

Why is it significant to consider life and suffering in Buddhist traditions?

Ben: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm your host, Ben Hurst. I'm a journalist, and a broadcaster and in this series we'll be going over the key beliefs and practices for your GCSE on Buddhism.

But I can't do it by myself, no no no. So joining me for this series is writer and practising Buddhist Gabrielle Westhead.

Gabrielle: Hi Ben! Like you said, I'm a Buddhist so I live most of these teachings every day. I'm a writer and I speak about my experiences of Buddhism on the radio sometimes too. My faith is really important to me, and I'm excited to help make sense of the ideas you might come across in your GCSE.

Ben: In this episode, we're exploring how Buddhist traditions explain life and suffering. But before we get into the details, grab a pen, some paper, or your notes app, because throughout the episode, we'll highlight key ideas you might want to jot down.

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

Ben: We know that Buddhism is a major world religion - but what's the core aim of Buddhism?

Gabrielle: Buddhism teaches that the core aim of life is to end suffering. Buddhists believe this can be achieved by developing wisdom, through studying the Buddha's teachings, meditation, and living ethically with compassion for others.

Ben: We'll cover these important areas throughout the series, but for this episode, I want to focus on that concept of suffering. Can you tell me more about that?

Gabrielle: Yes, Buddhists use the word 'dukkha' - it means suffering, unsatisfactoriness, or unease. In Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths help us to understand suffering.

Ben: Can we go through what The Four Noble Truths are?

Gabrielle: Yes, let's do it. They are the foundation of Buddhist teachings around suffering and they go like this:

- Noble Truth number 1 - dukkha - everyone experiences suffering in life.
- Noble Truth number 2 - Samudaya - we experience extra suffering when we respond with craving.
- Noble Truth number 3 - Nirodha - if we can stop craving, then it is possible to end suffering.
- And finally, Noble Truth number 4 - Magga - Buddhists can end suffering by following the Noble Eightfold Path.

Ben: The Four Noble Truths are often explained like a medical diagnosis. First, you identify the illness. In this case it's 'dukkha' or suffering.

Gabrielle: That's right. Next, you identify the cause of the illness. The second truth in Buddhism tells us it's craving or desire.

Ben: Then, we work out if there is a cure. The third truth is that it is possible to end one's suffering by learning to stop craving.

Gabrielle: And finally, we learn what the cure is. In Buddhism, it's the Noble Eightfold Path.

Ben: Let's follow up on the fourth part there - the Noble Eightfold Path. What is that?

Gabrielle: Good question. Most Buddhists believe there is a path to end suffering. There are eight guiding principles which, when followed, can help achieve enlightenment.

Ben: Enlightenment is the ultimate goal in Buddhism, isn't it?

Gabrielle: Yes, when you become enlightened in Buddhism, you reach Nirvana - the end of all suffering. This means you've ended the cycle of samsara - that's the cycle of death and rebirth.

Ben: We're going to learn much more about the samsara cycle in our episode on rebirth. You can listen to that one, and all the episodes in this series, on the BBC Sounds app.

Ben: So, tell me more about the eight principles, or actions, that form the Noble Eightfold Path?

Gabrielle: Well, these eight principles can be broken up into three categories because they fall into three core areas of Buddhist practice. These are ethics, meditation, and wisdom. This is known as the Threefold Way. I know I'm introducing quite a few terms here but stick with me - we're going to explain them all.

Ben: And if you need to, rewind this episode as many times as you like and listen again.

Gabrielle: Okay I'm going to list the principles that form the Noble Eightfold path, and which of the Threefold Way each of them come under. Does that sound good?

Ben: Yes, that's great. Let's start with one of the Threefold way - ethics. Which of the eight principles come under ethics?

Gabrielle: Number 1 is Right Speech. It means speaking truthfully and kindly, avoiding lies and harmful words.

Number 2 is Right Action. This means behaving in a way that avoids harm, such as not killing, stealing, or acting dishonestly.

Number 3 is Right Livelihood. This one means earning money in a way that doesn't cause harm.

Ben: Another part of the threefold way is meditation. Which of the principles from the Noble Eightfold Path are part of meditation?

Gabrielle: Number 1 is Right Effort - putting effort into every stage of Buddhist practice, including mindfulness and meditation.

Number 2 is Right Mindfulness - being aware of yourself and the people and things around you.

Number 3 is Right Concentration - developing focus so you can meditate.

Ben: So those are the Noble Eightfold principles connected to meditation. Let's look at the third part of the Threefold way - that's wisdom, isn't it? Which principles in the Noble Eightfold Path are associated with wisdom?

Gabrielle: Number 1 is Right Understanding - it means understanding the Buddha's teachings, for example that craving causes suffering and actions have consequences.

Number 2 is Right Intention - this means following the Buddha's teachings with the right motivation - because you sincerely want to develop wisdom and compassion and end suffering.

Ben: So, if a Buddhist follows these eight principles, what happens then?

Gabrielle: Well, the Buddha taught that actions have consequences. That's the teaching of karma. Practising ethics and meditation leads to wisdom, more contentment and less suffering.

So, life is happier for you and others around you. We'll look at this more closely in our episode on rebirth and karma.

Ben: So, it sounds like, for many Buddhists, the Noble Eightfold Path really influences how they live their life. Is there one that particularly stands out for you Gabrielle?

Gabrielle: They all are important, but I'd say right speech is a big one for me. It might be hard sometimes but it's really important that I try to be respectful and considerate to others when I speak.

Ben: So, Gabrielle, can you tell us about the different schools within Buddhism?

Gabrielle: There are many different types of Buddhism around the world, but there are two main schools; Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism.

Ben: How do they practise differently?

Gabrielle: Theravada Buddhism is the oldest surviving school in Buddhism, which follows the teachings in the earliest Buddhist scriptures. They describe the goal as becoming an arhat.

Ben: Can you define arhat?

Gabrielle: An arhat is a person who has followed the Buddhist path, become enlightened and reached the end of suffering.

Ben: So becoming an arhat is the goal for Theravada Buddhists. Can you tell us about Mahayana Buddhism?

Gabrielle: Yes! A key part of Mahayana Buddhism is the idea of the bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is someone who wants to become a Buddha and who wants to guide others to become enlightened too. Some Mahayana Buddhists believe that enlightenment is already present in us, just waiting to be realised, like a seed waiting to be watered, grow and flower. This is called Buddha-nature.

Ben: There are variations of thinking within Mahayana Buddhism, but how do some Mahayana Buddhists believe they can become Bodhisattvas?

Gabrielle: They believe in practising the Six Perfections, or 'Paramitas', which are closely connected to the Noble Eightfold Path. A bit like the Eightfold Path, the

Six Perfections - or 'Paramitas' - list a number of wonderful qualities anyone can practise in order to move towards enlightenment and help others to do that too.

Ben: What are the Six Perfections, or Paramitas?

Gabrielle: These six Bodhisattva qualities are:

- generosity
- ethics
- patience
- energy
- meditation
- and wisdom

Ben: These are just some examples of the differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. For more, head to the Bitesize GCSE revision guides on Buddhism.

Gabrielle: Let's look at a quote now. It comes from the Buddhist scripture Dhammapada, from the teachings of the Buddha. It's verse 277, and it goes like this:

"All conditioned things are impermanent. Those who see this are freed from suffering."

Ben, what do you think that might mean?

Ben: Hmm...maybe that everything changes and nothing stays the same forever?

Gabrielle: That's a really good way of putting it. In Buddhism we have The Three Marks of Existence, sometimes known as the Three Universal Truths. They're three characteristics that apply to all existence. Let's go through them together.

Anicca means 'impermanence'. It means that nothing is fixed and everything is a process of change.

Ben: Dukkha is the teaching that there is suffering in life. We talked about that at the start of the episode.

Gabrielle: And Anatta means 'not self', or 'no fixed self'. The Buddha said there was no permanent, fixed self, essence or soul.

Ben: With these three universal truths, do Buddhists accept that everything changes and nothing is permanent?

Gabrielle: That's exactly right. In this way, Buddhists understand that suffering is an inevitable part of life. When we accept this truth, we can remove suffering from our lives and find peace.

Gabrielle: Can I put you to the test now Ben?

Ben: Yes, let's see what I can remember. Grab a pen and paper and write down your answers too.

Gabrielle: First question. What does the word dukkha mean in Buddhism?

Ben: It means suffering. It's the first of the Four Noble Truths. For Buddhists, suffering is a part of life.

Gabrielle: Exactly! Next question. Buddhists believe it's possible to end suffering by following a set of guiding principles. What is that called?

Ben: It's called the Noble Eightfold Path. It's the last part of the Four Noble Truths. Remember it's the medical diagnosis or 'cure' for suffering.

Gabrielle: That's brilliant Ben. There are eight parts of the Noble Eightfold Path. Rewind this episode to hear what they are, or head to the Bitesize website for a full list. And final question. Can you remember what the word 'anicca' means in Buddhism?

Ben: It means 'impermanence'. Buddhists believe nothing is fixed or permanent - everything is a process of change.

Gabrielle: Exactly. The quote "All conditioned things are impermanent. Those who see this are freed from suffering" from the Buddhist scripture Dhammapada, verse 277, is a useful one for explaining that concept.

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

Gabrielle: In the next one we'll be looking at the role of meditation in Buddhism.

Ben: Remember there are loads of podcasts to help you with your GCSEs, including podcast series on English, history and science. Just search for Bitesize GCSE on BBC Sounds.

Gabrielle: See you next time!

Ben: Bye!