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2nd Edition

**by Jonathan Landaw, Stephan Bodian,
and Gudrun Bühnemann**

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Buddhism For Dummies®, 2nd Edition

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Introduction

Buddhism is much more widely known today than it was 30 years ago. Dozens of books on the subject line the shelves at your local bookstore, and hundreds of Buddhist centers throughout North America can help you find out about Buddhism directly from members of its various traditions. Buddhism even seems to be seeping into the general culture; you commonly hear casual references to it in movies and on TV.

But even with all the increased recognition, we wonder how much the general public actually knows and understands about Buddhism. Despite the number of books on the subject, we suspect that, except for folks who have pursued their interest fairly seriously, most people still have only a vague idea of what Buddhism is all about.

About This Book

So what do you do if you want to understand more about Buddhism in general, but the books you've looked at so far are too narrow — covering, for example, only one particular school, aspect, or practice? Well, the book you have in your hands may be just what you're looking for.

In this book, we cover the main themes and traditions of Buddhism without overwhelming you with too much technical jargon. (In the places where we do use technical terms, we explain them as clearly and succinctly as we can, and even provide a glossary that you can use to refresh your memory.) Because we believe that Buddhist teachings are as relevant to the human condition today as they were at the time of the historical Buddha 2,500 years ago, we avoid taking a purely theoretical approach to Buddhism, in favor of one that also shows you how you can apply its insights to your everyday life.

Conventions Used in This Book

In assigning dates, we use “BCE” (before the Common Era) and CE (in the Common Era) in place of the “BC” and “AD” that are probably more familiar to many people. These relatively new designations are coming into wider use and, being religiously neutral, seem more appropriate for a book of this nature. And don’t be concerned if the dates given differ a little from dates you find in other books on Buddhism. Historians disagree on quite a few of these dates, so we simply adopted the ones that seemed most reasonable to us.

Also, throughout this book, we cite (not too often, we hope) Buddhist technical terms and personal names from the ancient Indian languages Pali and Sanskrit (in which the Buddhist scriptures were first written) and from a smattering of other Asian languages, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan. Wherever possible, we simplify the spelling of these words to reflect their approximate pronunciation, and we omit most of the marks that scholars of these languages typically employ when writing them using the Latin alphabet. If any scholars happen to be reading this book, they’ll likely have no trouble identifying these terms even without their accustomed markings; for everyone else, we think that the presentation without such marks is more user friendly.

How This Book Is Organized

Buddhism is a huge subject. Not only are the teachings attributed to the Buddha himself extensive, but a succession of brilliant commentators in India and other countries have added their thoughts and interpretations to them over the years. This process has produced a large body of writings and led to the development of different Buddhist schools and traditions. In addition, as Buddhism moved from country to country, it took on different flavors. The Buddhism of Japan, for example, is different from the Buddhism of Thailand; you can even find a number of distinct forms of practice within Japan itself.

In a work like this, we can’t possibly do justice to all these aspects of Buddhist thought and practice. Instead, we combine a general overview of the different traditions and schools with a more in-depth discussion of the most important themes — the themes that characterize Buddhism as a whole. Then in the list of recommended readings in Appendix B, we provide the names of books and other resources to consult to research the aspects of Buddhism that you want to explore further.

To make our presentation as clear and useful as possible, we group the topics into the following parts, each with its own unifying theme.

Part 1: Embarking on a Journey: The Basics of Buddhism

We begin with an overview of Buddhism as a whole, showing how it can be regarded as a religion, a philosophy of life, and a practical approach to dealing with life's problems — all rolled into one. Then because the mind is so central to Buddhism, we take a look at how the mind creates both happiness and suffering, and how the centrally important Buddhist practices of wisdom and compassion can bring you into contact with your inner spiritual resources.

Part 2: A Short History of Buddhism

History doesn't have to be a boring subject, especially when it deals with the lives and deeds of extraordinary people. In this part, we look at the history of Buddhism, beginning with the life of the historical Buddha, known as Gautama or Shakyamuni, and a summary of the most basic teachings attributed to him. We then explore how Buddhism developed in India and evolved as it spread from country to country across Asia. Finally, we show you how Theravada, Vajrayana, and Zen Buddhism grew to become the three main Buddhist traditions practiced in the West.

Part 3: Behaving Like a Buddhist

In this part, we address a number of practical questions: How does someone become a Buddhist? What does being a Buddhist involve? How does Buddhism affect the way you live your life? In short, what do Buddhists actually do? To answer these questions, we look at the ways people can benefit from what Buddhism has to offer. We explore meditation and show you some of the ways you can practice it. We examine how followers of various traditions bring Buddhism into their everyday lives. And we conclude by taking you on a tour of the major Buddhist pilgrimage sites.

Part 4: Exploring the Buddhist Path

Buddhist teachings are vast and contain a wide variety of practices. In this part, we show you how all these different methods fit together. We examine the different interpretations of enlightenment and show you how you can apply the Buddhist

teachings at each stage along the spiritual path. Finally, we take a look at the lives of four Buddhist masters, as inspiring examples.

Part 5: The Part of Tens

If you like to receive information in bite-size, easily digestible chunks, then this is the part for you. We discuss (and dispel) ten common misconceptions about Buddhism and present ten ways that you can apply Buddhist insights to your life — all of this at no extra charge.

Part 6: Appendixes

Finally, in the appendixes, we provide some information to help round out your understanding and appreciation of Buddhism. Here you find a glossary containing many of the most commonly used Buddhist terms, as well as a list of resources to consult if you want to find out more about the different aspects of Buddhism that you encounter in this book.

Icons Used in This Book

To draw your attention to bits of information that we think are particularly important or interesting, we use the following icons throughout the text.



REMEMBER

The information next to this icon is worth repeating. We may use this icon to highlight a thought expressed elsewhere in the book or simply to point out something that we think is especially important to keep in mind.



TIP

This text offers suggestions for ways you can get a deeper understanding of the aspect of Buddhism being discussed.



WARNING

Don't be unduly alarmed by this icon. We use it to draw your attention to areas prone to misunderstandings so that you can avoid tripping up.



WORDS OF WISDOM

Next to this icon are quotations from famous Buddhist masters of the past — including those attributed to the Buddha himself — that illustrate the aspect of Buddhism being discussed.



ANECDOTE

This icon alerts you that we're retelling a traditional Buddhist story or perhaps relating an incident of a more personal nature.

Where to Go from Here

You can approach this book in several different ways. The table of contents and index are detailed enough that you can find specific topics of interest and turn directly to them, if you want. Or, because each chapter of the book is quite self-contained, you can start reading anywhere and skip around at your leisure. The cross-references we provide point out where you can find additional information on selected topics.

You can also read this book in the ordinary, straightforward manner: In other words, start at the beginning and, when you reach the end, stop. Finally, if you're like some people, you can open the book at the end and, after many detours, make your way back to the beginning. We hope that, whichever approach you follow, you find the material informative and enjoyable.

1

**Embarking on
a Journey:
The Basics of
Buddhism**

IN THIS PART . . .

Want to find out what *Buddhism* actually means, and whether it's a religion, a philosophy, a psychology, or something else? Well, look no further than the pages contained in this part. We also introduce you to the Buddhist understanding of the mind and its importance, and we tell you about the treasures inside you that Buddhism wants to help you discover. That seems well worth the price of admission, doesn't it?

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Realizing Buddhism's growing popularity
- » Considering whether Buddhism is a religion
- » Examining the role of the Buddha
- » Understanding the significance of Buddhist philosophy
- » Exploring Buddhist practices

Chapter **1**

Entering the World of Buddhism: The Basics

Not too long ago, the West was virtually unfamiliar with the teachings of Buddhism. Back in the 1950s and '60s, for example, you could've gone about your life scarcely hearing the word *Buddhism* mentioned. Sure, you may have come across Buddhist concepts in school in the writings of American Transcendentalists like Thoreau and Emerson (who read English translations of Buddhist texts in the mid-19th century). But the fact is, if you were like most middle-class people then, you may have grown up, grown old, and died without ever meeting a practicing Buddhist — except perhaps in an Asian restaurant.

If you wanted to find out about Buddhism in those days, your resource options were few and far between. Aside from a rare course in Eastern philosophy at a large university, you'd have had to dig deep into the shelves and stacks at your local library to discover anything more than the most basic facts about Buddhism. The few books that you could get your hands on tended to treat Buddhism as if it were an exotic relic from some long-ago and faraway land, like some dusty Buddha statue in a dark corner of the Asian section of a museum. And good luck if you wanted to find a Buddhist center where you could study and practice.

Today the situation is much different. Buddhist terms seem to pop up everywhere. You can find them in ordinary conversation (“It’s just your *karma*”), on television (*Dharma and Greg*), and even in the names of rock groups (Nirvana). Famous Hollywood stars, avant-garde composers, pop singers, and even one highly successful professional basketball coach practice some form of Buddhism. (We’re thinking of Richard Gere, Philip Glass, Tina Turner, and Phil Jackson, but you may be able to come up with a different list of celebrities on your own.)

Bookstores and libraries everywhere boast a wide range of Buddhist titles, some of which — like the Dalai Lama’s *Art of Happiness* (Riverhead Books) — regularly top *The New York Times* best-seller lists. And centers where people can study and practice Buddhism are now located in most metropolitan areas (and many smaller cities as well).

What caused such a dramatic change in just a few decades? Certainly, Buddhism has become more available as Asian Buddhist teachers and their disciples have carried the tradition to North America and Europe. (For more on the influx of Buddhism to the West, see Chapter 5.) But there’s more to the story than increased availability. In this chapter, we try to account for the appeal this ancient tradition has in today’s largely secular world by looking at some of the features responsible for its growing popularity.

Figuring Out Whether Buddhism Is a Religion

Wondering whether Buddhism is actually a religion may seem odd. After all, if you consult any list of the world’s major religious traditions, you inevitably find Buddhism mentioned prominently alongside Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and the rest. No one ever questions whether these other traditions are religions. But this question comes up repeatedly in relation to Buddhism.

The answer depends on how you define *religion*. Ask most people what comes to mind when they think of religion, and they’ll probably mention something about the belief in God, especially when discussing the creator of the world or universe. Our dictionary agrees. *Webster’s New World College Dictionary* defines *religion* as a “belief in a divine or superhuman power or powers to be obeyed and worshiped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe.”



REMEMBER

If this definition were the only definition of religion, you’d definitely have to count Buddhism out! Why? Well, we have two reasons:

» **Worship of a supernatural power isn't the central concern of Buddhism.**

God (as this word is ordinarily used in the West) is absent from Buddhist teachings, although some Buddhists do worship gods and celestial Buddhas.

» **Buddhism isn't primarily a system of belief.** Although it teaches certain doctrines (as we discuss throughout Part 3), many Buddhist teachers actively encourage their students to adopt an attitude that's the *opposite* of blind faith.

Many Buddhist teachers advise you to be skeptical about teachings you receive. Don't passively accept what you hear or read — and don't automatically reject it, either. Instead, use your intelligence. See for yourself whether the teachings make sense in terms of your own experience and the experience of others. Then, as the Dalai Lama of Tibet (see Chapter 15) often advises, “If you find that the teachings suit you, apply them to your life as much as you can. If they don't suit you, just leave them be.”



WORDS OF
WISDOM

This more practical approach agrees with both the spirit and the letter of the Buddha's own teachings. The Buddha is believed to have declared, “Do not accept anything I say as true simply because I have said it. Instead, test it as you would gold to see if it is genuine or not. If, after examining my teachings, you find that they are true, put them into practice. But do not do so simply out of respect for me.”

Buddhist teachings therefore encourage you to use the entire range of your mental, emotional, and spiritual abilities and intelligence — instead of merely placing your blind faith in what past authorities have said. This attitude makes the teachings of Buddhism especially attractive to many Westerners; although it's 2,500 years old, it appeals to the postmodern spirit of skepticism and scientific investigation.



REMEMBER

If Buddhism is *not* primarily a belief system and isn't centered upon the worship of a supreme deity, then why is it classified as a religion at all? Like all religions, Buddhism gives people who practice it a way of finding answers to the deeper questions of life, such as “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?” and “What is the meaning of life?” and “Why do we suffer?” and “How can I achieve lasting happiness?”

In addition to fundamental teachings on the nature of reality, Buddhism offers a method, a systematic approach involving techniques and practices, that enables its followers to experience a deeper level of reality directly for themselves. In Buddhist terms, this experience involves waking up to the truth of your authentic being, your innermost nature. The experience of awakening is the ultimate goal of all Buddhist teachings. (For more on awakening — or enlightenment, as it's often called — see Chapter 10.) Some schools emphasize awakening more than others (and a few even relegate it to the background in their scheme of priorities), but in every tradition, it's the final goal of human existence — whether achieved in this life or in lives to come.

THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA

Most scholars believe that the Buddha's life largely falls within the fifth century BCE, although the exact dates of his life are unknown. According to tradition, he died at age 80, and recent research puts the year of the Buddha's death not much later than 400 BCE.

The accounts of the Buddha's life aren't historical. The earliest ones date from several centuries after his death and consist mainly of legends, some of which have striking parallels in others told about Mahavira, a religious figure of Jainism (another religion spawned on the Indian subcontinent). The legendary material on the Buddha's life is summarized briefly in this chapter and presented in more detail in Chapter 3.

Writing wasn't in use at the Buddha's time. Because the earliest Buddhist texts were orally transmitted and written down only many centuries after the Buddha's death, scholars aren't certain about what the Buddha himself taught and what was later ascribed to him.

By the way, you don't have to join a Buddhist organization to benefit from the teachings and practices of Buddhism. For more info on the different stages of involvement in Buddhism, see Chapter 6.

Recognizing the Role of the Buddha

Buddhist systems are based upon the teachings given 2,500 years ago by one of the great spiritual figures of human history, Shakyamuni Buddha, who lived in the fifth century BCE. According to legendary accounts of his life (see Chapter 3), he was born into the ruling family of the Shakya clan in today's Nepal and was expected to someday succeed his father as king. Instead, Prince Siddhartha (as he was known at the time) quit the royal life at the age of 29 after he saw the reality of the extensive suffering and dissatisfaction in the world. He then set out to find a way to overcome this suffering.

After many hardships, at age 35, Prince Siddhartha achieved his goal. Seated under what became known as the *Bodhi tree* — the tree of enlightenment — he achieved the awakening of Buddhahood. Today a stone platform known as the diamond seat (*vajrasana*) near the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya (see Figure 1-1) marks the spot. From then on, he was known as *Shakyamuni Buddha*, the awakened (Buddha) sage (*muni*) of the Shakya clan.



FIGURE 1-1:
Stone platform
and Bodhi tree in
Bodhi Gaya.

Photo courtesy of Gudrun Bühnemann.

Prince Siddhartha spent the remaining 45 years of his life wandering the northern part of the Indian subcontinent, teaching anyone who was interested in the path that leads to freedom from suffering. The famous Buddha statue in Sarnath (India), the place where he gave his first sermon (see Figure 1-2), shows the Buddha making the gesture of turning the wheel of his teaching. (Part 3 offers an overview of the entire Buddhist path.) After a lifetime of compassionate service to others, Shakyamuni died at the age of 80.

The question is often asked, “What kind of being was Shakyamuni Buddha — a man, a god, or something else?” Some biographical accounts state that the Buddha was once a human being with the same hang-ups and problems as everyone else. He didn’t start out as a Buddha; he wasn’t enlightened from the beginning.

Only through great effort exerted over a long period of time — over many lifetimes, as the Buddhist texts tell us — did he succeed in attaining enlightenment. However, the later tradition clearly considered the Buddha an exceptional human being and elevated him to a special status. Legendary accounts of his life emphasize, for example, his miraculous birth in the Lumbini grove from his mother’s side, the 32 marks of a “great man” that were found on his body, and his ability to work miracles. (See Chapter 3 for more about his birth and the 32 marks.)



FIGURE 1-2:
Shakyamuni
Buddha.

Photo courtesy of Gudrun Bühnemann.

The Buddhist spiritual community (*Sangha*) took great pains to preserve and transmit his teachings as purely as possible so that they could pass from one generation to the next. These extensive teachings were eventually written down, producing a vast collection (or *canon*) of the Buddha's discourses (Pali: *suttas*; Sanskrit: *sutras*).

Over the centuries, the Sangha also erected burial monuments (*stupas*) in honor of the major events in their teacher's life, which allowed later practitioners to make pilgrimage to these honored sites and receive inspiration. (Chapters 8 and 9 have more information on Buddhist devotional practices and rituals.)

Thanks to the efforts of teachers and their disciples, the Buddha's teachings (known as *Dharma*) have been handed down from generation to generation up to the present day. That's why, after 2,500 years, Buddhism is still a living tradition, capable of bestowing peace, happiness, and fulfillment upon anyone who practices it sincerely.



REMEMBER

The legends about the life of the Buddha have been a source of inspiration for Buddhists. When the Buddha is considered a mortal, he's a vital example of what each of us can achieve if we devote ourselves wholeheartedly to the study and practice of his teachings.