

Why are rebirth and karma significant in Buddhist traditions?

Ben: Hi. Welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm Ben Hurst, a broadcaster and journalist, and in this series, we're exploring the key practices and beliefs of Buddhism. Along with my co-host Gabrielle, we look at the key facts and themes for GCSE.

Gabrielle: Yes indeed. Hello. I'm Gabrielle Westhead, a writer and practising Buddhist. My mum is a Buddhist and I have been practising Buddhism myself since I was 13, so I've been around some of the ideas you're learning about for my whole life.

Ben: In this episode, we're exploring how rebirth and karma are understood in Buddhist traditions. These are really important concepts in Buddhism, so grab yourself a pen and some paper, or open a notes app, and make some notes as we go.

Gabrielle: And stay listening to the end, because there'll be a quick quiz!

Ben, have you heard of the word 'karma' before?

Ben: I have, yes. It's the idea that our actions, whether big or small, have consequences. Is that right?

Gabrielle: Yes. It's the teaching that all thoughts, words and actions have consequences and that we can affect those consequences.

Behaving with kindness, generosity and thoughtfulness leads to greater contentment; while selfishness and greed, for example, will have unpleasant consequences. So, we have the power to affect our lives through the choices we make.

Ben: Is this linked to the cycle of samsara too?

Gabrielle: Yes, Ben. The Buddha taught that we are all going round and round in the cycle of samsara - an ongoing cycle of life, death and rebirth. We live, die, are reborn. Live, die, are reborn, as an ongoing cycle.

Ben: So, Buddhism teaches that people are reborn after they die?

Gabrielle: Yes. According to Buddhist tradition, when a person dies there is some sort of continuity of consciousness which is reborn in a new life. And what sort of new life this will be is affected by their ethical behavior in the previous life. So, their actions in previous lives affect how they will be reborn and what their circumstances will be.

Ben: So, if Buddhists do good things, they'll be reborn into a more favourable life?

Gabrielle: That's it. The tradition says we can affect our future, in this life or the next, by behaving skillfully or unskillfully.

Ben: What's the difference between a skillful or unskillful action?

Gabrielle: A skillful action is something that leads to the well-being and happiness of oneself and others, and that in turn leads to the reduction of suffering. It could be thoughts, words, or actions that have a helpful effect. On the other hand, an unskillful action is one that leads to suffering.

It's always motivated by greed, hatred or ignorance - three poisons the Buddha said we all suffer from but can overcome. Do you remember the word we use for suffering in Buddhism, Ben?

Ben: Was it dukkha?

Gabrielle: That's right Ben, dukkha. Shall we look at some examples of skillful and unskillful actions?

Ben: That would be really helpful!

Gabrielle: Skillful actions could be; being kind, being generous, and being helpful to others.

Ben: Maybe like offering to help a neighbour with their shopping or letting someone go in front of you in a queue?

Gabrielle: Yes, those would definitely be skillful actions. I always try to encourage my friends to recognise their greatness, especially during challenging times – this is a skillful action.

Ben: Would you say the Noble Eightfold Path is a description of skillful behavior?

Gabrielle: Yes, definitely Ben. We talked about the Noble Eightfold Path in our episode on Buddhist approaches to suffering. It includes actions like right speech and 'right action' They're a set of eight guiding principles which are skillful actions Buddhists should follow.

Ben: That's a useful link to make then, isn't it? Remember you can go back and listen to all episodes in this series, any time, on BBC Sounds, and there's more information on the Bitesize website too. Just search Bitesize GCSE Buddhism.

Ben: What about unskillful actions Gabrielle?

Gabrielle: Unskillful actions might be being unkind, being selfish, or refusing to help other people. It could be lying to your friend or ignoring someone who needs help.

Ben: So how do skillful and unskillful actions relate to karma?

Gabrielle: Because karma is based on actions, Buddhism teaches that each person is responsible for their own behavior. This encourages people to choose skillful actions over unskillful ones. Buddhism teaches us to act ethically, showing kindness and generosity. This way, we can reduce suffering and improve this and any future life.

Ben: So, in summary, in Buddhism, rebirth continues as part of the cycle of samsara, but a person's skillful or unskillful actions - their karma - influence the type of rebirth they experience and the conditions of their future existence.

Gabrielle: That's a good summary. In the Buddhist scripture, known as Dhammapada, there's a quote which I really like. It's from verse 1 and it says:

"If one speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows them..."

Ben: So, if a person acts badly - 'with an evil thought, pain follows them' - they create negative karma. That's a useful quote to explain this concept of karma.

Gabrielle: But it's important to add that the next verse goes:

"If one acts with a pure mind, joy follows..."

So, it's not all about avoiding suffering - the Buddha taught that behaving skillfully will lead to happiness.

Ben: Let's look more now at the cycle of samsara.

Gabrielle: Sure. As we've said, the Buddhist tradition teaches that when we die, the consciousness we have developed in this life flows on to be reborn in a new life. Humans can go through the cycle of rebirth, or samsara, many times, over many lifetimes.

Ben: Skillful actions lead to a more fortunate rebirth, and unskillful actions lead to a less fortunate rebirth, right?

Gabrielle: That's exactly it. There are six realms. Skillful actions lead to rebirth in the more fortunate realms, while unskillful actions lead to rebirth in the less fortunate realms.

Ben: I feel a list coming on! What are the six realms?

Gabrielle: They are:

- the realm of the gods
- the realm of the angry gods
- the realm of the animals
- the realm of the hell beings
- the realm of the hungry ghosts
- the realm of humans.

Ben: Are some of these realms better than others then?

Gabrielle: As we said before, the ultimate goal is enlightenment - leaving the samsara cycle altogether. And the human realm is considered the best opportunity for enlightenment because it provides the right balance of awareness, suffering, and access to Buddhist teachings. And by the way, this doesn't mean you die. It means you live as an enlightened person in this world, without mental suffering, until you die and are then not reborn.

Ben: Oh yes. Check out the GCSE Religious Studies pages on the Bitesize website for more information on enlightenment.

Gabrielle: Good idea. If someone has done their best to live skillfully, they will be reborn into a more preferable realm

Ben: How do the different schools of Buddhism think about samsara, or rebirth?

Gabrielle: Like most of the concepts we'll discuss in this series, there are often different interpretations. Buddhists believe that enlightenment ends the cycle of samsara, but various branches of Buddhism believe slightly different things about how that happens and what happens next.

Ben: Why don't we start with Theravada Buddhism.

Gabrielle: The Theravada Buddhist tradition describes the goal as becoming an arhat. Arhats are enlightened beings. It means they've rid themselves of all suffering and can enter nirvana.

Ben: Just to recap, nirvana represents the end of suffering, and the end of the cycle of rebirth, right Gabrielle?

Gabrielle: That's it. For Theravada Buddhists, once they become arhats they gain freedom from the samsara cycle. They won't be reborn again.

Ben: How is that different to say, Mahayana Buddhists?

Gabrielle: In Mahayana Buddhism, compassion is central, and the ideal is to become a Bodhisattva. Motivated by deep compassion for the suffering of the world, a Bodhisattva is an enlightened being who works within samsara in order to help everyone become enlightened and escape the suffering of samsara.

Ben: Ah okay. So a bodhisattva works with humans in samsara to help get off the wheel of samsara and reach enlightenment.

Gabrielle: Exactly. Vajrayana Buddhism is also slightly different when it comes to samsara. Vajrayana is a branch of Mahayana Buddhism. It teaches that it's possible to attain enlightenment in a single lifetime, rather than gradually progressing over many rebirths.

Ben: So, they believe it's possible to speed up the process?

Gabrielle: Yes. Through advanced practices like mantra and visualisation, Vajrayana Buddhists aim to transform ordinary experiences directly into wisdom on an accelerated path to Buddhahood.

For Buddhists that practise this way, the point is to get off the endless round of suffering in samsara - birth, death, rebirth - through choosing more and more skillful behaviour. And that leads to enlightenment.

Ben: There are a range of differences in the interpretation of samsara within schools of Buddhism, and these are just some of them.

Ben: I think it's time to test what we've learnt Gabrielle. Let's have a quiz. I'm going to grab a pen and paper to write down my answers. That might be a good idea for those listening too.

Gabrielle: OK Ben. I'll ask the questions and you come up with the answers. First question. What do Buddhists call the cycle of rebirth?

Ben: The cycle of rebirth is called samsara. It's the idea that when we die, our consciousness flows on into a new life.

Gabrielle: That's correct. Next question. What do we call the Buddhist concept of actions having consequences?

Ben: That's karma. It teaches Buddhists that actions have consequences. The quote "If one speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows them" helps to explain this concept.

Gabrielle: That's a great explanation. And final question; Buddhists believe there are two types of actions that affect karma. What are they?

Ben: Skillful and unskillful actions. Skillful actions lead to happiness and unskillful actions lead to suffering.

Gabrielle: Spot on. Well done.

Ben: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast.

Gabrielle: In the next one we'll be exploring Buddhist festivals and celebrations.

Ben: You can listen to more episodes on Buddhism over on the BBC Sounds app or search the Bitesize website.

Gabrielle: There are series on other faiths too aren't there, Ben?

Ben: Yes, there are, and there are series on other subjects like History and English too, so lots to get stuck into.

Gabrielle: See you next time!

Ben: Bye!