

Tenets of Buddhism

While there are many different lineages, languages, customs, and texts in Buddhism, there are a few central tenets of all Buddhism: karma, the four noble truths, the eightfold path, and the precepts.

Karma:

In the time of the Buddha's life, past lives and reincarnation were ideas commonly understood to be a fact of existence. Karma, then, was the idea that we come in to the world carrying with us an accumulation of karma from those past lives.

A less abstract way of understanding karma would be to consider how every moment of your life, karma is being created and destroyed. From the moment a person comes in to the world, they carry with them the genes of their ancestors, they are born in to a cultural group, a family of certain socio-economic standing, language, region, and many other factors. These "past lives" condition the current life of the person. That person will experience suffering in ways that are different from someone with different karma.

Additionally, karma changes throughout a person's life. Unskilled habits and conditioning will further create "bad" karma and the person will stay stuck in the cycle of rebirth (perpetually creating more "bad" karma) until they wake up to the truth of suffering.



Four Noble Truths:

You might also read this as the Four Truths of Nobles, the noble person being one who has realized that suffering is inherent to the human condition.

- Suffering: dukkha is often the Pali word we see for suffering. Dukkha can be understood through its two-part origin of "du" (bad/broken) and "kha" (hole, as in an axle hole), when together, it implies that a wheel on a bad axle will not turn properly and the wheel on it will be stuck turning poorly. Samsara is another word to help us understand suffering and is often translated as "the world of suffering." Humans are stuck in repetitive, ongoing suffering until they notice that suffering exists.
- Origin of suffering: suffering does not solely exist in the material world, body, or even in the mind. Suffering itself originates in the false notion that humans have a fixed "self" or fixed "I" or fixed "me." Suffering therefore increases when humans give in to craving or aversion to try to alleviate suffering in the fixed self that doesn't exist.
- Cessation of suffering: nibbāna (Pali) / nirvana (Sanskrit) is a state of authentic, lasting happiness that is available to all who pursue it. Buddhism is a causal practice - which means that if the root causes of suffering are found and solved, nibbāna can be achieved.
- The path: the Eightfold Path, divided in to three categories (ethics, meditation, and wisdom), is how one goes about beginning the journey to nibbāna.

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Eightfold Path:

The Four Noble Truths set the foundation for our understanding of what is real and true of karma, dukkha, and samsara. The final Noble Truth sets the direction for walking the path to finding nibbāna, lasting happiness.

Ethics* - the foundation before meditation and wisdom. Practicing right ethics leads to mental clarity and stability.

- Right speech
- Right action
- Right livelihood

Meditation - prepares the mind for wisdom. Practicing meditation builds on mental clarity and stability gained from ethics, while also contributing to focus and consistency.

- Right effort
- Right mindfulness
- Right concentration

Wisdom - is not just what we understand, but how we understand and how we apply that understanding.

- Right view
- Right intention

*Further clarified within the Eightfold Path is ahimsa, non-harm is the foundational ethical concern for those on the Path.

- Physical - avoid physically harming self and others (including all sentient beings)
- Verbal - avoid harmful speech to self and others (including lying)
- Mental - avoid negative intentions and attitudes (towards self and others)



Precepts:

The precepts are generally accepted by both lay practitioners and monastics (monastics have many more!) in Buddhism. Observing and adopting the precepts in life leads to clarity. The five main precepts are: Do not

- kill
- lie
- take intoxicants
- take what is not given (appropriate or steal)
- engage in sexual misconduct