

MEETING IN THE CITY

There are twenty different Buddhist groups in the city and several more in the Black Country. Some are run by monks of different nationalities while others are run by English laypeople. Among buildings most worth visiting are Dhammatalaka Pagoda in Osler Street, Ladywood (B16 9EU), which is built entirely in traditional Burmese style, and Chua Tu Dam Temple on Holyhead Road, Handsworth (B21 0LT). The latter is a converted building but houses a large and ornate Vietnamese shrine hall inside. There is a Sri Lankan temple on New John Street West in Hockley (B19 3UA) and an interestingly converted synagogue on Park Road, Moseley (B13 8AB), the centre of the Western Buddhist Order. The city's large Chinese community is catered for by the purpose-built Fa Yueh Temple in Brierley Hill (DY5 1RE). There are also smaller Thai and Tibetan centres. Several of these welcome visits by schools and other groups.

Buddhists liaise with the West Midlands Police and are represented on the city's Standing Advisory Committee for Religious Education, in educational, health service and prison chaplaincies, and on several cross-faith bodies. Regionally they are represented by the West Midlands Buddhist Council, which organises a public Buddha Day celebration every year in front of the beautiful statue of the Buddha in Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery.

Further information about Buddhism can be obtained from the WMBC secretary: email - ann_lovelock (at) yahoo.co.uk or phone 0121 449 6402 - and from its website at <http://www.westmidlandsbuddhistcouncil.org.uk>



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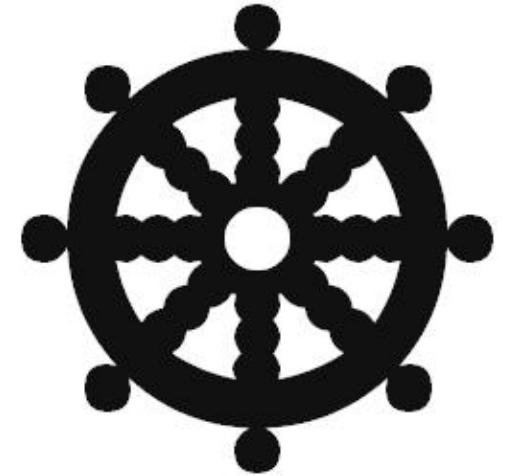
Originally founded in 1974, Birmingham Council of Faiths' objective is to promote knowledge and mutual understanding of the beliefs and practices of the city's many religious faiths.

Its belief is that through greater understanding of each other, a more harmonious and cohesive society can be created.

An additional strategy is to act as an interfaith hub, networking between the diverse faith organisations in the city and to serve as a focal point for information about their activities.

This brochure is one of ten covering the Council's affiliated faiths, which currently include Baha'is, Buddhists, Christians, Confucians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and Zoroastrians.

Buddhists



one of
Birmingham's
faith
communities

BUDDHIST BASICS

Buddhism is primarily a practical way of spiritual and moral training for those who follow the teaching of the Buddha (whose title means Enlightened One). One shows reverence to him, not as a god but as a teacher. Born in India in the 6th century BCE, he is believed to have found the middle way between asceticism and self-indulgence. This is called the Eightfold Path and is symbolised by an eight-spoked wheel, indicating areas of thought and action that need self-discipline. The aim is to eradicate personal egotism and material self-seeking, which is unwholesome, and to travel the spiritual road to wholesome thinking and action. It culminates in the elimination of the craving which causes us suffering and endless rebirth. This final state of liberation is called Nirvana.

There are three points of refuge, known as the Three Jewels, recollections of which are chanted daily: Buddha - the enlightened teacher and example; the teaching and practice that lead to liberation; the spiritual community of those who have achieved liberation or are in the process of realising it. In the Far East a number of other spiritual entities are also given reverence.

Buddhists believe that their actions in this life will affect the state of the next; they therefore accept responsibility for all they do. Although they prefer not to speculate on the nature of a divine absolute being, reverence for what is good is encouraged, including that in other faiths.

Since Buddhism has adapted to the cultures of the many countries to which it has been taken, it is now so diverse as to make general statements about it nearly impossible.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Personal devotional practice takes many forms and can be before a home shrine or in a religious building. It includes bowing and making offerings, usually of incense, lighted candles, flowers or food. Scripture is chanted and various devotional formulae. This can be in a diversity of Eastern languages but occasionally in English. Various forms of meditation are also practised, such as stilling the mind, visualisation and repetition of mantras.

The major festivals of Buddhism celebrate events in the Buddha's life or the monastic year. The most significant is at the Full Moon in May, when his birth, enlightenment and death are generally marked by the whole community. Such festivals include honouring the monks and nuns (there generally being no other clergy) and offering them a meal. There will also be chanting of scripture and a sermon relating to the occasion. Many of these festivals take place in the temples in Birmingham according to their tradition and country of origin, each adding their own special days.

To become a Buddhist one performs a ceremony known as Taking Refuge (in the Buddha, his teaching and disciples) when various vows are made. Lay people may also take ordination for short periods and live in the monastery as a monk or nun. This includes shaving the head completely and sometimes begging for food, since monastics are dependent on lay people for all their requirements. In some traditions they may take vows of silence and retreat completely from contact with the outside world.

Pilgrimage to significant Buddhist sites is also popular. This need not necessarily be abroad since Birmingham's Dharmatalaka Pagoda, for example, houses significant relics of the Buddha.

SOCIAL PRACTICE

Social action for Buddhists is based on five lay precepts: by trying to be helpful instead of violent; by being generous instead of acquisitive; by avoiding harming society or the environment by wrongly indulging the senses; by being truthful and avoiding discord; and by being mindful of our commitments instead of taking drugs or alcohol, one should try to benefit others. The Buddha's teaching is that all beings are interdependent and that there must be a corresponding balance between rights and duty. In the social sphere it is necessary to establish harmony and to work for the happiness of others.

Some decide to become monks or nuns in order to give their full attention to following the Buddha's example and so serve as an example of ideal behaviour. Others may become more socially active by volunteering to help green their local community or work for a charity. The Network of Engaged Buddhists is an organisation that encourages such participation. Earning a living in an ethical way has been the inspiration of the Right Livelihood Co-operatives set up by the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. The Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy Organisation dates back to 1984 and since then Buddhists have been active in other chaplaincy areas, serving on local Standing Advisory Committees on Religious Education and other forms of local liaison..

Teaching people to meditate has been recognised by the Charity Commission as contributing to public benefit. There is no need to become a Buddhist to learn to meditate and most Buddhist centres have classes open to anyone that wishes to learn.