

What's Life All About?

Ultimate Questions

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Programme Two Outline

Asking the Questions

2 minutes

A kaleidoscope of images and questions introduces issues related to suffering, death and the meaning of life. Young people comment through a series of soundbites.

The Buddhist Teaching

2 minutes

Siddhartha's Quest

Using illustrated storyboards we recap the story of the **Four Sights**, the **Going Forth** and the **Enlightenment** of the Buddha.

The Three Marks of Existence

6 minutes

Three young men visit Vajraloka, a Buddhist retreat centre, to learn more about meditation. Through reflection on their own experience and observation of the natural world they are introduced to the Buddha's teaching of the Three Marks of Existence: **dukkha**, **anicca** and **anatta**. They also learn about the role of meditation for Buddhists.

Buddhists Respond

18 minutes

Filmed in situ, five practising Buddhists give their views on:

- **impermanence**
- **suffering**
- **death and the afterlife**

Contributors

Theravada - Most Venerable Vajiragnana **Tibetan Tradition** - Venerable Lama Yeshe
Soto Zen - Reverend Raymond **Japanese Pure Land** - Reverend Professor Sato
Friends of the Western Buddhist Order - Dharmacharini Maitreyi

Background Information

Setting

Vajraloka Buddhist Retreat Centre

Established in 1979 by the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, Vajraloka Retreat Centre for men is dedicated to the teaching and practice of meditation. Set in converted farm buildings on the hills above Corwen, North Wales, the centre offers retreats of one or two weeks' duration. Here those who have already learned to meditate may deepen their practice in quiet and supportive conditions, free from the distractions of everyday life. The Centre is not open to day visitors.

Vajraloka is one of a number of retreat centres within the FWBO. For further information about Vajraloka and women's and mixed retreats see Contacts, p 62.

Contributors

Venerable Lama Yeshe fled Tibet as a young man of 16 when the Chinese seized power. He is now Abbot of Samye Ling Monastery in Dumfriesshire, Scotland. A monastery in the **Tibetan** tradition (Karma Kagyu lineage), it is dedicated to the preservation of Tibetan religion, culture, medicine, art, architecture and handicrafts.

Most Venerable Vajiragnana is head monk of the London Buddhist Vihara. He is one of the most senior monks in the **Theravada** school resident in Britain.

Reverend Professor K.T. Sato runs the Three Wheels Temple in West London, the first establishment of the Japanese True **Pure Land**, (Jodo Shin Shu) school in Britain.

Dharmacharini Maitreyi, a member of the **Western Buddhist Order**, lives at Tiratanaloka, an FWBO retreat centre for women near Brecon, South Wales. She is a member of the team which prepares women for ordination into the Western Buddhist Order.

Reverend Raymond is a member of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. He lives at Throssel Hole Abbey, a monastery in the **Soto Zen** tradition in Northumberland.

Siddhartha's Quest



Key Points

- The Buddha was born **Siddhartha Gautama** around the year 560 BCE. He was a member of a wealthy aristocratic family of the Shakyan clan in what is now Nepal.
- For twenty-nine years he lived a protected and luxurious existence but found a life devoted to material pleasures empty and unfulfilling.
- Disobeying his father's orders he went out into the nearby city and saw **The Four Sights** - old age, sickness, death and a wandering holy man.
- These sights heightened his sense of dissatisfaction and his desire to find meaning in life. He decided to leave his privileged existence and **Go Forth**.
- He spent six years as a wandering Truth-seeker, learning from religious teachers and undertaking harsh ascetic practices as a path to the Truth.
- Following **The Middle Way** between the extremes of denial and self-indulgence he gained Enlightenment while meditating under a tree (afterwards known as the Bodhi Tree).
- Buddhists believe that at his **Enlightenment** the Buddha understood the nature of existence and discerned the cause of suffering.
- After his Enlightenment he was known as the **Buddha**, which means 'One who is awake [to the Truth about the way things are]'.

Key Points

The Three Marks of Existence

The Buddha taught that all existence has three fundamental characteristics or marks. These are known as the Three Lakshanas.

Dukkha - suffering or unsatisfactoriness

- is an inescapable aspect of life - we will all suffer old age, sickness and death
- includes emotional and psychological suffering
 - frequently one **gets** what one **doesn't want** and **doesn't get** what one **does want**!

Dukkha literally means an ill-fitting chariot wheel - like a ride in a chariot with an ill-fitting wheel, life is often bumpy and uncomfortable.

Anicca - impermanence

- all things come into existence dependent on conditions
- nothings stands still or lasts forever
- nowhere is there anything fixed, permanent or eternal

Anatta - no self

Because nothing is permanent there is

- no fixed unchanging essence or soul
- no unchanging creator God
- unlimited potential to change and grow

Buddhists recognise that in order to achieve wisdom they need to develop for themselves a deep understanding of these truths, through meditating and reflecting upon them.



Interview Transcripts



Theravada

Most Venerable
Vajiragnana

Head Monk
London Buddhist Vihara

Impermanence

Reality means everything changes all the time, whether animate or inanimate. We can't stop that, and we can see it in ourselves, because even our hopes and wishes do not remain the same. We do not like becoming old, losing our hair or having wrinkles on our face but it happens. We have no control over it; change is taking place in us all the time.

Suffering

Suffering exists everywhere in the world. We have to come to terms with it. If we are not strongly attached to ourselves we are not affected by it. Therefore what we have to do is to realise the nature of the world and come to terms with it. You can suffer from a stomach ache, but this is not the only suffering that the Buddha referred to; the Buddha was referring to our entire existence: we have a mind and body, these are changing all the time, that change brings us unhappiness, that is the suffering we are not free from.

Death and the Afterlife

We firmly believe that we will be born again after our death. Until we attain Enlightenment we continue to be born again and again. And that birth will be conditioned by what we did during our lifetime - if we do good things we will be born in a good environment; if we do bad things we will be born in a bad environment.

These transcripts from the video interviews have been edited, retaining the key points.



Tibetan Tradition

Venerable Lama Yeshe
Abbot
Samye Ling Monastery
& Tibetan Centre

Suffering

Buddhism tells us honestly about the causes of suffering. Lacking wisdom or experience of selflessness, we suffer because of our ego. So, if I want certain things I use all my energy to achieve them. I'll suffer if I don't achieve them, and if I do achieve them I'll suffer if I can't protect and keep them.

Death and the Afterlife

In Buddhism we say death is an opportunity. If I've been meditating, practising, if I have a proper knowledge of Buddhism, I can say that first, death is an opportunity to attain Buddhahood. I can attain Buddhahood by recognising the mental state of spaciousness. But if I miss that karmic link then I will be born into another life, according to my karma.

If we plough the field properly and plant our seeds we don't have to dig it up every now and then, to see how fast it's growing. We know it will definitely grow. Just so, if we have been good in our body and spiritual mind, our activities, the result will be good. So I don't need to hope.

Buddhists Respond **What's Life All About?**

Impermanence

I don't see impermanence as an idea; it's simply an observable reality. Everything is born, grows, decays and dies; and mountains and rivers are eroded and change their courses. The new physics shows us that even on an atomic level everything is indeterminate. Change is a fact of life but so often we deny that and try and 'fix' life according to our idea of how things need to be.

When we are sitting in the present moment, change is no longer something frightening. We're not trying to fit the situation to our expectations of it; we're simply being with what 'is' and responding to that as best we can!

Suffering

Buddhism distinguishes between pain and suffering: if you have a toothache there's the pain of the toothache, but there's also the stuff you lay on top of it, like, "This is awful!" Buddhism won't get rid of the toothache, but it will allow you to drop all that mental suffering.

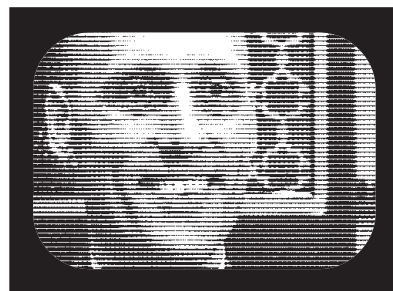
Meditation enables you to see where you are causing suffering for yourself and others, and to stop doing it. The habit will continue but gradually you can change the way you act.

Death and the Afterlife

The reason I became a Buddhist goes back to when I was about five or six years old, when I started to wonder about what happened after you died. When I was about thirteen, I became interested in astronomy and that really reactivated my awareness that death was common to all of us and ever-present. I had a sense of the vastness of the universe and how small I was. The fact that stars could explode and wipe out entire solar systems, and that our existence was so precarious, led me to ask "Why I am I here?"

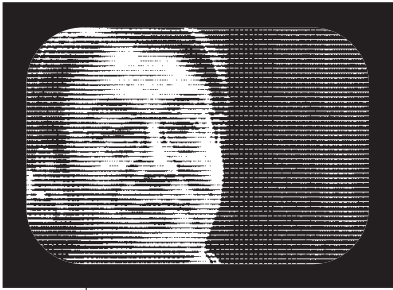
I don't have a set belief of exactly what's going to happen when I die. The important thing is to practise, to become more and more skilled at living from Buddha Nature from moment to moment; so at the moment of death we can go into that transition with full awareness of our unity with the Buddha Nature, with that greater life force. Then wherever it takes us is fine.

This transcript from the video interview has been edited, retaining the key points.

**Soto Zen**

Reverend Raymond
Order of
Buddhist Contemplatives

Throssel Hole Abbey



Pure Land

Reverend Professor
K.T. Sato

Head Priest
Three Wheels Temple

Interview Transcripts

Impermanence

The teaching of impermanence tells us that everything is always in the process of change, whether visibly or invisibly. What you understand could be true for a while but not everlasting. Thus the teaching of impermanence leads us to see things as constantly in a state of flux or, if you like, to accept the reality of the world as it is, including death. Do 'for the doing' what is important for you at the moment, but do so without attachment.

Suffering

There is so much suffering in our world brought about by discrimination on grounds of sex, class or race; fighting between groups, wars between parties or whole countries and so on. Those involved directly or indirectly suffer abominably.

At first sight, the cause of all this suffering appears very complicated and not readily attributable to selfish attachments within the human mind. It is, however, just such tenacious attachment - to possessions, standpoints, preconceptions etc - on the part of warring individuals or groups, that cause these problems. We have to solve problems between nations, just as between individuals, step by step.

Death and the Afterlife

In our tradition it is believed that we will be born in the Pure Land. Birth in the Pure Land is known as 'birth of no births'. Birth in the Pure Land is not birth in the sense of transmigration or reincarnation. When you are Enlightened, there is no more transmigration.

This transcript from the video interview has been edited, retaining the key points.

Buddhists Respond
What's Life All About?

The Meaning of Life

As a child I couldn't understand why other people believed in God; it seemed like a fairy tale invented to make people feel more secure.

From my early teens I wasn't satisfied with what life seemed to offer. I never wanted to get married. I studied philosophy thinking that that would give me the answers, and then I explored alternative lifestyles: I lived on a collective farm in Ireland with friends; I travelled widely and spent a year in India; I was involved with the Women's Liberation Movement. But none of these gave me what I was looking for.

Impermanence

The Buddha taught that everything is impermanent; everything is in process. I myself am in process, which means that I can change. I try to live my life with that truth in mind. Change means that we have a choice: we can change for the worse or for the better. What we can't do is stand still. So the Buddha's teaching is an encouragement to make an effort to change for the better: to experience more joy; higher states of consciousness.

Death and the Afterlife

We don't know what happens after death, do we? But it seems clear that we're not just our bodies; there is also consciousness and I believe that our consciousness continues after death in some way. It's as though this continuation of consciousness, tendencies that have become predominant in our lives, at some point will take rebirth. But that doesn't mean that I personally will be reborn.

Dhardo Rimpoche, whose ashes we have in the stupa here, devoted the whole of his life to teaching and spreading the Dharma. Somebody like him, who had developed their consciousness to a higher level during their lifetime, would, I'm sure, seek rebirth as soon as possible in order to continue their work.

This transcript from the video interview has been edited, retaining the key points.



FWBO

Dharmacharini Maitreyi

Western Buddhist Order