

Introduction to Bright Earth Buddhism

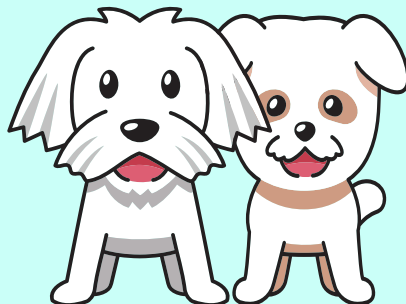


Who is Bright Earth?

The Bright Earth temple is in Malvern, Worcestershire. Some of the Bright Earth community live in the temple in Malvern, some live locally and others live further away. We have an emphasis on outside practice and on caring for the Earth, and many of us are involved in different forms of activism.

The temple is run by Kasper and Satya, who are married. They have two dogs, one cat and three rabbits. They both teach Buddhism, look after the building, and work as IFS psychotherapists. The temple is owned by Amida Trust, a charity formed to spread the Buddha's teachings. We practice a form of Buddhism called Mahayana Buddhism, and we are particularly drawn to the simplicity and all-inclusiveness of Pureland Buddhism.

Bright Earth is a friendly community and we welcome all kinds of different people to practice with us. Some visit every so often, attending a Mindful Day or staying in our guest room, and others come weekly and are more involved in the day to day life of the community. We hope that everyone who comes here gets a taste of the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha's teachings, helping them to find meaning, peace, inspiration and consolation.



The Basics of Buddhism

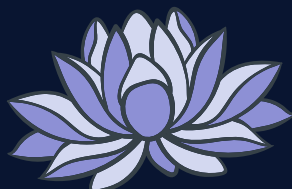
The word buddha means one who is awake. What are buddhas awake to? They are awake to the reality of suffering in this world, and awake to the causes of suffering. They are awake to our deep interconnectedness with all things and to the availability of unconditional love and infinite wisdom.

Usually when we say Buddha we mean Siddhartha Gautama who became enlightened in India around 2500 years ago. He taught for the rest of his life and created the Buddhist movement. He became known as Shakyamuni Buddha: awakened sage of the Shakyans.

Many different styles and traditions of Buddhism have sprung up since that time, each tending to the problem of suffering in their own way.

Buddhas dwell in loving kindness. They are wise and have the energy to awaken others. If we look deeply enough inside ourselves, beyond our greed, ill-will and ignorance, we find that we have these same qualities.

The awakened heart of the buddha exists outside of us, in the buddhas, and deep inside our own hearts. Sometimes our practice is about knowing we are ordinary, flawed, people receiving this loving-kindness from outside ourselves, and sometimes it is about speaking and acting from our own loving-kindness for the benefit of the Earth and all beings.



What is Pureland Buddhism?

Here at Bright Earth we are particularly connected to a buddha called Amitabha or Amida. Amitabha is the Buddha of Infinite Light, and is known for accepting us fallible beings 'just as we are'.

Amitabha probably wasn't a real person, and is an archetypal buddha of compassion, described in teachings from India, China and Japan. In these teachings Amitabha was inspired by another buddha, and vowed to create an easy path to awakening in order to save all beings from suffering. Amitabha created and lives in the Pureland, a place of beauty and harmony where all beings can easily receive the Buddha's teachings. Some people believe they go to the Pureland after they die, and some believe we can access the Pureland in this world, here and now.

Saying the name of Amitabha Buddha is a Buddhist practice called nembutsu. People who say nembutsu are known as Pureland Buddhists. There are different forms of nembutsu in different languages, 'Namo Amida Bu' in Japanese, 'Namo Omite Fo' in Chinese and so on.

When we say Amitabha's name, we are calling out from our small selves to something infinitely loving. Saying the nembutsu is simple and doesn't depend on us studying, having lots of free time, or living perfectly ethical lives, and so this form of Buddhism makes awakening available to absolutely everyone.

Namo Amida Bu

How we do Buddhist practice

On Saturdays at 9am we take slow meditation walks around the temple garden, winding through paths between bamboo stands and paying attention to ourselves and to the world. Once a month we take a slow mindful walk in the Malvern hills.

On Saturdays at 9.30am and Wednesdays at 7.30pm we practice inside the shrine room. Practice begins with the ringing of a big bell. We listen to a sharing from a member of our community and then move into a period of silent meditation.

After meditation we chant the nembutsu or a different mantra together. Chanting together is a heart practice. It is one of the ways we join our hearts with the hearts of the buddhas and their enlightened energy. We are invoking and inviting in the good qualities of unconditional love, compassion, wisdom, equanimity and so on.

We recite a few short traditional Buddhist verses and then we hear a short talk from whoever is leading practice. Finally we make prostrations (bows) expressing our gratitude and respect for the buddhas, their teachings, our ancestors and the Earth.

Some people find some of these practices a little strange to begin with, but as they become more familiar this feeling passes and their value and meaning is revealed. We also enjoy lightness, humour and informality alongside the more formal elements.

Everyone is welcome to join us for Buddhist practice, whether you are a beginner, have some Buddhist experience, or have been practising for years.

Starting a Buddhist practice at home

We recommend that you start a Buddhist practice at home, even if you can only spare a few minutes a day. This helps us to integrate Buddhist teachings into our lives, and reminds us that we can take refuge in something reliable.

It can help to have a special place to practice, like a corner of a bedroom or a particular spot in the garden. You could make a small shrine, with a buddha statue or an image of a buddha in the centre. You can add a candle, incense, flowers, or any other special objects.

On busy days, you might just have time to bow to your buddha, offer them some incense, or ask for their support during the day ahead. When you have more time you could sit for ten minutes in silent meditation, or chant the nembutsu, or recite the refuges.

You may also find that staying connected with nature helps you to stay connected to the teachings. Going on a slow, silent walk around your garden, or spending five minutes looking at the sky through a window, can ground you and remind you of something bigger than yourself. Enjoy experimenting and try not to feel too much 'ought' - a daily practice should also feel good!

What are the refuges?

All Buddhists take refuge in the "three jewels". The first is the Buddha: both Shakyamuni Buddha and all awakened beings. The second is the Dharma: the teachings of the Buddha, and the reality those teachings are pointing towards. The third is the Sangha: the community of people practising those teachings.

Dharma Glimpses

The dharma is the teaching of the buddhas - both the words of Shakyamuni Buddha, and the truths that those words are pointing towards.

Writing Dharma Glimpses is a tradition that comes from the Bright Dawn Centre of Oneness. A Dharma Glimpse is a moment from our own ordinary lives when we are given the gift of seeing the dharma. In our practice sessions here at the temple we begin by reading out a Dharma Glimpse that someone in our group has offered us.

We recommend a regular practice of this kind of reflection. Try writing a page or half a page each week in your journal. We'd be really happy if you'd share them with us.

You can read Dharma Glimpses from members of our community on our website. Your Glimpses might describe a moment when you suddenly become aware of the interconnected nature of things or when a deep feeling of gratitude appears. It might be a penny dropping moment when you suddenly learn something about yourself: about a habit you have, or seeing some way of behaving that you hadn't noticed before. It might be a moment of connecting a Buddhist teaching you have heard to something that's happening in your own life. When we start looking for them, Dharma Glimpses are everywhere.



Buddhism in everyday life

One of my Buddhist teachers once said that the best way of testing out a new teaching or practice is to ask, 'does it help me to become kinder?' You can apply this test as you learn more about Buddhism. Are you behaving differently in your everyday life? Do you have a little bit more patience, compassion, or insight?

Some people enjoy studying Buddhist scriptures and learning about the intricacies of doctrine - this is a good thing to do, but it is not essential. We begin very simply, by applying any Buddhist teachings we hear to our ordinary lives. We can reflect on what we are hearing or reading, and see how it applies to us. We can write Dharma Glimpses and pause during the day for moments of mindfulness. We can remember the truth of impermanence.

As human beings, we will continue to be blinded by our greed, hate and delusion. Pureland Buddhism knows that we are 'bomby' - foolish beings of wayward passions - we will always be a 'work in progress'!

Luckily we are not alone, and the Buddha sees us and accepts us just as we are. This experience of being loved softens our defences, and we naturally become more kind. The heart of Buddhism is refuge, and allowing our hearts to be softened.



Buddhism and the Earth

When we read the Buddha's teachings, we don't hear him talk much about nature. Then we notice that every teaching begins with a description of his location. He is 'in the deer park at Bhesakala Grove', 'in the mango grove of Cunda', 'in the Great Wood' - even 'at Alavi on a heap of leaves spread out on a cow track!' The Buddha mostly practised outside, and so for him, his relationship with the natural world went without saying.

Our experience is that practising outside supports our spiritual path in different ways. Meditating in the rain or with the sun on our faces also reminds us of our interconnectedness with all life. We are completely dependent on trees and plants of all sizes to produce our oxygen, and rich soil to produce our food. The ground underneath us holds us up in every moment.

When we truly appreciate these gifts, we naturally want to do whatever we can to help our planet. We are moved to live more lightly on the Earth, and to be more conscious of our consumption. We recognise the urgency of the climate and ecological emergency, and are moved to activism. We are moved to gratitude, to humility, to service, and to awe.

As well as being inspired to help the Earth we can also see her as our teacher. We find that we learn as much about ourselves on our mindful walks as we do in the shrine room, and that sitting vigil for the Earth always results in new insights. Coming into relationship with the Earth always takes us towards healing and awakening.



Engaged Buddhism

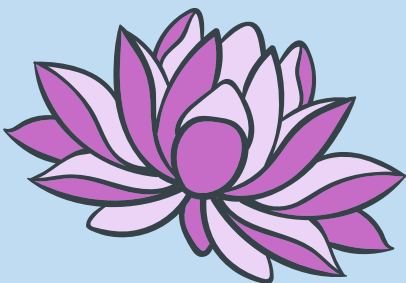
Compassion for all beings naturally springs forth from all buddhas. Inspired by their example, we try to make our own compassionate responses to the suffering of the world.

A traditional Buddhist response to suffering is to pass on the teachings of Buddhism. Throughout Buddhist history, Buddhists have also been moved to make the world a better place in small and bigger ways.

Engaged Buddhism is the work of applying Buddhist ethics and insights that come from our practice and the teachings to the issues and injustices that we see in the world.

This work might be campaigning for peace, caring for the dying, supporting the rights of oppressed groups or getting involved in environmental activism. This work in the world happens alongside the inner work of letting go of greed, ill-will and ignorance, and internalised systems of oppression.

Here at Bright Earth we believe that engaged Buddhism and the practices we do in the shrine room are two sides of the same coin.



Further resources

Our website at www.brightearth.org has information about joining our practice sessions from wherever you are, a free 30 day nembutsu course, recordings of the chants we use, lots of Dharma Glimpses and more. You can also sign up to our newsletter or donate a tree to the Bright Earth grove.

Subscribe to our Youtube channel at www.youtube.com/brightearth. We post all our weekly practice sessions there, and also Dharma talks, shorter talks and more.

For our take on Buddhism, start with 'Just As You Are: Buddhism for Foolish Beings' by Kasper Thompson and Satya Robyn, or 'Coming Home: Refuge in Pureland Buddhism' by Satya Robyn.


Noah Rasheta's 'No Nonsense Buddhism for Beginners' is an easy introduction to secular Buddhism (we are more devotional here but the basics are the same) or try Wendy Haylett's 'Everyday Buddhism'.

Nagapriya's 'The Promise of a Sacred World: Shinran's Teaching of Other Power' is a great exploration of Shinran's Pureland Buddhist teachings.

John Paraskevopoulos's 'Call of the Infinite' is a lyrical introduction to Pureland Buddhism.

Satya and Kasper are both hugely influenced by Internal Family Systems - 'No Bad Parts' by Richard Schwartz is a great introduction to this revolutionary way of seeing ourselves and others.

For a longer study programme we recommend the Bright Dawn Lay Ministry training. Find out more at www.brightdawn.org.



Blessed by Amitabha's light
May we care for all living things
and the holy Earth

Bright Earth Buddhist Temple
34 Worcester Road
Malvern
Worcestershire
WR14 4AA

www.brightearth.org