



Pilgrimage moments – Buddhist teachings

Introduction

This lesson would work well as part of a unit about Buddhism or on a unit about beliefs about what happens after death.

This lesson explores themes discussed in the TrueTube film 'Buddhist Teachings' - the clip has a discussion of Buddhist beliefs about life, death, and what happens after death.

The pilgrims discuss the idea that life is a journey/pilgrimage and different ideas about the meaning and purpose of this journey.

In Buddhism, life is understood as part of a continuous cycle called **samsara**, in which beings experience repeated birth, death, and rebirth. This cycle continues because of **karma** — the idea that actions have consequences that influence future lives. Buddhists believe there is no permanent **soul**, but rather a continuing stream of consciousness shaped by karma. A key teaching is Impermanence (**anicca**), the belief that all things, including life and identity, are constantly changing. The ultimate goal is **enlightenment**, when a person gains insight into reality, ends suffering, and is liberated from the cycle of rebirth. Practices such as meditation, ethical living, and rituals around sacred objects like a **stupa** support Buddhists in progressing along this spiritual path.

Overview:

Suitable for: Key Stage 3/4

Key Question: How do Buddhists understand life after death?

Time: 5.45 minutes [Pilgrimage Moments: Buddhist Teachings – TrueTube](#)

TrueTube Film: Pilgrimage Moments: Buddhist Teachings

Vocabulary: Lama, samsara, stupa, enlightenment, nibbana, dukkha, anicca, dhamma

Linked text: The Dhammapada (verses 146–151)

Resources: Guided reading of linked text, Buddhist Stupas sheet with discussion questions to follow up the clip

Lesson

Starter: Brain-dump - What different beliefs do people have about what happens after death?

Follow-up discussion: Where do these ideas and beliefs come from? How do you think ideas about what happens after death might influence a person's worldview about the purpose of human life and how they should live?

Main Activities:

- Reading of 'Buddhist teachings from the Dhammapada' (print as A3 copy for pupil use). Read through the information boxes on the left to ensure that pupils have the knowledge about Buddhism required to analyse the text. Go through the subject specific vocabulary so that pupils will be able to identify metaphors used in the text and make links with Buddhist concepts.
- Watch the clip: [Pilgrimage Moments: Buddhist Teachings – TrueTube](#)
- Discuss how the pilgrims (Christine, Spencer, Sonali and Eshaan) respond in different ways to these teachings and how their responses are shaped by their prior ideas and experiences.
- Check understanding of the term pilgrimage. Think-pair-share: What might people mean when they say life is a pilgrimage?
- Read through the additional information about stupas and discuss the questions.

Plenary: To what extent do Buddhist beliefs help followers not to be scared of death?

What is the Dhammapada?

The Dhammapada is one of the most important sacred texts in Buddhism. It is a collection of verses attributed to the Buddha. These teachings offer guidance on how to live a good life, understand suffering, and move towards enlightenment (*nirvana*).

For Buddhists, the Dhammapada is:

- A **source of wisdom** about life, death, and human nature
- A **moral guide** for how to think and act
- An **authoritative text** that reflects the Buddha's teachings (*Dhamma*)

Central Buddhist beliefs

Dukkha - Life involves suffering

The passage describes the body as "a mass of wounds" and "diseased."

This reflects the belief that:

- Suffering is a natural part of life
- Physical and emotional pain are unavoidable
- Even pleasure is temporary and can lead to suffering

Anicca - Impermanence

The text repeatedly reminds us that life is finite "This body... lasting only a short time", "What is born must die", "Even Kings' chariots wear out".

This teaches that:

- Everything changes
- Nothing lasts forever
- Death is a natural and inevitable part of existence

Enlightenment

The text asks "Why do you not seek the light?"

This represent darkness - ignorance (not understanding truth) and the light is wisdom and enlightenment.

Buddhists believe:

- People suffer because they do not understand reality
- Wisdom leads to freedom from suffering

Attachment and desire

The passage questions why people find joy in a world that is "burning"

This links to the idea that:

- Attachment to pleasure and the material world causes suffering
- Letting go of desire and craving helps reduce suffering

The importance of wisdom

The text says "The teaching of the wise does not grow old"

This reflects the belief that:

- The Buddha's teachings are timeless
- Wisdom is more valuable than physical things
- Following the Dhamma can lead to liberation (*nibbana*)

A Buddhist teaching from the Dhammapada

Why is there laughter,
why is there joy,
when the world is always burning?
Surrounded by darkness,
why do you not seek the light?

What might "the world is always burning" symbolise in Buddhism?

Why might Buddhists question why there is laughter and joy in this world?

Look at this body — a painted image,
a mass of wounds,
put together, diseased,
full of many thoughts and plans,
but lasting only a short time.

How does this link to the Buddhist concept of Dukkha?

This body wears out;
it is fragile and a nest of disease.
Life ends in death,
for what is born must die.

How might Buddhist beliefs about impermanence influence the way they view life and death?

Like gourds thrown away in autumn *
are these grey bones;
what pleasure can there be
in looking at them?
This body is a city made of bones,
covered with flesh and blood.
Inside dwell ageing, death, pride and deceit.

What does this passage suggest about the body after death? How might this influence a Buddhist's attitude towards physical appearance.

Even the splendid chariots of kings wear out,
and the body too grows old;
but the teaching of the wise does not grow old.
The wise teach this to the good.

"The wise teach this to the good." What is "this" that is being taught?

How might these ideas shape Buddhist beliefs about what happens after death?

* A gourd is a fruit hollow, which can be dried and used as a container. It can symbolise how the body is temporary and empty, reminding people not to become too attached to physical things.

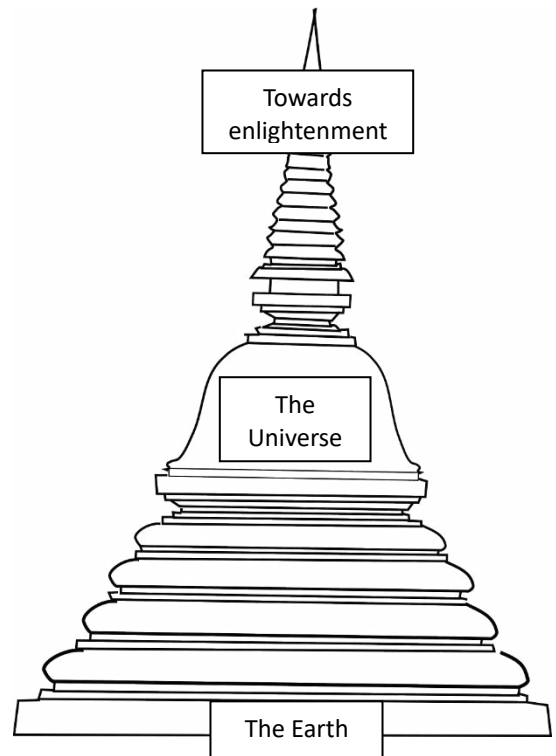
Buddhist Stupas

A stupa is a sacred structure used for meditation, reflection, and worship. Stupas often contain relics (such as ashes or objects linked to the Buddha or important teachers) and are designed to represent important spiritual ideas rather than just being decorative buildings. Buddhists walk around a stupa in a clockwise direction as a form of meditation, showing respect and focusing their minds.

The shape of a stupa is symbolic: its base represents the earth, the dome represents the universe, and the top points toward enlightenment. Stupas remind Buddhists of the path towards enlightenment and encourage them to develop qualities like wisdom, compassion, and awareness in their daily lives.



A Buddhist stupa adorned with prayer flags.
Credit: wordpress.org/photos/photo/1466790756/



In the clip, Lama Shenpen says “you could say that the stupa represents the centre of the universe and the centre of the universe could be anywhere or everywhere.

So this is a representation of it that actually contains the essence of it. When we walk towards the stupa, we're walking to the centre of the universe, which lies beyond all our thinking and opinions. It's considered to be radiating love and compassion, so it's considered to be very powerful.

And the centre of it is called a tree of life. Because really, in a way, Buddhism is about finding, what is significant. What is life? What is birth? What is death? You could say our life is a pilgrimage. We start with birth. You have this vision of a journey and the significance of your life. And then life ends. Your body dies.

Discussion questions:

1. Do you think reflecting on death makes life more meaningful or less? Why?
2. Lama Shenpen says life is a pilgrimage. Do you agree that life is a journey with meaning?
3. If a stupa represents the “centre of the universe”, what do you think Buddhism is teaching about where meaning and truth are found?
4. How do you think the response of each pilgrim is shaped by what they see as the centre of their universe?