Buddhism is a religion which is not based on belief in a unique creator God, but on a path of ethical discipline, meditative cultivation of good qualities, and wisdom aimed at understanding and ending greed, hatred and delusion, seen as the roots of suffering and of repeated rebirths. It aims at the realization of the timeless goal of Nirvana and helping others move towards this. It has strong dimensions of ethics, psychology, mental training and philosophy, as well as more obviously 'religious' aspects such as faith, rituals and a structure of beliefs about the nature of reality and a transcendent goal.

Buddhism accepts that there are a range of divine beings called *deva*s or 'illustrious ones'. These are generally seen as 'gods', in the sense that they dwell in heavenly realms and live for a very long time, and some can beneficially interact with humans. They are not seen as eternal, though, and the Buddha is seen as the 'teacher of *deva*s and humans', as he showed to all beings, even *deva*s, the path to liberation from the round of rebirths and the gross and subtle forms of suffering involved in these. So there is a sense in which Buddhism is polytheistic, yet as its *focus* is not on the gods, it could be said to be 'trans-polytheistic'. Indeed, one can practise Buddhism without needing to concern oneself with *deva*s, and many Western Buddhists do just this.

The Buddha did not accept that any deity created the world or its beings. He saw no need for a creator of the universe, as he saw no ultimate beginning to it.[1] He taught that the gods of the heavenly realms are themselves trapped within the round of rebirths like all other unliberated beings, and that the physical world develops by natural laws, like all other conditioned phenomena. As the Theravādin commentator Buddhaghosa (fifth century CE) says:

> For there is no god Brahmā,
> The maker of the conditioned world of rebirths.
> Phenomena alone flow on,
> Conditioned by the coming together of causes. (*Vism*.603)

The most well-known forms of monotheism are the three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – but monotheism is also found within Hinduism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism and the Bahai tradition. All see what they call God in somewhat different ways, but with many common elements.[2] Of

[1] Theistic religions sometimes see God as creating time along with the world; Thomas Aquinas saw God as having created time with an absolute beginning, with no time 'before' it. Nevertheless, Buddhism sees no need for a transcendent support for the network of mutually supporting conditions that is the 'world'.

[2] I would like to acknowledge the help of Perry Schmidt-Leukel, of the University of Münster, and Elizabeth J. Harris, currently President of the European Network of Buddhist Christian Studies, for feedback on a draft of this Element.

course for most of its history, Buddhism has been familiar with the forms of monotheism, and the related belief in a creator God, found within Indian religions, especially Hinduism, but in time also in Islam.

In order to understand Buddhist perspectives on monotheism, it is of course necessary to introduce some key Buddhist ideas that explain the Buddhist orientations.

1 The Indian Religious Context of the Rise and Development of Buddhism

In its country of origin, India, Buddhism was surrounded by Brahmanism/Hinduism, which contains many theistic strands, as well as non-theistic ones. Buddhists were thus aware of the idea of a single creator God (Great Brahmā) and an impersonal divine essence (*Brahman*), but critiqued or sidestepped these.

The Buddha (Pali Siddhattha Gotama, Skt Siddhārtha Gautama, *c.*484–404 BCE) interacted with many Brahmins (*Brāhmaṇa*s), the priests of Brahmanism. Their oral canon of texts, the *Veda*, included early hymns to a variety of gods, texts detailing how to perform sacrifices to them, and the *Upaniṣad*s, which focussed on the impersonal sacred power of *Brahman*, which had been seen as the force manipulated in the sacrificial rituals, but came to be seen as the unifying substance underlying the whole cosmos. It was also seen as identical with the *Ātman*, the universal Self which the yogic element of the Indian tradition had sought deep within the mind. By true knowledge of this identity, it was held, a person could attain liberation from reincarnation after death and merge back into *Brahman*.

A key term of Brahmanical thought was *Dharma*, seen as an uncreated order of the universe and human society, sustained by the gods and by rightly performed ritual and embodied in specific duties (*dharma*s) assigned to each social class. *Dharma* includes both how things are (cf. a 'law' of physics) and how they should be (cf. a legal 'law'); it is the existent ideal standard (cf. the standard metre rule in Paris). In Buddhism, *Dharma* (Skt, Pali *Dhamma*) is also a central term. Here, the emphasis is not on fixed social duties, but primarily on the nature of reality, practices aiding understanding of this, and practices informed by an understanding of this, all aiding a person to live a happier life and to move closer to liberation.

At the time of the Buddha, most Brahmins aimed at attaining the heaven of the creator god Brahmā by means of truthfulness, study of the Vedic teachings and either sacrifice or austerities. Some were saintly, but others seem to have been haughty and wealthy, supporting themselves by putting on large, expensive and bloody sacrifices, often paid for by kings. At its popular level,

Brahmanism incorporated practices based on protective magic spells, and pre-Brahmanical spirit-worship no doubt continued.

In the Buddha's day, there were also various non-Brahmanical groups of renunciants (Pali *samaṇa*, Skt *śramaṇa*): wandering thinkers who were somewhat akin to the early Greek philosophers and mystics. They rejected the Vedic tradition and wandered free of family ties, living by alms, in order to think, debate and investigate. They included the Jains, fatalists, materialists, sceptics and then the Buddhists.

In later centuries, as Brahmanism broadened out into what is generally called Hinduism, new ideas developed. Some emphasized the idea of *Brahman*, as an impersonal absolute that was both the source and the underlying substance of everything. New forms of theism also developed: some saw Śiva as the almighty personal God, some saw Viṣṇu in this way – in his case, he was seen to have incarnated himself a number of times, for example as Rāma, as Kṛṣṇā and even as the Buddha (to mislead those who were 'deluded') – and some saw the Mother Goddess Devī in this way. These can be seen as kinds of 'alternative monotheisms', in which those who focussed on one of these three saw the others as lesser aspects of him/her, or as lower forms of deity, along with many others. For some, Brahmā was the creator, Viṣṇu the preserver and Śiva the destroyer (of one cycle of things, prior to their recreation by Brahmā). These were all rivals to Buddhism in India, and Hinduism and Buddhism philosophically criticized each other, with Buddhists sometimes also persecuted.

2 The Different Traditions of Buddhism

The most important bearers of the Buddhist tradition have been the monks and nuns who make up the Buddhist *Saṅgha* or spiritual 'Community'. All branches of the *Saṅgha* trace their ordination line back to one or other of the early monastic fraternities, but of the early schools of thought, only that which became known as the Theravāda has continued to this day. Its name indicates that it purports to follow the 'teaching' which is 'ancient' or 'primordial' (*thera*): that is, the Buddha's teaching. While it has not remained static, it has kept close to what we know of the early teachings of Buddhism, and preserved their emphasis on attaining liberation by one's own efforts, using the Buddha's teachings as a guide: 'You yourself must make the effort; the *Tathāgata*s [Buddhas] only show the way' (*Dhammapada* v.276). The language of its texts and rituals is primarily Pali.

From the first century BCE, a movement began which led to a new style of Buddhism known as the Mahāyāna, or 'Great Vehicle'. This has been more overtly innovative than the Theravāda and other early schools, so that for many

centuries, Indian Mahāyānists continued to compose new scriptures. Mahāyāna texts came to be preserved mainly in Sanskrit in India, though now they mostly exist in Chinese and Tibetan translations of these.

The Mahāyāna is characterized by a more overt emphasis on compassion, devotion to a number of holy saviour beings, and several sophisticated philosophies, developed by extending the implications of the earlier teachings. In the course of time, in India and beyond, the Mahāyāna produced many schools of its own, such as Zen. The Mahāyāna came to express belief in a range of heavenly beings of a more specifically Buddhist nature than *deva*s. These are, firstly, advanced '*Bodhisattva*s': compassionate beings on the long path to Buddhahood. In the later stages of this path, they are seen to be powerful heavenly beings who inspire and aid those beings further down the path. The Mahāyāna also accepts the existence of many heavenly Buddhas, spread throughout the worlds of the vast universe. None of these is seen to have created the universe, but some are seen to have generated 'Pure Lands' where the conditions for attaining enlightenment are ideal.

One group which developed by the sixth century in India, and which is sometimes seen as separate from the Mahāyāna, is what came to be known as the Vajrayāna, or 'Vehicle of the Thunderbolt'. It is mostly the same as the Mahāyāna in its doctrines, but developed a range of powerful new *practices* to attain the goals of the Mahāyāna, such as the meditative repetitions of sacred words of power (*mantra*s) and complex visualization practices. It included Buddhicized forms of ideas, symbolism and practices drawn from new forms of the worship of the Hindu god Śiva (Harvey, 2013: 181).

While Buddhism is now only a minority religion within the borders of modern India, its spread beyond India means that it is currently found in three areas in Asia:

- Southern Buddhism, where the Theravāda school is found: mainly Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos.
- East Asian Buddhism, where the Chinese transmission of Mahāyāna Buddhism is found: China (including Taiwan) except for Tibetan and Mongolian areas, Vietnam, Korea and Japan.
- Northern Buddhism, where the Tibetan transmission of Buddhism is found. Here the Vajrayāna is the dominant form: Tibetan areas within contemporary China and India, Tibetan and other areas in Nepal, Mongolia and Bhutan.

Since the nineteenth century, with a large boost in the second half of the twentieth century, Buddhism has, in many of its Asian forms, also been

spreading in Europe, the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, as well as being revived in India.

When we look at the variety of forms that Buddhism has developed over the centuries and in different Asian cultures, we can see as much variety as exists within the Abrahamic family of religions. In that sense, Buddhism is as much a family of religions as one religion. In this Element, we focus at first on key Buddhist principles as expressed in the Theravāda tradition, and then introduce some relevant key features of the Mahāyāna.

3 The Historical Buddha and Past Buddhas

The historical Buddha is seen as one in a line of enlightened beings arising across the eons in our world. A term that the Buddha often used of himself, as an enlightened being, was *Tathāgata*, literally 'Thus-come' or 'Thus-gone' – what is 'thus' being the actuality of reality – in the sense of 'One-attuned-to-reality'. It is held that he became a Buddha after many lives as a *Bodhisatta*, a being (Pali *satta*, Skt *satva*) who is dedicated to attaining *bodhi*: 'enlightenment', 'awakening', Buddhahood. At *bodhi* there arises 'vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light' (*S*.V.422) and '*bodhi*' is related to *bujjhati*, 'understands', in the sense of 'rising from the slumber of the continuum of the (moral and spiritual) defilements' (*Asl*.217).

It is held that a 'hundred thousand eons and four incalculable periods ago', in one of his past lives, Gotama was an ascetic who met and was inspired by a previous Buddha, Dīpaṅkara. He knew that, while he could become an enlightened disciple of Dīpaṅkara, an *Arahat*, the path he had chosen instead would take many lives to complete. It would, however, culminate in his becoming a perfect Buddha (Pali *sammā-sambuddha*, Skt *samyak-sambuddha*), one who would bring benefit to countless beings by rediscovering and teaching the timeless truths of *Dhamma* in a period when they had been forgotten by the human race (*Bvms*.2A.56). He then spent many lives, as a human, animal and god, building up the moral and spiritual perfections necessary for Buddhahood. These lives are described in what are known as *Jātaka* stories (*Jat.*, e.g. *BS1*.24–30). Over the eons, he also met other past Buddhas (Harvey, 2007b: 161a–165a); the *Dīgha Nikāya* names six (*D*.II.2–9), and the *Buddhavaṃsa* lists twenty-three. In his penultimate life, he was born in the Tusita (Skt Tuṣita) heaven, the realm where the *Bodhisatta* Metteyya (Skt Maitreya), the Friendly One, now lives, ready for a future period in human history when Buddhism will have become extinct and he can become the next Buddha.[3]

[3] *D*.III.76; *BTTA*.22; *BS1*.238–42; *BS2*.12; *EB*.1.9 and Malalasekera, 1974, vol. 2: 660–2.

The early texts clearly see the conception and the other key events of Gotama's life, such as his birth, awakening, first sermon and death, as events of cosmic importance, for at all of them they say that light spread throughout the world and the earth shook.

After a comfortable early life as the son of the elected aristocratic ruler of a small republic (though later seen as a prince, the son of a king), Gotama reflected, in his twenties, on the 'ageing, sickness and death' that we are all subject to. After seeing a religious wanderer, he set out on his own religious quest to seek that which was beyond 'ageing, sickness and death': the 'unborn', 'deathless', Nirvana (Pali *Nibbāna*, Skt *Nirvāṇa*). Wandering as a mendicant supported by alms-food, he first learnt and mastered two very subtle mystical yogic states, 'the sphere of no-thingness' and 'the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception'. While he later incorporated these in his own meditation system, he did not see them as going far enough on their own. So he then tried another method of the day: ascetic mastery over the body and bodily desires, by extreme fasting, non-washing and painful breath-holding. While he became good at this, he came to see that this forceful approach was a spiritual dead end.

Wondering whether his quest was a futile one, he then remembered a meditative state he had attained in his youth, which came to be called the 'first *jhāna*' (Pali *jhāna* is *dhyāna* in Skt): the first meditative absorption. This was a state beyond attachment to the body and its desires, but full of joy and happiness, and attained by mindfulness and calm concentration, not forceful willpower. He thus decided to revisit this state, as he felt that it offered a way to liberation. After reattaining physical health by taking sustaining food, he sat beneath a tree to again attain the first *jhāna*, probably by using mindfulness of breathing. After a while, he overcame the five hindrances to meditative calm and wisdom: desire for sense-pleasures, ill-will, dullness and drowsiness, restlessness and worry and vacillating doubt.

The *Sutta* account (*M*.I.247–9 (*BW*.64–7)) describes how he entered the first *jhāna*, and then gradually deepened his state of concentrated calm till he reached the fourth *jhāna*, a state of great equanimity, mental brightness and purity. Based on this state, he went on to develop, in the course of one night, the 'threefold knowledge': memory of many of his countless previous lives, seeing the rebirth of others according to their karma, and the destruction of the *āsava*s (Skt *āśravas*): intoxicating inclinations which keep one unawakened by attachment to sense-pleasures, to a particular way-of-being and identity, and to spiritual ignorance. The third knowledge, completed at dawn, brought the perfect awakening he had been seeking, so that he was now, at the age of thirty-five, a Buddha, one 'awakened' to the nature of reality and the unconditioned, Nirvana.

4 Rebirth

It is said not just that we have had 'many' past lives, but that we have had *innumerable* ones. On the night of his awakening, the Buddha is said to have remembered more than 100,000 (*M*.I.22). The Buddhist view, in fact, is that there is no known beginning to the cycle of rebirths or to the world: 'Inconceivable is any beginning of this wandering on [from rebirth to rebirth;] an earliest point is not discerned of beings who, obstructed by spiritual ignorance and fettered by craving, run and wander on' (*S*.II.178 (*BW.* 37–40)). However far back in time one goes, there must have been prior conditions for whatever beings existed at that time. Hence, it should not be said that the Buddha remembered 'all' his past lives.

One word used to refer to the cycle of rebirths is *saṃsāra*, 'wandering on', which indicates that the process is seen as a long and often aimless one of wandering between good and bad rebirths according to the natural results of one's karma. It is also known as *puna-bbhava*, or re-becoming – becoming this being, then another, then another. It is not seen as having any in-built purpose, which it could only have if it were created with a purpose in mind. Only conscious beings and the things they make can have a 'purpose', in the sense of having a goal, or being made to aid in attaining a goal. The world as such just is as it is. However, as its nature and structure is understood, humans can choose this set of purposes: living in the world as ethically and harmoniously as possible, acting in a way which leads to happier future rebirths – and ultimately to attaining liberation from the round of any and all rebirths – by experiencing Nirvana, the highest reality, experienced by transcending attachment to the conditioned realm, *saṃsāra*. In this way also, life is given a fulfilling overall 'meaning'.

That the overall flow of the world has no in-built purpose or direction is reflected in the Buddhist idea that the universe goes through cyclical phases of arising and passing away (see Section 11), and human society and its general ethical level also goes through cyclical phases of decline and improvement (*Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta: D*.III.58–79). So the world has a pattern, but not an overall direction of travel.

5 Karma

For Buddhism, the specifics of our wandering from life to life are not seen as either random or determined by a God, but as decided by the nature of our intentional action, or karma (Pali *kamma*, Skt *karma*; Harvey, 2013: 39–43). Intentional actions are seen to later naturally produce certain results for the person who did the action. Karmic results are not 'rewards' or 'punishments',

as there is not seen to be any God handing out the results. Neither are the results set up as 'lessons to learn', though a person may hopefully develop insights by reflection on life events as possible results of prior behaviour. Karmic results are seen simply as natural results, arising from a kind of law of nature. A common simile is that a karma is like a seed, and its results are like the fruits that develop from the seed. As is said in Christianity, 'as you sow, so you reap' (Galatians 6:7).

Good actions lead to pleasant results and good character traits, and bad ones to unpleasant results and bad character traits. Bad actions are those arising from greed, hatred or delusion, and are seen to sow seeds in the mind that naturally mature in unpleasant experiences and rebirth in one of the lower rebirths (but beings in these lower rebirths have unexpended fruits of good actions, which will in time help them back to a good rebirth). Good actions are those arising from generosity, kindness and wisdom, and are seen to sow seeds maturing in the more pleasant experiences of the human and divine realms. A term for a good action and its potency to bring good karmic fruits is *puñña* (Pali, Skt *puṇya*), often translated as 'meritorious action' and 'merit'. This, however, suggests that karmic results are some merited or deserved reward, rather than natural results. Hence *puñña* is better translated as 'karmically beneficial action' and 'karmic benefit' or 'karmic fruitfulness' – or simply 'good karma'.

At the time of the Buddha, some non-Brahmanic teachers taught a kind of fatalistic determinism, according to which beings were driven through a series of improving rebirths by an impersonal force of destiny or fate (*niyati*), rather than by their own karma. The Buddha criticized such fatalism, as he taught that what one does *matters*. It makes a difference to one's life and future. Given the changeability and variety of human action, there is no inevitability that the next rebirth will be a better one; it could be better, worse or similar, depending on how one lives one's life. Indeed, the Buddha criticized *any* view that undermined this principle of personal responsibility, including the idea that *all* one's experiences, pleasant, unpleasant or neutral are due to one's past karma. This is seen to imply that the actions springing from such experiences would be out of one's present control, but due to past karma (*A*.I.173–6).

However, only *some* of what happens to a person, such as illnesses and unpleasant experiences, is seen as due to their past karma (*S*.IV.230–1 and *A*.V.110). While all volitional actions are seen as having karmic results, this does not mean that all that happens is a karmic result; karma is one cause among many in life. In part, this is simple logic: because A is a cause of B, this does not mean that B is *only ever* caused by A; drowning is a cause of death, but not all deaths are due to drowning.

From a Buddhist perspective, a non-Buddhist, whether or not religious, may be reborn after death in a good rebirth, including a heaven, due to actions such as generosity, kindness, compassion and non-violence. Indeed, they may have a better rebirth than a Buddhist who is weak in these qualities. A heavenly rebirth, though, is not seen as permanent, and it is not yet liberation/salvation.

Intentional actions of body, speech *and mind* are seen to generate karmic results, and mental actions that are particularly mentioned are covetousness, ill-will and wrong view, and their opposites (*M*.I.46–7). Here, one might think that 'wrong view' might include belief in a creator God, but in regard to bad karmic effects, the relevant view is:

(1) 'There is no gift, there is no offering, there is no (self-)sacrifice': these are not worthwhile.
(2) 'There is no fruit and ripening of deeds well done or ill done': it is not the case that what one does (karma) *matters* or has an effect on one's future.
(3) 'There is no this world, there is no world beyond': this world is unreal, and one does not go on to another world after death.
(4) 'There is no mother or father': there is no need to respect parents, who establish one in this world.
(5) 'There are no spontaneously arising beings': it is not the case that some of the worlds one can be reborn in (for example some heavens) are populated by beings that come into existence without parents.
(6) 'There are not in this world renunciants and Brahmins who are faring rightly, practising rightly, and who proclaim this world and the world beyond having realized them by their own super-knowledge': spiritual development is not a real possibility, actualized by some people; neither can it lead, in the profound calm of deep meditation, to memory of past rebirths in a variety of worlds, and awareness of how others are reborn in such worlds. (*M*.III.72)

A monotheist who believed in the opposite of these views – in the worth of generosity and self-sacrifice; that one's actions have consequences in this life and beyond; that there is a world beyond this one, after death, populated by beings of a different nature than humans and animals; and that spiritual insight can be cultivated – would have a right view, hence, in this respect, good mental karma. This would conduce to a good rebirth, though not, without transformative wisdom, to Nirvana. K. N. Jayatilleke holds that:

> The early Buddhist conception of the nature and destiny of man in the universe is . . . not in basic conflict with the beliefs and values of the founders of the great religions so long as they assert some sort of survival, moral

> values, freedom and responsibility and the non-inevitability of salvation. (2006: 12)
>
> A theistic religion and philosophy which, 1) stresses the importance of human freedom, responsibility and effort, 2) encourages the cultivation of moral and spiritual values and the attainment of moral perfection, and 3) offers the hope of fellowship with God (Brahmā), who is represented as a perfect moral being (wise and powerful but not omniscient or omnipotent) is to be commended on pragmatic grounds. (2006: 14)

However, if a monotheist's belief is accompanied by ill-will towards others, for example because they have a different view, this would generate bad karma. Strong, clinging attachment to 'this alone is true, all else is falsehood' would also produce a narrowing of the mind that would undermine wisdom.

6 Suffering: Its Causes and Its Transcending

A key teaching of Buddhism is on what are usually called the four 'Noble Truths' about suffering, its origin, its cessation and the path to this. These can often sound like a set of things to believe in. But they are not presented like this in the Buddha's discourses. What in Pali are the *ariya-sacca*s (Skt *ārya-satya*) are not really 'Noble Truths' but 'True Realities for the Noble Ones'. They are key dimensions of existence, basic true realities as identified and understood by the Buddha and other 'noble' ones: those who have been spiritually ennobled by deep, transformative insight into reality as illuminated by *Dhamma*. For ordinary people, the important thing is – based on calm and clarity of mind – to tune into these realities, to contemplate and get the measure of them.

In the *sacca-saṃyutta* (*S*.V.414–77), it is repeatedly said that one should make an effort to understand:

- 'This is painful/the painful (*dukkha*),' that is, some aspect of experience which is itself mentally or physically painful, or which often entails, or involves, mental or physical pain.
- 'This is the origin of the painful.'
- 'This is the cessation of the painful.'
- 'This is the way going to the cessation of the painful.'

These are things that one should think about, reflect about and talk about, when one does think, reflect and talk (*S*.V.417–20).

The 'true realities (*sacca*s) for the noble ones (*ariya*-)' are what these identifying reflections or insights are about: the painful, what originates it, its ending from the cessation of this, and the way to this cessation. The first sermon