



## Equality Policy Unit

'everyone included, everyone involved'

### Briefing note: **Buddhism**

Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world; it was founded in the area that is now northeast India and southern Nepal around 535 BCE by Siddharta Gautama, who was given the title Buddha (meaning 'He who is fully Awake') after his attainment of the state of spiritual insight known as Enlightenment or Nirvana.

Buddhism is very diverse and has many different forms, however, key themes throughout being that it is possible to break through one's limitations and develop to a level of unlimited awareness, resourcefulness, kindness, wisdom and compassion called 'Enlightenment' in parallel with the Buddha. Because Buddhism does not include the idea of worshipping a creator god, some people do not see it as a religion in the normal, Western sense. The basic tenets of Buddhist teaching are straightforward and practical: nothing is fixed or permanent; actions have consequences; change is possible. So Buddhism addresses itself to all people irrespective of race, nationality, caste, sexuality, or gender. It teaches practical methods which enable people to realise and use its teachings in order to transform their experience, to be fully responsible for their lives.

#### **Key beliefs**

Buddhists generally believe that the nature of existence is a cycle of life, death and re-incarnation; that life inevitably involves suffering and that the only way to break out of this cycle is to achieve enlightenment.

#### **Ethics**

The two key Buddhist ethical principals are:

- Avoiding causing harm and seeking to develop greater kindness.
- Seeking to avoid confusion, delusion and intoxication and developing clear awareness.

These principals are applied to:

- Possessions, by avoiding taking that which is not freely given and developing generosity.
- Relationships and sexuality, by avoiding any form of manipulation.
- Developing stillness, simplicity and contentment.
- Communications by avoiding lying, slander, negative and meaningless speech. Seeking to become more kind and honest and helpful through speech.

#### **Denominations**

**Theravada Buddhism** recognises only the Pali Canon as the definitive teaching of the Buddha. Practicing countries include Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand.

**Mahayana Buddhism** accepts the Pali Canon and subsequent texts (Sutras) and has many different schools and philosophical perspectives. Mainly practiced in China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam.

**Vajrayana (Tibetan) Buddhism** accepts the Pali Canon, Mahayana Sutras and a huge range of Tantras and commentaries. There are four main Tibetan schools: Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Geluk.

**Zen Buddhism** is a Japanese Mahayana school focusing on meditation derived from the Ch'an school of Chinese Buddhism.



**Soka Gakkai** is a lay form of Nichiren Buddhism originating in Japan and is very popular in the West and has an emphasis on cultivation of faith and teaches individual empowerment and inner transformation which at the same time contributes to global peace, enabling people to develop themselves.

**Western Buddhist Order** was founded by an English monk in the late 1960's seeks to apply the principles of all schools of Buddhism to contemporary life.

### **Worship elements**

Although Buddhists do not believe in an interventionist God, worship and prayer are still important. This normally takes place in a shrine room and includes meditations, chanting of texts or mantras and making offerings to the shrine of flowers, lamps and incense.

### **Places of worship**

**Temples** these may be purpose built or adaptations of previous buildings, containing teaching and meditation halls and a statue of Buddha meditating. Visitors are expected to remove their shoes on entering a temple;

**Stupas** a symbolic stone structure, usually reliquary or built over ancient texts of Buddha's teachings;

**Monasteries** built in secluded, peaceful locations to house monks and their activities.

### **Food and drink**

Many Buddhists are vegetarians as an expression of the key principle non-harm. There are different practices with regard to eating meat, for example, many Tibetan Buddhists eat meat and Chinese Zen is strictly vegetarian. Theravada Buddhist monks and nuns are allowed to eat meat if, to the best of their knowledge, the animal has not been specifically killed for them. Meat is never served in monasteries. Chinese forms of Buddhism avoid garlic and onion as this is said to create heat in the body and cause difficulties in meditation. Fasting is not common in Buddhism; however, Theravadin monks do not eat after midday.

### **Festivals and days of worship**

The different traditions of Buddhism have different festivals and mark the same events on different days. The main festivals are:

**Wesak or Buddha Day** the first day of the full moon in April/May. One of the main festivals as this celebrates the Buddha's enlightenment. In some traditions it is also seen as his birth and death and Buddha's Enlightenment is marked in December.

**Dhamma (Pali) or Dharma (Sanskrit) Day** celebrates Buddha's first teaching and is held on the day of the full moon during the eighth lunar month.

**Paranirvana Day** observes the death of Buddha on either the 8th or 15th of February.

**New Year** is celebrated on different days throughout the world according to culture/calendar and the particular Buddhist tradition practised.

Q For further information on faith dates and religious festivals follow this link: <http://www.equality.leeds.ac.uk/for-staff/good-practice-guidance/faith-calendar-and-dates-of-religious-festivals/>

\*This information sheet was produced using information found in the 'Faith Communities Navigator' published in 2007 by the Faith Regen Foundation. Further information about the Foundation is available by following this link <http://www.thefrf.org/work/archive>

