BUDDHISM

Worship Practices

The most common form of Buddhist worship is meditation (deep thought or reflection) before sacred images of the Buddha. Believers may meditate before shrines in their homes or in temples. They may offer gifts of food, flowers, or candles out of respect for or worship of the Buddha. (Some Buddhists consider the Buddha a god, though he himself did not.) Both in temples and at home, worshipers burn incense and light candles before images of the Buddha. The light of the candles recalls the light of Buddha’s wisdom.

Ritual

One of the most important symbols in Buddhist ritual and art is the lotus flower, which has acquired deep religious meaning over the centuries. The lotus flower takes root in mud but blossoms on the surface of tranquil water. Through the lotus, Buddhists are reminded that the spiritual life of a believer can blossom in enlightenment even though it is rooted in the impurity of the world and the heart.

References to the lotus occur in early Buddhist scriptures. As a result of the long tradition about the lotus, worshipers often offer lotus flowers at shrines and temples. Festival days, such as the Buddha’s birthday, provide special occasions for offering the lotus.

**Worship Practices**

Statues of the Buddha, such as this one in China, appear in shrines throughout Asia. Buddhists strive to follow the Buddha’s teachings through meditation, a form of religious contemplation. They also make offerings at shrines, temples, and monasteries.

**Ritual**

Women in Rangoon, Myanmar, sweep the ground so that monks can avoid stepping on and killing any insects. Many Buddhists believe in rebirth, the idea that living beings, after death, are reborn and continue to exist. Buddhists believe that all living beings possess the potential for spiritual growth—and the possibility of rebirth as humans.

**Leadership**

Those who dedicate their entire life to the teachings of the Buddha are known as Buddhist monks and nuns. In many Buddhist sects, monks are expected to lead a life of poverty, meditation, and study. Here, Buddhist monks file past shrines in Thailand. To learn humility, monks must beg for food and money.

**Creating a Glossary of Key Words**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dharma</td>
<td>Buddha’s teachings</td>
<td>Buddha taught that the key to happiness was detachment from worldly desires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rebirth</td>
<td>The idea that living beings, after death, are reborn</td>
<td>Rebirth allows people the possibility for spiritual growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meditation</td>
<td>A form of religious contemplation</td>
<td>Buddhists use meditation to help them follow the Buddha’s teachings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**World Religions and Ethical Systems**

**Sects**

Buddhists are united in their respect for the Buddha and in their search for nirvana (enlightenment and liberation from suffering). But various groups understand the Buddha’s message in somewhat different ways.

Theravada Buddhism is marked by an effort to stay as close as possible to the Buddha’s recorded teachings. The Theravada ideal is the arhat, a saint who reaches nirvana alone. The arhat’s pursuit of nirvana is carried out in a monastery, away from the world.

Mahayana Buddhism is more accepting of change and of the world. It considers reaching nirvana as an effort of all believers working together. The Mahayana ideal is the bodhisattva, a human who delays personal nirvana and returns to the world by rebirth to help others attain nirvana.

**Leadership**

There are significant religious and social differences in the leadership styles of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism.

Theravada Buddhists try to follow the Buddha’s own ideas on what an ideal society should be like. In his view, the king, the monks, and the laity (ordinary people) had important responsibilities to one another. For example, monks guided the spiritual development and schooling of the community as well as gave advice and resolved conflict. Laypeople, in return, had to provide support to the monks in the form of money and food.

Mahayana Buddhists tend to downplay Buddhism as a social force and concentrate more on its spiritual features.

---

**Analyzing a Primary Source**

**Class Time** 30 minutes

**Task** Expressing the ideas of Buddhist scripture in everyday language

**Purpose** To understand a primary source better

**Instructions** Have students get together with a partner and read the excerpt from the *Dhammapada*. Ask them to rewrite the excerpt in their own words. Explain that the pronouns *him* and *he* in the excerpt refer to a Buddhist follower. The excerpt might be rewritten as follows:

> A Buddhist follower should be happy with his or her own belongings and not be jealous of what others have. The follower who is jealous of others will not be able to meditate and achieve happiness.

Have students discuss the ideas expressed in the excerpt with their partner. Have they ever envied another’s belongings? How did envying that person make them feel? *(Students will probably say that they felt dissatisfied and unhappy).* How does the excerpt support what they learned about the Buddhist belief in the key to happiness? *(The Buddha taught that the key to happiness was to let go of possessions.)*