

# Buddhism

and the Welcoming Workplace

**A Guide for Inclusive Relationships**

Buddhism is the world's fourth largest religion and has significant influence in our current culture, even for non-Buddhists.

This guide is a short overview of a fascinating religion, designed to give readers information to help foster a welcoming and respectful workplace. Please remember that Buddhists are diverse, varying by sect, culture, level of adherence, and personal interpretation. If you are curious about whether this information applies to your Buddhist friends and colleagues, we invite you to start a conversation.



Encounter World Religions can help you learn more about religious literacy and how to create a welcoming workplace.



[worldreligions.ca](http://worldreligions.ca)

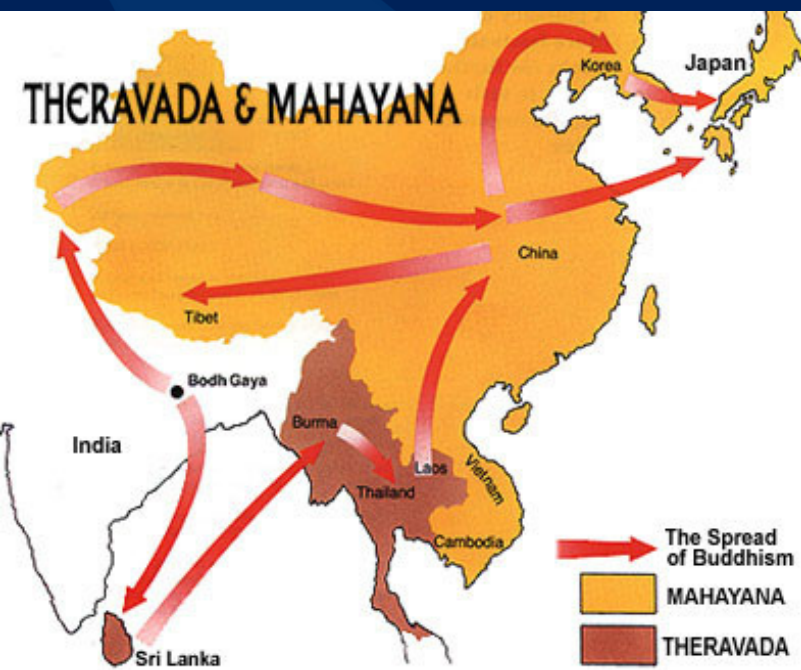
# Buddhism – The Basics

To create a welcoming workplace it helps to know a bit about each other. Knowing the basics about a religion can increase our comfort with one another and makes us feel more connected.

**Siddhartha Gotama**, who became known as the Buddha, was born as a prince in what is now Southern Nepal over 2500 years ago. Gautama was moved by suffering in the world and gave up his lavish life, living instead in poverty in an attempt to find a path to **enlightenment**.

The Buddha taught that life is marred by suffering and that our primary task is to liberate ourselves and other beings from suffering.

He believed that the solution required both wisdom and compassion and that practices of meditation and mindfulness helped cultivate the insights and character to live this way.



Buddhism is enormously diverse with three main schools or branches and innumerable sub-branches.

The three main branches – **Theravada**, **Mahayana**, and **Vajrayana** – often have different practices and holidays. These practices can vary by country and culture.

*Mahayana Buddhism is the largest school, encompassing the large populations of China, Korea and Japan. Theravada is the second largest school.*

# Buddhism – The Basics *continued*

## Not Theistic

Many associate religions with belief in a creator God or gods. Buddhism is not structured this way. The Buddha thought that enlightenment was something achieved via diligent effort and that gods played no role in this process.



*The Sangha is the monastic community that has preserved Buddhism for over two millennia.*

## The Three Jewels

Buddhists take refuge in the three jewels or the **triple gem**, meaning the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

The **Buddha** is the teacher, the **Dharma** is his teachings, and the **Sangha** is the community of monks that keeps the teachings and practices of Buddhism alive.

If you visit a Buddhist temple, you often see people do rituals in threes and if you take a meditation class, the leader will likely ring a meditation bowl three times to start and end the session.

## Five Precepts

Buddhists advocate for five ethical precepts which are:

- 1) abstain from harming living beings;
- 2) abstain from stealing;
- 3) abstain from sexual misconduct;
- 4) abstain from false speech; and
- 5) abstain from taking intoxicants



# Greetings and Holidays



*Devotees bathe the baby Buddha to mark his birth.*

## **Mahayana Buddhists:**

Buddhism's largest branch marks the Buddha's birth at Wesak (also called Vaisakha) but has different festivals for the Buddha's enlightenment and death.

For Mahayana Buddhists, **Bodhi Day** commemorates the day the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama (also called Shakyamuni), **experienced enlightenment**. This holy day falls on **December 8**, and Mahayana Buddhists may spend the day meditating, praying, studying and chanting. Offer your friends your best wishes.

It is appropriate to say **Happy Bodhi Day!**

**Paranirvana Day** is celebrated by some Mahayana Buddhists on February 8 and by most on February 15. Devotees celebrate the Buddha's death when they believe that, having attained enlightenment, he achieved **freedom from physical existence and its sufferings**. Celebrations vary by culture but typically include visits to the temple, meditation, contemplation about one's own life and death, and social gatherings. Wish friends and colleagues a **Peaceful Paranirvana Day**.

**Wesak:** Two of Buddhism's three main branches celebrate the **Buddha's birth, death and enlightenment** on one day called Wesak. Milk rice and oil cake is offered to the Buddha on this day. Wesak falls in or near the month of May and many Buddhists mark the day by abstaining from meat and alcohol, giving alms to the poor, and focusing on doing good deeds that create **positive karma**.



# Cultural Awareness

**Physical Contact:** The following sensitivities need to be observed on greeting or introduction: It is inappropriate for some Theravada Buddhist monks and nuns to shake hands. A common Buddhist way of greeting is to put the **palms of the hands together and raise them to the chin.**

**Language Considerations:** Some Buddhists from South-East Asian countries may be **reluctant to contradict others**, disagree or refuse requests directly, as this would be considered impolite. 'No' may be expressed or hinted at indirectly.

For some Buddhists from South-East Asian countries, direct public criticism may lead to 'loss of face'. For them, this is a state of severe humiliation, loss of reputation and emotional upheaval.



**Food:** Traditions vary over whether or not the Buddha prohibited the eating of meat.

When hosting people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, always serve a **selection of vegetarian and meat on separate trays** as a matter of good practice.

A variety of **non-alcoholic drinks** should also be available. Some Buddhists refrain from intoxicants of all kinds.

# 5 Interesting Facts about Buddhism

## The Buddha was a Man, not a God

The Buddha is understood to be a normal person who acquired unusual insight into the human condition and the nature of reality. He is **not a creator nor a god** but rather someone who showed the path to liberation.

## An Emphasis on Practice over Belief

While believing in the Buddha's teachings is helpful, **belief itself does not lead to liberation**. Some see the Buddha as akin to a health coach who shows the value of exercise, diet, sleep, etc. Ultimately, what matters is not belief but adopting the behaviours. In the same way, enlightenment comes not from believing in the Buddha but in **engaging in the practices** he demonstrated.

## Many Buddhas

"The Buddha" refers to the historical person Siddhartha Gautama who founded the religion 2500 years ago. But in some branches, many other buddhas and bodhisattvas (i.e. enlightened figures) are also revered.

The **buddha to come, Maitreya** (shown heavy and laughing) is familiar to many but often mistaken as representing the historical Buddha.

## Some Adopt Parts of Buddhism

Some people find Buddhist **meditation and philosophy helpful** and adopt these aspects without becoming Buddhists.

Jews, Christians, Pagans, etc. can find meditation and mindfulness practices beneficial for their mental wellbeing and sometimes as compliments to their other spiritual practices. The field of psychology has adopted some of these practices and teachings due to their effectiveness in alleviating mental distress.



*Maitreya*

## Buddhism Sometimes Blends with Other Traditions

In South and East Asia, Buddhist temples may incorporate beings from other traditions including from Shinto, Daoism, Confucianism, Hinduism or local folk traditions.

For example, it is sometimes said that ever Chinese wears a Confucian cap, a Daoist robe and Buddhist sandals meaning people freely **practice all three traditions simultaneously**.



*The Three Teachings of China*

# Discovering Our Misconceptions

Sometimes what we think we know isn't accurate. We're all susceptible to misconceptions and it is good practice to check our assumptions.

## **Misconception: Buddhism is a Philosophy, not a Religion**

The word "religion" is complicated and some Buddhists do not use it for themselves. And Buddhism certainly has a rich and deep philosophical tradition. However, it also has many of the **elements we associate with religion**: rituals, temples, non-earthly realms, scriptures, and teachings about a life beyond this one.

Although many people today (especially in the West) practice Buddhist meditation and read its philosophy without engaging with other components, for most of its history, Buddhist practice has predominantly fit what we typically mean by "religion."

## **Misconception: All Buddhists are Pacifists**

Buddhists display the **full spectrum of human behaviour**. Regrettably, both lay practitioners and monastics have engaged in violence. Recent examples include violence against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, civil war in Sri Lanka, and Japanese imperialism leading up to W/WII. Other Buddhists have bravely and courageously advocated against war and violence including Thich Nhat Hanh who Martin Luther King nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

## **Misconception: All Buddhists Meditate**

Buddhism is often associated with meditation but historically, meditation was mostly done by monks. Lay people have typically engaged in chanting, praying, making offerings, observing temple rituals, and engaging with monks. Westerners are most interested in meditation and so this image has come to represent the whole tradition.

**Some lay Buddhists do meditate but certainly not all.**

## **Misconception: Buddhists are Vegetarians**

Some Buddhists are vegetarians, stemming from the precept to not harm living beings. But **other Buddhists consume meat**. The same holds among monks – in some Buddhist branches the monks are vegetarian but in others, they consume meat.

# Want to Learn More?



For more than 20 years Encounter World Religions has provided religious literacy and inclusion programs as well as consulting services to help businesses, organizations and institutions create welcoming workplaces.

Our popular talks, **The Religiously Literate Leader**, and **Religious Literacy and the Welcoming Workplace** are excellent foundations for building religious literacy for your Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging initiatives. Our **Discovering Identities** series invites deeper, focused exploration of the world's major religions.

This guide is a small taste of what is covered in our talk on Buddhism.

We also offer engaging in-person and virtual programming for individuals who want to dig a little deeper.

Our **Discovery Week**, held in Toronto each summer, is an entertaining and enlightening tour of 11 religions and more than 20 site visits. It's like traveling the world in a week.



**All of Encounter's programs are taught from a non-sectarian perspective and are welcoming to all.**

Learn more about our programs on our website at [worldreligions.ca](http://worldreligions.ca) or follow our blog at [www.religionsgeek.com](http://www.religionsgeek.com).

We also invite you to connect with us on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter.



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