

## FAQ - Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. Do Buddhists believe in God?

It depends on what you mean by God. If you mean a supreme and almighty being who created the world and all the beings in it, and who decides the destiny of those beings after death, then Buddhists do not believe in any such God. However, if you believe that there must be something that transcends the material realm of the senses, something eternal and real that can be personally realized, and that transforms the lives of those who realize it, then Buddhists do believe in such a reality. It is called nibbāna. **Nibbāna** is a word used by the Buddha to describe the perfect peace of the mind.

### 2. Why is Buddhism so negative and pessimistic?

Buddhism talks a lot about suffering and impermanence because living beings are very strongly attached to life and to the enjoyment of sensual pleasures. It is this attachment and enjoyment that is the cause of suffering. If one follows the Buddhist path, attachment is gradually reduced and finally eradicated altogether. The complete absence of attachment is the highest possible bliss. Even a little less attachment means less suffering, so Buddhism is a path of joy and liberation from pain, disappointment, grief and despair. It is not pessimistic at all.

### 3. If there is no soul, what is reborn?

The idea of a self, person, I, or you are a misperception or illusion. There is a continuous chain of cause and effect throughout life, and this process does not come to an abrupt halt after death. Because the process is continuous, we perceive it as a fixed reality - as a person or soul. However, not one thought or one atom is permanent; everything is in a constant flux. The self is not destroyed by realizing nibbāna, because the self is a non-existent thing. What is destroyed is the illusion of self. When the illusion is shattered, all doubts will disappear.

### 4. Does one have to be a monk or nun to be a Buddhist?

Monks and nuns make a full-time commitment to the practice and study of the Dharma, hopefully because they have strong faith in the Buddha's teaching. A layperson can also have strong faith in the Dharma, but due to social responsibilities may be unable to follow the monastic life-style. Spiritual attainments depend on the maturity of one's insight, not on one's chosen vocation.

### 5. Why Are Buddhists Not Always Vegetarians?

A lay Buddhist can make a free choice what he or she eats. A monk or nun has fewer options, and usually has to make do with what is offered. As long as one does not kill, urge to kill, rejoice in killing, nor speak in praise of it, one can buy and eat meat. The karma depends on one's intention. Those who kill or trade in animals to make a living will inherit their bad karma. It is a wrong livelihood for a Buddhist, but not everyone in the world is a Buddhist. Even so, some Buddhists may be fishermen or may raise livestock. Growing fruit and vegetables nearly always involves the deliberate destruction of many living beings too. Not everyone can afford pure organic produce.

### 6. What happened to the Buddha after he died?

The Buddha is not in heaven, nor "in" nibbāna. He put an end to all kinds of rebirth.

## **7. Is it still possible to gain enlightenment?**

Yes, it is possible, but it is not easy. To realize nibbāna in this very life requires the utmost dedication, transparent honesty, and strenuous effort. Almost anyone may realize nibbāna if they try hard enough, the trouble is, most people just do not try hard enough, or are not wise enough so though they try hard, they don't succeed because the method they are using is wrong.

## **8. Do heaven and hell really exist?**

Yes, of course. One could hardly believe otherwise if one just reads a dozen or so discourses of the Buddha. However, believing is one thing; knowing and seeing by means of psychic powers is far more difficult. The Buddha and his leading disciples had psychic powers so they could converse with celestial beings or see the evil-doers suffering in hell or as hungry ghosts due to their evil deeds. "Seeing is believing" as they say. If you cannot see, then you must believe. You don't have to believe if you don't wish to, as it is prudent not to accept anything on hearsay, but if you dismiss heaven and hell as mere allegories for pleasure and pain, then you would find this hard to justify from the Buddhist texts.

## **9. Are the disabled suffering due to past evil karma?**

Not all present results are the results of karma done in previous lives. If one drives carelessly and has a road accident one may end up disabled. However, some people are born with physical or mental disabilities, and some get killed or injured due to the carelessness of others. In such cases we must assume that the cause lies with the victim's past karma. It does not follow that careless or drunken drivers should not be prosecuted if they accidentally injure someone. Even though they had no intention to cause an accident, carelessness is blameworthy, Killing someone by recklessness is not murder, but it may be manslaughter, and should be punished severely. The likely result of such reckless or negligent behavior is that at some point in the future one will suffer a similar fate, and be killed or injured through no fault of one's own.

## **10. Is intentional killing always wrong?**

Yes, it is always unwholesome karma with the unpleasant future result of disease, injury, or premature death. However, killing is always justifiable (sic). Even the terrorist can justify, at least to himself or herself, why he or she has to murder dozens of innocent civilians. If one were undiluted and totally mindful, there is no way that one could kill any living being. However, human beings are seldom undiluted, and rarely mindful, so they can always justify killing: "If I don't kill the mosquitoes I will get malaria," or "If I don't carry out this abortion, the mother may kill herself, or the baby will have a miserable existence as an unwanted child," or "If we don't execute this murderer he will kill many more people." All such justifications make false assumptions based on one's conditioning, which is nothing but the unskillful mental attitude of aversion, ill-will, or anger. Killing and anger is always justifiable, and only part of being human, but that doesn't make it right balanced with tranquility. One must be relaxed, but not lax. Attentive, but not tense. The lazy person is incapable of attaining anything, let alone enlightenment. "This Dharma is for the energetic, not for the lazy."

## **12. The Buddha never criticized anyone**

It is true that the Buddha never slandered or abused anyone. He was completely free from jealousy and ill-will. However, he certainly did say some things that were displeasing to others. When he started teaching the Dharma, the Brahmins were well-established as the "Church" of the day. They held that the Brahmins or priests were a superior caste to workers, farmers,

merchants, and nobles. The Buddha ridiculed them in many ways, both in private with his loyal disciples and in public when non-believers were present. They lost most of their support, and conspired to discredit the Buddha by hiring a prostitute to pretend she had had an affair with him, then hiring some thugs to murder her.

The Buddha also criticized evil-doers among his own followers and constantly admonished his loyal disciples not to be heedless. He said, “Ānanda, I will not treat you [gently] as a potter treats an unbaked pot. I will instruct and admonish you repeatedly [robustly if necessary]. The sound core will stand the test.”

### **13. Men and women are equal in Buddhism**

When the Buddha returned to Kapilavatthu he soon ordained his son Rāhula as a novice, but he did not then ordain his former wife, Yasodharā as a nun. The Buddha permitted the ordination of women only after the intervention of Venerable Ānanda, having already refused a direct request from his foster-mother three times. That is not equal treatment. What is equal between men and women is their ability to understand and practice the Dharma to gain realization of nibbāna. As regards spiritual maturity, virtue, and wisdom — the things that really matter — there is no difference. The physical and emotional needs of men and women are not identical.

### **14. There is no need to strive for enlightenment**

If only! Some say that all striving is motivated by desire, and is therefore the cause of suffering. “Just chill out, be yourself. The Buddha is within and you are already enlightened. You just haven’t realized it yet.” Teachings like this do not fit with the Pāli texts. No such teachings are found in the Tipitaka. Effort should be constant, continuous, and resolute. However, it must be

### **15. The Buddha never tried to control his disciples**

There is control by force, and control by truth. The Buddha did not force his disciples to follow the training. If they did not follow properly, he taught Dharma. If they refused to follow the training, he permitted the Sangha to ostracize them or excommunicate them. If lay people worked for the harm of the Sangha, trying to discredit them or prevent offerings to them, the Buddha permitted the Sangha to refuse gifts from those individuals.

### **16. Buddhists are pacifists**

A Buddhist can use reasonable force in self-defense. One does not have to meekly accept injustice as the result of one’s past bad karma. However, one should consider carefully before acting, and be wary of acting in the heat of the moment, though that is often unavoidable. Hatred is never appeased by hatred, and harsh words lead to quarrels, even to the exchange of blows. Buddhists can resort to the law to defend their property rights or reputation. If one kills or injures others while retaliating in self-defense the karma will depend on one’s intention. Martial arts that aim to disarm one’s assailant while inflicting no more pain than absolutely necessary, have developed out of the Buddhist ideology of non-violence.

### **17. Buddhism is all about the here and now.**

Not quite true. The past is already gone, and the future is yet to come, so a Buddhist should live in the present. However, death is certain, and life is uncertain, so one should make plans for the future. A short Zen story may illustrate the opposing view-points.

Two monks were arguing. One maintained that it was vital to believe in rebirth to be a Buddhist, the other maintained that it was unnecessary, that one could understand the Dharma only in the present moment.

The first went and asked the abbot whether it was essential to believe in rebirth. The abbot replied, "Yes you are right." The second went to the abbot and asked whether one could understand the Dharma only in the present moment. The abbot replied, "Yes you are right."

The monks argued again, each saying that the abbot had told him he was right. So they went in together, and each said to the abbot, "You said I was right. We can't both be right." The abbot thought for a while, and then replied, "Yes, you are right!"

### **18. Enlightened teachers are found in all religions**

The Buddha said that one can only find Noble Ones where the Noble Eightfold Path is found. There is no other way to realize nibbāna other than by following the Noble Eightfold Path. Right View, Right Mindfulness, and so forth are essential. Those who hold wrong views regarding God and the soul could not possibly practice the Eightfold Path in full, therefore they could not possibly gain enlightenment. Most other religions do not even teach about nibbāna as the highest goal of the spiritual life, so how could their followers ever realize it? Broadly speaking, other religions do not consider the end of rebirth as desirable.

### **19. Sex is necessary for a healthy and happy life**

Blameless sex may well be conducive to physical and emotional well-being. It is not immoral to have sex with one's own wife or husband. However, it is not wholesome karma either. Renunciation of sexual pleasures is wholesome karma, and chastity is essential for those intent on gaining realization of the Dharma. "For as long as the slightest brushwood (of the passions) of man towards women is not cut down, so long is his mind in bondage, like the milk calf to its mother-cow." (Dhp v.284) A lay person can enjoy sex from time to time, but it will inevitably lead to attachment, grief, and despair in the long term. It is therefore wise to treat it with respect, as one treats a fire in one's own home.