



## **Buddhism**

It is sometimes claimed that Buddhism is really a form of Advaita Vedanta philosophy, and thus really a form of Hinduism. Both systems of thought are certainly manifestations of perennial philosophy. But Buddhism has its unique flavor. Buddhism is often considered to be a sort of reformation in terms of the Hindu milieu out of which it arose. Buddhism rejects the cast system that was prevalent at the time, proclaiming that all can attain enlightenment, regardless of cast. From an enlightened perspective, cast distinctions are meaningless. Buddhism also proclaimed that male and female are equivalent in the Dharma (the way, the path of awakening), and women as well as men may awaken to their true nature.

Usually a discussion of Buddhism begins with Buddha's teachings on the Four Noble Truths and the Eight Fold Path.

### **The Four Noble Truths**

1. In life, suffering tends to arise (things don't always work out as planned).
2. The cause of suffering is attachment (i.e., cravings and aversions based on compulsive attachments to dualistic concepts).
3. To cease suffering, sever all attachments (i.e., cut compulsive attachments to dualistic notions).
4. To achieve the cessation of suffering, practice *The Noble Eight Fold Path*.

### **The Noble Eight Fold Path**

1. Right seeing – Seeing clearly what's there, not just what one wants to see or expects to see.
2. Right intention – Intending to drop one's delusional thinking, and to cease causing harm to others, both intentional and unintentional.

3. Right speech – Speaking truthfully and non-harmfully.
4. Right action – Not causing harm to others through ones actions or ones inactions.
5. Right livelihood – Not causing harm to others through ones livelihood.
6. Right effort – Apply effort to cheerfully practice all of the above!
7. Right mindfulness – Seeing directly and clearly without conceptual, judgmental filtering.
8. Right meditation – Abiding in non-dual pristine awareness, wherein all arbitrary distinctions dissolve, along with all cravings and aversions.

### **The Middle Way**

Buddha had seen firsthand that indulging oneself in the pleasures of the world didn't lead to the end of suffering (he was born a prince). But practicing extreme yogic austerity and being averse to the world's pleasures didn't result in the end of suffering either (he spent many years with such practices). Buddha had realized an important principle of Buddhist philosophy, the Middle Way. On one extreme, craving; On the other extreme, aversion. The Middle Way attaches to neither extreme. Otherwise, one is stuck in a karmic vicious circle, oft visualized as the [Wheel of Life](#). The Middle Way is a way off this merry-go-round.

### **The Nature of Reality**

Buddha told his followers that they must realize the truth for themselves. Believing scriptures was missing the whole point, as Buddha's teachings concern realization and awakening. The Dharma is not about belief, but about realization. In order to awaken to one's true nature, one has to drop all of one's preconceptions. Even more than this, one must learn how to push the off button on that conceptual word generating machine in one's head. When the incessant prattle of thoughts ceases, so does delusion.

With right meditation, one can attain a state fully awake and clear, devoid of thought streams. In this state of mind, one experiences an extreme sense of connectedness to all that is. All concepts subside, including all concepts of oneself as a separate entity. Concepts of inside and outside, self and other, subjective and objective, all completely dissolve. One experiences not emptiness, but rather an infinite radiant fullness and a profound peace.

Buddha avoided metaphysical speculation about the nature of reality. After all, attachment to concepts is what gets us into all our trouble in the first place. What's the point of weaving more verbal nets, since getting caught in these conceptual nets is the very cause of the suffering we seek to escape? This is just weaving more netting to entangle us further.

Buddha likened our state to that of one just shot with a poisonous arrow. The point is to pull out the arrow and clean out the poison, STAT! Discussions about why the person was shot, or the

trajectory that the arrow took, etc., are clearly not helpful at this point. Also, once realization blooms, the meaninglessness of metaphysical speculation is evident.

Indeed, in reading over The Noble Eight Fold Path, notice that the focus is entirely on the present moment. Buddhism isn't concerned with dogma and intellectual speculation; rather, it's concerned with realization, right here and right now.

## Forms of Buddhism

Buddhism has continued to evolve through the centuries. The original form as taught by Siddhartha Buddha about 500 B.C.E., is called Theravada Buddhism. This form is still alive and well today, and is practiced primarily in Sri Lanka, Burma, Laos, and Thailand. Theravada Buddhism stresses attaining enlightenment for oneself.

About 500 years later, a new form of Buddhism had begun to arise, Mahayana Buddhism. This form of Buddhism is primarily practiced in Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, and Viet Nam. Mahayana Buddhism accepts the teachings of Theravada Buddhism, and adds additional teachings, many concerning the concept of the *Bodhisattva*. The Bodhisattva vow is to help all sentient beings attain enlightenment. One's practice is not for oneself alone, but for the entire universe. In Mahayana (literally "Great Vehicle") Buddhism, the Theravada practices are sometimes referred to as Hinayana (literally "Lesser Vehicle").

Another 500 years, in Tibet, Mahayana Buddhism evolved new teachings and practices which came to be known as Vajrayana (diamond vehicle) Buddhism. Vajrayana introduced many new (and often quite advanced!) meditation techniques and practices to the Mahayana tradition.

In this course, we will examine some of these Buddhist traditions in more detail, in particular the Zen school of Mahayana Buddhism, and the Vajrayana tradition of Tibet. We will also look at several of the world's non-Buddhist perennial philosophic traditions and their similarities to the various Buddhist traditions.



Hamilton Botanical Gardens "Zen Garden", New Zealand.  
Photo by [Julie Cartwright](#)

## What is the Meaning of Zen?

The word Zen has become part of the English language, but what exactly does it mean? It's much easier to answer the question "When is Zen?", for that answer would have to be "Now!". The whole point of Zen practice is to become fully aware, here and now. To come home to the present moment; this is truly where we live. Thinking verbally takes us far into the past, or into the distant future. But both past and future are fantasies, since the future isn't known and our memories of the past are often quite distorted accounts of what really happened. Zen exhorts one to "Come to your senses!", for when we get lost in thoughts of the past or future, life passes us by. When one mindfully dwells in the present moment, one completely dissolves into whatever activity manifests. One becomes the activity. Most people have had peak experiences, which all involve being so totally involved with life that one's sense of separateness dissolves into the experience. Very Zen.

The word 'Zen' is the Japanese attempt at pronouncing the Chinese word 'Chan', which in turn is the Chinese attempt at pronouncing the Sanskrit word 'Dhyana', which translates as 'meditation'. And indeed, the word Zen conjures up an image of motionless Buddhist monks lost in deep meditation. This mysterious image becomes less mysterious when you realize the monks are simply practicing being here now. And even cats frequently practice that.

Cognitive scientists tell us that it takes about a third of a second for our brains to start thinking about a sensory experience (meaning verbally interpreting it). A third of a second is a vast chasm separating one from "right now". A Zen master once proclaimed:

Lightening flashes, sparks fly!  
In one blink of the eye,  
you have missed seeing.

Living fully and authentically in the present moment makes each instant of one's life a peak experience. Each moment is filled with a profound peace and clarity. Each moment is perceived to have infinite depth and significance, charged with magic and mystery, infinitely precious. Zen brings us face to face with our true original nature, undefiled by cultural conditioning and painful neurotic tendencies.

Words and concepts can be useful, but mistaking them for reality is a big mistake. Concepts about reality are not reality. The menu is not the food. Dissolving all ones preconceptions, beliefs, concepts, and judgments about ourselves and the universe, can be a very liberating experience. What a relief to let go of all that baggage! (Most or all of it is not true anyway.)

Simplicity is often associated with Zen. And Zen practice is indeed simple, if not easy. Just practice being fully present, right here, right now. Perceive directly, without filtering perceptions through beliefs and preconceptions. Dissolve into the eternal now, and realize that the Universe itself peers out through your eyes, hears through your ears, and breaths each breath. Unity beyond all conception. If not now, then when?

## Further reading on Buddhism

[Wikipedia's entry on Buddhism](#)

[Buddhanet](#) - Lots of Buddhism links

[Essentials of Buddhism](#)

[Tricycle](#) - Excellent Buddhism journal

## Further readings on Zen

Wikipedia's entry on Zen: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zen>

Zen Stories: <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~suler/zenstory/zenframe.html>

Zen Texts: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/zen/>

A Catholic priest who is also a Zen master: [Father Kennedy's Zen Center Website](#)

## Documentary on Buddhism

[Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#), [Part 4](#), [Part 5](#)

## Some Zen Videos:

Alan Watts: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGWdzFyOOFw&feature=related>

Thich Nhat Hanh: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mKJGOiOOBE&feature=related>

Carlotte Joko Beck Roshi

Interview: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqVKb-WABQA>

Bernie Glassman Roshi and Zen Peacemakers:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IPIgskqXxg>

“Gratefulness in the Now”, Joan Halifax Roshi & Br. David Steindl-Rast

- Part 1 : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3SOG0ahxigv>
- Part 2 : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-2GP9vLIFs>
- Part 3 : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZLS3xrFd0s>
- Part 4 : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Szcvmf752L0>
- Part 5 : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwlDDMHAQ1w>
- Part 6 : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sttl0ceL1w>
- Part 7 : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DrhdVpOVa4>
- Part 8 : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzX0oqD5wU>
- Part 9 : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFBnIJmSwV8>
- Part 10: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqxxwNno-48>

### **How to practice Zazen ( Zen meditation )**

An American Zen master, John Daido Loori, giving beginning meditation instruction:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9b4FbGIVSE&feature=related>

An excellent intro to Zen meditation: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csyCrepDs58>

[\[ Back to Course Home Page \]](#)