

BUDDHISM: SUMMARY OF PRINCIPAL POINTS

1. The Four Noble Truths (Cattari-ariya-saccāni): (i) everything is suffering (dukkha), (ii) the cause of suffering is desire (taṇhā [Skt: tṛṣṇa]), (iii) the cessation of suffering, and (iv) the path to the cessation of suffering – the Noble Eightfold Path (Aṭṭaṅgika-magga [Skt: Aṣṭaṅgika-marga]).
2. All sentient beings are trapped in the cycle of saṃsāra, and revolve beginninglessly through six possible realms of rebirth: gods, asuras, humans, animals, hungry ghosts (pretas) and hell-beings.
3. The force that propels them within saṃsāra is karma. Whether good or bad, karma keeps all sentient beings cycling around for ever. The Twelve Links of Dependent Origination (Paticca-samuppāda) represents a schematic diagram of the mechanism of karma.
4. While maintaining that beings are trapped in saṃsāra, the existence of the self (ātman) in all sentient beings is rejected. This meant specifically that nothing is unitary, eternal, and/or unchanging. Instead, everything in the world is marked by impermanence (anicca).
5. Liberation from saṃsāra, and thus from suffering (dukkha) is called nirvāna, a state beyond all contingency, conditioning, and suffering, and which is so far beyond our frame of reference as to be indescribable.
6. A later form of Buddhism called Mahāyāna departed from traditional Buddhist thought (which is called Hīnayāna) in several ways:
 - (a) It reconceived the Buddha(s) as not having passed into a nirvāna of extinction, but rather as eternally existing and able to help suffering beings actively via the path of bodhisattva.
 - (b) It reconceived the basic problems of beings not as mere suffering but as ignorance (avidyā), and developed highly sophisticated philosophical systems to explain the true nature of reality as a way to overcome ignorance which traps people in saṃsāra. The key concept in these philosophies is śūnyatā (emptiness), which maintains that all things are devoid of a self (essence); i.e., they are not unitary, eternal, and independent of all causes and conditions.
 - (c) As a result of the above two insights, Mahāyāna Buddhism went on to claim that there is no ultimate distinction between saṃsāra and nirvāna. Saṃsāra is not a “place” in which beings are “trapped,” and nirvāna is not a “goal” outside of and separated from saṃsāra. Saṃsāra is nirvāna, and becomes nirvāna instantly when beings shed their ignorance and perceive reality correctly.
 - (d) Hence, for Mahāyāna Buddhism, the goals shift from nirvāna and personal liberation as an arhat (as the Hīnayāna tradition maintains) to compassion (karuṇā) and bodhisattvahood.
7. Pure Land Buddhism: The branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism known as Pure Land Buddhism despaired of human beings ever having the ability to carry out religious practices and attain enlightenment. They advocated devotional practices aimed at calling upon the Buddha Amitābha (Japanese: Amida) to transport the devotee at death to the Western Pure Land (Sukhāvātī), a place that is conducive to the practice and attainment of enlightenment.
8. Ch’an (Zen) Buddhism: The branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism known as Ch’an (Zen) Buddhism affirmed that all sentient beings have buddha-nature (buddhatā [Japanese: bussho]), not merely as a potential to become a buddha as earlier Mahayanists had thought, but as the presence in every being of an inherent buddhahood already fully developed. Through techniques such as inscrutable riddles (koans) and sitting meditations (zazen), one is able to overcome one’s ignorance to uncover one’s buddha-nature.