

Ways of Holiness in Buddhism

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What do Buddhists consider holy ?

The word 'Holy' normally refers to something that is associated with God, or something that is regarded as sacred. One may be called "holy" for his or her devotion to the service of God, or because he or she is considered morally or spiritually pure.

Buddhism seldom uses the word holy. The word that is more commonly used in Buddhism, is purification. The practice of Buddhism, is the path of purification. This touches on the fundamental difference between the teachings of Buddhism, and other religions.

In Buddhism, the Buddha is not regarded as a god, but as a great teacher. Through his practice, he realised why there are dissatisfactions in this world, and how these sufferings come about. He also found the way to end the suffering. He proved that as long as we eliminate the causes of suffering, our suffering ends.

The Buddha disentangled himself from suffering. With great compassion, the Buddha spent the rest of his life, teaching about the methods of practice, in order that we might get rid of the causes of our sufferings. The teachings of the Buddha explain why there are dissatisfactions in life, how they come about, and how to end them.

The Buddha taught us that all the sufferings and dissatisfaction that we have in our lives, come from ourselves. Our sufferings are not caused through anyone else. It is due to our ignorance and craving, that we create the causes of our sufferings.

We are ignorant about the truth of life. We are attached to ourselves and the things that we see. We are self-centred and are always thinking about 'I', and 'mine'. We want to protect 'I' and 'mine'. Because of this self-centredness, jealousy, hatred, greed and pride arise. Our speech, actions and thoughts are not free from these defiled elements. Hence, whatever we do, we cannot be pure. We are not free from personal views and self-attachments.

Whatever we have done through our speech, actions and mind, has left behind an influential power. This is what we call Karma in Buddhism. The unwholesome karma will lead us to suffering. Our sufferings come from our own actions. They are not inflicted upon us by anyone else.

Buddhism emphasizes self-responsibility. In order to reduce our suffering, we must learn to reduce our defilements of greed, hatred, and ignorance. By reducing the causes of our suffering, we can have less suffering. By cultivating more wholesome and pure karma, we will have more causes that lead to our

happiness and freedom. We can have more contentment, and finally end our suffering.

To practice Buddhism, is to learn to eliminate the defiled elements in ourselves. Then we will have less and less greed, hatred, and ignorance. When we are free from greed, hatred, and ignorance, we can be at peace and at ease. We say that practising the teachings of the Buddha, is a path of purification. The cause of suffering was created by ourselves, and therefore our own efforts are required to eliminate it. No one can help us eliminate our suffering.

There is a saying in the Dhammapada (verse 165) :

By ourselves is evil done;
By ourselves we pain endure.
By ourselves we cease from ill;
By ourselves become we pure.
No one can save us but ourselves;
No one can and no one may.
We ourselves must walk the path,
Buddhas only point the way.

Ways of holiness in Buddhism is a path of purification. It is a path of eliminating our defilements such as greed, hatred, and ignorance, and developing the wisdom to see the truth of life.

Ordinary ways of Buddhist holiness

Prayer

Buddhists do not “pray” in the common Australian interpretation of the word. Common praying, is often related to expressing, and even fuelling, our desires and attachments for other things. For example, it is very common in Australian society, for our friends to tell us, “You had better pray for your good luck !” Or, “You should pray to win the race, to get another job, or to find another partner !” This is not the Buddha’s practice, nor the Buddha’s advice !

Instead Buddhists commonly chant prayers aloud. Why do Buddhists do this ? What do Buddhists chant ? What is the significance of chanting in Buddhism ?

Buddhists chant and recite words or verses in praise of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Buddhists chant and recite sermons (sutras) of the Buddha. They also chant and recite short phrases or syllables that symbolise certain teachings, or qualities of the Buddha. These help us to recall either the essence of a particular teaching, or a special quality of the Buddha.



The reason why Buddhists chant and recite such verses, is to remind themselves of the qualities, and teachings, of the Buddha. Chanting and reciting verses, is a time for us to reflect upon ourselves and our own actions. Have I been doing what the Buddha taught ? Have I been improving myself in following the Buddha’s teachings ? Are my defilements becoming less ?

It is a time for spiritual development. It helps us to strengthen our faith and determination in following the teachings. It is also a time for us to focus our mind on pure elements, and to get our mind away from daily chaos and defilements.

Chanting helps us to concentrate, and to develop a calm and peaceful state of mind. With this peacefulness of mind, we can develop our wisdom.

Meditation

Why do Buddhists meditate ? How can meditation help us in our daily life ? What are the different ways of meditation ? Meditation helps us to recollect our scattered mind, so that our mind can focus on pure elements, and we can be more mindful about what we are doing. Meditation helps to strengthen our mind-power so that we can be a master of ourselves, and subdue our defilements

Meditation helps us cultivate peacefulness and calmness in ourselves, and helps us to develop wisdom. There are different ways of meditation, such as meditation on breathing, or loving kindness.



Why do Buddhists worship? Buddhists worship to show their respect to the Buddha, and to look upon the Buddha as our role model and goal. Buddhists usually use the term, “pay respects” rather than “worship”. We pay respect to remind ourselves of the merits and virtues of the Buddha. We pay respect to thank, and to remind ourselves of the Buddha’s teachings. We also pay respect to remind ourselves to practice and to cultivate the merits and virtues of the Buddha, and particularly to strengthen our faith and determination in practising the Buddha’s path.

Buddhists bow and prostrate to shrines for all these reasons, as well as to develop our “Anatta”. Anatta is the characteristic of non-self, or selflessness/egolessness. This is another very special and unique teaching of the Buddha, and a characteristic very often confused or misinterpreted by others.

When we prostrate, we put our head, our body, and our ego, below that of the Buddha shrine or image. Hopefully this will help us to see how imperfect we are, as compared with the great virtues and wisdom of the Buddha. There is nothing for us to be too proud of in ourselves. In this way, we practise to reduce our self-pride and self-attachment, which is another way of reducing our ego, and therefore our sufferings.

Offerings at the shrine

Often at Buddhist monasteries, there are flowers, fruits, incense, water, or lights around the Buddha statues or images. Why is this ?

These flowers, fruits, incense, water, and lights are considered as offerings to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Each of these has a special meaning.

Flowers – These convey the meaning impermanence. We know that flowers don’t last very long. After a few days they will wilt and die. This reminds us to be mindful of impermanence. Things will change. Change is occurring at every moment. But most changes are so small we don’t notice them.

The Buddha taught us that the dissatisfactions and sufferings in this world are due to impermanence. Our attachments and ideas of having or keeping things permanently. We should learn to hold onto things lightly, keeping in mind that things are always changing.

Fruits – These also convey the meaning impermanence. There is usually only four plates, or types of

fruits that are placed on the altar tables. Why four ? Well the four fruits represent the four stages of fruition of the Arhat.

- First fruition (Srotapanna) – Stream Winner
- Second fruition (Sakradagami) – Once-Returner
- Third fruition (Anagami) – Non-Returner
- Fourth fruition (Arhat) – Noble One

Incense – This is also a reflection of impermanence. As soon as the incense is lit, it will inevitably burn down. The perfume it releases, will soon rise and disperse, filling the environment with a sweet smell. But this is only temporary. Where there is a beginning, there must be an ending. Where there is birth, there is death.

Knowing that time is limited, we should use it wisely. The nice aroma of the incense, also reminds us to purify ourselves. Hopefully, instead of relying on external fragrance, we can create and exude nice and pure aroma from within !

Water – The small glasses of water on the altar represent purity. The Buddha has three perfections; – wisdom, compassion and loving kindness, and purity. When offering water to the Buddha, we should reflect on the Buddha’s purity. We should hold his purity dear in our hearts, as a goal for us to attain.



Water also has the characteristic of cooling. It reminds us to cool down our hatred, anger, and jealousy, to cleanse our inner mind, and to stay cool and calm all times.

Light – The various forms of light (candle, electric etc...) are a reflection of the Buddha’s wisdom. The teachings of the Buddha are like guiding lights, that lead us from the darkness of ignorance, to the brightness of wisdom and knowing. The light also reminds us, that we should try to bring up the light within ourselves one day !

Combined together, these various offerings beautify the altar and the Buddha statues, reflecting our respect and appreciation to the great sage. Though of course, the best offering we can make, is to practice and live our daily lives in accordance with what the Buddha taught.

Special ways of holiness

There are those people that prefer to devote their lives to practising, and to passing on the Buddha’s teachings. These are the monks and nuns (like myself), who choose to lead a monastic life. In Buddhism, monks and nuns are collectively called the Sangha. The Sangha have many more rules and precepts to observe and follow than lay-Buddhists. The Buddha set these rules for the monks and nuns with only one purpose, - to help the Sangha cut their attachments to this life and to this body, to cut their suffering, and to purify their minds.

We may also practice to attain the higher levels of meditation. However, this requires years of devotion and daily practice. It also requires practice in seclusion.

In conclusion, I hope these explanations may help you understand the Buddhist approach to practice. I hope also that it has given you some time to reflect on your own practice or religion, and to value the good things in all human beings.

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