

Buddhist ethnography

[Religion](#), [Buddhism](#)



The Buddhist Experience Buddhism is a religion that focuses more on the individual and the actions of that individual, which was prevalent to me when I made my way into Portland and set foot in a Buddhist temple. The man I met within the walls of this temple was far from my stereotypical thoughts of Buddhist monks. The man I met looked like your plain old, average Joe, American man. Before I delve into the depths of my visit to this inspiring place, I need to sum up the Buddhist religion and why I chose to study this particular group of people.

First, Buddhism. Buddhism is a religion based off of the idea that there is a path that one can take to achieve enlightenment, instead of believing in a god or multiple gods. Buddhism began with a man named Siddhartha. Siddhartha, the son of a king and heir to the throne, was forbidden to leave the castle walls within which he was confined. His Father, the king, made him stay within the walls at all time so as not to see the suffering that was happening in the outside world. His father even hid all aging and sickness from his son.

One day, Siddhartha told his personal bodyguard that he wanted to venture beyond the walls of the castle. The servant had no choice but to obey what Siddhartha had told him. The two set out and on their journey, they came across an old man in the street who was very close to dying. Siddhartha asked the bodyguard what was wrong with the man and the bodyguard had no choice but to tell Siddhartha the truth. They repeated this feat of leaving the castle walls on 3 more occasions, seeing a sickly woman on the side of the road one day, a dead body on the side of the road the next, and a renunciator on the fourth and final day.

Each time the bodyguard was asked what was wrong with the person they saw, and each time, he was forced to tell Siddhartha the truth. These four people became known as the four sights, and eventually lead to Buddhism's main teachings: life is suffering but there is a way out of the suffering. The way out of the suffering of life is through the Noble Eight Fold Path. The Noble Eight Fold Path teaches the way to act within the living world and what you can do to further your way along the path of Enlightenment.

The Eight folds are: Right understanding, Right thought, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness, and Right concentration. This is the way that everyone should live if they want to achieve enlightenment along the Buddhist path. This is not the only thing that Siddhartha taught though. Like every single religion since the beginning of time, there is a list of rules. Christianity has the 10 Commandments, Islam has the Five Pillars of Islam, and Buddhism has the Religious Reformations of Buddha. Unlike most religions, Buddhism strays from the focus on an all mighty deity or deities.

Buddhism preaches five different logics that deviate from the norm when it comes to religious ideals: first, Strive after enlightenment with due diligence. This means you must put a lot of effort into the job of enlightenment if you wish to achieve it. Second, there will be no metaphysical theorizing. This is the one that seems to throw a wrench into the ideals of every religion before it, there is no God and if you even think that there is a God, you are disgracing the Buddhist way of life. Buddhism is a way of life, it is not a religion with a holy God. Third, there is no tradition, no ritual.

The teachings themselves are supposed to lead you, but if you do not know yourself, there is no way that you can know Buddhism and have the ability to follow the Noble Eightfold Path to enlightenment, once you find yourself and know yourself, then you can accept or reject the teachings of the Buddha. Fourth, is that you will find salvation through your efforts. If you are a diligent Buddhist and you work at the Eightfold Path to achieve enlightenment, you will be rewarded; you just need to have patience. Finally, there are no supernatural miracles, no water into wine, no parting of the Red Sea, just what goes on down here on plain old earth.

In fact, at one point, the Buddha says “ Those who attempt to work miracles are not my disciples”. This tells you just how serious the Buddha is about his focus on the natural and this-worldly things. Now that the basics have been laid out, time for why I chose to study Buddhism. Buddhism has been in my life for as long as I can remember, if only minimally. My father subscribed to a Buddhism magazine called Tricycle, more of an Americanized look at Buddhism. Moreover, the teachings of Buddhism and its focus on the here and now, how you treat people around you, and how you act towards people, have always been appealing to me.

This opportunity fell into my lap and I was more than happy to take the chance to learn about something I had always known too little about. When I approached the temple, I immediately got a feel for an organized group of people simply by the way they approached the trimming of the trees and plants. Everything seemed to have a purpose and seemed to play off each other. The trees, with circles of branches only, seemed to perfectly accent

the red, almost poinsettia looking flowers behind them leading up the staircase into a very plain, unexpressive building.

Once I gained entrance into the temple itself, it was a different site than I expected. Beyond a Plexiglas barrier, was a very church-like worship area with decorations on a slightly elevated plateau. Gold smattered in with vivid colors greeted my eyes as I stepped through the door into the temple's worship area. There was a statue of the Buddha in the middle, made out of gold, with a halo surrounding his head. On the left, slightly behind the level of the Buddha, was a cloth with the picture of 7 men that our Reverend Gregory G Gibbs would refer to as the authors of the Chinese Buddhist Cannon which is about 100, 000 pages long.

There was two thirds of a copy of the Cannon itself on the far sides of the raised area. In front was a large circular bowl with a top on it that we were informed was used for incense which is one of the three offerings that people were allowed to leave for Buddha. Incense is one of the ancient ways, and would be burned while the reverend would teach to the disciples. The other two gifts were flowers, which were meant to signify impermanence, and candles, meant to signify wisdom.

The man we were lead by was a middle aged looking white male, far from the short, bald, Asian monk dressed in flowing orange robes I had expected to meet. He taught us all about the temple and how it had been around for more than 105 years. He was a very cordial man who loved to hear the sound of his own voice, unfortunately. The man lead us through the basement, seeing holy murals that had been created for the centennial

celebration a few years prior. He was very obviously a pious man who had sought to follow the path of the Buddha into enlightenment.