

Questions: Buddhists

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A VIEW FROM INSIDE BUDDHISM

It is always important for students of RE to hear authentic voices from inside in a faith community. Dr Joyce Miller, formerly an RE teacher and adviser, belongs to the Thai Forest Sangha, a tradition within Theravada Buddhism. We asked her to bring together her Buddhist and teacher identities and answer some questions about teaching Buddhism. (Note: In accordance with the Theravada School, we have used the Pali terms in this article.)



Dr Joyce Miller

What do you want young people to know about Buddhism in Britain today?

That Buddhism is a spiritual, moral and religious practice that has worldwide significance. I want young people to understand the key aspects of the Buddha's teaching and that they provide a coherent analysis of the situation in which we live and a means of achieving happiness and wellbeing within it.

What matters most in British Buddhism at the moment? Why?

I think there are two answers to this. The first is that I don't feel that I am part of 'British Buddhism' – I'm not sure what that is. I am a Buddhist living in Britain, trying to follow the Buddha's teaching. We're not evangelical and we don't have a strong socio-political agenda to pursue. Buddhists aren't much into labels.

It's also true, however, to say that the practice of compassion is extremely important and therefore there is deep concern about issues of social justice and suffering. Many Buddhists in Britain will identify with Buddhist countries where there are major political problems, such as Burma and Tibet.

There are issues, for some Buddhists, about the place of women and the perceived inferior status of nuns as opposed to monks, but I try not to get caught up in these controversies. Buddhism is an ancient, eastern religion that is adapting to life in the West and this is a long, gradual process. It's also important to find a balance between our Western perspectives and what the Buddha taught was the real path to finding wellbeing. There are tensions there that we need to continue to try to resolve and that will take time and patience.

What are the questions that Buddhists worry about? What are the issues that concern the Buddhist community?

Do we worry? My teacher often talks about not turning a difficulty into a problem. The reality is that life is unsatisfactory and we try to remember to face difficulties in the knowledge of the first Noble Truth. That doesn't mean that we don't get involved in issues, but we try to keep a balanced perspective on all such questions.

There are issues that are of concern to Buddhists – the environment or human rights, for example – and I would guess that many will give support to charities that work in areas they are concerned about – but it's important to remember that Buddhism is the middle path and it's always about striving for equanimity, as well as practising compassion and kindness. Non-attachment is difficult but it's partly about not getting too emotionally caught up in issues, however noble they might be.

What are your favourite stories and sayings of the Buddha?

In the tradition to which I belong, the focus is on meditation and morality rather than stories and texts. The Buddha's teachings underpin all of this but rarely do we read the scriptures, as such. On the full and new moon days, each month, the abbot of the monastery I support sends out, by email, a quotation from the *Dhammapada*, a collection of very beautiful, short Buddhist teachings and to this he adds his own commentary on how it can help us on our spiritual path. The *Dhammapada* is very accessible and, I think, inspirational.

My other favourite is the teachings on the divine abidings, the Brahmaviharas, which are about the cultivation of four key qualities: kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), sympathetic joy (mudita) and equanimity (upekkha). I often use these as the basis for meditation and reflection and hope they help me develop those qualities.

What issues do you want RE teachers to remember when they plan to teach about Buddhism?

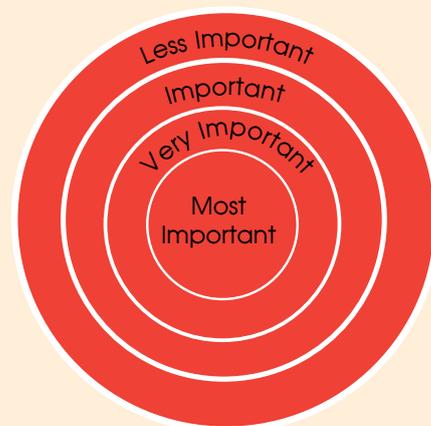
That Buddhism is more than a philosophy of life. It's easy to secularise Buddhism and I think one of the reasons it is so popular in the West is that it doesn't make demands in terms of what one believes. But it is a religion with rituals, teachings, a strong ethical code and a body of literature. Teaching Buddhism offers a real opportunity to explore some fundamental questions about our lives and to develop pupils' conceptual understanding.

What else would you like to say?

I'm about to commit heresy and say that I don't think pupils below A level need to learn about, for example, the differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism or that they need to study a variety of traditions. Focusing on the Buddha's teaching and how that is interpreted in people's lives is sufficient at school level.

These pages were written for teachers but you might get your older students to use them and ask them to:

- identify what is most important to Joyce, giving evidence
- find two statements that make them think and explain why
- devise some more questions they would like to put to Joyce
- contact a Buddhist from a different tradition and ask the same questions; can they explain the reasons for any differences?

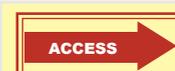


Learning from Buddhist ways of living

- 1 After reading Joyce Miller's answers carefully, ask students to work in pairs or individually to try and identify **nine** key words that sum up what Buddhism means to her.
- 2 Compare their nine words with this selection. Note any words that match their own choices, and any different words chosen. Decide together which are the best nine words from this list and their own.

The Buddha	Kindness	Compassion
Happiness	Equanimity	Non-attachment
Meditation	Morality	Rituals

- 3 Use the nine words agreed in the pairs, plus a selection of other words suggested in Activity 2 (between 5 and 10). Use a target board and ask students to go through the words one at a time, deciding where to place them on the target board. They should place one word in the centre, and then 3, 5 and 7 words as the rings move away from the centre. The rings represent what is of ultimate importance to Buddhists (from this interview); what is very important; quite important; not so important. Use this again after some further study of Buddhism, adding key words and concepts to assess your students' understanding. There will be no single right answer to this.
- 4 Ask students for their own suggestions for how we find happiness in the situation in which we live.



See p.31 for an activity to make this more accessible to lower-achieving students.

May all beings everywhere . . .

This prayer of dedication is a compilation of verses by Shantideva, a Buddhist master from India in the eighth century CE. It is from the *Bodhicaryavatara*, or *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. It is one of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's favourite prayers, and is important to many Buddhists, particularly those from the Tibetan traditions.

May all beings everywhere
Plagued by sufferings of body and mind
Obtain an ocean of happiness and joy
By virtue of my merits.

May no living creature suffer,
Commit evil, or ever fall ill.
May no one be afraid or belittled,
With a mind weighed down by
depression.

May the blind see forms
And the deaf hear sounds,
May those whose bodies are worn with toil
Be restored on finding repose.

May the naked find clothing,
The hungry find food;
May the thirsty find water
And delicious drinks.

May the poor find wealth,
Those weak with sorrow find joy;
May the forlorn find hope,
Constant happiness, and prosperity.

May there be timely rains
And bountiful harvests;
May all medicines be effective
And wholesome prayers bear fruit.

May all who are sick and ill
Quickly be freed from their ailments.
Whatever diseases there are in the world,
May they never occur again.

May the frightened cease to be afraid
And those bound be freed;
May the powerless find power,
And may people think of benefiting
each other.

For as long as space remains,
For as long as sentient beings remain,
Until then may I too remain
To dispel the miseries of the world.

Seven ways to use Shantideva's prayer

- 1 Read the Dedication aloud. What tone is best? What difference does it make if you read it calmly or enthusiastically, grumpily or angrily, fast or slowly?
- 2 Get students working in groups. Half of the groups should list words that describe the world as it is expressed in the prayer; the other half should list words describing the world as Shantideva would like it to be. They can use words in the poem as well as their own words.
- 3 Give each verse to a group of three or four students. Ask them to come up with a freeze-frame or a short drama to express something from *before* the prayer, and one to express what might happen if the prayer is fulfilled.
- 4 Give each student in the class one line or couplet to express through art or sculpture. They should consider an appropriate colour to express the emotion of the phrase, as well as images or symbols to express the meaning and the hope. Create a display using all of the artwork alongside the prayer.
- 5 The Buddha taught that his followers should practise *metta* (P.*metta*) – loving-kindness to all beings. Using the information in this prayer, ask students to come up with a definition of *metta*, with examples to show what it means in action.
- 6 Set students the task of finding an example of this prayer being fulfilled in the news during the next week. Get them to bring in the information and to be able to describe the people or individuals who have brought the good news into reality. Have students themselves done anything to help?
- 7 Ask students to imagine they were to recite this Dedication every day. What difference might it make to how they live? Give three things they probably would not do any more and three things they probably would do.

WHAT IS THE HEART OF BUDDHIST TEACHING? DOES IT MATTER?

Summary of learning

The essence of the Buddha's teaching on the causes of suffering and the way to end suffering, is expressed in the Four Noble Truths. The fourth Noble Truth is also known as the Eightfold Path.

Written for **students aged 11–12**, the activities in this section are designed to introduce students to the Buddha's teaching in a variety of active ways which encourage them to reflect on their own understandings and questions about the causes of suffering and the things that give their life value and purpose.

Resources

BBC's Learning Zone Broadband Clips Library

A searchable database of video clips on a variety of topics covered in RE, e.g. clips 8349-8350

See: www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips

Buddhanet

An extensive site on many aspects of Buddhism including a story of the life of the Buddha, an interactive Wheel of Life and a collection of Buddhist stories.

See: www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/lifebuddha

CLEO

A collection of short videos designed for the RE classroom including an interactive Wheel of Life with commentary and template to design your own Wheel of Life. Choose KS3 section.

See: www.cleo.net.uk

The Dhammapada

An illustrated version of the Dhammapada:

See: www.buddhanet.net/dhammapada/index.htm

Using the pages

Activity 1 Three wishes

This activity is designed to open up discussion about desire and craving as an introduction to the Four Noble Truths. It is useful to return to this activity following Activity 2 and ask students to reflect on any fresh insights and questions they may have.

Activity 2 The Four Sights

This activity uses simple drama and digital cameras to engage students with the impact of the Four Sights on the development of Siddhartha Gautama's thinking and teaching (P. Siddhattha Gotama).

Activity 3 The Parable of the Arrow

The Parable of the Arrow introduces the idea that the Buddha had made a diagnosis of the human condition and identified a cure, and a prescription to follow for the cure. It explains why the Buddha did not offer comment on speculative questions.

Activity 4 Ethical conduct

Students will need a response sheet (p.10) and a set of cards (pp. 8–9) for each group. The activity asks them to consider: the meaning of ethical conduct as expressed in some Buddhist texts; how some Buddhists express this in action; how students' own actions reflect their beliefs.



A version of the life of the Buddha for Activity 2 on p.6 is also available as a downloadable presentation available for subscribers.



See p.31 for a version of Activity 1 suited to lower-achieving students.



Suggestions for higher-achieving students can be found on p.32.

Outcomes

Students can demonstrate achievement at levels 4–6 in these activities if they can say 'yes' to some of these 'I can' statements:

Description of achievement:
I can ...

Level 4

- describe and link up Buddhist beliefs about ethical conduct and how Buddhists show this in their behaviour
- ask questions and suggest some answers about why Buddhists try to live ethically.

Level 5

- explain the impact for Buddhists of believing that there is a 'cure' for suffering
- connect my own views about causes and cures of suffering with the understandings expressed by Buddhists.

Level 6

- interpret Buddhist texts and use examples to give an informed account of what Buddhists mean by the Four Noble Truths
- express my own insights into the understanding of the causes and cure for suffering offered by Buddhism.

For the teacher

Where two spellings are given for key Buddhist terms, the first is in Sanskrit, with the Pali following in brackets e.g. karma (kamma) and duhkha (dukkha). Sanskrit is the language of the texts of the Mahayana school, while Pali is used in the Theravada school.