Buddhism is a spiritual tradition that focuses on personal spiritual development and the attainment of a deep insight into the true nature of life. There are 376 million followers worldwide. Buddhists seek to reach a state of *nirvana*, following the path of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who went on a quest for Enlightenment around the sixth century BC. There is no belief in a personal god. Buddhists believe that nothing is fixed or permanent and that change is always possible. The path to Enlightenment is through the practice and development of morality, meditation and wisdom.

Buddhists believe that life is both endless and subject to impermanence, suffering and uncertainty. These states are called the *tilakhana*, or the three signs of existence. Existence is endless because individuals are reincarnated over and over again, experiencing suffering throughout many lives.

It is impermanent because no state, good or bad, lasts forever. Our mistaken belief that things can last is a chief cause of suffering.

[**The history of Buddhism**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/history/history.shtml) is the story of one man's spiritual journey to enlightenment, and of the teachings and ways of living that developed from it.

**The Buddha**

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was born into a royal family in present-day Nepal over 2500 years ago. He lived a life of privilege and luxury until one day he left the royal enclosure and encountered for the first time, an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. Disturbed by this he became a monk before adopting the harsh poverty of Indian asceticism. Neither path satisfied him and he decided to pursue the ‘Middle Way’ - a life without luxury but also without poverty. Buddhists believe that one day, seated beneath the Bodhi tree (the tree of awakening), Siddhartha became deeply absorbed in meditation and reflected on his experience of life until he became enlightened. By finding the path to enlightenment, Siddhartha was led from the pain of suffering and rebirth towards the path of enlightenment and became known as the Buddha or 'awakened one'.

**Beliefs:**

The Four Noble Truths contain the essence of the Buddha's teachings. It was these four principles that the Buddha came to understand during his meditation under the bodhi tree.Path to the cessation of suffering (Magga)

1. The truth of suffering (Dukkha)
2. The truth of the origin of suffering (Samudāya)
3. The truth of the cessation of suffering (Nirodha)
4. The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering (Magga)

The fourth Noble Truth, in which the Buddha set out the Eightfold Path, is the prescription, the way to achieve a release from suffering.

The Eightfold Path: The eight stages can be grouped into Wisdom (right understanding and intention), Ethical Conduct (right speech, action and livelihood) and Meditation (right effort, mindfulness and concentration).

The Buddha described the Eightfold Path as a means to enlightenment, like a raft for crossing a river. Once one has reached the opposite shore, one no longer needs the raft and can leave it behind.

**The wheel of the Dharma, the symbol of the Eightfold Path**

Nirvana means extinguishing. Attaining nirvana - reaching enlightenment - means extinguishing the three fires of greed, delusion and hatred. Someone who reaches nirvana does not immediately disappear to a heavenly realm. Nirvana is better understood as a state of mind that humans can reach. It is a state of profound spiritual joy, without negative emotions and fears.

Someone who has attained enlightenment is filled with compassion for all living things.

**Schools of Buddhism**

There are numerous different schools or sects of Buddhism. The two largest are [**Theravada Buddhism**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/subdivisions/theravada_1.shtml), which is most popular in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Burma (Myanmar), and [**Mahayana Buddhism**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/subdivisions/mahayana.shtml), which is strongest in Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Mongolia.

The majority of Buddhist sects do not seek to proselytise (preach and convert), with the notable exception of [**Nichiren Buddhism**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/subdivisions/nichiren_1.shtml).

All schools of Buddhism seek to aid followers on a path of enlightenment.

**Key facts**

* Buddhism is [**2,500 years old**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/history/history.shtml)
* There are currently 376 million followers worldwide
* There are over 150,000 [**Buddhists in Britain**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/history/britishbuddhism_1.shtml)
* Buddhism arose as a result of [**Siddhartha Gautama's**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/history/history.shtml) quest for Enlightenment in around the 6th Century BC
* There is no belief in a personal God. It is not centred on the relationship between humanity and God
* Buddhists believe that nothing is fixed or permanent - change is always possible
* The two main Buddhist sects are [**Theravada**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/subdivisions/theravada_1.shtml) Buddhism and [**Mahayana**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/subdivisions/mahayana.shtml) Buddhism, but there are many more
* Buddhists can [**worship**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/customs/worship_1.shtml) both at home or at a temple
* The path to Enlightenment is through the practice and development of morality, [**meditation**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/customs/meditation_1.shtml) and wisdom.

**Tibetan Buddhism** is a religion in exile, forced from its homeland when Tibet was conquered by the Chinese. At one time it was thought that 1 in 6 Tibetan men were Buddhist monks.

**The rôle of the Dalai Lama**

The Dalai Lama is the head monk of Tibetan Buddhism and traditionally has been responsible for the governing of Tibet, until the Chinese government took control in 1959. Before 1959, his official residence was Potala Palace in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. The Dalai Lama belongs to the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which is the largest and most influential tradition in Tibet. The institution of the Dalai Lama is a relatively recent one. There have been only 14 Dalai Lamas in the history of Buddhism, and the first and second Dalai Lamas were given the title posthumously.

According to Buddhist belief, the current Dalai Lama is a reincarnation of a past lama who decided to be reborn again to continue his important work, instead of moving on from the wheel of life. A person who decides to be continually reborn is known as *tulku*. Buddhists believe that the first tulku in this reincarnation was Gedun Drub, who lived from 1391-1474 and the second was Gendun Gyatso.

However, the name Dalai Lama, meaning Ocean of Wisdom, was not conferred until the third reincarnation in the form of Sonam Gyatso in 1578. The current Dalai Lama is Tenzin Gyatso.

**Potala Palace, the Dalai Lama's residence until 1959**

**Buddhist worship**

**Buddhist temple, Khatmandu, Nepal**

Buddhists can worship both at home or at a temple. It is not considered essential to go to a temple to worship with others. **At home**

Buddhists will often set aside a room or a part of a room as a shrine. There will be a statue of Buddha, candles, and an incense burner.

**Temples**

Buddhist temples come in many shapes. Perhaps the best known are the pagodas of China and Japan.

Another typical Buddhist building is the Stupa, which is a stone structure built over what are thought to be relics of the Buddha, or over copies of the Buddha's teachings.

Buddhist temples are designed to symbolise the five elements:

* Fire
* Air
* Earth, symbolised by the square base
* Water
* Wisdom, symbolised by the pinnacle at the top

All Buddhist temples contain an image or a statue of Buddha.

**Worship**

There are as many forms of Buddhist worship as there are schools of Buddhism - and there are many of those. Worship in Mahayana tradition takes the form of devotion to Buddha and to Bodhisattvas.

Worshippers may sit on the floor barefoot facing an image of Buddha and chanting. They will listen to monks chanting from religious texts, perhaps accompanied by instruments, and take part in prayers.

**Mantras**

**Woman spinning prayer wheels**

A mantra is a word, a syllable, a phrase or a short prayer that is spoken once or repeated over and over again (either aloud or in a person's head) and that is thought to have a profound spiritual effect on the person.

A very well known mantra is the mantra of Avalokiteshvara: *om mani padme hum*. This is sometimes said to mean "Behold! The jewel in the lotus!", but this translation isn't much help - the phrase isn't really translatable because of the richness of meaning and symbolism it contains. It's common to use prayer beads to mark the number of repetitions of a mantra. Mantras may also be displayed on a prayer wheel and repeated by spinning the wheel, or written on a prayer flag - in which case the prayer is repeated each time the flag moves in the wind. Prayer wheels can be tiny things that a Buddhist carries with them or enormous objects up to nine feet high found in monasteries. These physical prayer devices are very common in Tibetan Buddhist communities.