

Quick Dharma Series

What is Buddhism?

By Gyoshin

Buddhism is all about liberation from suffering. Although most Buddhists would be comfortable with describing their beliefs and practices as a “religion,” others have said that Buddhism is not a religion because there seems to be no acknowledgement, or worship, of a Supreme Being or God. However, Buddhists would maintain that when most people speak of God, they are thinking of one who intervenes in human affairs, punishes or rewards, or grants favors to some and not to others. Buddhists believe that this kind of a God is most likely a human construct and not the Ultimate Reality. Moreover, such beliefs quite often serve to shift responsibility from the individual to fate or some divine plan. Buddhism, on the other hand, focuses on individual responsibility for one’s own spiritual life.

Siddhartha Gautama, the historic Buddha, was asked about the existence of God (or Gods) and refused to say “yes” or “no.” Instead he shifted the focus of discussion to the immediate present and the necessity of the individual to assume responsibility for his or her own spiritual development. It is safe to say that Buddhism is neither theistic nor atheistic. Either point of view can lead to extremes that draw our attention away from overcoming of our own ignorance or lack of self knowledge. Most Buddhists would be comfortable with following the lead of the Buddha in these matters and not be drawn into embracing one belief or the other. On the other hand, many Buddhists would feel comfortable with Jesus’ explicit teaching that “...the Kingdom of God is within you,” (Luke 17:20). Overall, Buddhists tend to shy away from labels that reinforce fixed concepts of self because they draw our attention away from the task at hand.

So, from a Buddhist perspective what is this task at hand? It is the “inner work” of self knowledge. The Buddha Dharma teaches that we must overcome the false idea of a fixed, encapsulated, separate self and begin to experience the self as something constantly changing, flowing, and unlimited. Buddhists are often misunderstood and accused of being negative because they use the terms “No Self and No Mind” to describe this constantly changing, flowing, unlimited self. However, as one touches this “No Self,” the way begins to be cleared to experience a larger self and a greater connectedness to the universe — our sense of separateness fades. Also, our compassion grows as the false sense of a fixed isolated self fades. As our understanding of greater

self develops we move toward the experience of Ultimate Reality. We call this step by step development the Bodhisattva Path. We neither look back on nor do we crave the end of the journey because with each step we take, a foot comes down in the present. It is only in this present that our ignorance falls away and we begin to embrace a greater vision of life.

Buddhists have a “road map” for this journey. It is called the “Four Noble Truths” and the “Eightfold Path.” In following these and other teachings of the Buddha (we call these teachings “The Dharma”), we engage in a number of spiritual practices. The most central of these is the practice of meditation. There are many different types of meditations. The focus on quiet breathing, visualizations, and various arts such as calligraphy, poetry, and flower arranging, and various martial arts are well known examples.

The foundation of the Buddhist journey is what we call the “Three Treasures”: the Buddha (because he is a great teacher), the Dharma (the teaching itself), and the Sangha (the Buddhist community). I close with a comment from Reverend Kubose (1905–2000) of the Buddhist Temple of Chicago who was a significant inspiration in my life.

“Gautama Buddha said, ‘Seek your own Enlightenment with diligence.’ Buddhism knows no authority for truth save the intuition of the individual and this is authority for himself alone. Each man suffers the consequences of his own acts, and learns thereby, while helping his fellow men to the same deliverance; nor will prayer to the Buddha or to any God prevent an effect from following its cause. Buddhist monks are teachers and exemplars, and in no sense are intermediates between Reality and the individual. The utmost tolerance is practiced toward all other religions and philosophies, for no man has the right to interfere in his neighbor's journey along the Way.”