

Introducing Buddhist practice: information sheet for primary school teachers

Overview: This includes information about practising Buddhism and some important Buddhist teachings. The sheet includes: the symbolism of the lotus flower, what it means to go for refuge to the three jewels, the meaning of each of the jewels, the meaning of enlightenment and importance of meditation, the life of a Buddhist living in the west.

So we'll start this work sheet with a beautiful image which is very important in Buddhism: the image of a lotus flower.

The **lotus flower** (which looks like the lily shown on the right) is an important symbol in Buddhism. It represents spiritual growth and development and receptivity to the Buddha's teachings. It is said that shortly after the Buddha's enlightenment, he saw all human beings like lotuses. He realised that some beings were in full bloom, others had tight buds and others were still growing through the mud or the water of the pond towards the light. It seems that the Buddha meant that each of us have the capacity for growth and development, whether we are small shoots emerging from the mud on the pond floor, or in full blossom. The other point he seemed to be making is that each of us have the 'mud' of our personal challenges and obstacles to grow through and overcome on our unique spiritual journey!



The lotus can be a useful symbol in explaining personal growth and development to children, as they can probably fairly easily relate to the stages of growth of a flower from seed to blossom and the beauty it conveys.

Ask the children to imagine a flower growing from a seed through to a full blossom (perhaps do this as a guided visualisation for a few minutes). What do they think of as they imagine this? How do they feel? Suggest that our lives can be like the growth and cycles of a flower. If it helps, use props! (Seeds, a plant in bud, a fully blossoming flower, watering can, sun etc).

Enlightenment (full awakening) is the point at which the Buddha meditated under the bodhi tree, and *finally saw the way things really are*. In other words, he realised his answer to his lifelong quest for the truth about life, suffering and the spiritual life. He was in 'full bloom' at this point, if we go back to the lotus symbol! His answer was that one of the most important things is to meditate in order to develop our personal awareness and awareness of others, so that we naturally begin to live a more skilful life from this greater foundation of awareness. **'Skilful'** in this context, means living a non harming, generous, simple, truthful and mindful life, full of metta ("loving kindness" for all beings). He also realised that many of our problems in life are caused by our own actions (karma) and expectations and looking for happiness in the wrong places. If we live a skilful life, and meditate to develop our personal awareness, we will live with greater **wisdom**. The Buddha taught that we often create our own suffering, through what are called the three traditional **'poisons'** of greed, hatred and delusion. The opposites of these are generosity, loving kindness and wisdom.



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As a result of his realisations, the Buddha taught the importance of the ‘**three fold path**’ of ethics (acting skilfully), meditation and wisdom. This three fold path may be translated for children as: being kind, truthful and self and other regarding, sitting quietly and stilling our minds and bodies and seeing things in a clearer way.

The Three Jewels in Buddhism

Buddhists all over the world “go for refuge” (explained later) to the “three jewels”. These are the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha:



Buddha, the historical figure, Siddhartha Gautama, who realised enlightenment in Northern India. Buddha means ‘he who is fully awake’

Dharma, his teachings and the way he introduced meditation practice

Sangha, the spiritual community of Buddhist practitioners who practice the dharma (the teachings of the Buddha) together. It’s a little like the Christian equivalent of the congregation

The three jewels are a very traditional formulation in different Buddhist schools across the globe and very important in the life of a practising Buddhist.

For example, when you are ordained into the Western Buddhist Order, you wear a white ribbon around your neck (a “kesa”) when you are teaching or leading meditation. On this kesa the symbol (shown above) of the three jewels is embroidered. The symbol shows the three jewels as follows: the yellow jewel represents the Buddha, the blue jewel represents the Dharma, and the red jewel represents the Sangha. The jewels rest on a large red lotus (I’ve already said why lotuses are important!) the jewels are set against flames, which represent the flames of transformation. So when we each change, we can be seen like fire, as our ‘impurities’ are burnt away or transformed in an alchemical way, leaving our precious qualities. Wearing our kesas reminds us of this process and the commitment we have made in becoming ordained.

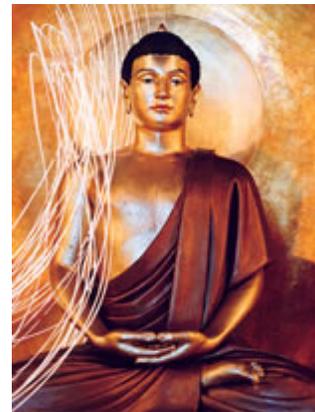


Photo of an ‘Amitayus’ shrine at the London Buddhist Centre.

So why are these three jewels so important?

The Buddha. The Buddha is a really important historical figure and global role model, given that he realised enlightenment. He’s also important in that his life showed that it is possible for all of us, should we choose to, to live a life with greater awareness of our own growth and development to bring about a kinder and wiser world. Before the life of the Buddha, we don’t hear of any other practitioners achieving enlightenment (although we hear stories of founders/teachers from other religions with amazing qualities). So the Buddha brought the truth of enlightenment into our awareness. Perhaps most importantly, he is often shown sitting in meditation, which reminds us of the importance of meditation in developing our awareness of ourselves and others.

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Give the children the chance to look at a Buddha figure in silence. What do they notice? How do they feel when they look at the Buddha figure? What words and images come to mind as they look at the Buddha?

The Dharma. These are the Buddha's teachings. There are many many different ways in which the Buddha's teachings were explained. One of the simplest teachings is captured in the words that the Buddha said on his deathbed: "all conditioned things are impermanent, with mindfulness strive on". In other words, life is constantly changing and we need to live mindfully in line with this truth to help our practice of Buddhism. The three fold path, mentioned above, is another important teaching, as is the law of karma. Karma simply means 'action' and it draws our attention to the fact that our actions have consequences, whether positive or negative, which we can see in our own experience if we pay attention to the way we live.

Meditation. The other aspect of the Buddha's teaching which is really important is meditation. As the three fold way points out, we need ethics and meditation in order to become wiser people. There are many forms of meditation practice, developed by the different schools of Buddhism throughout the world.

Ask the children to think of two things that have happened to them lately. One where they were unhappy, or caused someone else to be unhappy, and one where they were pleased or caused someone else to be pleased and positive. Ask them to think about what happened in detail, and how they felt in each situation. This begins the process of encouraging children to think more fully about the effects of their own consequences and how this links to karma.



Two practices which we teach are the **mindfulness of breathing** and the **metta bhavana** (or cultivation of loving kindness). The mindfulness of breathing is an ancient practice, and was taught by the Buddha (and legend has it, he practiced it the night he was enlightened). It basically focuses upon the breath coming in and out of the body. The metta bhavana teaches us to develop the kindness to wish all living beings well, through sending loving kindness or compassion to ourselves, our friend, someone we know less well, our enemy, and then extending that compassion all that lives. So meditation is an important part of Buddhist teachings.

Try leading through a stilling exercise, so the children can understand the benefits of sitting still and relaxing first hand.

The Sangha. The sangha is the spiritual community. In an everyday sense, this is the people who we practice with at the Buddhist Centre. Spiritual friendship is a very very important part of Buddhist practice. The Buddha himself is reported as saying that friendship is "the whole of the spiritual life". The picture on the right shows a sangha gathering together to practice together in a shrine room, with the Buddha figure at the front of the room.

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In a more esoteric sense, the 'arya' sangha includes all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas (those who want to achieve enlightenment to help all sentient beings) who want to support us to be more ethical, meditative and wise.

Ask the children who they care about most in their lives. Why do they care about them so? How do they feel when they think of these people?

Going for Refuge.

At the point of ordination in many traditions, practitioners make a commitment to **'going for refuge'** to the three jewels. This means that these people have decided that they want to continually place the three jewels at the heart of their lives, so that the way they live is guided by a deepening awareness of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

What does going for refuge mean? 'Taking refuge' means that you place your heart upon something, in this case the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. You take refuge in the knowledge that living and practising from an understanding of the Buddha's teachings will gradually bring peace, clarity, kindness, courage etc. It's not always easy to go for refuge to the three jewels as we often fall into old, ingrained habits, so we need a lot of patience, kindness, friends and a long-term perspective!

We all go to refuge a lot of the time. The refuges we choose can be more or less positive, depending on our mood and our habits. For example, in our society there is great emphasis on material possessions e.g. shopping and wealth. So some people might go for refuge to shopping, others to chocolate and their new car! Of course, there is nothing wrong with shopping, chocolate or new cars. It's just that we sometimes think that that thing/activity is going to bring us everlasting happiness, as we seek to make ourselves happy. In fact, taken to the extreme, it can often have the opposite effect and the more we have, the more we want. This wanting (traditionally known as 'craving') can make us unhappier and more grasping, moving away from a simpler, more centred state of peacefulness with ourselves and ease with our lives.

Retreat. It can be really useful for a practising Buddhist to take time to go on retreat. This means that you literally retreat or leave behind your 'normal life' (including email, mobile, i-pod, TV etc!) to spend more time meditating,

studying and learning about the Dharma with like minded people. The photo to the right shows the view from Dhanakosa, a Buddhist retreat centre in Scotland. Some

Buddhists go on much longer retreats. For example, some friends have just returned from a 3 month retreat in the mountains in Spain. Women (and men) being ordained are also likely to go on a longer retreat.



Dhanakosa retreat centre,
Scotland

Other events in the life of a western Buddhist...

As well as making time to go on retreat, here's a few of the other things Buddhists friends might do...

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- Work. The majority of Buddhists work to support themselves and their families, if they have one
- Live alone, or with their partner, or friends, or in a community of Buddhists
- Lead study, courses and meditation about Buddhism
- Be part of a group of fellow Buddhists to share thoughts and ideas about their practice
- Visit schools to talk about Buddhism. The photo below shows a shrine from a school visit



- Spend time with family and friends
- Practice meditation at the Buddhist Centre together, in the shrine room
- Meet together on Buddhist festival days to recall the life and death of the Buddha and his teachings
- Go to the ordination ceremonies of friends being ordained
- Socialise together with Buddhist and non Buddhist friends

What do you enjoy doing as part of your everyday life? Which activities do you enjoy most, and why? If you practice a religion or faith, where do you go to practice your faith, what do you do, and who's a part of your spiritual community?

Photo credits:

All the author's (Kamalamani) own photos, apart from the Amitabha rupa from the website of the London Buddhist Centre: <http://meditationlondon.org/> and Dhanakosa from their website: <http://www.dhanakosa.com/>