

CHAPTER TWO

Buddhist Beliefs and Teachings

As is true of most religions, Buddhists have separated themselves into various groups and sects. The two main groups are Mahayana, or Northern Buddhism, and Theravada, or Southern Buddhism. You will learn about these and other groups in Chapter Six, "Buddhist Sects."

Regardless of the many divisions within Buddhism, all Buddhists share certain beliefs and symbols. This chapter looks at the basic beliefs common to a religion that claims some 324 million followers.

The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path

Central to Buddha's teachings are what are called the Four Noble Truths. Buddha taught that recognition of these truths is necessary for a person to attain enlightenment.

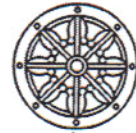
The first noble truth states that suffering (*dukkha*) is everywhere. One cannot escape it, as Buddha learned when he was still Prince Siddhartha and he ventured outside his father's palace grounds. Buddha told his disciples that birth, sickness, old age, sorrow, mourning, and despair were suffering.

The second of the noble truths maintains that suffering is caused by greed and selfishness. It is the desire for pleasure and material things, Buddha pointed out, that causes people to suffer and to be unhappy. It is also this desire that results in the endless cycle of death and rebirth.

The third noble truth holds that by overcoming desire, one can become enlightened and break out of the rebirth cycle taught by Hinduism. Buddha believed that by being good, a follower

would be reborn into a higher form of goodness. Then if the person continues to be good and is pure in mind and heart, he or she will be reborn into an even higher form of goodness. In time, the cycle stops, and the believer escapes both life and death. He or she is then said to have attained Nirvana, which is the highest state of enlightenment.

The fourth noble truth points out ways Buddha said people can free themselves from desire and selfishness and become enlightened. These ways he summarized in the Noble Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path lists all the



As depicted below (moving clockwise from the top and center), the Four Noble Truths are:
1) all life is suffering;
2) the origin of suffering is desire and greed;
3) the only way to avoid suffering is to renounce desire; and 4) the formula for renouncing desire is the Noble Eightfold Path.





“right” things people should strive to do. They are:

- right beliefs or understanding;
- right aims or intentions;
- right speech;
- right conduct or action;
- right work or livelihood;
- right effort;
- right thinking or mindfulness; and
- right concentration.

Buddhists differ in their approach to fulfilling the Eightfold Path. Some, for example believe that they have fulfilled the goal of right action by giving alms to the poor. Others feel that they can achieve right thinking by studying sacred Buddhist scriptures.

Of special interest are rules concerning right conduct. These rules are based on what Buddhists call the Five

Precepts or Five Moral Rules. (A precept is a rule of action or behavior.) These precepts are: not to kill any living thing, not to steal, not to lie, to avoid alcohol, and not to engage in improper sexual activity. Buddhists who are studying to become monks and nuns must follow five additional precepts—precepts in which they agree not to:

- eat anything after the noon hour;
- wear any jewelry or ornament;
- sleep on a soft bed;
- participate in or enjoy any kind of entertainment; or
- use money.

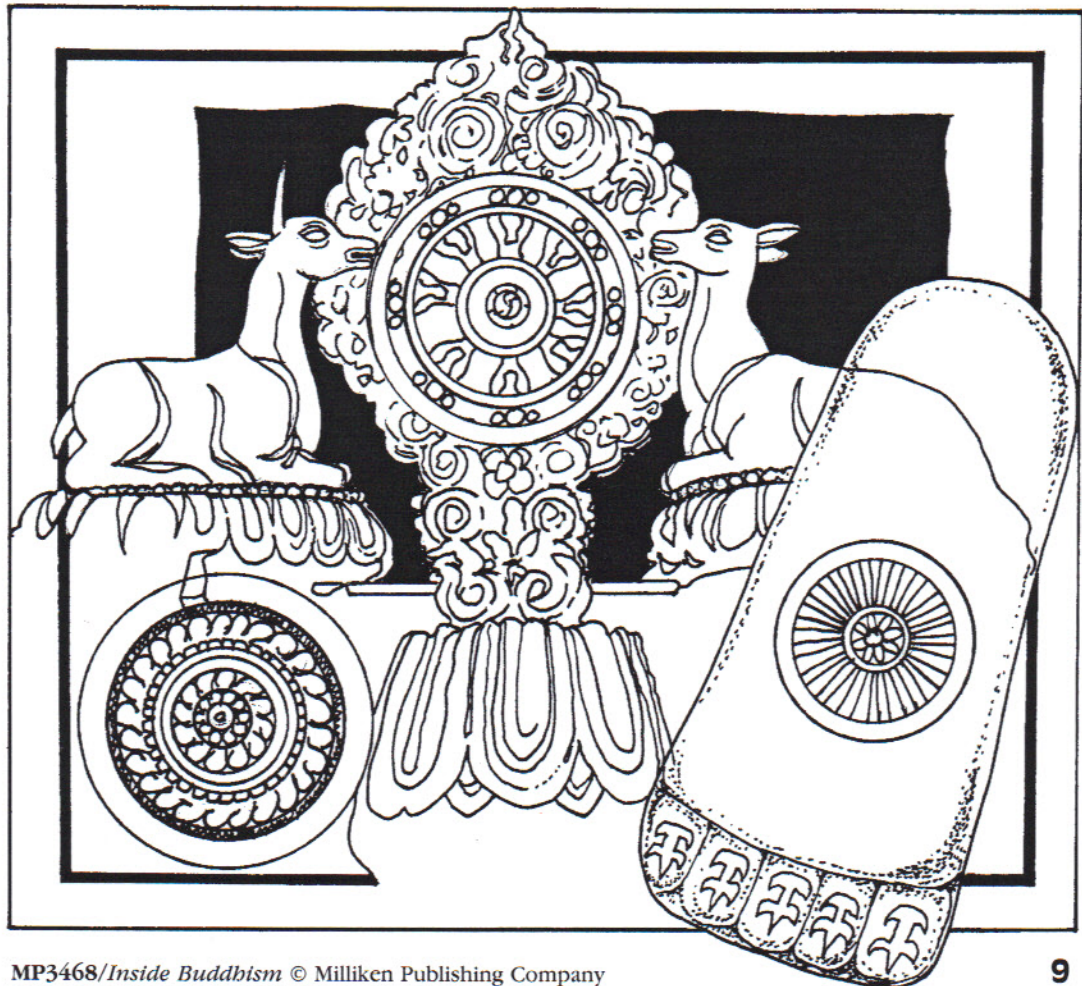
Monks and nuns must also follow more than 200 other rules when they enter a monastery. These rules are addressed briefly in Chapter Seven, “Holy Places.”

Words to remember:

duhkha

Five Precepts

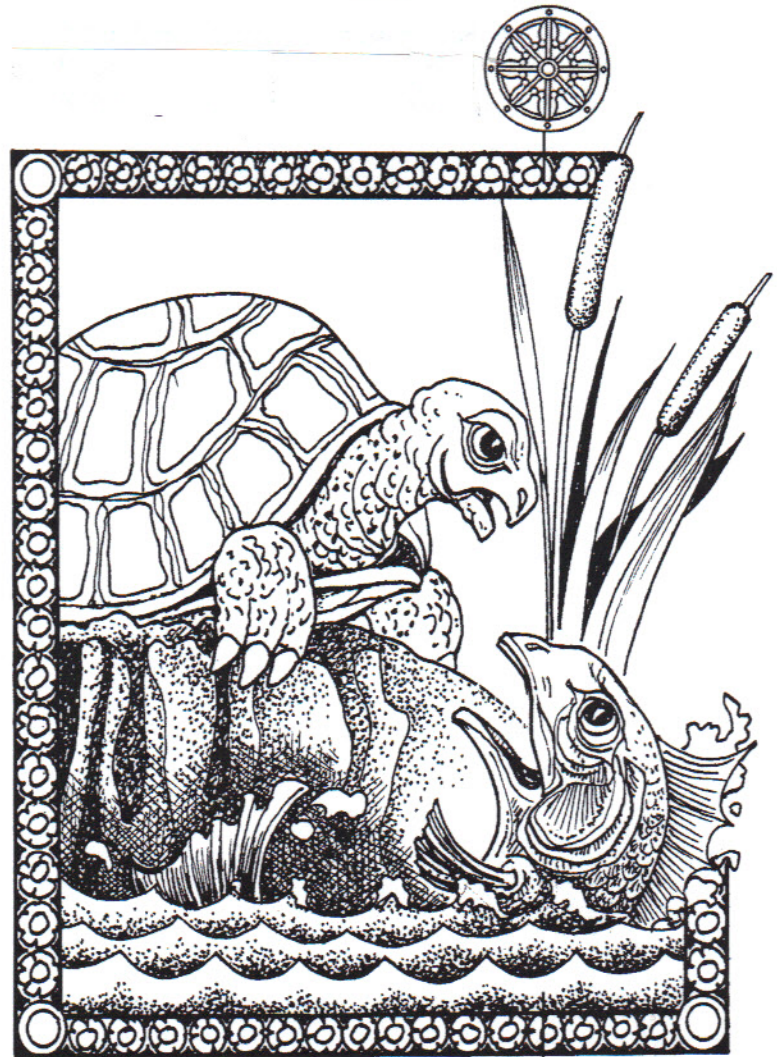
One of the most common symbols of the Buddhist tradition is the Dharma Wheel with its eight spokes symbolizing the Noble Eightfold Path. The wheel is here depicted with two deer to commemorate the Buddha’s first act of teaching in the deer park at Sarnath. The wheel and the deer are characteristic features of Buddhist temples in Tibet. It is said that the figure of a wheel also appeared on the soles of Buddha’s feet and the palms of his hands.



Nirvana

Asking a Buddhist to describe Nirvana is similar to asking a Christian, Jew, or Muslim to describe Heaven. Every person who contemplates heaven has a different idea about what it would be like. The same is true of Buddhists and their concept of Nirvana. An old Buddhist story tells about a fish who asked a turtle to describe life on dry land. Try as it might, the fish could not picture such land-related things as grass and trees. So it is with a Buddhist trying to conjure up an image of Nirvana.

Nirvana might be easier explained by what it "isn't" as opposed to what it "is." It isn't a place comparable to heaven, where deserving people are believed to go and where they spend eternity. It is also not a place where the streets are gold and people want for nothing. It is, rather, a state of nothingness, in which a person escapes the wheel of rebirth and simply ceases to exist. The word *nirvana* itself comes from a root word meaning "blown out." Buddhists believe that when one reaches the level where all greed and selfishness has ceased, the flame of desire and wrong thinking "burns out." At this point, the person is released from all suffering and is said to attain painless and passionless peace.



Other Beliefs

Buddhists do not believe in a personal creator or personal God. Buddha did not claim to be a god, nor did he claim to have received any revelation from a god. Although there are many statues of Buddha throughout the Buddhist world, Buddhists do not worship him as a deity. Because the followers of Buddhism do not recognize the existence of an all-powerful god, adherents of other religions, particularly Christianity, hold that Buddhism is not a religion at all but a way of life.

Buddhists also have no concept of a Savior or of a heaven. Some sources refer to Nirvana as the Buddhist "heaven," but, as you have learned, Nirvana is looked

Nirvana is indescribable. To illustrate this point, an old Buddhist story tells of a fish who asked a turtle to describe life on dry land. Try as it might, the fish could not fathom such things as grass and trees.



upon as being a state of non-existence rather than a place where people might spend eternity.

“Hell” to a Buddhist is a temporary place where some persons are believed to be condemned until they are ready to be reborn into a new life. Hell is divided into several layers. The bottom layer is reserved for people who commit what is considered the gravest of acts—the killing of their parents or their teacher.

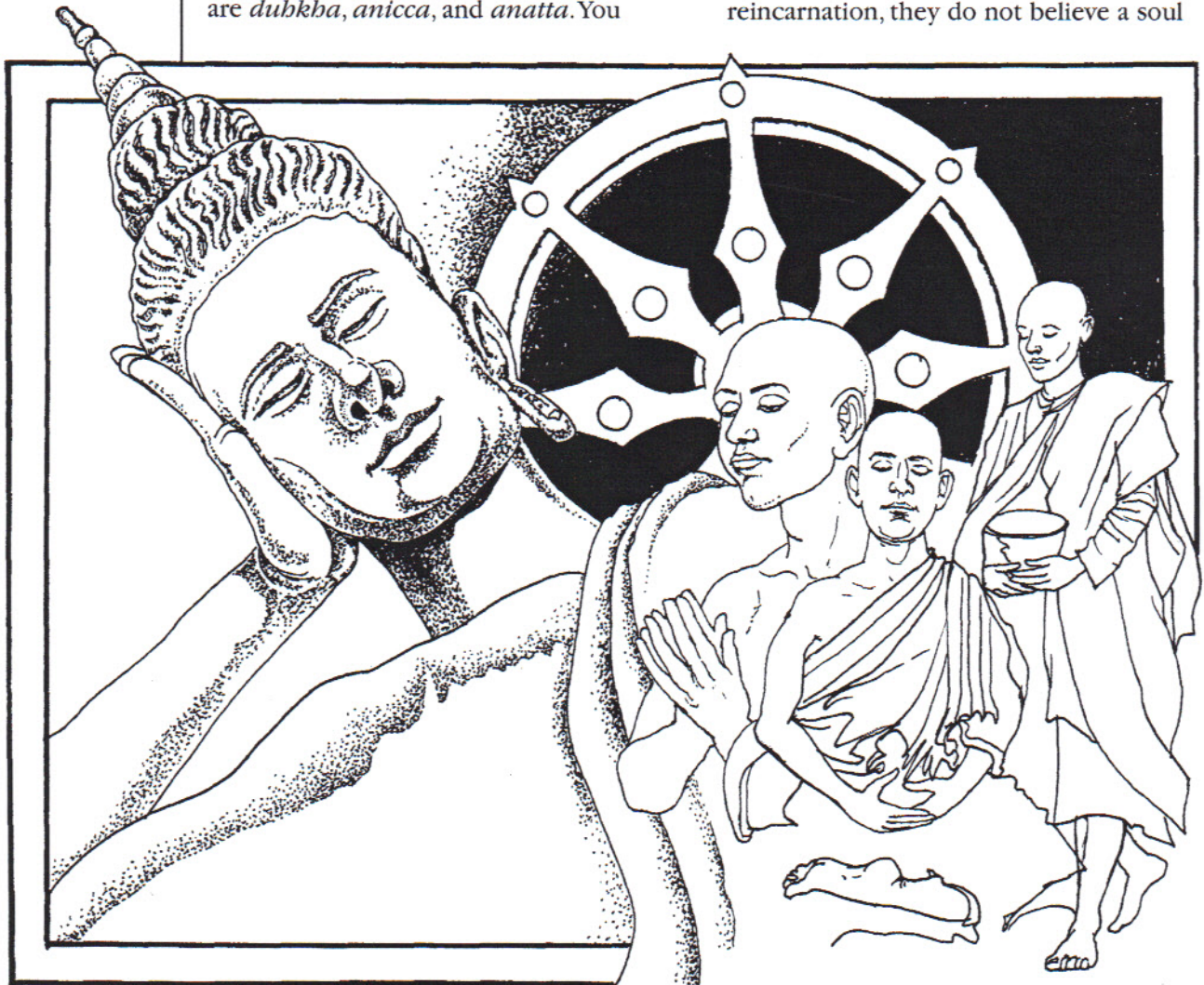
The Three Signs of Being

In addition to the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, there is a third part of Buddha’s teachings that is important to his followers. It is called the Three Signs of Being. These three signs are *dubkha*, *anicca*, and *anatta*. You

were introduced to *dubkha* in the section dealing with the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. There it was explained simply as suffering. But *dubkha* is anything that brings unhappiness. Buddhists maintain that all life is *dubkha* as nothing in life is perfect.

The second sign, *anicca*, refers to the impermanence of things. Nothing is permanent, the Buddha taught. Everything is temporary. Whether one refers to changes in the seasons, to animals living and becoming extinct, to flowers that bloom and then die, or to human beings, nothing remains the same. The only escape humans have from *anicca* is to attain Nirvana.

The third sign is *anatta*. *Anatta* means “no soul.” Although Buddhists believe in reincarnation, they do not believe a soul



is transferred from one body or thing to another. One might be reborn into a higher form of goodness or die and be reborn into some lower form. One could even be reborn as an animal. Still, no soul continues from one being to another. What kind of life a person is reborn into depends on karma. *Karma* refers to all the deeds, words, and thoughts of one's life. Buddhists believe karma is the deciding factor in one's fate in his or her next life. Therefore, a person who led a life of self-centeredness and selfishness might be reborn as a rat.

The Three Jewels

The Three Jewels hold that Buddhism stands on three pillars. The pillars are:

- the Buddha;
- the Dharma—the teachings of the Buddha; and
- the Sangha—the community of Buddhist monks and nuns, as well as lay people, who guide Buddhists in their quest for enlightenment.

Some Symbols of Buddhism

Symbols are important to Buddhists, just as they are to the followers of other religions. One of the most important symbols, of course, is the image of Buddha. As has already been mentioned, Buddha is not worshiped as a god, but statues of him are found in many places.

Another important symbol is the Eight-Spoked Wheel, or the Wheel of Dharma. This is the symbol most often used to denote Buddhism, just as the cross stands for Christianity and the Star of David for Judaism. Each spoke in the wheel represents one of the "right" ways in Buddha's Eightfold Path. The swirling segments in the middle of the wheel represent Buddhism's Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

Eight symbols make up what is called

the Eight Auspicious (Favorable) Symbols. These are symbols of good fortune, and they represent the offerings all heavenly beings made to



the Buddha. These symbols are: a parasol or umbrella, a golden fish, a treasure vase, a lotus, a conch, an endless knot, a victory banner, and a wheel. Briefly, here is what each of the symbols stands for:

- Parasol—protection from illness and other misfortunes;
- Golden Fish—humans in a state of fearlessness without drowning in the ocean of sufferings;
- Treasure Vase—long life, wealth, and prosperity;
- Lotus—purity;
- Conch—the deep, melodious sounds of the dharma;
- Endless Knot—the permanent awareness of the Buddha;
- Victory Banner—victory over all obstacles; and
- Wheel— "right" ways in Buddha's Eightfold Path.

Symbols are important to Buddhists. One of the most important and most widely known symbols is, of course, the image of the Buddha. After that, the Eight-Spoked Wheel figures prominently. Above are depictions of other significant Buddhist symbols.



Above is an illustration of the Buddha in a previous incarnation as a tree spirit. Below him are cats representing "good" and "bad" karma.

Words to remember:

anicca
anatta
karma
dharma
sangha

Eight-Spoked
Wheel

Eight Auspicious
Symbols

A Summary

By now you are probably confused after reading about such Buddhist beliefs as Nirvana, the Eightfold Path, the Three Jewels, and the Three Signs of Being. But Buddhism is not hard to comprehend if one remembers three important points. First, Buddha taught that people must recognize the truth about suffering and how it affects them. Second, he pointed out that the way to free oneself from suffering and possibly attain Nirvana was to follow the Eightfold Path. Third, he said that one's karma, or the way one acts and thinks during a particular lifetime, directly influences what kind of person one will become in his or her next life. Therefore, attaining Nirvana is directly tied to an individual's actions and thoughts as he or she passes through the cycles of birth and death.

For Further Thought:

1. Tell why you agree or disagree with Buddha when he stated that all life is sorrow and suffering.
2. Look at Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path again. How are the "right ways" Buddha talked about similar to the teachings of other religions?
3. If you decided to follow Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, which of the "right ways" would you consider the most important? Why?
4. Tell why you agree or disagree with this statement: Buddhism is more a way of life than a religion.
5. Pretend that you are Prince Siddhartha Gautama at the moment he is said to have become the Buddha—the moment when he became enlightened. Make a diary entry describing your feelings at the time.
6. What role do symbols play in a religion?
7. Without looking back over what you have read, write a paragraph explaining the basic beliefs of Buddhism.
8. Compare/contrast the doctrine of Buddhism with your religion. If you are not a religious person, compare/contrast Buddhism with your views about life and personal conduct. (Using a Venn diagram would be helpful.)