The Four Buddhist Seals: Basic Beliefs and Practices

The basic doctrines of early Buddhism, which remain common to all Buddhism, include the four noble truths: existence is suffering (*dukhka*); suffering has a cause, namely craving and attachment (*trishna*); there is a cessation of suffering, which is [nirvana](https://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/religion/eastern/buddhism/nirvana); and there is a path to the cessation of suffering, the eightfold path of right views, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Buddhism characteristically describes reality in terms of process and relation rather than entity or substance.

Experience is analyzed into five aggregates (*skandhas*). The first, form (*rupa*), refers to material existence; the following four, sensations (*vedana*), perceptions (*samjna*), psychic constructs (*samskara*), and consciousness (*vijnana*), refer to psychological processes. The central Buddhist teaching of non-self (*anatman*) asserts that in the five aggregates no independently existent, immutable self, or soul, can be found. All phenomena arise in interrelation and in dependence on causes and conditions, and thus are subject to inevitable decay and cessation. The casual conditions are defined in a 12-membered chain called dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*) whose links are: ignorance, predisposition, consciousness, name-form, the senses, contact, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, old age, and death, whence again ignorance.

With this distinctive view of cause and effect, Buddhism accepts the pan-Indian presupposition of samsara, in which living beings are trapped in a continual cycle of birth-and-death, with the momentum to rebirth provided by one's previous physical and mental actions (see [karma](https://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/religion/eastern/hinduism/karma)). The release from this cycle of rebirth and suffering is the total transcendence called nirvana.

From the beginning, meditation and observance of moral precepts were the foundation of Buddhist practice. The five basic moral precepts, undertaken by members of monastic orders and the laity, are to refrain from taking life, stealing, acting unchastely, speaking falsely, and drinking intoxicants. Members of monastic orders also take five additional precepts: to refrain from eating at improper times, from viewing secular entertainments, from using garlands, perfumes, and other bodily adornments, from sleeping in high and wide beds, and from receiving money. Their lives are further regulated by a large number of rules known as the Pratimoksa. The monastic order (sangha) is venerated as one of the three jewels, along with the dharma, or religious teaching, and the Buddha. Lay practices such as the worship of stupas (burial mounds containing relics) predate Buddhism and gave rise to later ritualistic and devotional practices.