

FORM OF WORSHIP

Question: What is Buddhism?

Answer: The name Buddhism comes from the word 'budhi' which means 'to wake up' and thus Buddhism is the philosophy of awakening. This philosophy has its origins in the experience of the man Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, who was himself awakened at the age of 35. Buddhism is now 2,500 years old and has about 300 million followers world-wide. Until a hundred years ago, Buddhism was mainly an Asian philosophy but increasingly it is gaining adherents in Europe and America.

Question: So Buddhism is just a philosophy?

Answer: The word philosophy comes from two words 'philo' which means 'love' and 'sophia' which means 'wisdom'. So philosophy is the love of wisdom or love and wisdom, both meanings describing Buddhism perfectly. Buddhism teaches that we should try to develop our intellectual capacity to the fullest so that we can understand clearly. It also teaches us to develop love and kindness so that we can be like a true friend to all beings. Thus Buddhism is a philosophy but not just a philosophy. It is the supreme philosophy.

Question: Who was the Buddha?

Answer: In the year 563 B.C. a baby was born into a royal family in northern India. He grew up in wealth and luxury but eventually found that worldly comfort and security do not guarantee happiness. He was deeply moved by the suffering he saw all around and resolved to find the key to human happiness. When he was 29 he left his wife and child and set off to sit at the feet of the great religious teachers of the day to learn from them. They taught him much but none really knew the cause of human suffering or how it could be overcome. Eventually, after six years study and meditation, he had an experience in which all ignorance fell away and he suddenly understood. From that day onwards he was called the Buddha, the Awakened One. He lived for another 45 years in which time he traveled all over northern India teaching others what he had discovered. His compassion and patience were legendary, and he made thousands of followers. In his eightieth year, old and sick, but still happy and at peace, he finally died.

Question: Wasn't it irresponsible for the Buddha to walk out on his wife and child?

Answer: It couldn't have been an easy thing for the Buddha to leave his family. He must have worried and hesitated for a long time before finally leaving. But he had a choice, dedicating himself to his family or dedicating himself to the whole world. In the end, his great compassion made him give himself to the whole world. And the whole world still benefits from his sacrifice. This was not irresponsible. It was perhaps the most significant sacrifice ever made.

Question: The Buddha is dead so how can he help us?

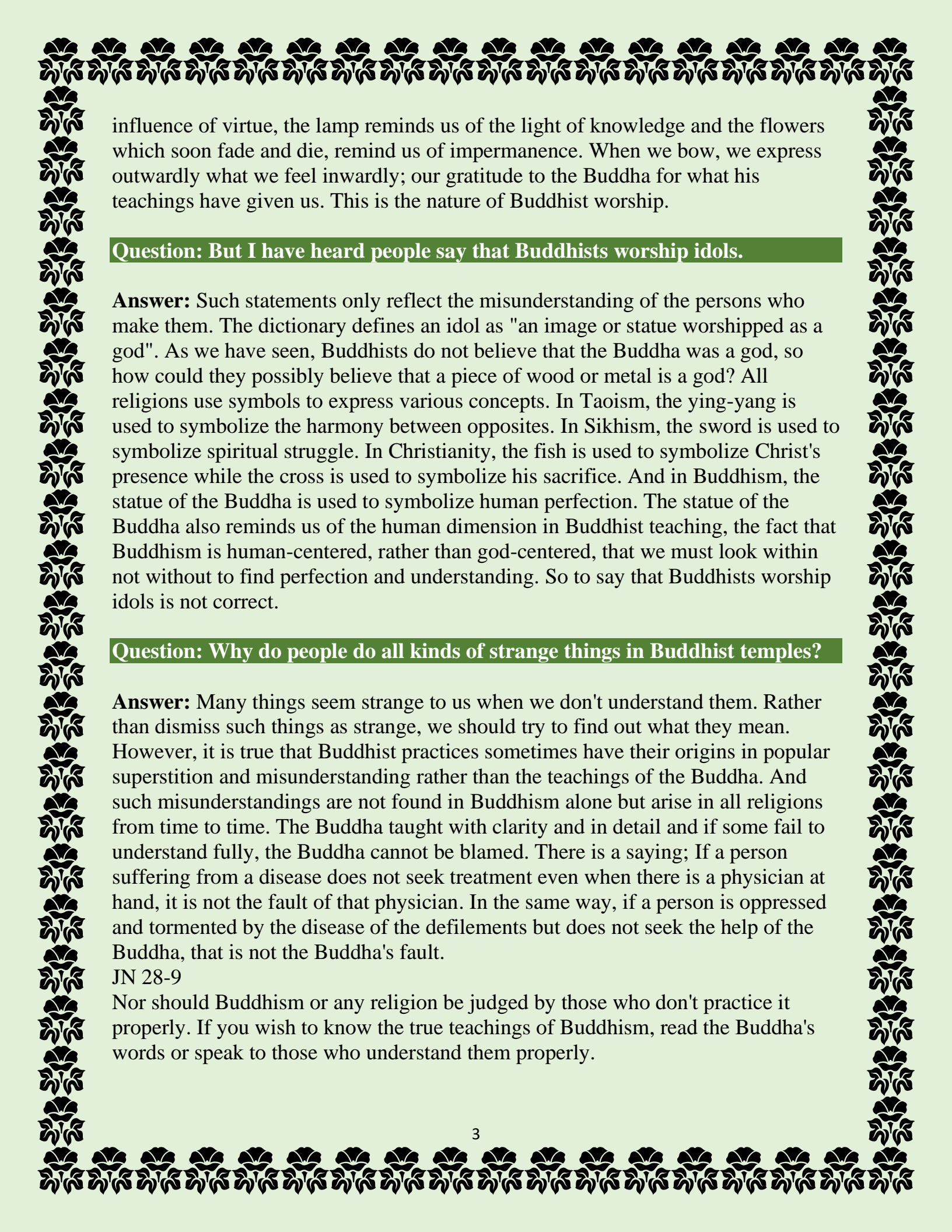
Answer: Faraday, who discovered electricity, is dead but what he discovered still helps us. Luis Pasteur who discovered the cures for so many diseases is dead, but his medical discoveries still save lives. The great artist Leonardo da Vinci is dead but what he created can still uplift and give joy. Noble men and heroes may have been dead for centuries but when we read of their deeds and achievements we can still be inspired to act as they did. Yes, the Buddha is dead but 2500 years later his teachings still help people, his example still inspires people, his words still change lives. Only a Buddha could have such power centuries after his death.

Question: Was the Buddha a god?

Answer: No, he was not. He did not claim that he was a god, the child of a god or even the messenger from a god. He was a human being who perfected himself and taught that if we followed his example, we could perfect ourselves also.

Question: If the Buddha is not a god, then why do people worship him?

Answer: There are different types of worship. When someone worships a god, they praise and honor him or her, make offerings and ask for favors, believing that the god will hear their praise, receive their offerings and answer their prayers. Buddhists do not indulge in this kind of worship. The other kind of worship is when we show respect to someone or something we admire. When a teacher walks into the room we stand up, when we meet a dignitary we shake their hand, when the national anthem is played we salute. These are all gestures of respect and worship and indicate our admiration for certain persons or things. This is the type of worship Buddhists practice. A statue of the Buddha with its hands rested gently in its lap and its compassionate smile reminds us to strive to develop peace and love within ourselves. The perfume of incense reminds us of the pervading

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influence of virtue, the lamp reminds us of the light of knowledge and the flowers which soon fade and die, remind us of impermanence. When we bow, we express outwardly what we feel inwardly; our gratitude to the Buddha for what his teachings have given us. This is the nature of Buddhist worship.

Question: But I have heard people say that Buddhists worship idols.

Answer: Such statements only reflect the misunderstanding of the persons who make them. The dictionary defines an idol as "an image or statue worshipped as a god". As we have seen, Buddhists do not believe that the Buddha was a god, so how could they possibly believe that a piece of wood or metal is a god? All religions use symbols to express various concepts. In Taoism, the ying-yang is used to symbolize the harmony between opposites. In Sikhism, the sword is used to symbolize spiritual struggle. In Christianity, the fish is used to symbolize Christ's presence while the cross is used to symbolize his sacrifice. And in Buddhism, the statue of the Buddha is used to symbolize human perfection. The statue of the Buddha also reminds us of the human dimension in Buddhist teaching, the fact that Buddhism is human-centered, rather than god-centered, that we must look within not without to find perfection and understanding. So to say that Buddhists worship idols is not correct.

Question: Why do people do all kinds of strange things in Buddhist temples?

Answer: Many things seem strange to us when we don't understand them. Rather than dismiss such things as strange, we should try to find out what they mean. However, it is true that Buddhist practices sometimes have their origins in popular superstition and misunderstanding rather than the teachings of the Buddha. And such misunderstandings are not found in Buddhism alone but arise in all religions from time to time. The Buddha taught with clarity and in detail and if some fail to understand fully, the Buddha cannot be blamed. There is a saying; If a person suffering from a disease does not seek treatment even when there is a physician at hand, it is not the fault of that physician. In the same way, if a person is oppressed and tormented by the disease of the defilements but does not seek the help of the Buddha, that is not the Buddha's fault.

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Nor should Buddhism or any religion be judged by those who don't practice it properly. If you wish to know the true teachings of Buddhism, read the Buddha's words or speak to those who understand them properly.

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Question: Why are there so many different types of Buddhism?

Answer: There are many different types of sugar: brown sugar, white sugar, granulated sugar, rock sugar, syrup and icing sugar but it is all sugar and it all tastes sweet. It is produced in different forms so that it can be used in different ways. Buddhism is the same. There is Theravada Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, Yogacara Buddhism and Vajrayana but they are all Buddhism and they all have the same taste - the state of freedom. Buddhism has evolved into different forms so that it can be relevant to the different cultures in which it exists. It has been reinterpreted over the centuries so that it can remain relevant to each new generation. Outwardly, the types of Buddhism may seem very different but at the center of all of them are the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. All major religions, Buddhism included, have split into schools and sects. But the different sects of Buddhism have never gone to war with each other, they have never been towards each other and to this day, they go to each other's temples and worship together. Such tolerance and understanding are certainly rare.

*Credit & Reference by
Tisaranārāma Monastery*