Followers of the teachings of the Buddha are called Buddhists. Buddhist staff and students form a substantial part of the Flinders community. Acknowledging and respecting Buddhist identities at Flinders therefore requires, in part, a basic understanding of what Buddhism and being a Buddhist is about.

About Buddhism

Buddhism began in India during late 500BCE from the teachings of a prince named Siddhartha Gautama who later came to be known as Gautama Buddha, meaning 'enlightened one'. In Sanskrit (ancient Indian language), the term Buddha means "The Awakened One." A Buddha is a person who is self-aware, and has wisdom and compassion. Buddhists therefore celebrate and revere the Buddha as an enlightened human being rather than as a god or an incarnation of God.

The main source of faith and practice for Buddhists is the Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha).

Most Buddhists believe:

- in the ‘Four Noble Truths’ and follow the ‘Eightfold Path’
- nothing in the world is fixed or permanent
- everyone is influenced by past actions (karma)
- rebirth can occur in human form, animal form, as a ghost in a blissful state or in a state of woe, although beliefs about rebirth vary.

Buddhists in Australia

- Buddhism was first introduced to Australia in the mid to late 1800s with the arrival of Chinese, Sri Lankan and Japanese gold miners, pearl divers and sugar plantation workers.
- A small number of Buddhists from the Anglo-European community settled in Australia during the 1920s.
- The first Buddhist monastery in Australia was set up in 1971 in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales.
- The establishment of Wat Buddharangsee, Wat Buddha Dhamma and the Chenrezig Institute, as well as smaller general Buddhist associations, Zen groups and Tibetan groups began in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

- During the 1990s, immigration from Southeast Asia expanded Buddhist numbers considerably.
- In the 2011 Census 2.5% of the total population identified as Buddhist. Buddhism is the largest non-Christian religion in Australia.
- People from various Asian backgrounds such as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia and Tibet have set up Buddhist communities in Australia.

Schools of Buddhism

Although there may be different traditions within each school, the central teaching is common – the teaching of Buddha Sakyamuni. The differences between the schools of Buddhism rest on the emphasis they place on particular aspects of the teachings and the interpretation of rules governing the conduct of the sangha (Buddhist spiritual community).

Theravada

The Theravada School adheres strictly to the original teachings of Buddha as contained in the Pali canon (scripture) and emphasises the goal of personal salvation for the individual follower. The importance of the community of monks is also characteristic of the Theravada tradition. Theravada countries include Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos.

Mahayana

The Mahayana School is not as strict as the Theravada School in its interpretation of the monastic code of conduct. The importance of followers becoming buddhas for the salvation of living beings is also emphasised. Zen Buddhism, a branch of Mahayana Buddhism, strongly emphasises the practice of meditation. Mahayana countries include China, Japan, Vietnam and Korea.
Vajrayana

The Vajrayana School’s interpretation of the teachings is essentially the same as the Mahayana School but differs in that it emphasises the importance of acceptance of a personal guru (teacher) who initiates his followers into what has been called ‘secret teachings’ (tantra). Meditation and special sayings known as mantras are also characteristic of the Vajrayana tradition. Vajrayana countries include Tibet, Mongolia and Nepal.

The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path

The central teachings of all schools of Buddhism are based on the Four Noble Truths:

1. Life is subject to mental and physical suffering and frustration (dukkha).
2. The origin or cause of dukkha can be attributed to selfishness and desiring/craving things for oneself, for example, sensual pleasures, wealth and power.
3. The overcoming of dukkha is known as nirvana – a state of mind that transcends desire and suffering.
4. One attains the state of nirvana by following the Eightfold Path:
   - **Right Understanding** – knowledge that the Four Noble Truths lead to overcoming dukkha.
   - **Right Thought** – genuinely wishing to break free from desire.
   - **Right Speech** – controlling one’s speech so that it does not harm others, for example, avoiding lying, gossip and slander.
   - **Right Action** – avoiding actions considered harmful to oneself or any other living creatures.
   - **Right Livelihood** – earning a living in a way that does not cause harm or suffering to others, for example, avoiding occupations that involve the selling of intoxicants, firearms or animals for slaughter.
   - **Right Effort** – exerting a constant attentiveness to lifestyle.
   - **Right Mindfulness** – constant awareness about the effects of one’s actions so as to avoid harmful actions.
   - **Right Concentration** – attaining serenity by cultivating the mind through meditation.

Buddhist religious observance

Place and style of worship

The main place of worship for a Buddhist is the temple, which often includes a shrine and a statue of Buddha on festival days. Lay Buddhists make offerings of flowers, light candles and incense in front of the statue and perform meditation.

Worship is commonly in the form of chanting Buddha’s teachings, meditation and mantras (single sounds such as Om or Aum repeated constantly).

Buddhist symbols

The most popular symbol of Buddhism is the Buddha statue. Other symbols of Buddhism include the Dharma wheel with its eight spokes that refer to the Eightfold Path, and the lotus flower which often represents the inherently pure potential of the mind.

Buddhist dress code

- Buddhism has no prescribed dress code for lay Buddhists.
- Buddhist monks shave their heads and wear a robe that is usually brown, tan, orange, red, maroon or grey.
- Buddhist nuns also shave their heads and usually wear a brown, white, grey or pink robe.

Dietary requirements and restrictions

Regulations governing food depend on which branch of Buddhism is practised and in what country.

- Meat and fish are generally not eaten by the Theravada and Mahayana traditions because it is considered bad karma (since animals can be reincarnated as humans and vice versa).
- Some followers of the Mahayana and Theravada tradition are also vegans.
- Buddhists from China and Vietnam usually do not eat onion, garlic or leek. Commonly referred to as ‘five pungent spices’, these foods are believed to increase one’s sexual desire and anger.
- Buddhist monks fast from all food on the new and full moon of each lunar month.
- Buddhists generally abstain from mind altering substances such as alcohol.
**Significant Buddhist festivals and celebration dates**

Buddhist festivals provide an opportunity for celebrating and expressing devotion and appreciation of the Buddha and his teachings. The dates and the way that festivals are celebrated vary between countries and Buddhist traditions. With the exception of Japan, most Buddhists use the lunar calendar.

**Buddha Day**

Considered the most important festival of the Buddhist year, Buddha Day commemorates the birth and enlightenment of Buddha in Mahayana Buddhist countries. In Theravada countries, Buddha Day is also known as Wesak Day. It differs from Mahayana Buddhism in that it celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha. Buddha Day is commonly celebrated with the ‘Bathting of Buddha’ whereby water is poured over the shoulders of the Buddha as a reminder of the need to purify the heart and mind. Dancing dragons, lanterns made out of paper and wood, releasing caged birds and making origami paper crane decorations are other ways in which Wesak Day is celebrated across different traditions. Offerings of food to monks and flowers/incense for shrines and temples are also made as signs of respect. Buddha Day is celebrated on the first full moon day in May except in a leap year when it is held in June.

**Dharma Day (Asalha Puja Day/Buddhist Teaching)**

The teachings of the Buddha are known as the Dharma. This is celebrated on Dharma Day. Dharma Day is often celebrated with readings from Buddhist scriptures, providing an opportunity to reflect on their contents. Collective ritual celebrations in a ceremonial manner are also common. Dharma Day is celebrated on the full moon day of July.

**Sangha Day (Magha Puja Day/Spiritual Community)**

The second most important Buddhist Festival is Sangha Day which celebrates the community of followers of the teachings of Buddha. The Sangha specifically includes those who have left home to follow the spiritual path such as monks and nuns, but can also include lay followers of the teachings of Buddha. Sangha Day has become a prominent festival amongst Western Buddhists and is considered a traditional time for the exchange of gifts.

**Parinirvana Day (Nirvana Day/Death of the Buddha)**

This is a Mahayana Buddhist date that celebrates the passing away of Buddha. It provides an opportunity to reflect on one’s own future death and on people who have recently died. Meditations are conducted for those recently deceased, providing them with help and support. Parinirvana Day is also known as Nirvana Day. This festival is celebrated in January by Vietnamese Buddhists.

**Respecting Religious and Cultural Diversity at Flinders**

The following information may assist in creating an environment that is considerate and respectful of the religious and cultural traditions of staff and students at Flinders University.

**Flinders’ Equal Opportunity Policy**

Flinders’ Equal Opportunity Policy is inclusive of the diverse elements associated with culture – age, race, religion, political conviction, marital status, sexuality, gender, pregnancy, disability.

The Equal Opportunity Policy states:  
*Flinders University values and celebrates the social and cultural diversity that is reflected in its community, is committed to achieving equality of opportunity in education and employment and to promoting an environment where students and staff are able to study and work effectively, without fear of unlawful discrimination, harassment or bullying.*

**Oasis**

Flinders University has established Oasis for the benefit of staff and students, in support of the pursuit of their diverse religious and spiritual views, beliefs and practices.

The Oasis is intended to provide a space on campus where religious or spiritual activities can take place and a meeting place for groups and individuals with a focus on or interest in religious or spiritual matters. It is located at the southern end of the Union Building on the mall level.

Religious bodies appoint chaplains to the University. The chaplains work together as a multifaith team as well as being a resource for particular faiths. For further information visit the Oasis homepage.
Religious observance

Where it is reasonable and practicable to do so, flexible work and study arrangements can be made to accommodate the religious obligations of staff and students at Flinders. Examples include:

- Negotiated flexible work/study arrangements between heads of departments/supervisors and staff and students who are required to pray at certain times of the day or to attend other religious ceremonies at particular times of the year.
- Consideration of the main religious festivals when determining examination dates, assessment dates, field trips and arranging placements.
- Consideration given to student requests for extensions to accommodate religious observance.

Some common misconceptions about Buddhism

- Not all Buddhists believe in reincarnation.
- Buddha is not a god. Further, Buddhists don’t concern themselves about god or god(s). Buddhists concern themselves with the Dharma, which is not a god. It can be described as ‘truth’ or ‘reality’.

References and Further Resources


Buddhanet 2015, Buddhanet, Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc. <www.buddhanet.net/>.


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