or unfair reward
- **poverty:** being without money, food or other basic needs of life (being poor)
- **people-trafficking:** the illegal movement of people, typically for the purposes of forced labour or commercial sexual exploitation



▲ In Thailand, many workers in the shrimp-processing industry are exploited

course of a year. For example, an interest rate of 100 per cent means that if a person initially borrows £500, at the end of the year they will owe twice that amount – the original £500 and the interest on the loan, which in this case is 100 per cent, so another £500.

Some money lenders in the UK charge interest rates around 3000 or 4000 per cent. They often target low-income families who need short-term loans to help them out until the next payday. If people cannot repay the loans fast enough, the huge interest rates mean they can quickly end up in debt.

Like underpaying workers, charging excessive interest is also against the Buddha's second precept, to avoid taking what has not been freely given. Making money by exploiting the poor is a clear example of greed. It is a form of deliberate harm, which means it also goes against the first precept. It causes suffering to the person doing it as well as to the person being exploited.

On the other hand, many Buddhists feel it is a person's responsibility not to get into debt if they can help it. Sometimes there is no alternative, but sometimes people borrow just to indulge their craving. One example is compulsive overspending on credit cards. Is someone hungry or in danger of being evicted from their home, or do they just want to buy a more fashionable television? Are they becoming addicted to spending? Debt tends to make people feel bad about themselves. This makes it harder to live the kind and honest life which can lead to enlightenment.

■ People-trafficking

People-trafficking is a worldwide problem, and a multi-billion pound industry. It is often referred to as modern-day slavery, because people are bought, sold and smuggled from one place to another like slaves. Sometimes people are kidnapped and forced to work as prostitutes. At other times, people who are desperate for a better way of life pay smugglers to get them out of their own poverty-stricken country and into a more prosperous country. Once in the new country, the migrants have few rights and the smugglers may force them to work in poor conditions for little pay.

Some of the world's most serious people-trafficking takes place in countries that are extremely poor, and that also happen to be traditionally Buddhist. It's unclear whether trafficking or slavery in the modern Western sense existed in northern India in the Buddha's time. However, he certainly spoke out against India's caste system, in which some groups of people were considered so inferior that they were forced to live outside their villages, doing only the worst jobs such as cleaning toilets, and were paid almost nothing to do it.

Activities

- 1 Why is it important to pay people fairly for their work?
- 2 Why do Buddhists think it is bad to charge excessive interest on loans?
- 3 Explain how human-trafficking exploits people.

“ In five ways does [a] master minister to his servants and employees ... by assigning them work according to their strength; by supplying them with food and wages; by tending them in sickness; by sharing with them unusual delicacies; by granting leave at times. ”

The Buddha in the *Digha Nikaya*, vol. 3, pp. 190–191

Research activity

Use the internet to find out about the Dharma Moli project in Nepal, where Buddhist nuns are helping to protect girls from trafficking.

★ Study tip

Buddhism is not against lending and borrowing money as long as it does good rather than harm. For example, there are Buddhists running micro-credit schemes in Asia, where groups of poor people (often women) save money together, which they agree to lend to each other in turn at very low interest rates, for example to buy a sewing machine to start a small business.

Summary

You should now be able to discuss issues surrounding the exploitation of workers, excessive interest on loans, and the problem of people-trafficking. You should have some idea of Buddhist attitudes towards these topics.

8.7

Poverty and giving to the poor

■ The problem of poverty

Someone is defined as living in poverty if they do not have enough money to be able to meet basic daily needs. Poverty exists in all countries, but particularly in the developing world. The United Nations estimates that around 800 million people still live in extreme poverty. Each year this leads to millions of deaths, often from diseases caused by poor sanitation or unsafe drinking water, or from malnutrition due to a lack of food.

Poverty is a complex global problem that has many causes, from how society is structured to environmental issues such as drought. Often developing countries have huge debts that mean they cannot afford to provide adequate healthcare, education and similar necessities for their people. War and conflict can ruin a country's infrastructure and cause widespread poverty. Environmental disasters can destroy people's homes, livelihoods and crops. In the UK, one of the main causes of poverty is unemployment.

■ Helping those in poverty

There are two main ways to help the poor. The first is to give emergency aid to help provide basic necessities such as shelter and food. This type of aid is particularly important after a disaster or crisis such as an earthquake or civil war. It is also important for those who need help to survive in the short term, such as those living on the streets in the UK.

Some people argue that this type of help is important for people's immediate survival, and that providing it shows compassion and kindness. Others argue that while this type of short-term aid is important, it does not help to get people out of poverty, and it also makes them reliant upon whoever is giving out the aid.

Some people therefore feel it is more important to direct their energies towards solving the root causes of poverty. For example, they might campaign against multinational companies that exploit the poor, or they might donate to charities that provide education for those in poverty.

Several lists of Buddhist virtues start with *dana*, or generosity, indicating that this is viewed as a most basic Buddhist virtue. The Buddha talked of various possible motivations for giving, some less generous than others. For example, giving because you want something back from the person goes against Buddhist ethics. The Buddha taught that the best way to give is freely, out of desire for the wellbeing of others.

Objectives

- Understand Buddhist attitudes towards charity and giving money to the poor.
- Examine the responsibilities of those living in poverty.

Discussion activity

With a partner discuss the following questions:

- 1 What do you think might be the best ways to eliminate world poverty? If you were the prime minister of the UK, what actions would you take first to try to eliminate poverty?
- 2 Who do you think should take the most responsibility for helping people to get out of poverty? How much responsibility do you think should be placed on the people in poverty to get themselves out of it?



▲ Is it better to give money directly to the poor or to a charity that tries to solve the root causes of poverty?

However, for Buddhists it is important to give what is likely to be of genuine help. It could be argued that giving money to a homeless person who appears to be drunk is not ethical if there is a strong probability that they will spend it on more drink, which could harm their health. It could be more generous to buy them food, or give the money to a homeless charity instead.

There are a huge number of Buddhist charities working with the world's poor in various ways, but they tend to be little known. Many of them are very small, helping particular local groups of people, for example sponsoring girls in Cambodia to go to school. Probably the largest British Buddhist charity is the Karuna Trust, which raises money for projects working with the poor in Nepal and India.



▲ The Karuna Trust helps to provide care and education for children living in poverty

“ Bhikkhus [monks], a donor who gives food gives the recipients five things. What five? One gives life, beauty, happiness, strength, and discernment. ”

The Buddha in the *Anguttara Nikaya*, vol. 3, p. 42

“ Learn to live in this world with self-respect. You should always cherish some ambition of doing something in this world. ”

Dr Ambedkar

■ Responsibilities of the poor

Who is responsible for poverty: the people who are in poverty, or the social systems that have caused their poverty? Some argue that most people are in poverty through unfortunate circumstances that are a result of how society works, therefore it is society's responsibility to help them. Others think that more responsibility should be placed on the individuals in poverty, either not to get into poverty in the first place, or to make more of an effort to improve their situation.

There are many types and causes of poverty. Some poverty is the result of personal irresponsibility (such as gambling and drinking one's money away). Some poverty just happens for reasons completely out of a person's control (such as an earthquake destroying someone's village and livelihood). However, Buddhism teaches that all poverty deserves profound compassion. Relieving poverty requires responsibility on the part of poor people, governments, businesses and the wealthy.

Here is one example of the poor liberating themselves. Page 155 mentioned India's Dalit people, formerly known as 'untouchables', who are at the bottom of India's caste system. Since the 1950s, millions of them have freed themselves from extreme poverty. It is significant that many of them did this partly by changing religion. They converted to various religions but many became Buddhists, following their leader, Dr Ambedkar. He told them to 'educate, agitate and organise' to resist the people and laws keeping them in poverty. However, he also said that one of the most important things they could do to free themselves from poverty was to change their self view, to stop seeing themselves as poor and insignificant, to develop more self-respect, and to take themselves and each other seriously.

Activities

- 1 What are some of the causes of poverty?
- 2 Do you think it is a good idea to give money to homeless people on the streets? Explain your views.
- 3 What are Buddhist attitudes towards giving money to the poor and helping those in poverty?

★ Study tip

Buddhism sees nothing noble in poverty. Poverty should not be confused with choosing to live very simply, as many Buddhists do, especially some monks and nuns. There can be a great sense of freedom and joy in living simply, but poverty usually results in a struggle to survive.

Summary

You should now be able to explain something about the causes of poverty, and some views on how to relieve poverty, including Buddhist perspectives.

Human rights – summary

You should now be able to:

- ✓ explain prejudice and discrimination in religion and belief, including the status and treatment within Buddhism of women and homosexuals
- ✓ explain issues of equality, freedom of religion and belief, including freedom of religious expression
- ✓ explain what is meant by human rights and the responsibilities that come with rights, including the responsibility to respect the rights of others
- ✓ explain Buddhist views about social justice
- ✓ explain Buddhist attitudes to racial prejudice and discrimination.

Wealth and poverty – summary

You should now be able to:

- ✓ explain Buddhist teachings about wealth, including the right attitude to wealth
- ✓ explain religious teachings about the uses of wealth

- ✓ explain the responsibilities of having wealth, including the duty to tackle poverty and its causes
- ✓ describe and explain the problem of exploitation of the poor, including issues relating to fair pay, excessive interest on loans and people-trafficking
- ✓ explain the responsibilities of those living in poverty to help themselves overcome the difficulties they face
- ✓ explain what Buddhism teaches about charity, including issues related to giving money to the poor
- ✓ explain similar and contrasting perspectives in contemporary British society to all the above issues
- ✓ explain similar and contrasting beliefs in contemporary British society about the three issues of the status of women in religion, the uses of wealth, and freedom of religious expression, with reference to the main religious tradition in Britain (Christianity) and non-religious beliefs such as atheism or humanism.

Sample student answer – the 12-mark question

1. Write an answer to the following practice question:

‘Racism is the worst form of prejudice.’

Evaluate this statement. In your answer you:

- should give reasoned arguments in support of this statement
- should give reasoned arguments to support a different point of view
- should refer to religious arguments
- may refer to non-religious arguments
- should reach a justified conclusion.

[12 marks]

2. Read the following sample student answer:

“Some people have believed in the past that some races are inferior to others. Hitler believed this and picked on the Jews and had millions of them sent to concentration camps and then to the gas chambers. He wanted to wipe out the Jewish race and the holocaust resulted. So racism can be a horrible thing. It can cause genocide where one race kills people of another race simply because they are different. Some people would say that because racism can cause so much suffering, like the holocaust, it is the worst form of prejudice.”

There are other types of prejudice, like thinking badly about people because of their gender or their religion or their sexuality. Some people might say that sexism is the worst type of prejudice because it affects about 50% of the world's population. Other people might say that religious prejudice is worse because it can lead to more extreme suffering for the people affected. Like in Myanmar, where Buddhists have destroyed Muslim mosques and businesses, and some Muslims have even died.

Maybe it depends what the prejudice leads to. For example, if someone is killed because of their race, this is much worse than if someone isn't given a job because of their gender. But at other times the racism might not lead to such bad things happening. So maybe it depends on the situation. For example, there are some Buddhist temples in the UK where black Buddhists don't feel like they fit in because the people running the temples are white. That might be a type of racism but it's not as bad as lots of other things that sometimes happen because of other types of prejudice."

3. With a partner, discuss the sample answer. Is the focus of the answer correct? Is anything missing from the answer? How do you think it could be improved?
4. What mark (out of 12) would you give this answer? Look at the mark scheme in the Introduction (AO2). What are the reasons for the mark you have given?
5. Swap your answer with your partner's and mark each other's responses. What mark (out of 12) would you give? Refer to the mark scheme and give reasons for the mark you award.

Practice questions

- 1 Which one of the following is the main religious tradition in Britain?
A) Buddhism B) Christianity C) Islam D) Hinduism **[1 mark]**
- 2 Give two ways in which wealth can be used responsibly. **[2 marks]**
- 3 Explain two contrasting beliefs in contemporary British society about the equality of men and women in religion.
In your answer you should refer to the main religious tradition of Great Britain and one or more other religious traditions. **[4 marks]**
- 4 Explain two religious beliefs about social justice.
Refer to scripture or sacred writings in your answer. **[5 marks]**
- 5 'People who are poor need to help themselves to overcome their poverty.'
Evaluate this statement. In your answer you:
 - should give reasoned arguments in support of this statement
 - should give reasoned arguments to support a different point of view
 - should refer to religious arguments
 - may refer to non-religious arguments
 - should reach a justified conclusion.**[12 marks]**