

Part 1: The study of religions

1 Beliefs and teachings

1.1 The birth of the Buddha and his life of luxury

■ The birth of the Buddha

There is a great variety of religious practices that are associated with the word **Buddhism**, but most take their source of inspiration to be Siddhartha Gautama, who lived and taught in northern India some 2500 years ago. After he was enlightened he became known as the **Buddha**, which is a title meaning 'the enlightened one' or 'the awakened one'. It is a title given to a being who has attained great wisdom and understanding through their own efforts.

There are many sources that tell us about the life of the Buddha. Some of these were written hundreds of years after his death, and so at times it is difficult to distinguish between fact and legend. Even so, for Buddhists these legends express important, spiritual truths.

It is believed that Siddhartha was born around 500 BCE in Lumbini in southern Nepal, close to the border with India. According to Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha was a prince: his father was King Suddhodana Tharu and his mother was Queen Maya Devi Tharu. The following traditional story is commonly told about Siddhartha's birth:

One night, Queen Maya had a dream that a white elephant came down from heaven and entered her womb. The elephant told her that she would give birth to a holy child, and that when he was born he would achieve perfect wisdom.

About ten months later, when the baby was almost due, Queen Maya began the journey home to her parents' house, where she had planned to give birth. On the way she stopped in the Lumbini Gardens to rest and here she gave birth to a son. According to legend, he could immediately walk and talk without any support. He walked seven steps and with every step he took, a lotus flower sprang up from the earth beneath his feet. He then stopped and said, 'No further rebirths have I to endure for this is my last body. Now I shall destroy and pluck out by the roots the sorrow that is caused by birth and death.' He was called 'Siddhartha', meaning 'perfect fulfilment'.

Shortly after Siddhartha's birth, a prophecy was made that he would become either a great king or a revered holy man.

Objective

- Examine some of the stories surrounding the Buddha's birth and his early life.

Key terms

- **Buddhism**: a religion founded around 2500 years ago by Siddhartha Gautama
- **Buddha**: a title given to someone who has achieved enlightenment; usually used to refer to Siddhartha Gautama



▲ The Buddha's first steps

■ Siddhartha's life of luxury

Siddhartha's mother died when he was just seven days old, and he was raised by his mother's sister, Maha Pajapati.

According to Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha grew up in a palace, surrounded by luxury. His father, Suddhodana, kept in mind the prophecy that was made about Siddhartha shortly after his birth. Suddhodana was determined that Siddhartha would follow in his footsteps and grow up to be a great king. So he decided to protect Siddhartha from any pain, sadness, disappointment or suffering that he might experience in his life. Suddhodana didn't want his son to seek religion and become a holy man.

Suddhodana also thought that if his son became attached to a life of luxury, he would not want to leave the palace. Siddhartha was therefore supplied with everything he could possibly want. He wore clothes of the finest silk, ate the best foods, was surrounded by dancers and musicians, received an excellent education, and was generally cared for in every way.

Siddhartha later said of his upbringing:

“ I was delicately nurtured ... At my father's residence lotus ponds were made just for my enjoyment: in one of them blue lotuses bloomed, in another red lotuses, and in a third white lotuses ... By day and by night a white canopy was held over me so that cold and heat, dust, grass, and dew would not settle on me. I had three mansions: one for the winter, one for the summer, and one for the rainy season. I spent the four months of the rains in the rainy-season mansion, being entertained by musicians, none of whom were male, and I did not leave the mansion. ”

The Buddha in the *Anguttara Nikaya*, vol. 1, p. 145

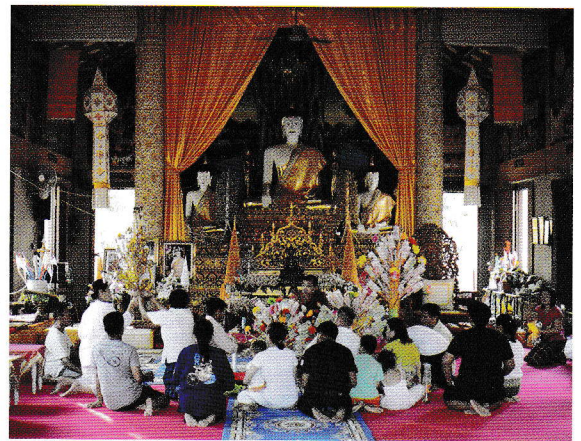
Despite being spoilt and pampered while he was growing up, traditional stories say that Siddhartha was a good and kind person. At the age of 16 he married his cousin, Yasodhara.

Discussion activity

Research online other accounts of the birth of the Buddha and his life as he grew up. Discuss with a partner some of the differences that you notice between the accounts. Why do you think there are so many different accounts of the Buddha's birth and his life of luxury? What meanings do you think they have for Buddhists?

Activities

- 1 According to Buddhist tradition, what did Siddhartha do as soon as he was born?
- 2 How did the prophecy that was made about Siddhartha affect his upbringing?



▲ Most Buddhist traditions are inspired by the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who is known as 'the Buddha'

Research activity

Two traditional stories told about the Buddha's early life recall his visit to the ploughing festival, and his encounter with a swan. Research these two stories. Why did each event seem to have such a profound effect on Siddhartha?

★ Study tip

Knowing about the extent of the luxury that the Buddha experienced while growing up is important for understanding his later teachings.

Summary

You should now know some of the stories surrounding the Buddha's birth and his life growing up.

1.2 The four sights

We have seen that Siddhartha grew up in a palace living a life of luxury, shielded from the rest of the world. However, Siddhartha grew curious and wanted to explore outside the palace walls. Traditional Buddhist stories say that one day at the age of 29, despite his father's orders, Siddhartha decided to leave the palace grounds and go with Channa (his attendant and chariot driver) to the nearby city. Siddhartha then encountered **the four sights**, which had a profound effect on his life. The story of the four sights is recorded in **Jataka** 075.



▲ Siddhartha encountered four sights when he left the palace, which had a profound effect on his life

The first sight: old age

Siddhartha and Channa may not have gone very far before Siddhartha saw a frail old man, something he had never witnessed before in his life. He was shocked by what he saw as it was his first real experience of old age.

The second sight: illness

Some stories say that Siddhartha asked Channa to take him back to the palace, and he saw the other three sights on separate visits to the city. Other stories say that Siddhartha saw all four sights on his first and only visit to the city. Whether he made a number of trips or just one to the city, Siddhartha also saw someone lying in the road in agony. This disturbed him as he had never seen sickness or illness before, and he began to understand that illness was a reality of life.

The third sight: death

Siddhartha then saw a dead man being carried through the streets in a funeral procession. Some say that this third sight struck Siddhartha even more deeply. It was, after all, the first time he had seen death.

Objectives

- Know the story of the Buddha's encounter with the four sights.
- Understand the effect this had on the Buddha.

Key terms

- **the four sights:** old age, illness, death, and a holy man; these four sights led the Buddha to leave his life of luxury in the palace
- **Jataka:** the Jataka tales are popular stories about the lives of the Buddha

Research activity

There are a number of different versions of the story of the Buddha's encounter with the four sights. Here are a few differences between the stories:

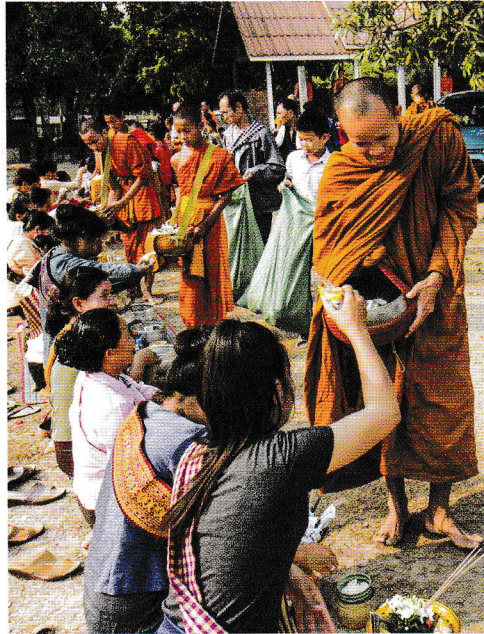
- 1 All the sights were seen on one trip, rather than on different trips.
- 2 Siddhartha's father actually gave permission for the trips to take place, rather than telling Siddhartha not to leave the palace.
- 3 Siddhartha never actually saw the four sights. They are just metaphors to show different forms of suffering.

Using the internet or a library, read different versions of this story and make a note of any other differences. Why do you think these differences have occurred? Do you think they change the overall message or importance of the story?

He realised that death came to everyone. If someone was born, they would go through a process which would involve growing older, illness, suffering and death. There was no escape, even for kings.

The fourth sight: a holy man

The fourth sight Siddhartha saw was quite different. Walking calmly through the city was a man dressed in rags and carrying an alms bowl. The peaceful expression on the face of this holy man impressed Siddhartha very much. He felt inspired to be like this holy man and to become a wandering truth seeker. This was perhaps the beginning of Siddhartha's quest to search for the answer to the problem of why people suffer, and how to stop that suffering.



▲ Monks use alms bowls to collect food or money from supporters

■ Leaving the palace

Finding the answer to the problem of suffering became the most important thing in Siddhartha's life. But he knew that if he stayed in the palace, he would find no answers. It is said that on the night his own son Rahula was born, he left the palace for good in search of an answer. He got up quietly, kissed his wife and newborn son, woke Channa, and they crept past the sleeping guards and silently rode away from the palace.

When they both reached the edge of a river, they dismounted from their horses. Taking his sword, Siddhartha cut off his hair and swapped his rich clothes for the clothes of a beggar. He gave all his rings and bracelets to Channa to take back to his father. Channa watched as Siddhartha crossed the river and disappeared into the forest on the other side.

By giving up his possessions and the symbols of his previous life, Siddhartha was letting go of the things that he thought were keeping him ignorant and thus resulting in his suffering. Later he was to teach that renunciation, a 'letting go', was important in reaching enlightenment.

Summary

You should now know what the four sights are, and be able to explain the effect they had on Siddhartha.

Activities

- 1 How do you think you would feel on seeing each of the four sights for the first time in your life?
- 2 Explain what you think Siddhartha learned from seeing the four sights.
- 3 Describe how you think Channa, who was Siddhartha's charioteer and best friend, would have felt on seeing Siddhartha disappear into the forest.

Discussion activity

Discuss with a partner the effect you think that seeing the holy man would have had on Siddhartha, as he tried to search for the answer to the problem of suffering.

★ Study tip

As you continue to learn about the Buddha's teachings, remember how they were influenced by his encounter with the four sights.

1.3 The Buddha's ascetic life

Living as an ascetic

After he left the palace, Siddhartha tried various methods to learn how to overcome the problem of suffering. He had been impressed by the sense of peace that he felt coming from the holy man – an **ascetic** – that he met before he left the palace, so he decided to follow ascetic practices for six years. He rejected anything that would give him pleasure and practised extreme self-discipline. He met and studied with various holy men. In particular, he began to practise **meditation** with two ascetics, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. They used pain and hardship to discipline their minds. It is said that the meditation gave Siddhartha a feeling of bliss, but did not offer him a permanent solution to the suffering that people experienced.

Siddhartha then began to ignore his appetite. He fasted for long periods of time, becoming increasingly hungry and weak. Stories say that his body became so thin that his legs were like bamboo sticks, his backbone was like a rope, his chest was like an incomplete roof of a house, and his eyes sank right inside his skull, like stones in a deep well. He looked like a living skeleton, and suffered from terrible pain and hunger.

Traditional stories also say that Siddhartha lived in dangerous and hostile forests, which were too hot during the day and freezing at night. He slept on a bed of thorns as part of his ascetic practices. He was frightened when the animals came but he never ran away.



▲ Siddhartha ate very little as part of his ascetic lifestyle, becoming incredibly thin as a result

Objectives

- Know how the Buddha lived as an ascetic.
- Understand why the Buddha wanted to follow ascetic practices, and why he later decided to reject them.

Key terms

- **ascetic:** living a simple and strict lifestyle with few pleasures or possessions; someone who follows ascetic practices
- **meditation:** a practice of calming and focusing the mind, and reflecting deeply on specific teachings to penetrate their true meaning

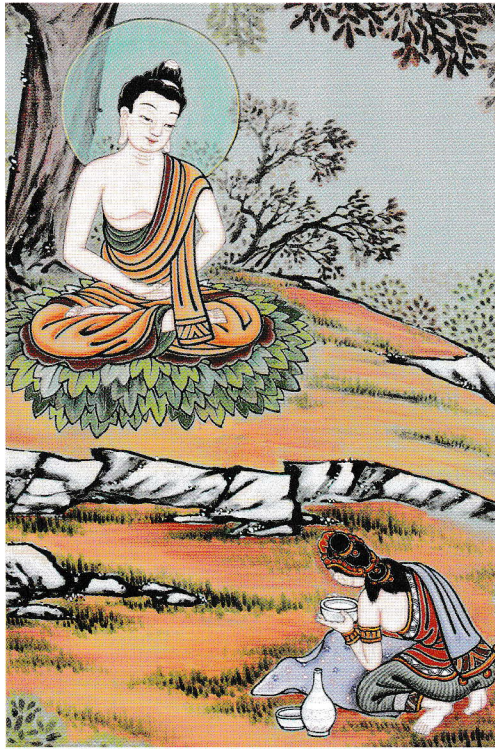
Discussion activity

Many people have found simplicity helpful in living a religious life. Discuss with a partner why some people have taken this further, ignoring the needs of the body. What are the dangers of this?

■ Turning away from asceticism

One day, Siddhartha was bathing in the River Nairanjana. When he got out of the water he saw a girl who was looking after a herd of cows for her father. The girl offered Siddhartha a bowl of milk and rice. He accepted the food because he had by this point become too weak even to meditate.

Siddhartha's strength was restored by the food and he decided to stop his ascetic practices, because he was no closer to the truth of why people suffer and how to get rid of this suffering. His ascetic practices taught him discipline and willpower, but they did not provide a cure for suffering. Neither luxury nor an ascetic lifestyle had given Siddhartha any real answers. This led him to develop a 'middle way' between the two extremes that he had experienced.



▲ The Buddha stopped practising asceticism after he was offered a bowl of milk and rice

“ And the Bodhisattva [“One aspiring to Awakening”] himself, who was determined to practise austerities in their most extreme form began to subsist on one grain of sesamum or rice a day. He even took to complete fasting ... When the Great Being was practising severe austerities for six years it was to him like a time of intertwining the sky with knots. Realising the practice of such austerities was not the path to Enlightenment he went about gathering alms in villages and townships in order to revert to solid food, and he subsisted on it. ”

The *Jataka*, vol. 1, p. 67

Activities

- 1 In your own words, explain what an ascetic is.
- 2 Give three different methods that Siddhartha tried in order to resolve the problem of suffering.
- 3 Explain why the meeting at the River Nairanjana was important for Siddhartha.

Extension activity



Carefully read the quotation from the *Jataka* on this page. Rewrite the quotation in your own words, showing that you have understood what the Buddha did and why, after six years, he decided to give up his ascetic life.

★ Study tip

When learning about the choices that the Buddha made during his life, consider why he made them, and how they helped him in his search for enlightenment.

Summary

You should now be able to explain what happened to Siddhartha after he left the palace and decided to live as an ascetic. You should also be able to understand why Siddhartha wanted to become an ascetic, and why he decided to stop following ascetic practices.

1.4

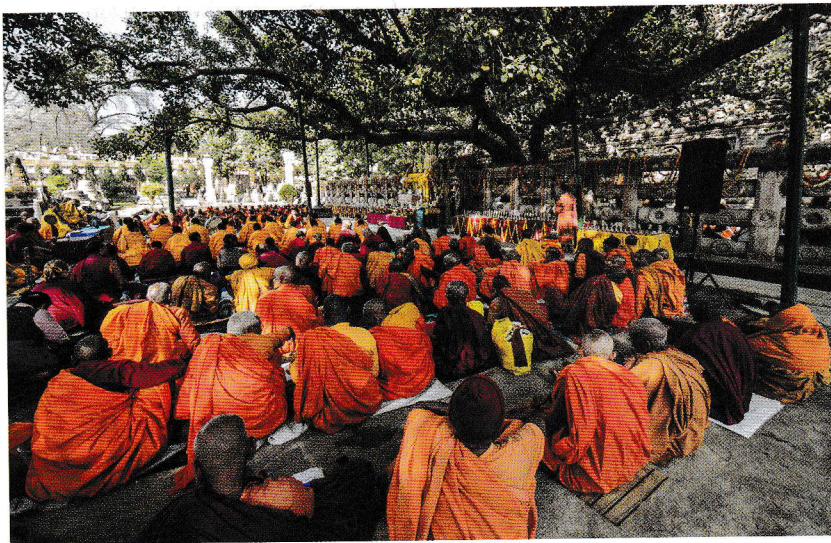
The Buddha's enlightenment

■ The Buddha's meditation

After rejecting his ascetic lifestyle, Siddhartha wondered if meditation might be a way of attaining the wisdom and compassion of **enlightenment**. Traditional stories say that he made himself a cushion of grass and found a suitable place to sit down and meditate, underneath a peepul tree. He sat with his face to the east and thought:

“ Let only my sin, sinews and bone remain and let the flesh and blood in my body dry up; but not until I attain the supreme Enlightenment will I give up this seat of meditation. ”

The Buddha in the *Jataka*, vol. 1, p. 71



▲ The peepul tree at Mahabodhi Temple in India is thought to be a direct descendant of the original peepul tree, and the place where Siddhartha gained enlightenment. It is a popular Buddhist pilgrimage site.

Then Siddhartha began to meditate. Traditional stories tell how **Mara**, the evil one, appeared to try to stop him from achieving enlightenment. Mara tried a number of different tactics:

- he sent his daughters to seduce Siddhartha
- he sent his armies to attack Siddhartha
- he offered Siddhartha control of his kingdom
- Mara himself tried to attack Siddhartha.

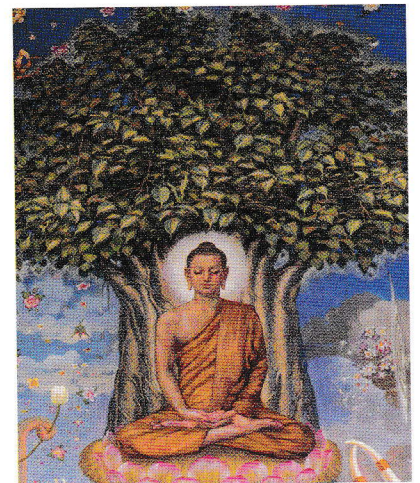
Throughout it all, Siddhartha stayed focused on his meditation. He ignored the temptations of Mara's daughters. Arrows directed at him from the armies turned to flowers before they could hit him. Towards the end of his meditation, Mara claimed that only he had the right to

Objectives

- Know the story of how the Buddha became enlightened.
- Understand the three realisations that the Buddha made in order to achieve enlightenment.

Key terms

- **enlightenment**: the gaining of true knowledge about God, self or the nature of reality, usually through meditation and self-discipline; in Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh traditions, gaining freedom from the cycle of rebirth
- **Mara**: a demon that represents spiritual obstacles, especially temptation
- **the three watches of the night**: the three realisations that the Buddha made in order to achieve enlightenment
- **the five ascetics**: the Buddha's first five students; five monks who followed ascetic practices



▲ Siddhartha sitting beneath the peepul tree

sit in the place of enlightenment and his soldiers were witnesses to this. He claimed that without anyone to witness his enlightenment, Siddhartha would not be believed. Siddhartha then touched the earth and called upon the earth to witness his right to sit under the peepul tree in meditation. The earth shook to acknowledge his right.

There are different versions of the story of how Mara tried to stop Siddhartha from becoming enlightened. Most accounts are quite dramatic, but they all show that Siddhartha remained focused on his meditation, and that fear, lust, pride or other negative emotions were overcome with a disciplined mind.



▲ Siddhartha being tempted by Mara

■ Becoming enlightened

During the night that Siddhartha became enlightened, he experienced three important realisations. These realisations happened over three different periods (or 'watches') during the night, and so they are known as **the three watches of the night**:

- Firstly, Siddhartha gained knowledge of all of his previous lives.
- Secondly, he came to understand the repeating cycle of life, death and rebirth. He understood that beings were born depending on their kamma (their actions), and he realised the importance of anatta (there is no fixed self).
- Thirdly, he came to understand why suffering happens and how to overcome it.

After his enlightenment, Siddhartha became known as 'the Buddha', which means 'the enlightened one' or 'the fully awakened one'. The Buddha left the peepul tree and wandered back to the place where he had previously left **the five ascetics**, who were his first students. It is said that Mara still tried to tempt him further to keep his realisations to himself. But the Buddha was determined to teach about suffering and how to overcome it, to help others to achieve enlightenment. He asked anyone who would follow him to reject a life of extremism, which meant not having too many luxuries or living a very ascetic lifestyle.

Activities

- 1 The image of the Buddha meditating and achieving enlightenment is a focal point for many Buddhists. Why do you think this image is so important?
- 2 Have you ever been tempted by someone or something? What did you do to try to overcome the temptation?
- 3 What were the three realisations that the Buddha made during the night of his enlightenment?
- 4 When asked questions about his enlightenment, the Buddha often spoke in negative terms, describing what it is not rather than what it is (for example, it is *not* heaven, or it is *not* the end). Why do you think the Buddha spoke in this way?

Discussion activity

In achieving enlightenment, the Buddha chose between two extremes. Is it always best in life to avoid the extremes? Give reasons for your answer.

Research activity

Research traditional stories about the Buddha's enlightenment. In what different ways is he said to have been tempted? Consider whether it is possible for the Buddha to have concentrated his mind in such a way that he would not be distracted from achieving enlightenment by these temptations. If possible, discuss your thoughts with a partner.

★ Study tip

Learn the story of Siddhartha's enlightenment carefully. It will help you to understand Buddhism.

Summary

You should now know how Siddhartha became enlightened and became a Buddha.

1.5

The Dhamma

■ What does 'Dhamma' mean?

The term **Dhamma** (in **Pali**) or **Dharma** (in **Sanskrit**) has many meanings. It means the 'truth' about the nature of existence, as understood by the Buddha when he became enlightened. (His Four Noble Truths and the three marks of existence are examples of this.) It also means the path of training that was recommended by the Buddha for anyone who wishes to understand what he understood (for example, the Eightfold Path). It is sometimes translated as 'law', not in the sense of rules to be followed, but in the sense of a universal law such as Newton's law of gravity: a fact about the way things are.

Even though the Buddha described his insights into reality as the 'truth', he encouraged his followers to test his teachings against their own experience. He did not want people to follow his teachings unquestioningly because, for example, they were impressed with him as a teacher, or because he must be right if he had so many followers. In his book *Old Path White Clouds*, the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh recounts stories about the Buddha's life. In one of them, the Buddha explains his teaching to the ascetic Dighanaka like this:

“ My teaching is not a philosophy. It is the result of direct experience ...

My teaching is a means of practice, not something to hold on to or worship.

My teaching is like a raft used to cross the river.

Only a fool would carry the raft around after he had already reached the other shore of liberation.”

Thich Nhat Hanh (Vietnamese Buddhist monk)

Many Buddhists say that following the Buddha's teachings has relieved them of much suffering, giving them meaning, purpose and greater happiness or satisfaction in life. Becoming more aware, wise and compassionate is not only good for them, but also transforms their relationships with others and the wider world.

■ Dhamma as a refuge

The Dhamma is also the second of the three refuges (also known as 'treasures' or 'jewels') in Buddhism. The other two refuges are the Buddha and the Sangha. Depending on the context in which it is used, Sangha has three different meanings:

Objectives

- Examine what is meant by the Buddhist concept of Dhamma.
- Understand different meanings of Dhamma.

Key terms

- **Dhamma (Dharma):** the Buddha's teachings
- **Pali:** the language of the earliest Buddhist scriptures
- **Sanskrit:** the language used in later Indian Buddhist texts

Links

To read more about the three marks of existence and the Four Noble Truths, see pages 20–35.



▲ The Buddha encouraged his followers to examine and question his teachings before accepting them

1. all those who have become enlightened following the Buddha's teachings
2. monks and nuns
3. the community of all those who follow the Buddha's teachings, whether ordained or lay.

In many traditions, it is common to recite the three refuges at the start of a Buddhist event or meeting, and in ceremonies where people become Buddhists. They might say:

“ To the Buddha for refuge I go
To the Dhamma for refuge I go
To the Sangha for refuge I go ”

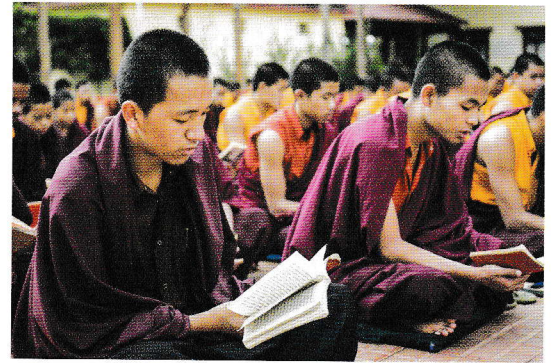
To 'go for refuge' means to seek safety. For Buddhists, this means looking for safety from suffering. The Buddha taught that, a lot of the time, people take refuge in things which are unreliable and cannot provide lasting safety (for example, you get the new mobile phone you really wanted and you feel great about it – until it breaks or a new model comes out). However, following the truths and path of training he discovered would give lasting safety from suffering. When Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, they are saying that they trust these things as lasting sources of safety from suffering. They are asking for the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha to guide them in their development of wisdom and compassion. When Buddhists 'go for refuge', they are expressing their longing for enlightenment, and their commitment to following the path leading to enlightenment.

It is interesting to consider whether any of the three refuges could be said to be more important than the others. It could be argued that the Buddha is the most important because he provides an example for Buddhists to follow. If he had not discovered the Dhamma and then taught it, Buddhists might never have been able to understand the way out of suffering. On the other hand, it could be argued that the Dhamma is the most important because it describes the way things are. This 'truth' existed long before the Buddha recognised it (in the same way that the law of gravity is true whether anyone knows about it or not).

Finally, the Sangha is very important to a Buddhist's life. For an ordinary person following the Buddha's teaching, it is very encouraging to know that other ordinary people have reached the wisdom and compassion of enlightenment, not just the Buddha. Nuns and monks (and other experienced teachers) are essential as guides to less experienced Buddhists. In Buddhists' everyday lives, the Sangha around them can also provide support, encouragement and friendship.

Activities

- 1 Give two different meanings of the word 'Dhamma'.
- 2 In what circumstances might a Buddhist find (a) the Buddha, (b) the Dhamma, and (c) the Sangha the most useful refuge?



▲ By following the Buddha's teachings, Buddhists hope to eventually achieve enlightenment

Discussion activities

Discuss the following questions with a partner:

- 1 Why do you think the Buddha wanted his followers to test and question his teachings? What were the potential benefits and disadvantages for the Buddha of his followers questioning his teachings?
- 2 Where do you 'go for refuge'? What experiences or things make you feel safe? Are they completely reliable?

Extension activity

Research meanings of 'Dharma' in Hinduism, and note some of the key differences between these and Buddhist meanings of 'Dhamma' or 'Dharma'.

★ Study tip

Remember that the word 'Dhamma' or 'Dharma' has significantly different meanings in other Indian religions.

Summary

You should now be able to understand the different meanings of the word Dhamma.

1.6

The concept of dependent arising

■ What is dependent arising?

Dependent arising (paticcasamuppada) expresses the Buddhist vision of the nature of reality. It says that everything arises, and continues, dependent upon conditions. Nothing is permanent and unchanging. Dependent arising is often expressed in this simple formula:

- when this is, that is
- from the arising of this, comes the arising of that
- when this is not, that is not
- when this ends, that ends.

This basically expresses the view that life is an interdependent web of conditions. For example, a tree depends on soil, rain and sunshine to survive. Everything else also depends on certain conditions to survive. Nothing is independent of supporting conditions, which means that nothing is eternal, including human beings. Everything is a constant process of change.

The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, explained dependent arising like this:

“All events and incidents in life are so intimately linked with the fate of others that a single person on his or her own cannot even begin to act. Many ordinary human activities, both positive and negative, cannot even be conceived of apart from the existence of other people. Because of others, we have the opportunity to earn money if that is what we desire in life. Similarly, in reliance upon the existence of others it becomes possible for the media to create fame or disrepute for someone. On your own you cannot create any fame or disrepute no matter how loud you might shout. The closest you can get is to create an echo of your own voice.”

Tenzin Gyatso (the Dalai Lama)

■ The Tibetan Wheel of Life

The Tibetan Wheel of Life illustrates the process of dependent arising in relation to human life, death and rebirth. The outer circle of the wheel is made up of 12 links or stages (**nidanas**). The 12th link (old age and death) leads directly into the first link (ignorance). This represents the Buddhist teaching about rebirth: many Buddhists believe that when they die, their consciousness transfers to a new body. So the wheel shows the continual cycle of birth (and ignorance), death, then rebirth. This cycle is called **samsara**.

The type of world that a Buddhist is reborn into (for example, as a human, animal or heavenly being) is said to depend upon the quality of

Objectives

- Understand what is meant by the concept of dependent arising.
- Understand the Tibetan Wheel of Life as an example of dependent arising.

Key terms

- **dependent arising**: the idea that all things arise in dependence upon conditions
- **the Tibetan Wheel of Life**: an image that symbolises samsara, often found in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and temples
- **nidanas**: 12 factors that illustrate the process of birth, death and rebirth
- **samsara**: the repeating cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth
- **kamma (karma)**: a person's actions; the idea that skilful actions result in happiness and unskilful ones in suffering
- **nibbana (nirvana)**: a state of complete enlightenment, happiness and peace

Activities

- 1 In your own words, explain what dependent arising means.
- 2 Analyse the existence of your school in terms of dependent arising. What conditions are necessary for it to continue?
- 3 How can kamma affect a person's future?

their actions (**kamma**) in their previous lives. The principle of kamma says that intentions lead to actions, which in turn lead to consequences. In the cycle of life, good intentions lead to good actions. Good actions can lead to a more favourable rebirth. Kamma is a specific example of dependent arising that explains how a person's actions create the conditions for their future happiness or suffering.



▲ The Tibetan Wheel of Life

For Buddhists, the ultimate aim is to break free of the cycle of samsara, because this is what causes suffering. The cycle is broken by following the Buddhist path but, more specifically, through breaking the habit of craving (*tanha*). For this reason, Buddhist practice focuses on the relationship between feeling and craving. When someone has an unpleasant feeling, they want to escape it, and when they have a pleasant feeling they become attached to it. Buddhism teaches that this kind of automatic response is what leads to suffering. Through breaking this response, and coming to understand the Buddha's teachings in other ways as well, Buddhists may achieve **nibbana**: a state of liberation, peace and happiness.

Extension activity



Research each of the 12 nidanas and find out how they are depicted on the Tibetan Wheel of Life. Does the image for each nidana help to illustrate what it means?

“ Think of a wave in the sea. Seen in one way, it seems to have a distinct identity, an end and a beginning, a birth and a death. Seen in another way ... you come to realize that it is something that has been made temporarily possible by wind and water, and that it is dependent on a set of constantly changing circumstances. You also realize that every wave is related to every other wave. ”

Sogyal Rinpoche (Tibetan Buddhist teacher)

★ Study tip

The concept of dependent arising might seem complicated, but remember that in essence it means that all things change and all things are interconnected, like a web.

Summary

You should now understand the concept of dependent arising and its relationship to kamma. You should also be able to explain how the Tibetan Wheel of Life is an example of dependent arising.

1.7

The three marks of existence: dukkha

■ The three marks of existence

Buddhism teaches that there are three characteristics that are fundamental to all things. These are:

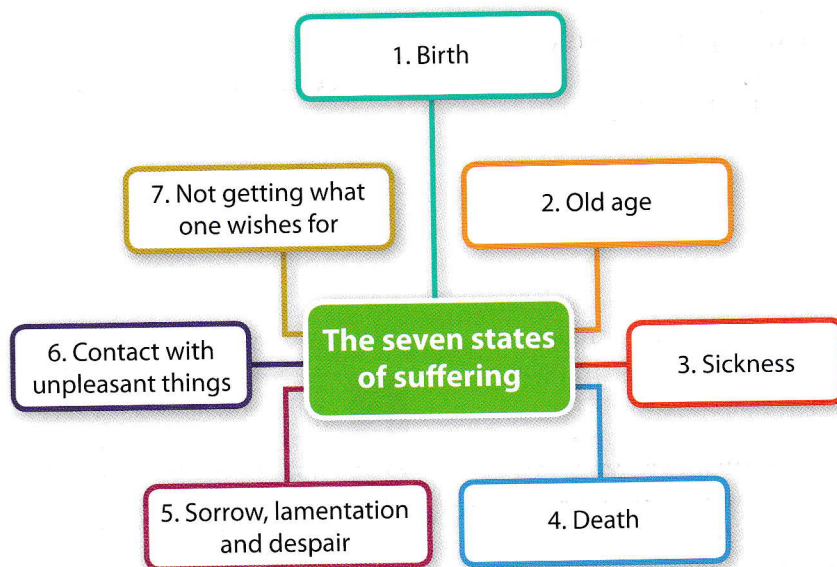
1. suffering (dukkha)
2. impermanence (anicca)
3. having no permanent, fixed self or soul (anatta)

For Buddhists, understanding these three characteristics as part of life is important for achieving enlightenment.

■ What is dukkha?

Dukkha is a fundamental concept in Buddhism. It has many different meanings but is best translated into English as suffering, dissatisfaction or unsatisfactoriness. Buddhists try to reduce suffering for themselves and others through right actions and intentions, and by gradually increasing their understanding of reality. Eventually they hope to break the cycle of samsara and achieve nibbana. The main reason why the Buddha left his life of luxury in the palace was to search for an answer to why people suffer.

After the Buddha became enlightened, he gave a sermon in the Deer Park at Sarnath (a city in India). He spoke of the seven states of suffering. The first four of these (birth, old age, sickness and death) refer to the suffering caused by samsara, while the other three refer to further types of suffering that people experience in their lives.



▲ The Buddha taught that there are seven states of suffering

Objectives

- Examine what is meant by the three marks of existence.
- Understand the concept of dukkha.

Key term

- **dukkha**: the first noble truth: there is suffering

“... what I teach is suffering and the cessation of suffering.”

The Buddha in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, vol. 1, p. 140



▲ Illness can cause suffering by creating mental or physical pain

Research activity

Find three examples from the Buddha's life of occasions when he suffered. What types of dukkha did he experience during these times of suffering?

■ Different types of dukkha

Suffering

The first type of dukkha (called dukkha-dukkhata) refers to ordinary pain or suffering. It is used to describe both physical and mental (emotional) pain. Examples might include breaking a leg, getting the flu, being separated from and missing someone you love, or being upset at not achieving a goal.

Change

Another type of dukkha (viparinama-dukkha) is produced by change. One of the Buddha's teachings is that nothing is permanent – things are always changing. These might be small changes (such as the weather turning cloudy), gradual changes (such as getting older), or larger changes (such as moving to a new city). When something changes and a sense of happiness is lost as a result, this is viparinama-dukkha. It refers to the sorrow and unhappiness that a person feels as a result of a change or losing something good.

Viparinama-dukkha can also be experienced *during* something good, as a subtle sense of unease and sorrow that comes from knowing the good thing won't last. Therefore, even happiness can be seen as dukkha.

Attachment

The third type of dukkha (samkhara-dukkha) is linked to the idea of attachment. Buddhism teaches that everyone is attached to other people, objects, activities and many other things. But when people crave and try to hold on to the things they are attached to, they suffer. This is perhaps the hardest form of dukkha to understand. It is often described as a more subtle dissatisfaction with life. Unlike dukkha-dukkhata and viparinama-dukkha, it may not arise due to specific events (such as twisting an ankle or ending a relationship). It is more to do with a general dissatisfaction with life that arises from many things, including the unhappiness that comes from change and from craving things that are not possible to have.



▲ Change can cause suffering, such as when children grow up and leave home

Discussion activity

With a partner, come up with as many examples as you can of the three different types of dukkha (dukkha-dukkhata, viparinama-dukkha and samkhara-dukkha). Do some of your examples fit into more than one category?

Activities

- 1 Give examples of some of the things that give people pleasure in their lives, and the ways in which they are only temporary.
- 2 Think of as many different words or phrases as you can for dukkha (such as 'suffering' or 'sorrow').

Summary

You should now understand the concept of dukkha and be able to identify different forms of dukkha, with examples. You should be able to see how dukkha impacts on all aspects of life.

★ Study tip

Here is another example to show the differences between the three types of dukkha: you feel lonely because you miss your family, which is dukkha-dukkha. You eat a cake to cheer yourself up, which gives you temporary pleasure, but you then feel lonely again – this is viparinama-dukkha. You feel generally unhappy about life, which is samkhara-dukkha.

1.8

The three marks of existence: anicca

■ What is anicca?

Anicca is usually translated as impermanence. As we have already seen, the Buddha taught that everything is impermanent and continually changing.

Anicca can be thought of as affecting the world in three different ways:

1. It affects living things. For example, birth is followed by growth and then decay and finally death. Imagine for instance a small seed growing into a giant redwood tree.
2. It affects non-living things. For example, an iron nail that is left out in the rain will rust; a temple will eventually erode and turn into ruins if it is not repaired.
3. It affects our minds. Our thoughts, feelings, morals, longings and ideals change frequently throughout our lives.

■ How anicca and dukkha relate to each other

Even though things in the world change all the time, people often expect them to stay the same and the Buddha believed that this is one of the reasons why people suffer. He taught that when people expect things to remain unchanged, they become attached to them. Therefore when they do change (anicca) people experience suffering (dukkha).

Buddhists believe that accepting that all things change – including themselves – will lead to less suffering. For Buddhists, the ultimate goal is to break the cycle of samsara and achieve nibbana, a permanent state of no suffering.



▲ Buddhism teaches that attachment can lead to suffering when things change

Objective

- Understand the concept of anicca.

Key term

- **anicca:** impermanence; the idea that everything changes



▲ How might Buddhist teachings about anicca help a family come to terms with moving house?

Discussion activities

Discuss the following questions with a partner or in a small group:

- 1 Do you think you can understand dukkha without understanding anicca?
- 2 Is it important to understand the concept of anicca in order to suffer less in our lives?

Stories from Buddhist tradition

When Kisa Gotami had a child she at last found some happiness in her life. However, just when her little boy was old enough to begin to run about and play, he became ill and died. Gotami became almost crazy with sorrow, and refused to believe that he was dead. She took the corpse from house to house, asking for medicine to cure her child. 'Why are you asking for medicine?' everyone said. 'Can't you see that the child is dead? You are crazy.'

But one of her neighbours, who was wiser and kinder than the others, realised that Gotami's strange behaviour was due to the depth of her sorrow, and said: 'Why don't you go to the Buddha; perhaps he can give you the medicine you need.' So she took the dead body of her little boy and showed it to the Buddha, saying, 'Please, O Wise One, give me some medicine for my poor sick child.' The Buddha looked at Gotami and at her dead child, and he could see that deep down Gotami had enough wisdom and strength to understand her sorrow and gain comfort, even though her terrible loss had made her almost mad with grief. So he said to her, 'Go back to the town, knock on all the doors and wherever you find a household where no one has died, ask them to give you a little mustard seed. Then, in the evening, bring me all the mustard seed you collect and we will be able to make some medicine for your child.'

So Gotami went into the town, knocked on the door of the first house and said, 'If no one has died in your family, please give me some mustard seed: I need it as a medicine for my sick child.' The woman of the house looked at her sadly and said, 'Certainly I can give you some mustard seed, but I'm afraid that we have had many, many deaths in our family.' And Gotami looked sadly at the woman, saying, 'In that case, I'm sorry for you, but your mustard seed will be

of no use as medicine for my little boy.' She went to the second house, and the same thing happened: yes she could have some mustard seed, but in that house also there had been many deaths and much sorrow. And at the third, fourth and fifth house it was the same. At every house where she knocked at the door the family told her that they also were in sorrow for the death of a dearly loved relative – a mother, or a father, or an uncle, or an aunt, or a son, or a daughter.

So by the evening, she still had no mustard seed for medicine for her child. However, something important had happened. As a result of sharing her sorrow with so many other people who had also lost a loved one, she found that her own sorrow was now different. She no longer felt agonised and almost mad with grief. Instead, although she still felt sorrow at the loss of her child, she also knew that everyone else in the town had experienced a similar loss and the same terrible sorrow. Suddenly she realised that sorrow and death are part of how life is, not only for her but for everyone. So she took her dead child to the cemetery outside the town and, sadly, lovingly, buried him.

Then she went back to the Buddha, who asked, 'Well, Gotami, have you got the mustard seed for the medicine?' Gotami answered, 'Thank you, O Wise One. No, I have not brought any mustard seed, but your medicine of the mustard seed has already worked, as you knew it would. Because I now see that my own sorrow is part of the sorrow of all people, and that the death of our loved ones is part of the pattern of life for everyone. That is the medicine I needed, and that is what you have helped me to understand.'

After this experience, Gotami became a follower of the Buddha and an Arhat (see page 40).

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Activities

- 1 Think of as many words or phrases as you can for the term 'impermanence' (such as 'temporary' or 'not staying the same'). Use these words or phrases to write a definition of 'impermanence'.
- 2 Give an example of how anicca can affect non-living things.
- 3 Give an example of how anicca can lead to dukkha.
- 4 Read the story of Kisa Gotami. What did Gotami learn about suffering, and how did it help her?

★ Study tip

Being able to give examples of the different ways that anicca can affect the world will help you to explain the concept of anicca more effectively.

Summary

You should now understand the concept of anicca, and be able to explain how it relates to dukkha.

1.9

The three marks of existence: anatta

■ What is anatta?

In Buddhism, the concept of **anatta** was developed in contrast to the belief in a soul or unchanging self. Anatta is often translated as 'no self', but it does not mean that Buddhists believe there is no concept of 'I', 'me' or 'self', just that the self is not fixed or permanent. The Buddha taught that there is no fixed part of a person that does not change.

“ If all the harm, fear, and suffering in the world occur due to grasping on to the self, what use is that great demon to me? ”
Shantideva (Indian Buddhist monk from the eighth century)

■ Nagasena and the chariot

A story that is often used to illustrate the concept of anatta is found in a text called 'The questions of King Milinda'. King Milinda was a Greek king who lived some 200 years or more after the Buddha. One day a monk called Nagasena arrived at the court of King Milinda. The king asked Nagasena what his name was. The monk replied that he was known as Nagasena, but that this was merely his name, without any reference to a real self or person. The king was confused by this and asked how there could be a person before him, who was standing in robes and was hungry for food, if Nagasena was just a name.

Nagasena replied in what might be seen as a strange way. He asked the king how he had arrived today. The king said that he had arrived by chariot. Nagasena asked him to point out what a chariot was, which the king did.



▲ A chariot does not have an independent 'self' that is separate from its parts; Nagasena said that people are just the same

Objective

- Understand the concept of anatta.

Key terms

- **anatta**: the idea that people do not have a permanent, fixed self or soul
- **the five aggregates**: the five aspects that make up a person

Discussion activity

Ask a partner to describe themselves to you and take notes of what they say. Read your notes back to them. Then ask them whether they have mentioned anything about themselves that will not change over time.

Nagasena then said that a chariot is not the wheels or the axle or the yoke, but is actually something separate to these things. So, the term ‘chariot’, like the term ‘Nagasena’, is merely a name used to refer to a collection of parts.

Nagasena said that people are made up of various body parts like liver, kidneys, lungs and so on, but only when these are put together in a particular order and given a name do we recognise the ‘owner’ of these parts. A chariot exists but only in relation to its parts; likewise a person exists but only in relation to the parts they are made up of. There is not a separate ‘self’ that is independent from these parts.

■ The five aggregates

The Buddha taught that people are made up of five parts. These are called **the five aggregates** (skandhas). They are:

1. Form (our bodies)
2. Sensation (our feelings)
3. Perception (our recognition of what things are)
4. Mental formations (our thoughts)
5. Consciousness (our awareness of things)

The Buddha said that these parts are constantly changing. Therefore the ‘self’ – which is the sum of all these parts – is also constantly changing.

On pages 18–19 we saw that according to Buddhist teaching, death is followed by rebirth. But if there is no fixed, independent ‘self’ or ‘soul’ then what is reborn? How is someone’s identity taken forward into their new body? For Buddhists, the answer is that there is a continuation of kammic energy, which means that the energy that is a person’s kamma passes on into another being.

Activities

- 1 Explain why Buddhists believe there is no permanent self.
- 2 Explain the concept of anatta by using a more modern-day example than a chariot.
- 3 If there is no permanent, independent self, how is rebirth possible?

Summary

You should now be able to explain the concept of anatta. You should also understand the Buddhist view that people are all made up of five parts that are always changing.



▲ For Buddhists, a person’s kamma determines their rebirth

Links

Learn more about the five aggregates on pages 36–37.

★ Study tip

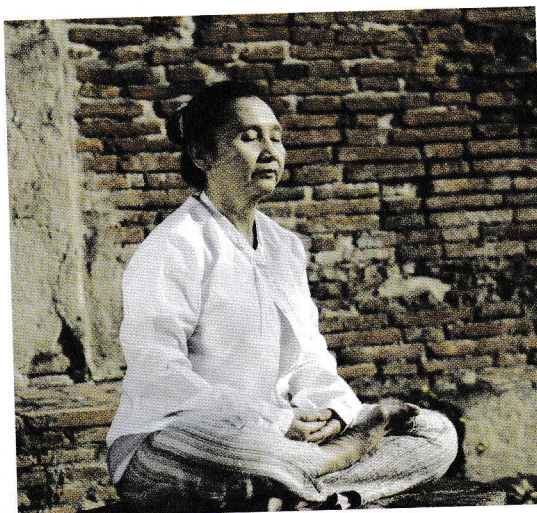
You could think of the Buddhist idea of the ‘self’ like a long-running football team. Many things about the team change over the years – new players come and go, as do new supporters, the team’s position in the league changes, and so on. But the team itself still exists and has its own identity, even though it is made up of many changing parts.

1.10

An introduction to the Four Noble Truths

■ What are the Four Noble Truths?

The Four Noble Truths are often said to contain the essence of the Buddha's teachings. They were discovered by the Buddha while he searched for enlightenment under the peepul tree. They were also the first teachings that he gave to the five ascetics, during his first sermon in the Deer Park at Sarnath.



▲ Buddhists use meditation to help improve their understanding of the Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths are:

1. the truth of suffering (**dukkha**)
2. the truth of the cause of suffering (**samudaya**)
3. the truth of the end of suffering (**nirodha**)
4. the truth of the path leading to the end of suffering (**magga**).

Another way of thinking about these four truths is to say that:

1. suffering exists
2. suffering is caused by something
3. suffering can end
4. there is a way to bring about the end of suffering.

Therefore, the Four Noble Truths seek to explain why people suffer and how they can end that suffering.

■ The Four Noble Truths in practice

“ The truth of suffering is like a disease, the truth of origin is like the cause of the disease, the truth of cessation is like the cure of the disease, and the truth of the path is like the medicine. ”

The *Visuddhimagga*, p. 512

In his teaching of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha can be compared to a doctor. When a doctor establishes that you have an illness, he first

Objectives

- Gain an overview of the Four Noble Truths.
- Understand why the Four Noble Truths are important in Buddhism.

Key terms

- **the Four Noble Truths:** the four truths that the Buddha taught about suffering
- **dukkha:** the first noble truth: there is suffering
- **samudaya:** the second noble truth: there are causes of suffering
- **nirodha:** the third noble truth: suffering can be stopped
- **magga:** the fourth noble truth: the way to stop suffering; the Eightfold Path
- **Theravada Buddhism:** 'the school of the elders'; an ancient Buddhist tradition found in southern Asia
- **Mahayana Buddhism:** an umbrella term to describe some later Buddhist traditions, including Pure Land Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism and Zen Buddhism

Extension activity



Buddhism often refers to the Buddha, the Dhamma (Dharma) and the Sangha as the three refuges. In what ways do you think the Four Noble Truths can be seen as part of the refuge of the Dhamma? (You may need to look up the word 'refuge' and consider its meanings carefully. Dhamma is discussed on pages 16–17.)

finds the cause of the illness (the first two noble truths). He then tells you what the cure is (the third noble truth). He then prescribes the cure, and undergoing this treatment helps you to get better (the fourth noble truth).

“ Each of these truths entails a duty: stress [suffering] is to be comprehended, the origination of stress abandoned, the cessation of stress realized, and the path to the cessation of stress developed. When all of these duties have been fully performed, the mind gains total release ... Thus the study of the four noble truths is aimed first at understanding these four categories, and then at applying them to experience so that one may act properly toward each of the categories and thus attain the highest, most total happiness possible. ”

Thanissaro Bhikkhu (American Buddhist monk)

Buddhists aim to come to a complete understanding of these four truths through study, reflection, meditation and other activities. For **Theravada Buddhists**, understanding the four truths is the most important goal for achieving enlightenment. **Mahayana Buddhists** likewise believe the Four Noble Truths are very important, but they also emphasise other teachings, such as the development of compassion, as being central to the experience of enlightenment.

The Buddha taught that the ‘cure’ to overcome suffering is the Eightfold Path. This is a series of practices that Buddhists follow in order to achieve enlightenment. This is discussed in more detail on pages 34–35.



▲ The Buddha can be compared to a doctor; the Four Noble Truths can help to ‘cure’ suffering

Discussion activity

Some people think that Buddhism is a negative or pessimistic religion because it directs people’s attention to suffering. Others think that Buddhism is a positive and uplifting religion because it provides a cure to suffering that relies on an individual’s own actions rather than an external god. Discuss with a partner which of these viewpoints you agree with.

Activities

- 1 Work in small groups to create a series of four posters to help your classmates understand the meanings behind the Four Noble Truths.
- 2 When you visit a doctor they will try to work out what the problem is and then come up with a way to cure it. The formula for helping a patient is basically: problem; cause; solution; treatment. Apply the same formula to the following problems:
 - a an example of bullying
 - b being worried about an exam
 - c experiencing a very bad headache
 - d falling out with a family member or good friend
- 3 Explain the connections between the Four Noble Truths and the other aspects of the Buddha’s teachings that you have studied so far.

★ Study tip

Remember that it is helpful to consider how Buddhist teachings are linked. For example, the Four Noble Truths are an expression of dependent arising (see pages 18–19).

Summary

You should now have a basic understanding of the Four Noble Truths and know how they relate to each other. You should also understand why the Buddha can be compared to a doctor.

1.11

The first noble truth: the existence of suffering

■ What is the first noble truth?

We saw on pages 20–21 how dukkha (suffering) is one of the three marks of existence, and examined some of the different types of suffering that people experience. The first noble truth draws attention to the fact that suffering is a part of life and something that everyone experiences.

The Buddha taught that there are four unavoidable types of physical suffering: birth, old age, sickness and death. Everyone experiences these in the course of their life. Buddhism teaches that beings will experience these four types of suffering many times over a number of lives, as part of the cycle of samsara. Remember that old age, sickness and death were three of the sights that the Buddha saw when he first left the palace. Coming into contact with these types of suffering had a profound effect on him and prompted his search to find an end to suffering.

The Buddha also taught that there are three main forms of mental suffering: separation from someone or something you love; contact with someone or something you dislike; and not being able to achieve or fulfil your desires.

“ Now this, bhikkhus [monks], is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering. ”

The Buddha in the *Samyutta Nikaya*, vol. 5, p. 421

■ Suffering and happiness

Even though the Buddha taught that it is important to recognise that suffering is a part of life, he did not deny that happiness exists. He often acknowledged in his teachings that there are many different types of happiness that everyone can experience. However, as we saw on page 21, the Buddha taught that even though happiness is real it is also impermanent; it will not last and will therefore eventually give way to unhappiness.

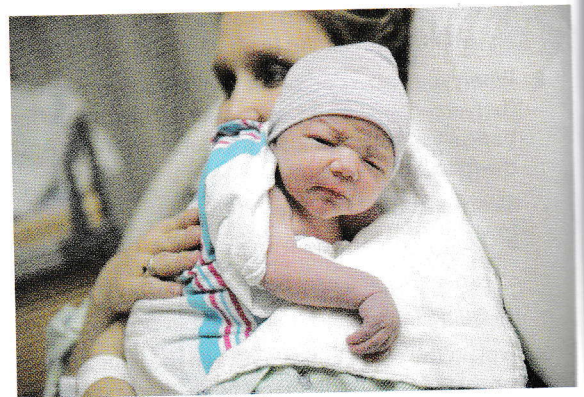
Some people think that the Buddha's teaching that suffering is a part of life, and that happiness doesn't last, is a negative or pessimistic way to view life. Buddhists, however, would argue that it is simply realistic. They

Objectives

- Understand what the first noble truth means.
- Understand the Buddha's teachings on suffering and happiness.



▲ The Buddha taught that physical suffering is an unavoidable part of life



▲ Birth is one of the four main types of physical suffering

would argue that everyone experiences pain and suffering at some point in their lives. It is a universal truth, meaning that it affects everybody. So dissatisfaction or suffering in life is a problem that everyone needs to overcome. Buddhists reflect on suffering not to make themselves miserable, but to be able to release themselves from that suffering.

Many people try to combat suffering with temporary pleasures. To take one simple example, imagine that you got a bad mark for an exam and feel miserable about it as a result. You eat a bar of chocolate to cheer yourself up, but the happiness that the chocolate creates only lasts until you get to the end of the bar. It doesn't solve the root cause of your unhappiness.

Because happiness and pleasures are temporary, the Buddha did not believe they could be the ultimate answer to the problem of suffering. Instead he developed other teachings and advice to help prevent people from suffering because of their dissatisfaction with life. As part of this he taught that the first step to end suffering is to accept the first noble truth: that suffering is an unavoidable part of life.

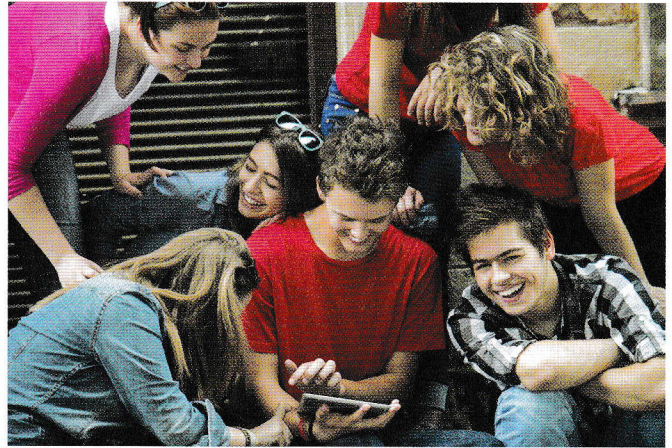
Buddhism teaches that one of the ways in which suffering may be reduced is to not personalise it. Suffering simply happens, and the key to reducing it is to not become 'attached' to it. If a person puts themselves at the centre of the suffering, the suffering becomes worse because it is personalised. This is how Ajahn Sumedho wrote about suffering:

“ The ignorant person says, 'I'm suffering. I don't want to suffer. I meditate and I go on retreats to get out of suffering, but I'm still suffering and I don't want to suffer ... How can I get out of suffering? What can I do to get rid of it?' But that is not the First Noble Truth; it is not: 'I am suffering and I want to end it.' The insight is, 'There is suffering' ... The insight is simply the acknowledgment that there is this suffering without making it personal. ”

Ajahn Sumedho (American Buddhist monk)

Activities

- 1 Explain why you think Buddhists feel it is important to understand and acknowledge that suffering is a part of life.
- 2 Do you think it is good to be optimistic in life, or does having expectations that are too high mean that you will always fail? Explain your answer.
- 3 What makes you the most happy? Write down five things and then discuss these with a partner. Is anything you have written permanent in your life?
- 4 In the quote above, the Theravada teacher Ajahn Sumedho advises people not to identify with suffering or make it personal. Explain what you think Ajahn Sumedho meant by these words. You may find it useful to give an example in your explanation.



▲ Because happiness is temporary, the Buddha thought it could not ultimately solve the problem of suffering

Research activity

Using the internet, find some examples of occasions when people have learned something from their suffering, and seen their suffering as being a positive experience as well as a negative one. Is it possible to avoid suffering? Do you think that it is important to experience some suffering during life? What benefits might suffering have?

★ Study tip

Remember that the Buddha did not deny the existence of happiness; instead he thought that happiness is real but only temporary, so it cannot permanently overcome suffering.

Summary

You should now understand the meaning of the first noble truth. You should also understand how the Buddha's teachings on suffering and happiness are viewed by Buddhists as being realistic and practical.

1.12

The second noble truth: the causes of suffering

■ The concept of tanha

The second noble truth (samudaya) explores the origins of suffering. Buddhists believe that understanding *why* people suffer is important if suffering is to be reduced.

The Buddha taught that one of the main causes of suffering is **tanha**, which means 'thirst' or 'craving'. This refers to wanting or desiring things. The Buddha said that there are three main types of craving:

1. Craving things that please the senses, such as beautiful sights or pleasant smells. One example is drinking a hot chocolate not because you are thirsty, but because you like the taste of it.
2. Craving to become something that you are not, such as craving to become rich or powerful or famous.
3. Craving not to be, or craving non-existence. This refers to when you want to get rid of something or stop it from happening any more, such as not wanting to feel embarrassed after making a mistake, or not wanting to feel pain after twisting an ankle.

“ Now this, bhikkhus [monks], is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination. ”

The Buddha in the *Samyutta Nikaya*, vol. 5, p. 421

Buddhism teaches that the reason why people find life to be unsatisfactory and full of suffering is because they become attached to the things they like, and want to avoid the things they don't like. However, the concept of anicca (impermanence) teaches that everything changes. So if people become attached to things, when they lose them through change, they inevitably suffer. The temporary pleasures that people crave cannot last or make them feel consistently happy.

■ Suffering and the three poisons

At the centre of the Tibetan Wheel of Life there are usually three animals that represent three different tendencies:

- a pig, representing ignorance
- a cockerel, representing greed and desire
- a snake, representing anger and hatred.

Objective

- Understand what causes suffering according to Buddhism.

Key terms

- **tanha**: craving (desiring or wanting something)
- **the three poisons**: greed, hatred and ignorance; the main causes of suffering

Links

Read more about the concept of anicca and how it causes suffering on pages 22–23.



▲ The three poisons in Buddhism are represented by a pig, cockerel and snake



▲ For Buddhists, trying to reduce anger and hatred is important for reducing suffering

These are called **the three poisons** in Buddhism. They sit in the centre of the wheel because they are considered to be the forces that keep the wheel spinning, and the cycle of samsara turning.

The Buddha taught that craving is rooted in ignorance. This is not the sort of ignorance related to not knowing the location of a country or not knowing how to speak a language, but a deeper ignorance about people, the world and the nature of reality. Buddhists believe they will only achieve enlightenment by overcoming ignorance and finding wisdom. The Buddha also taught that craving leads to greed and hatred. It is these three poisons that trap humans in the cycle of samsara and prevent them from reaching nibbana.

Activities

- 1 Look at the three main categories of craving mentioned on page 30. Give two more examples of each of these types of craving.
- 2 Write a list of things that people commonly crave. Suggest the steps a person might take in order to get rid of these cravings.
- 3 Explain how letting go of craving and attachment in your own life might change you and your lifestyle.

Summary

You should now be able to explain how Buddhists believe that craving things can lead to suffering.

Discussion activity

Discuss with a partner how the three poisons could lead to suffering. Try to think of specific examples where greed, hatred or ignorance might cause someone to suffer.

“ There is no fear for one whose thought is untroubled [by faults], whose thought is unagitated, who is freed from good and evil, who is awake.

The Buddha in the *Dhammapada*, verse 39

★ Study tip

Remember that although the Buddha taught that craving for things results in suffering, this is not the same as saying that people should not have or experience those things. It is not the things themselves that are necessarily bad, but becoming obsessively attached to them.

1.13

The third noble truth: the end of suffering

■ What is the third noble truth?

The third noble truth (nirodha) is that there is an end to suffering. This means that Buddhism teaches it is possible to end a person's suffering through their own actions and efforts, and that this can lead to enlightenment. Buddhists believe that the Buddha achieved this, and that anyone else can achieve it too. This noble truth is important because it teaches that it is possible to achieve happiness, and that although suffering is an unavoidable part of life, it is also possible to overcome it.

■ Overcoming craving and ignorance

On the previous page we saw how the second noble truth teaches that one of the main causes of suffering is craving things. It follows then that if people stop craving things, their suffering will cease, and this is the message of the third noble truth.

The Buddha taught that when people desire things but don't get them – or can't hold on to them for long enough – they become frustrated and unhappy with life. So they have to let go of this craving in order to stop feeling dissatisfied with life.

The Buddha said that this does not mean that people should avoid the things they enjoy or crave. In fact, this might only make things worse, because they might end up craving something more if they can't have it at all. Instead, the Buddha taught that people should enjoy and take pleasure in things but recognise that they can't last. People should enjoy things without craving them or becoming too attached to them.

The Buddha also taught that the way to stop craving is to have an inner satisfaction with life and a total appreciation of what one has already got.

“ Now this, bhikkhus [monks], is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it. ”

The Buddha in the *Samyutta Nikaya*, vol. 5, p. 421

Objectives

- Understand what the third noble truth means.
- Understand how Buddhists believe that suffering can be overcome.

Key term

- **nibbana (nirvana)**: a state of complete enlightenment, happiness and peace



▲ Does a consumerist society encourage people to become attached to things?

Research activity

How is it possible to stop craving or being attached to things? Research advice given online for Buddhists to follow, and write a short summary of the main points that are made.

Ajahn Sumedho's experience of how craving leads to suffering

Ajahn Sumedho, who was previously the abbot of the Amaravati Buddhist monastery in the UK, talks about his experience of how craving can lead to suffering:

'In my practice I have seen that attachment to my desires is suffering. There is no doubt about that. I can see how much suffering in my life has been caused by attachments to material things, ideas, attitudes or fears. I can see all kinds of unnecessary misery that I have caused myself through attachment because I did not know any better. I was brought up in America – the land of freedom.

It promises the right to be happy, but what it really offers is the right to be attached to everything. Like every materialist culture, America encourages you to try to be as happy as you can by getting things. However, if you are working with the Four Noble Truths, attachment is to be understood and contemplated; then the insight into non-attachment arises. This is not an intellectual stand or a command from your brain saying that you should not be attached; it is just a natural insight into non-attachment or non-suffering.'

Buddhists believe that it is important to overcome ignorance as well as craving in order to end suffering and achieve enlightenment.

The third noble truth, therefore, teaches that it is possible to end suffering, and that this can be achieved by overcoming ignorance and craving. The fourth noble truth gives specific steps to help Buddhists attain this goal.

Interpretations of nibbana and enlightenment

'**Nibbana**' literally means the 'extinction' or snuffing out of a flame – in this case, the extinction of the three poisons (or three fires) of greed, hatred and ignorance. The Buddha said after his enlightenment that he knew he was now entirely free of these three poisons.

'**Bodhi**' literally means 'knowing'. A Buddha is 'one who knows' the truth about the nature of existence. Such a person would know exactly what causes suffering, and have no expectations of permanence. Knowing this, they would naturally behave according to the five moral precepts, which are a description of the perfect wisdom and compassion of a Buddha.

But did the Buddha know everything? Buddhists have discussed this question over many centuries. Most Buddhists would probably say they believed the Buddha knew everything about the principles governing the nature of existence, such as the three marks of existence and Four Noble Truths. They would not say he knew absolutely everything, because that would mean believing he had supernatural powers.

Discussion activity

The third noble truth teaches that it is possible to stop craving things that cannot provide lasting satisfaction. However, the Buddha also said that some things offer deeper enjoyment and satisfaction than others: real friendship, for example, compared with a new pair of trainers. He said that enlightenment was the most satisfying experience of all, totally free of craving.

Discuss whether you have ever wanted something very much and then found it wasn't nearly as interesting or rewarding as you had expected. What sort of experiences are most deeply rewarding or satisfying, in your experience?

Activities

- 1 Read Ajahn Sumedho's thoughts about how attachment can cause suffering. Give an example of how attachment has led to suffering in your own life.
- 2 Recall the Buddha's childhood and the life of luxury that he had growing up. Write down a list of all the things you think the Buddha might have been attached to during his childhood in the palace.

★ Study tip

Think about the third noble truth as the start of trying to put things right. There is a clear change of direction from the first two truths – which identify the problem and cause of suffering – to the third truth, which tells Buddhists that they can overcome suffering by themselves.

Summary

You should now understand the meaning of the third noble truth, and understand how Buddhists believe suffering can be stopped by overcoming ignorance and craving.

1.14

The fourth noble truth: the cure for suffering

■ What is the fourth noble truth?

The fourth noble truth (magga) is the ‘cure’ to end suffering: a series of practices that Buddhists can follow to overcome suffering and achieve enlightenment. It is known as the middle path or middle way, because the Buddha taught that people should lead a moderate life between the two extremes of luxury and asceticism. He found that neither of these extremes was helpful in his search for enlightenment.

The fourth noble truth is **the Eightfold Path**, which consists of eight aspects that Buddhists can practise and follow in order to achieve enlightenment. These eight aspects are sometimes grouped into three different sections: ethics, meditation and wisdom. Together these three make up what is sometimes known as **the threefold way**.

“ But if any one goes to the Buddha, the Doctrine and the Order as a refuge, he perceives with proper knowledge the four noble truths: Suffering, the arising of suffering, and the overcoming of suffering, and the noble eightfold path leading to the cessation of suffering. ”

The Buddha in the *Dhammapada*, verses 190–191

■ The Eightfold Path

The Eightfold Path consists of the following eight practices, which are grouped below into the three different sections that make up the threefold way.

Ethics (sila)

1. **Right speech:** speaking truthfully in a helpful, positive way; avoiding lying or gossiping about others.
2. **Right action:** behaving in a peaceful, ethical way; avoiding acts such as stealing, harming others, or overindulging in sensual pleasures.
3. **Right livelihood:** earning a living in a way that does not harm others, for example not doing work that exploits people or harms animals.

This section of the threefold way is concerned with having good morals and behaviour, and living in an ethical way. It essentially requires Buddhists to act in ways that help rather than harm themselves and others.

Meditation (samadhi)

4. **Right effort:** putting effort into meditation, in particular thinking positively and freeing yourself from negative emotions and thoughts.
5. **Right mindfulness:** becoming fully aware of yourself and the world around you; having a clear sense of your own feelings and thoughts.
6. **Right concentration:** developing the mental concentration and focus that is required to meditate.

Objectives

- Understand the meaning of the fourth noble truth.
- Understand the different sections on the Eightfold Path, and know how these can be grouped together to form the threefold way.

Key terms

- **the Eightfold Path:** eight aspects that Buddhists practise and live by in order to achieve enlightenment
- **the threefold way:** the Eightfold Path grouped into the three sections of ethics, meditation and wisdom
- **ethics (sila):** a section of the threefold way that emphasises the importance of skilful action as the basis for spiritual progress
- **meditation (samadhi):** a section of the threefold way that emphasises the role of meditation in the process of spiritual development
- **wisdom (panna):** a section of the threefold way that deals with Buddhist approaches to understanding the nature of reality

“ Bhikkhus [monks], abandon the unwholesome! It is possible to abandon the unwholesome. If it were not possible to abandon the unwholesome, I would not say: “[Monks], abandon the unwholesome!” ”

The Buddha in the *Anguttara Nikaya*, vol. 1, p. 58

This section of the threefold way is concerned with how to meditate effectively, which for Buddhists is an important practice for developing wisdom and achieving enlightenment. Meditation is discussed in more detail on pages 52–57.

Wisdom (panna)

- 7. **Right understanding:** understanding the Buddha’s teachings, particularly about the Four Noble Truths.
- 8. **Right intention:** having the right approach and outlook to following the Eightfold Path; being determined to follow the Buddhist path with a sincere attitude.

This section of the threefold way emphasises the importance of overcoming ignorance and achieving wisdom, to truly understand the Buddha’s teachings and thus the nature of reality. For Buddhists, developing this understanding is essential for achieving enlightenment.

“ Mental phenomena are preceded by mind, have mind as their leader, are made by mind. If one acts or speaks with an evil mind, from that sorrow follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox ... If one acts or speaks with a pure mind, from that happiness follows him, like a shadow not going away. ”

The Buddha in the *Dhammapada*, verses 1–2

Despite being called a ‘path’, the Eightfold Path is often represented as a wheel with eight spokes. This emphasises the fact that the different steps do not need to be followed in a linear sequence, one after the other, but can be practised at the same time. Each of the different steps reinforces the others. For example, acting more ethically might include making the effort to meditate more regularly. This leads to a greater understanding of the Buddha’s teachings, which in turn makes it easier to act more ethically and meditate more effectively, which further increases one’s wisdom, and so on.

Research activities

- 1 Research the different parts of the Eightfold Path to make sure you understand what each part involves. Then give a specific example of how Buddhists might follow each of the eight practices. (For example, an example of right livelihood might be working for a charity.)
- 2 Using the internet, try to find links that are common between each of the three sections of the threefold way. Then draw a Venn diagram to illustrate which bits of the threefold way overlap with each other.

★ **Study tip**

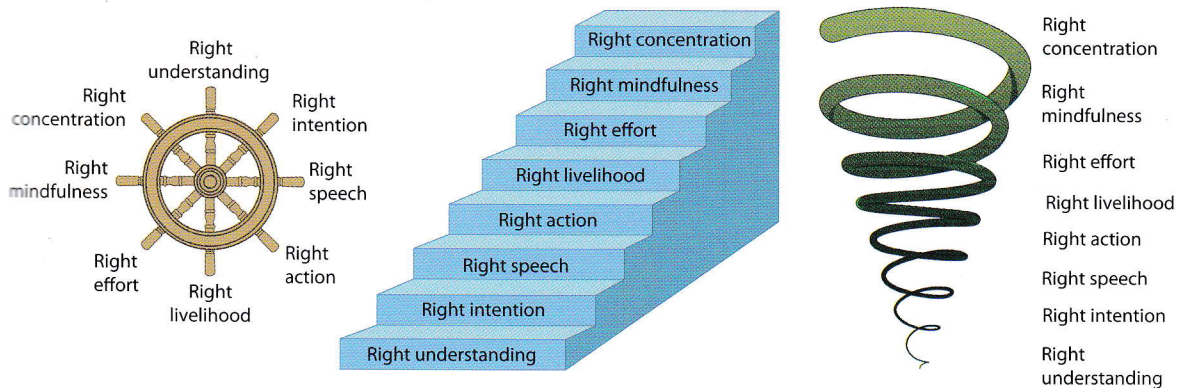
To help you remember the information on this page, draw yourself a diagram showing the elements of the Eightfold Path, and how they divide into the threefold way.

Summary

You should now be able to explain the different steps on the Eightfold Path, and know how these are grouped together to form the threefold way.

Activities

- 1 Are there any steps of the Eightfold Path that you think you already follow? Why do you follow them? What does this tell you?
- 2 Look at the diagram below. Which of the images do you think is most helpful in trying to understand the Eightfold Path and why? Which is least helpful and why?



▲ Three different ways of representing the Eightfold Path

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

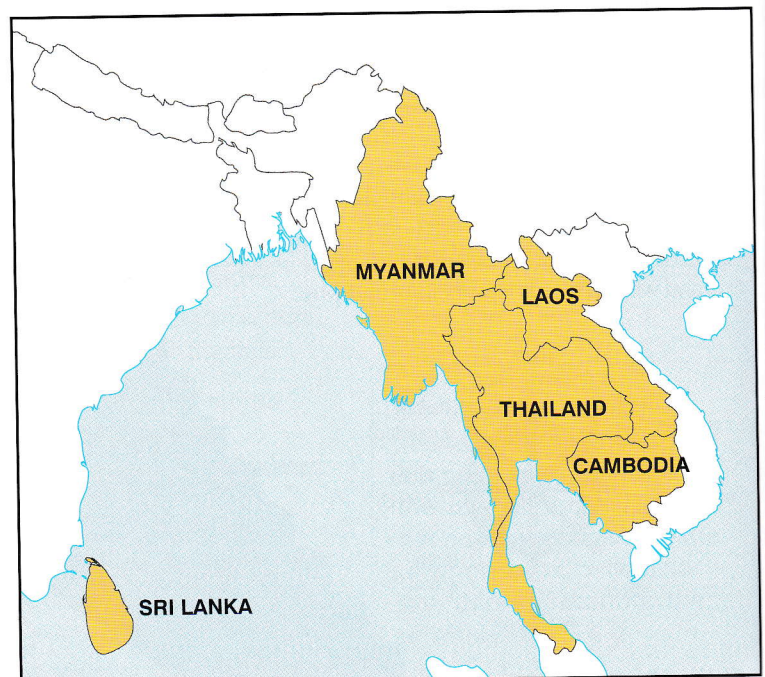
On page 25, we saw how the Buddha taught that people are made up of five parts, called the **five aggregates** (skandhas). Theravada Buddhists in particular believe that these five parts

Objectives

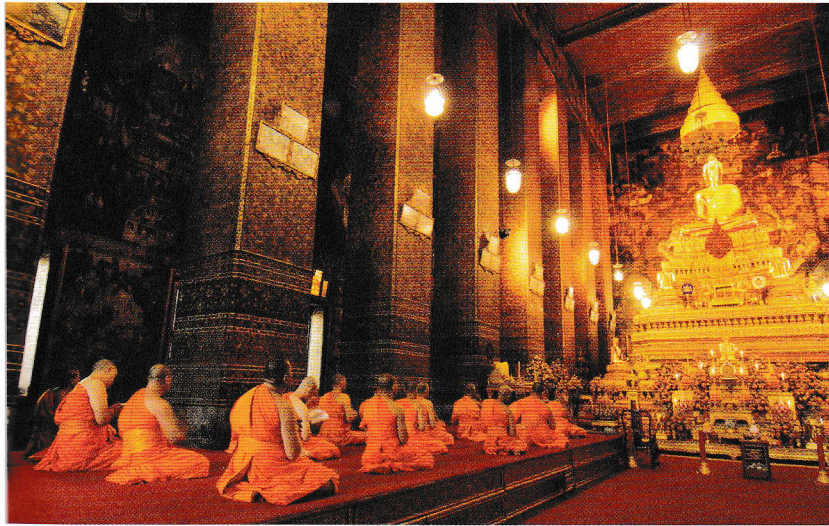
- Know the main features of Theravada Buddhism.
- Understand how the five aggregates make up the human personality.

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

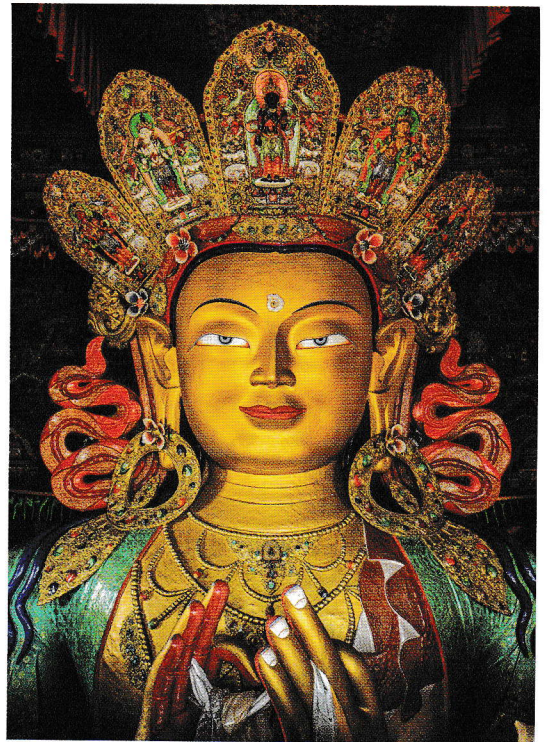
A person becomes a Bodhisattva by perfecting certain attributes in their lives. There are six of these that Mahayana Buddhists focus on (called the six perfections):

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.

1

Assessment guidance

The Dhamma (Dharma) – summary

You should now be able to:

- ✓ explain the concept of Dhamma (Dharma)
- ✓ explain the concept of dependent arising (paticcasamuppada)
- ✓ explain Buddhist teachings about the three marks of existence: suffering (dukkha), impermanence (anicca) and no fixed self (anatta)
- ✓ explain how the human personality is thought to be made up of five aggregates (skandhas) in Theravada Buddhism (form, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness)
- ✓ explain the concepts of sunyata, Buddha-nature and Buddhahood in Mahayana Buddhism
- ✓ explain the differences between Arhats and Bodhisattvas
- ✓ explain how Pure Land Buddhists believe they can attain Buddhahood and achieve enlightenment.

The Buddha and the Four Noble Truths – summary

You should now be able to:

- ✓ explain the circumstances of the Buddha's birth, and how his life of luxury growing up influenced his teachings
- ✓ explain the Buddha's encounter with the four sights (illness, old age, death and holy man), and its significance, including Jataka 075
- ✓ explain how the Buddha lived as an ascetic, how this later influenced his teachings, and how he achieved enlightenment
- ✓ explain the Buddha's teachings about the Four Noble Truths: suffering (dukkha); the causes of suffering (samudaya) including the three poisons; the end of craving (tanha); and the Eightfold Path (magga) or threefold way, made up of ethics (sila), meditation (samadhi) and wisdom (panna), including Dhammapada 190–191.

Sample student answer – the 4-mark question

1. Write an answer to the following practice question:

Explain two ways in which learning about the four sights influences Buddhists today.

[4 marks]

2. Read the following sample student answer:

"Some Buddhists are reminded that all things are impermanent (which is called anicca) when they recall the four sights the Buddha saw. For example, when Buddhists remember the old man, it is a reminder that we will not stay young always as things change and people need to accept this change. When Buddhists recall the dead man, it makes them think that even our own lives are impermanent and we all die at some point. Also, remembering the holy man the Buddha saw as the fourth sight can influence Buddhists to follow the Eightfold Path, his major teaching, to hopefully reach enlightenment one day and a way out of the constant cycle of births, deaths and rebirths."

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 4) would you give this answer? Look at the mark scheme in the Introduction (AO1). What are the reasons for the mark you have given?
5. Now swap your answer with your partner's and mark each other's responses. What mark (out of 4) would you give the response? Refer to the mark scheme and give reasons for the mark you award.

Sample student answer – the 5-mark question

1. Write an answer to the following practice question:

Explain two Buddhist teachings about the causes of suffering.

Refer to scripture or sacred writings in your answer.

[5 marks]

2. Read the following sample student answer:

"Buddhists believe that there are many causes to suffering but craving (known as tanha) is one of the main causes. When people crave things they suffer because they cannot always have what it is they want. They are ignorant of the fact that nothing stays the same according to the Buddha's teaching, but their ego tells them that there are certain material things they must have in life because these material things will make them happy. The Buddha's teaching was that they would not make them happy. Some of the other causes of suffering are greed, hatred and ignorance, and these can be seen on the Tibetan Wheel of Life in the middle of the wheel itself. They are shown as a cockerel for greed, a pig for ignorance and a snake for hatred. Buddhists believe that they will always suffer if they do not get rid of these things from their lives."

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 5) would you give this answer? Look at the mark scheme in the Introduction (AO1). What are the reasons for the mark you have given?
5. Now swap your answer with your partner's and mark each other's responses. What mark (out of 5) would you give the response? Refer to the mark scheme and give reasons for the mark you award.

Sample student answer – the 12-mark question

1. Write an answer to the following practice question:

'For Buddhists, dukkha is the most important of the three marks of existence.'
Evaluate this statement. In your answer you should:

- refer to Buddhist teaching
- give detailed arguments to support this statement
- give detailed arguments to support a different point of view
- reach a justified conclusion.

[12 marks]

2. Read the following sample student answer:

"Dukkha could be said to be the most important of the three marks of existence for Buddhists, as it is the first major teaching the Buddha gave and some Buddhists believe it to be the basis of the whole religion. It means suffering and everyone suffers so it is a universal teaching in that sense. We all experience suffering so it is a teaching that everyone can relate to. It is easy to understand, as there are so many different types of suffering such as birth, sickness, old age and death that people can easily relate to the Buddha's teaching. We all experience sadness too in life when things are not going our way or just don't feel right. All of this is part of dukkha and it affects all aspects of our lives.

On the other hand, the Buddha taught anicca which is that all things are impermanent, and unless we understand impermanence it may be hard for us to grasp aspects of dukkha, so maybe anicca is the most important of the three marks of existence. Everything changes and nothing is permanent and in theory if we understand this fact, we will suffer less. The Buddha also taught anatta which means that nobody has a permanent soul or self. If we understand this mark of existence then we will not be led by our ego; we will learn to let go and realise that only we, ourselves can make our situation better in this life. There is no God to ask for help and once we realise that we are just an ever-changing combination of mental and physical forces, impermanence and suffering become easier to understand. I do agree with the statement though as dukkha is so fundamental to everything the Buddha taught and is clearly the one thing Buddhists need to grasp and understand before everything else."

3. With a partner, discuss the sample answer. Consider the following questions:

- Does the answer refer to Buddhist teachings and if so what are they?
- Is there an argument to support the statement and how well developed is it?
- Is a different point of view offered and how developed is that argument?
- Has the student written a clear conclusion after weighing up both sides of the argument?
- What is good about 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. Now swap your answer with your partner's and mark each other's responses. What mark (out of 12) would you give the response? Refer to the mark scheme and give reasons for the mark you award.

Practice questions

- 1 Which one of the following is a Buddhist school or tradition?
A) Sunyata B) Asceticism C) Theravada D) Bodhisattva [1 mark]
- 2 Give two of the four sights that the Buddha saw. *death illness* [2 marks]

★ Study tip

If a question asks you to 'give' a piece of information, you do not need to give any explanation.

- 3 Explain two ways in which belief in the Buddha's enlightenment influences Buddhists today. [4 marks]
- 4 Explain two Buddhist beliefs about the third noble truth. *sickness*
Refer to scripture or sacred writings in your answer. [5 marks]
- 5 'The stories of the Buddha's birth have no relevance for Buddhists today.'
Evaluate this statement. In your answer you should:
• refer to Buddhist teaching
• give detailed arguments to support this statement
• give detailed arguments to support a different point of view
• reach a justified conclusion. [12 marks]

★ Study tip

You should think carefully about the statement before you start writing. When you have finished writing, read what you have written to make sure you have included all that the question asks you to provide.