

Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction
By Damien Keown

Words such as 'karma' and 'nirvana' have entered our vocabulary, but do we really understand their meaning? This Very Short Introduction introduces the reader to the teachings of the Buddha and to the integration of Buddhism into daily life. Damien Keown looks at the distinctive features of Buddhism, how Buddhist thought developed over the centuries, and how contemporary dilemmas can be faced from a Buddhist perspective.

Questions for thought and discussion

- In what ways is the Buddhist worldview similar to or different from the traditional Western one, and how do both of these compare to the current scientific way of thinking? Are the Buddhist and Western conceptions incompatible?
- Does it make sense to believe in reincarnation? If "no," are people like the Buddha deluded when they claim to remember past lives? If "yes," what evidence is there for it? What difference would it make to you now if you believed you would be reborn and live again?
- Is karma the same as destiny, in the sense that everything that happens to you is predetermined? Do you believe that "what goes around comes around," and if so is this the same as karma? Does everyone get what they deserve, in the end?
- What problems are there in writing a biography of Buddha? How far back would you have to go, and what sources would you use?
- Do you think the Buddha's own experience (such as losing his mother as an infant, being cosseted in a palace) had any influence on his outlook on life? Was it selfish of him to abandon his wife and child in order to seek enlightenment?
- Is the First Noble Truth right when it claims that "all existence is suffering," or is Buddhism overly-pessimistic in its assessment of the human condition? What sorts of things are included in the scope of the term dukkha?
- Do people have a soul, and if so, what is it like? If not, what is it that makes you who you are, and how do you remain the same person if—as science tells us—the material basis of your being changes continuously? If your memories changed, would you be someone else?
- If the Noble Eightfold Path leads to nirvana, why is nirvana not mentioned anywhere in it? Is nirvana reached as the ninth stage of the path, or if not, when?
- Why do you think Buddhism fragmented so easily into different sects? Did Buddha make a mistake in not appointing a successor?
- Why does the monastic sangha require such a rigorous behavioural code as opposed to the less difficult guidelines for the laity?
- Why do the Buddhist nuns seem to occupy a lower, lesser position than the monks in the early Buddhist sangha?
- Do rulers like Ashoka sometimes use religion for political ends? Is this justifiable?
- Is art important in religion, and if so, why? Do you see any differences between Buddhist and Western styles of art?

- What would you say are the main features of Buddhism in Southeast Asia? What variations, and what common themes, can be identified?
- Why has Buddhism become so popular in Western cultures in recent years?
- Is Buddhism more or less environmentally friendly than Christianity? Which aspects of Buddhist teachings might make it appear in harmony with contemporary ecological attitudes? Do you think Buddha was concerned about the environment?
- How do the Buddhist Five Precepts differ from the Christian Ten Commandments? Can Buddhist moral teachings have any force if Buddhism does not believe in a divine lawgiver?

Other Books by Damien Keown

Damien Keown, *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP, 2005)

Damien Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism* (OUP, 2003)

Damien Keown, *Buddhism and Bioethics* (Palgrave, 2001)

Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (Palgrave, 2001)

Damien Keown (ed.), *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics* (Curzon Press, 2000)

Damien Keown and Charles S. Prebish, *Introducing Buddhism* (Routledge, 2006)