Buddhism, founded by the Indian philosopher Gautama Buddha in the 6th century BC, is the fourth largest religion in the world with about 400 million adherents worldwide (6% of the world’s population).

**Buddhism**

Although Buddhism is without doubt a religion in its own right, its roots are deeply imbedded in Hinduism – the age-old Indian religion from which it developed. For the casual student to gain some understanding of Buddhism, it is therefore recommended to first read up on Hinduism in order to become familiar with some of the concepts and beliefs these two religions have in common (see articles: “Hinduism”, “Buddha and the history of Buddhism”, “Branches and Schools of Buddhism” and “Jainism”).

As in the case of most of the world’s other large religions, Buddhism have several branches and variations, which makes it difficult to clearly define all of its teachings and beliefs. However, there are some doctrines and concepts which most Buddhists share and which therefore distinguish Buddhism as such.

**General beliefs of Buddhism**

ABOVE: Buddhists believe in reincarnation – an ever-revolving wheel of life, death and rebirth.

**Anatman – denial of permanence**

Perhaps the most basic and fundamental of Buddhist teachings is that of Anatman. Buddha taught that human (and all other living) existence consists of five parts or “aggregates” called skandhas. These are a physical body, feelings (emotions), perceptions, predispositions or karmic tendencies, and consciousness. With death these parts cease to exist as an individual unit, although they can bond with each other or completely different parts to be born as a new individual in a new life.
A person or animal or other living creature is merely a temporary and random combination of these skandas. This means that no permanent individual self or soul (atman) exists. Buddha stated that the very belief in such individual existence results in desire, egoism, pain, sorrow, etc, and that this is the cause of all suffering.

Buddha's solution to this was the doctrine of anatman - the denial of a permanent soul or permanent existence. Instead of an individual existence, existence can only be described as anatman (no soul), anitya (impermanence), and dukkha (suffering).

Buddha thus taught that there is no individual self that exists continuously throughout reincarnation - the samsara cycle of birth and rebirth (see paragraphs: “Beliefs shared with Hinduism” and “Differences between Buddhism and Hinduism”).

Inter-dependency of Universe

Apart from (but closely related to) Anatman, the ‘Law of Causal Condition’ is probably the next most important doctrine in Buddhism. This law states that all phenomena in the universe are produced by causation. Since all phenomena result from the complicated causes and effects, all existing things in the universe are inter-dependent.

This supports the doctrine of Anatman - that there is no such thing as "self nature" - and also implies that nothing exists on its own. Moreover, all phenomena and things are impermanent (constantly changing). It was to this law that Siddhartha Buddha was awakened when he attained enlightenment (see article: “Buddha and Early History of Buddhism”).

ABOVE: Buddhist Lama-temple in Beijing.
Four Noble Truths

Of course, there are also many teachings and beliefs that are unique to Buddhism. The basic teachings or doctrines of Buddhism are defined in what is known as the “Four Noble Truths”.

The 1st Noble Truth – Life consists of dukkha (suffering) which befalls all humans. Suffering includes experiences such as sickness, pain, sorrow, unfulfilment and misery.

The 2nd Noble Truth – Everything is constantly changing and impermanent, known as the doctrine of anicca. Human suffering is the result of desiring that which is impermanent.

The 3rd Noble Truth – To be liberated from suffering, a person has to eliminate all desire. In other words, stop craving the impermanent things.

The 4th Noble Truth – The way to eliminate desire is by following the “Eightfold Path”, which, as the name indicates, consists of eight points.

The Eightfold Path

The first two points in this path serve as the base from which the other points flow, which means that the other points cannot be attained without first attaining the first two. However, the eight points are regarded as attitudes and actions that has to be developed simultaneously and not in sequence.

Wisdom (Panna) – 1) Right Understanding; 2) Right Thought.

Ethical Conduct (Sila) – 3) Right Speech; 4) Right Action; 5) Right Livelihood.

Mental Discipline (Samadhi) – 6) Right Effort; 7) Right Awareness; 8) Right Meditation.

While Panna (wisdom) forms the base of the Eightfold Path, the Sila address a person’s actions. This includes the commands to refrain from the taking of life (in any form), stealing, immoral sexual behaviour, lying and the taking of intoxicants (including alcohol and drugs). Samadhi is concerned with a person’s state of awareness and attitudes.
ABOVE: Buddhist monks in Thailand giving lay believers the opportunity to accumulate “positive karma” by serving them breakfast.

The Five Skandhas

Buddhism has five Skandhas (precepts) which Buddhists undertake as aids or guidelines of conduct in their quest to reach enlightenment. While monks and nuns and other dedicated believers strive to adhere to all five, lay believers often undertake just one of the five. The Skandhas can be regarded as promises to oneself rather than commands or rules.

The five Skandhas are:

- To refrain from harming or killing any living creatures.
- To refrain from stealing, defined as taking that which is not freely given.
- To refrain from promiscuity or sexual misconduct.
- To refrain from incorrect speech (lying, harsh language, slander, idle chit-chat).
- To refrain from intoxicants which lead to loss of mindfulness.

Beliefs shared with Hinduism

Although Buddha rejected some of the central teachings of Hinduism (see articles: “Hinduism” and “Buddha and the Early History of Buddhism”), Buddhism nevertheless shares many of its
basic beliefs with Hinduism. These include belief in a ever-revolving wheel or cycle of life, death and rebirth, called Samsara or reincarnation; the law of karma (our actions have direct consequences not only in our present life, but also in all other lives yet to come); a monistic (“all is one”) concept of an impersonal God or “Absolute”; and the belief that one can be liberated from death and rebirth through enlightenment. Both religions also claim that what we perceive as our present individual life on earth is merely an illusion which is ultimately the cause of our suffering.

Buddhism and Hinduism also has a number of symbols in common such as the swastika (symbol of good luck and safety) and the Dharma Wheel. In many oriental countries, it is also fairly common for adherents of both religions to share temples and places of worship.

(Also see article: “Jainism”)

**Immediate and Ultimate goal**

By following the Eightfold Path, a Buddhist strives to attain the immediate goal of eliminating the cause of suffering (desiring the impermanent) in this present life.

However, the ultimate goal of Buddhism is to be liberated from samsara - the continuous cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth. By successfully following the Eightfold Path, an individual can cease craving. In doing so, he or she will eliminate attachment to and beliefs in the existence of the illusionary self. When eliminating this attachment, the effects of karma will have nothing to attach themselves to, and the individual will be released from “the realm of illusion”.

At that moment of “enlightenment”, the person achieves Buddhism’s ultimate goal - the state of nirvana (the Buddhist concept of God which is described as nothingness or an “abstract Void”). Of course this does not mean that the individual is annihilated or becomes part of “God”, because, if individual existence was an illusion from the beginning, it means that there never was a person to be annihilated in the first place!
Refuge in the "Three Jewels"

To declare oneself a Buddhist (or dedicating oneself to reach enlightenment), either for the first time or by repetition, is known as "taking refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddhism". These Three Jewels, also known as the "Triple Gem" or "Triple Jewel", are the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

A typical refuge prayer is:

Until I attain Enlightenment,  
I take refuge in the Three Jewels;  
The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

The Three Jewels

Depending on which branch of Buddhism (see article "Branches and Schools of Buddhism") a person adheres to, the "First Jewel" - Buddha - may refer to the historical Gautama Buddha (see article: "Buddha and the Early History of Buddhism"); one of innumerable enlightened beings or the "potential Buddha" in oneself. Generally speaking though, taking refuge in the Buddha means to accept Buddha as an "enlightened" teacher.

Dharma, the "Second Jewel", is Sanskrit for 'doctrine' or 'teaching'. In general, dharma refers to Buddha's message of "liberating truth". More specifically, it refers to a sutra consisting of Buddha's teachings given at various times and places. It is regarded as the "original" teaching of the Buddha, which can be used for reference, moral instruction and inspiration. Taking refuge in the Dharma means to accept the teachings of the Buddha as a "guidebook" on the path of enlightenment.

ABOVE: Dharma Wheel, symbol of Buddha's teachings.

The "Third Jewel" - Sangha - generally refers to the Buddhist communities of monks and nuns. However, the term is sometimes also used to include all followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained. So, taking refuge in the Sangha means to accept them as the supporting community of believers who has the same goals and spiritual ideals as oneself.
Conversion or Dedication

When an individual accepts Buddhism as the "vehicle" by which he or she chooses to follow the path to enlightenment, refuge in the Three Jewels is a public "conversion ritual" taken before the monks or community of believers (the "Sangha").

However, many Buddhists take the refuge daily to re-affirm their dedication to what they believe and to what they are striving to attain (enlightenment). For them, it is a personal spiritual dedication rather than a religious ritual.

Another aspect of taking refuge in the Three Jewels is that of temporary escaping the consequences of one's karma. Although it is impossible to escape the effects of your karma (positive deeds committed in our present life accumulates in positive karma while bad deeds accumulate in negative karma), some Buddhists believe that the Jewels act as a 'raft' or temporary refuge from karma's immediate effects.

Holy Scriptures of Buddhism

After the death of Buddha in 483 BC, his teachings and sayings were transmitted orally until about the first century BC when it was formally written down in Sanskrit for the first time. Consisting of three collections of writings, the resulting Buddhist canon is known as the Tripitaka – the "three baskets". The Tripitaka includes Buddha's sermons, 100 volumes of philosophical teachings, commentaries and rules for the monks and nuns.

Complete versions of the Triptitaka has survived in Pali – a popular dialect derived from Sanskrit. The complete canon is also available in Tibetan and Chinese, while portions of the original has survived in Sanskrit.

Sutra Pitaka

The Sutra Pitaka are mostly conversations between Buddha and other individuals or groups. It consists of five collections namely the Digha Nikaya ("Collection of Long Discourses"); the Majjhima Nikaya ("Collection of Medium-Length Discourses"); the Samyutta Nikaya ("Collection of Grouped Discourses"); the Anguttara Nikaya ("Collection of Discourses on Numbered Topics"); and the Khuddaka Nikaya ("Collection of Miscellaneous Texts"). The very popular Jatakas, comprising stories of alleged former lives of the Buddha, and the Dhammapada ("Religious Sentences"), a summary of the Buddha's teachings on mental discipline and morality, are both contained in the fifth collection.

Vinaya Pitaka

The Vinaya Pitaka aims to regulate the conduct of Buddhist monks and nuns and consist of more than 225 rules and regulations. The rules are arranged in order of the seriousness of the offense resulting from their violation. Each rule is accompanied by a story explaining the original reason for the making of that rule.

Abhidharma Pitaka

The Abhidharma Pitaka is mostly of interest to serious practitioners and scholars of Buddhism. It and consists of seven separate works. They include detailed classifications of psychological phenomena, metaphysical analysis, and a thesaurus of technical Buddhist vocabulary.
Different Views on Scriptures

The different groups and schools of Buddhism (see article: "Branches and Schools of Buddhism") does not all agree on the authority and nature of the Tipitaka.

Theravada ("the teaching of the old ones") Buddhists considers the Tipitaka to be the remembered words of the historical Gautama Buddha. Theravada also regards two noncanonical texts as having great authority, namely the Milindapanha ("Questions of King Milinda") and the Visuddhimagga ("Path of Purification").

However, Mahayana ("the greater vehicle") Buddhists does not regard the Buddhist canon to be closed and limited to what is contained in the Tripitaka. Nor do they limit their scriptures to the teachings of Gautama Buddha as they believe him to have been only one of several manifestations of a "universal Absolute" or "Buddha essence".

Different branches of Mahayana therefore regards various scriptures as authoritative. Some of the more important Mahayana scriptures include the Saddharmapundarika Sutra ("Lotus of the Good Law Sutra", popularly known as the "Lotus Sutra"); the Vimalakirti Sutra, the Avatamsaka Sutra ("Garland Sutra"); and the Lankavatara Sutra (the "Buddha's Descent to Sri Lanka Sutra"), as well as a group of writings known as the Prajnaparamita ("Perfection of Wisdom").

Pure Land Buddhists originally adhered to what was known as the "Three Sutras and One Commentary". Two additional sutras were added later to complete the Pure Land scriptures now known as the "Five Sutras and One Commentary". These are The Infinite Life Sutra; The Sixteen Contemplations of Amitabha Sutra; The Sutra of Amitabha Buddha; The Essence of Samantabhadra’s Vows (added during the Ching Dynasty); the Chapter on The Foremost Attainment of Great Strength Bodhisattva through Buddha Recitation (added in the early 1900’s); and The Way to Reach the Pure Land (the "One Commentary").

Vajrayana Buddhism has gained much of its teachings from the Hindu Tantras - writings on attaining occult power. Zen Buddhists reject all the sacred texts of buddhism while Nichiren Buddhists believe that the Lotus Sutra contains the essence of Buddhist teaching.

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<th>Number of Buddhists</th>
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<td>India</td>
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ABOVE: Countries with largest Buddhist populations.

(Statistics sourced from www.adherents.com)

**Differences between Buddhism and Hinduism**

Although Buddhism and Hinduism share many of its beliefs such as reincarnation, there are some important differences in the way some of these concepts are interpreted by the two religions. Whereas Hindus sees humans and other life forms as an individual “essence” (extension of Brahman) that is continuous from one lifetime to another, Buddhists does not believe that such a continuous essence exists (see paragraph: "Anatman – denial of permanence").

The ultimate goal of both Hinduism and Buddhism is to be liberated from the continuous cycle of reincarnation, although Buddhism also has the immediate goal of being liberated from suffering (one of the four inescapable “Noble Truths” of this illusionary life as an individual). Perhaps the most important difference between the two religions are in the ways they believe a person can be liberated from reincarnation and suffering respectively. Hindus believes it can be done through the paths of correct actions, knowledge and meditation or devotion. Buddhists follow Buddha’s “Eightfold Pathway”.

ABOVE: The Hindu-symbol of "OM" – the "Absolute".

Although both religions has a concept of an impersonal, monistic ("all is one") God, Hindus describe him/it as the "Absolute", the "World Soul" or the "force of existence" which "penetrates everything". Some Hindus even see him as a more personalized “ultimate deity” to whom they
refer as saguna Brahman (Brahman “with attributes”). Buddhists describe him as an “abstract Void” or “ultimate nothingness” called nirvana.

Finally, another important difference between Buddhism and Hinduism is in its founding. Whereas Hinduism developed from a myriad of religious traditions and practices over hundreds of years, Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha), albeit on the foundations of the much older Hinduism. Also, Buddha and subsequently most branches of Buddhism denied the validity of the Hindu Vedas as inspired or ‘holy’ scripture.

**Glossary**

Amitabha - Literally means boundless light and boundless life. He is the Buddha in the Land of Ultimate Bliss (Pure Land), in which all beings enjoy unbounded happiness. Amitabha has forty-eight great vows to establish and adorn his Pure Land. People also recite or call upon his name by the time of dying will be born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss with the reception by Amitabha.

Arahant - A "worthy one" or "pure one;" a person whose mind is free of defilement and thus is not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples.


Atman - The individual self or the soul in Brahmanism thought.

Brahman – In Hinduism, the ultimate source of all that is (the visible and invisible world), and is at the same time part of everything and above everything. Also described as the impersonal “Absolute”, the “World Soul” or the “force of existance” which penetrates everything. The term is also used for the highest of the Four Castes in ancient India at the time of Shakyamuni. They served Brahma, with offerings, the keepers of the Vedas, i.e. priestly caste.

Buddha – A fully "enlightened one," a historical person in the Theravada view; one of innumerable beings in Mahayana views because each person is a potential Buddha.

Caste: There are four main castes and thousands of sub castes in Hinduism. These castes (orders in the social hierarchy) traditionally had strong social economical and even political implications. The only way in which your caste position could be changed, is if you fulfilled your caste dharma in your current life in order to attain a better position in your next life.

Contemplation - Abstract contemplation. There are four levels through which the mind frees itself from all subjects and objective hindrances and reaches a state of absolute indifference and annihilation of thought, perception, and will.

Dharma – One of the “Three Jewels” of Buddhism. Sanskrit for the word ‘doctrine’ or ‘teaching’. In general, this refers to Buddha’s message of liberating truth. More specifically, it refers to a sutra consisting of two sections and 39 chapters, with 423 short verses of the Buddha, teachings given
at various times and places. It is regarded as the "original" teaching of the Buddha, which can be used for reference, moral instruction and inspiration.

Dualism / Dualistic: Belief in two equal powers which can be opposing each other (competing dualism) or in balance with each other (balancing dualism).

Karma: Within the context of samsara, the karma refers to the results of your actions. Karma is therefore the belief that you deserved your current circumstances through previous actions. Positive deeds accumulates in positive karma while bad deeds accumulate in negative karma. There is no forgiveness for negative karma and no escaping its consequences.

Karuna - Compassion for all sentient beings, what motivates a bodhisattva.

Maitreya (Sanskrit) - Literally means friendly and benevolent. Mahayana Buddhists and some New Age groups (see article: "New Age") believe he will be the next Buddha in our world. He is now preaching in Tusita Heaven. He is usually represented as the fat laughing Buddha.

Mandala - Microcosmic diagram, used as a "power circle" and object of contemplation in the rituals of Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism.

Meditation - A process of deep thought.

Monism: A belief that "all is one" – an impersonal God that is part of everything and everything is part of God.

Nibbana - Literally, the "unbinding" of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. "Total nibbana" in some contexts denotes the experience of Awakening; in others, the final passing away of an Arahant. Sanskrit form: nirvana.

Nirvana – (See Nibbana) Condition of perfect peace and happiness where a person is released from the cycle of repeated death and birth (reincarnation). This is the final purpose of Buddhism.

Occult: A study and alleged 'science' of the hidden, secret, esoteric, demonic, paranormal and supernatural - not related to the true God of the Bible.

Reincarnation - Doctrine according to which the soul of a dead person would repeatedly return to the earth to be born into a new body. Also see articles: "Hinduism", "New Age", "Druidism" and "Druse".

Roshi - Japanese term for a Zen master, sometimes functioning as abbot of a monastery.
Samana - Sramana in Sanskrit. Contemplative. Literally, a person who abandons the conventional obligations of social life in order to find a way of life more “in tune” (sama) with the ways of nature.

Samsara - The world of appearances and endless flux, including all aspects of becoming and death; the eternal cycle of births and rebirths, which can happen in any life form.

Sangha – One of the “Three Jewels” of Buddhism. On the conventional (sammati) level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns; on the ideal (ariya) level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least stream-entry.

Sanskrit - The classical Aryan language of ancient India, systematized by scholars. With the exception of a few ancient translations probably from Pali versions, most of the original texts in Buddhism used in China were Sanskrit.

Satori - Japanese term for full enlightenment.

Article by Manie Bosman [E-Mail maniebosman@mweb.co.za]