Intro to Buddhism in the US
Week 2: Fundamental concepts (and a lot of lists)

OLLI, Charlottesville, VA

22 September 2026

Link to extended readings & slides:https://parusanalytics.com/introbud2026/week-two-2026.html

Some links to local sanghas

- Insight Meditation Community of Charlottesville: imeditation.org
- Cloud Floating Free (Plum Village): https://cloudfloatingfree.org/
- Serenity Ridge/Ligmincha International (Tibetan Bön): https://ligmincha.org/centers-usa-serenityridge/
- Jefferson Tibetan Society: http://jts.avenue.org/
- Serenity Sangha (Zoom but based here; Insight): https://www.serenitysangha.org/
- Expanding Light Sangha (for people under 50): https://www.imeditation.org/Young-Adults-Sangha
- UVA Contemplative Sciences Center: https://csc.virginia.edu/
  [yeah, they aren't a sangha per se but they sponsor a lot of relevant events]
- Charlottesville Recovery Dharma Group: see contact info at IMCC web site under "Resources"

[if you know of others, let me know and I'll update the list]

Marshall Sahlins. *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe: An Anthropology of Most of Humanity*. Princeton University Press, 2022

- Acceptance of an immaterial world by elites was the norm until *very* recently in human experience
  - E.g. Socrates embarking on the greatest "Screw you" (technical term) in western history: "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; pay it and do not neglect it."
  - As noted last week, Nietzsche was at the pivot point where he could see this change in Europe
  - Criticizes his discipline of anthropology, which is mostly materialist, for not taking this seriously
- Complex political hierarchies found, e.g. in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Meso-America reflect their perceptions of the cosmological hierarchy
  - Early complex human aggregations, e.g. Çatalhöyük and Göbekli Tepe in Anatolia, ca 9000 BCE; Harappa and Mohenjo-daro in Indus valley, ca. 3300-1300 BCE, do not have this
- There are a lot of similarities in these structures across societies spanning millennia that could not possibly have had knowledge of each other

Sunday New York Times gives me a teaching point…score!!

The New York Times

Go Ahead and Laugh at Mediums. They May Be On to Something.

Sept. 20, 2026



Lucia Catalini

Listen · 13:09 min

Share full article

218



By Sarah Wildman

Ms. Wildman is a senior editor in Opinion.

More evidence: Pew Religious Landscape Study, 2023-2024

And large majorities of Americans have a spiritual, supernatural outlook. For example:

- 86% believe people have a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body.
- 83% believe in God or a universal spirit.
- 79% believe there is something spiritual beyond the natural world.
- 70% believe in heaven, hell or both.

Also 44% report praying at least once a day, and this is stable (though down from 58% in 2007)

That is, an overwhelming majority reject the elite assumption of a purely material world

Several caveats

- This is largely from a Theravadan perspective, and a number of core terms, e.g. *samadhi*, are used quite differently in different schools. "Buddhism" here generally means "Theravadan Buddhism"
- Because it was transmitted for 400+ years orally, Buddhism contains a *huge* number of lists: these are a tiny fraction
- Even within the English language Theravadan tradition, there is a great deal of disagreement on how to translate some key words, e.g. *dukkha*
- Teachers can and have done multiple-week classes/dharma talks on the contents of each one of these slides: remember, this is the departure lounge, not the baggage claim

Presuppositions from South Asian culture

- Rebirth: see https://tricycle.org/article/traleg-kyabgon-karma/ (Oct-2024)
- Karma
- Complex cosmology ranging from devas (minor immaterial beings, much like angels) to major gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva with lots of intermediate levels, and a couple of hell levels
    - The opening of the *Lotus Sutra* reports the audience for the Buddha's sermon as follows: "a whole assembly of such humans and nonhumans as monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, the devas, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, asuras, garuḍas, kiṃnaras, mahoragas, kings, and noble emperors, filled with joy as they gazed attentively at the Buddha"

Parallel: Christianity and Islam both take from Judaism an eternal omnipotent (all powerful) and omniscient (all knowing) creator god who wishes to be worshiped exclusively, as well as a cosmology with other immaterial beings, some named.

Vietnam: some specific cases of the law of karma

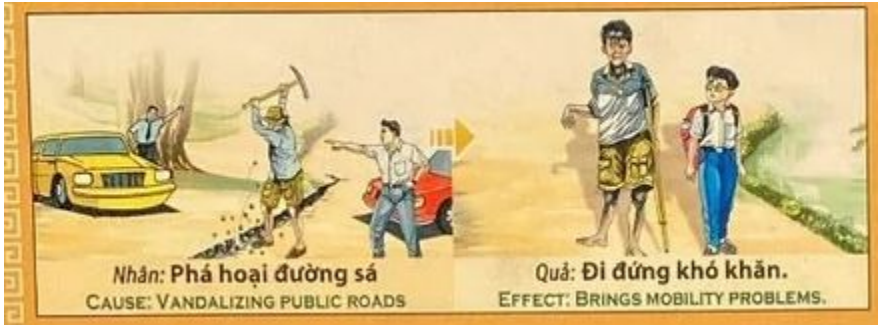


variously from temples in Can Tho and Hanoi (One Pillar Temple adjacent to Ho Chi Minh's tomb)

Vietnam: some specific cases of the law of karma



Vietnam: hey, you guys may nominally be Communist atheists (yeah, right…) but we can help out the state…





Universals of all Buddhist schools (Dalai Lama)

- Acknowledging *dukkha*
  - And more generally, the Four Noble Truths
- No self: *annata*
  - There is no permanent "soul": this is quite radical in the context of karma (and Hinduism) and has always been highly controversial (starting with "Who is the self asserting the nonexistance of the self
  - Arguably, however, a variety of non-karma interpretations it are quite moder: e.g. the mind (or at least the brain) consists of separate modules; the mind is constantly changing from experience
- Impermanence: annica
  - All things are conditioned and always changing" "codpendent origination". Unlike *annata*, this concept is shared with Hinduism
- Ethical living: precepts

Nicene Creed (ca. 325 CE)

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth,of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God,born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried,and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Also: Sacraments of baptism and communion , both in many forms, are also essential. If not for Quakers.

Five Pillars of Islam

- **Shahada (Declaration of Faith):** Reciting the belief that there is no god but God (Allah) and Muhammad is His messenger. This statement is the core creed of Islam. [1, 2, 3]
- **Salah (Daily Prayer):** Performing ritual prayers five times a day (at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and night) while facing Mecca. [1, 2]
- **Zakat (Almsgiving):** Giving a fixed portion of one's wealth—typically 2.5% of savings—annually to help the poor and needy in the community. [1, 2]
- **Sawm (Fasting):** Abstaining from food, drink, and other physical needs from dawn to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan. [1, 2]
- **Hajj (Pilgrimage):** Making the sacred journey to the holy city of Mecca at least once in a lifetime, required for those who are physically and financially able

Google AI overview accessed 21 Sept 2026

Four Noble Truths

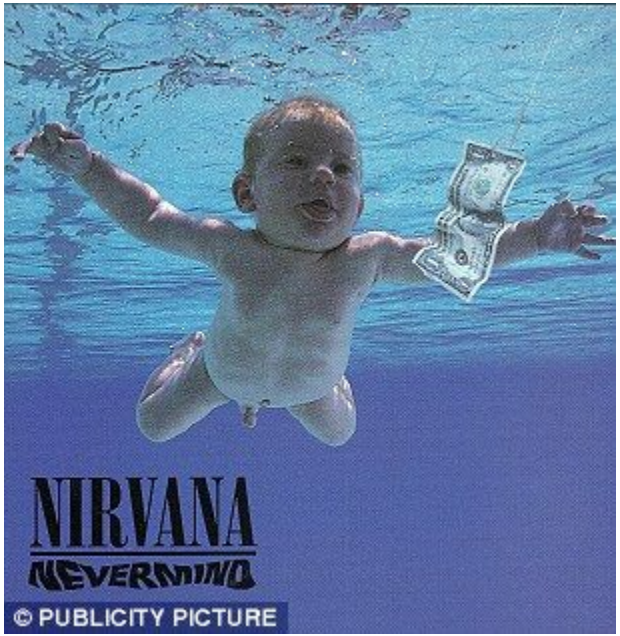
1. Suffering (*dukkha*) is universal
2. Attachment/craving (*tanha*) is the cause of suffering
3. It is possible to escape suffering and achieve *nibbana* (Sanskrit *nirvana*)
4. One escapes suffering by following the Eightfold Path

Some issues with the Four Noble Truths

- They probably were added after the death of the Buddha as a compact way of summarizing the Buddhist path
- From the perspective of an elite South Asian in 500BCE, they would have seemed like common sense; they also follow a standard South Asian medical formula: symptom⇒cause⇒cure⇒means of achieving cure
- "A great deal of suffering has been caused by translating *dukkha* as 'suffering'": "reactivity" or "unsettled" are two good alternatives
    - Best analogy I've heard, and apparently this goes back to the Sanskrit root, is that dukkha is the equivalent of pushing a shopping cart with a wonky wheel: anyone able to related to that? In the Sanskrit, the reference was to a unbalanced chariot wheel, not a shopping cart…
- They aren't really "noble": better translation might be "truths acknowledged by the noble ones"

And just what is *nibana*/*nirvana*?

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And just what is *nibana*/*nirvana*?

It's complicated: e.g. a couple years back Upaya recently did a day-long seminar on this, conveniently available as a podcast. There was little or no consensus.

Web definition: "a transcendent state in which there is neither suffering, desire, nor sense of self, and the subject is released from the effects of karma and the cycle of death and rebirth." (but we can't verify the rebirth part)

But there's also "enlightenment" (or "awakening"): "Buddha" literally means "the awakened one" Some people use these as synonyms; other people give long discourses on why they aren't synonyms

Practical definition 1: Freedom from the three poisons/hinderences of anger, greed, and delusion

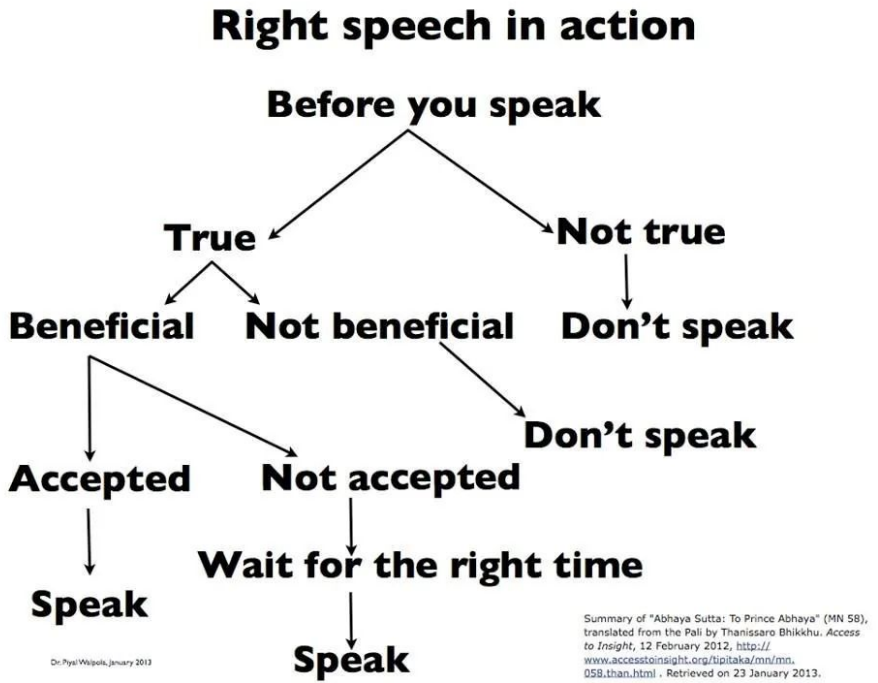
Practical definition 2: Full realization of the truths of emptiness, no-self, and impermanence, the core Buddhist doctrines

Eightfold Path

- right view/understanding
- right intention
- right speech
- right livelihood
- right action
- right effort
- right mindfulness: *vipassana*
- right "concentration" (focus, "calm abiding"): *samadhi*

Key point: this is generally not considered as an ordered list! The symbol of Buddhism is an eight-spoked wheel, not an eight-stepped ladder. As always, some teachers think otherwise.





Also frequently included: am I the right person to speak?

From IMS: "The Buddha divides right speech into four components: abstaining from false speech, abstaining from slanderous speech, abstaining from harsh speech, and abstaining from idle chatter."
https://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/right-speech-samma-vaca/

Mary Aubry's summary: King TUT

K: kind

i

n

g

T: true

U: useful

T: timely

Right livelihood

In defining Right Livelihood, the Buddha named five types of businesses that lay people should not engage in. These were:

- Dealing in weapons
- Trade of human beings including slavery and prostitution
- Meat production and butchery
- Business in intoxicants
- Business in poison

https://www.upaya.org/2017/11/dharma-right-livelihood-maia-zenyu-duerr/

Right livelihood: One should earn a living in a way that is legal, peaceful, and promotes compassion, understanding, and awareness. This includes avoiding occupations that cause harm, such as the arms trade, slave trade, and meat industry, or cause others to violate this precept. (Google AI Overview, 14-Jan-2025)

The Five Precepts

- Abstain from killing and harming of living creatures
  - Vegetarianism or veganism would be the logical conclusion
- Abstain from taking that which is not freely offered
- Appropriate speech: abstain from lying and gossip
- Appropriate use of sexual energy
- Abstain for the use of substances that cloud the mind and cause misjudgement
  - Often interpreted as avoiding intoxicants altogether
  - Thich Nhat Hanh: this includes media. Particularly media…

There are numerous variations on the extent to which these are commandments, e.g. "undertake the training of…"

Some aspects of the precepts that have varied widely across cultures

Vegetarianism: depends a lot on whether a vegetarian diet is practical in the culture, particularly when monks are dependent on begging. One common except is that meat should not have been explicitly killed for the monks to eat

Celibacy: As with Christianity, this varies widely, and unsurprisingly, the closer the practice moves to a village level, the less likely celibacy will be expected.

Interesting variant: in some Mahayana schools, *violating* the precepts is an ethical *obligation* when doing so creates a greater good, e.g. stealing to feed a starving child, killing someone who is on a rampage, even marrying a grieving widow. Situation ethics.

Three additional precepts some follow on retreat

- Not eating after noon (or lunch)
- Refraining from "dancing, music, visiting shows, flowers, make-up, the wearing of ornaments and decorations" (so Thervadan and Zen retreats are rather low-key)
- Refraining from "sleeping in a tall, high place"
    - Generally interpreted as avoiding luxury

Most retreats also extend the precept on sexual misconduct to celibacy during the retreat

The full monastic precepts—the vinyana—are much much longer, with 227 rules for men and 331 for women in the Theravadan lineage.

Thich Nhat Hanh: the Buddha intended to edit these down to just the important ones but, well, ran out of time. The most serious schism during the Buddha's lifetime, led by his cousin Devadatta, asserted these were not strict enough, paralleling Christian monastic reform movements (e.g. Bernard of Clarvaux, 1090-1153). Buddhist monastic practices go through many cycles of decay and reform.

Thich Naht Hanh's Order of Interbeing: 14 Mindfulness Trainings

1. Openness
2. Non-attachment to views
3. Freedom of thought
    - *Very* strong emphasis on tolerance in these first three trainings, e.g. "I am determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones."
4. Awareness of suffering
5. Simple, healthy living
6. Dealing with anger
7. Dwelling happily in the present moment
8. Community and communication
9. Truthful and loving speech
10. Protecting the sangha
11. Right livelihood
12. Reverence for life
13. Generosity
    - includes a ecodharma component
14. Right conduct
    - specifically sexual conduct

The 14 Mindfulness Trainings of Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing

1. Openness

Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, I am determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help me learn to look deeply and to develop my understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill or die for.

2. Non-attachment to Views

Aware of suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, I am determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. I will learn and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to others' insights and experiences. I am aware that the knowledge I presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Truth is found in life and I will observe life within and around me in every moment, ready to learn throughout my life.

3. Freedom of Thought

Aware of the suffering brought about when I impose my views on others, I am committed not to force others, even my children, by any means whatsoever – such as authority, threat, money, propaganda or indoctrination – to adopt my views. I will respect the right of others to be different and to choose what to believe and how to decide. I will, however, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness through compassionate dialogue.

Source: http://bloominglotussangha.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/the-fourteen-mindfulness-trainings.pdf

Break, and prepare yourself
(or flee in terror…)
from a forthcoming seemingly
endless set of lists

I warned you…on to some mostly Theravadan lists/concepts you might encounter but are less central

"Three Jewels"

- I take refuge in the Buddha
- I take refuge in the dharma
- I take refuge in the sangha

In some traditions, these are essentially used as a declaration of faith, comparable to the Islamic *shahada*. In other traditions, just a nice chant, typically in Pali, often at the beginning or end of a gathering

Note what is missing: "I take refuge in the teacher": the Tibetan approach effectively adds this

"Three Poisons"

- anger, hate
- greed
- delusion, ignorance (generally in the sense of not seeing things as they truly are, that is, dharma)

These occur many times in the suttas

And as I constantly if obnoxiously (but truthfully…) note, for social media (and arguably more generally, e.g. politics, advertising) these are the central business model

Lots of people, e.g. in Charlottesville, reject the notion that "anger" is a bad thing: they get very angry when you assert this

Non-duality

An *exceedingly* broad concept that can apply in many different contexts:

- Interdependence and intercausality of all things generally
  - Dismantle a chariot: when does it cease to be a chariot? Are the trees that made the wood a chariot?
- Relative (day-to-day) vs absolute/ultimate reality
- Subject vs object
- samsara (daily "suffering") vs nirvana (cessation of same: "momentary nirvanas)
- Life vs death: see "rebirth"
- Identity
  - See Galatians 3:28 "In Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave or free, male or female"
- Good vs evil/pure vs impure: this, needless to say, can lead to some really dark places
  - Decided contrast to dualistic religions such as Zoroastrianism/Manichaeism/"Gnosticism". Ambiguous role of Satan/Lucifer in Christian traditions (see Milton's *Paradise Lost* for a sympathetic view: it's complicated…)

See David Loy, https://www.buddhistinquiry.org/article/the-many-faces-of-nonduality/

Emptiness

Heart Sutra: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form"

Nagarjuna (ca. 150-250CE); Madhyamaka philosophical school

Two related concepts

- Interdependence and causality: nothing exists by itself but only in relation to other things
- Reality only is experienced through our perceptions
    - This is similar to the approach of David Hume, and there is some recent research he might have been exposed to these ideas through Jesuits returning from China

Yet another case where the term—while unambiguous in Sanskrit (*sunyata)*—may not work that well: it is not "empty" as in nihilism but instead a "middle way" between nihilism and "externalism", things having a distinct, independent reality (closer to Plato)



DAILY DHARMA

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Understanding Reality

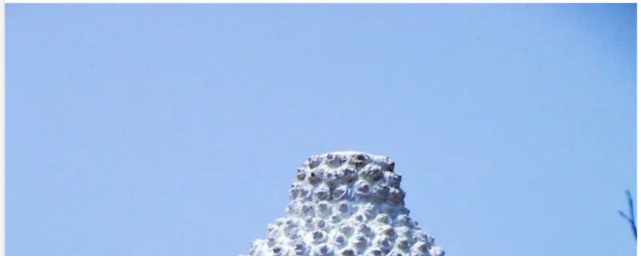
> “Having a clear understanding of how our mind works is the foundation to understanding reality, and understanding reality is the key to mental well-being and health.
>
> Karuna Cayton, “The Myth of Reality”
>
> CLICK HERE TO READ THE ARTICLE

TEACHINGS

The Myth of Reality

A psychologist on how understanding the nature of reality is the foundation of Buddhism

By Karuna Cayton | OCT 04, 2025





* * *

"creative use of white space"



Photo by Maitrayee Raha

The myth of reality is the fundamental myth we live by—the granddaddy of them all. We mistakenly see the world—and ourselves—as a result of this fundamental misperception of reality. "Reality" here is both a philosophical topic and a day-to-day topic. Here we are only really interested in how the philosophical theory impacts our everyday life. Simply put, the definition of "reality" is that things appear in the way they exist. Buddhist theory posits that since we actually do not see things the way they truly exist, then we are in constant relationship—actions and reactions—with things as we



DHARMA TALKS

Buddhist Teachings for Fools and Losers

Mauricio Hondaku

Top courses

Take an online Buddhism course at your own pace.

1. **Demystifying Nirvana**
   by: Christina Feldman, John Peacock, and Jake Dartington

Core teaching in secular Buddhism: Kalama Sutta

- **Question Authority:** The Buddha tells the people of Kalama not to rely on tradition, hearsay, scripture, logical deduction, or the prestige of a teacher. [1, 2]
- **Test by Experience:** Instead, individuals should test teachings by observing whether actions and qualities lead to harm or well-being. [1]
- **Pragmatic Ethics:** If a state of mind—such as greed or hatred—leads to suffering, it should be abandoned. If it leads to peace and happiness, it should be cultivated.

Google AI overview accessed 21 Sept 2026

Sort of related to this: lists of "unanswerable questions"

Cula-Malunkyovada Sutta: ten questions nature of the world (eternal? infinite?) and Buddha in time and space

Sabbasava Sutta: sixteen questions on the nature of the self (including, curiously, reflections on no-self)

Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta, "Discourse to Vatsagotra on the [Simile of] Fire," Majjhima Nikaya 72:

> Vaccha, [any of these views] is a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. It is accompanied by suffering, distress, despair, & fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation; to calm, direct knowledge, full Awakening, Unbinding. [quoted in Wikipedia]

[note that this does not preclude a vast philosophical literature developing in later years]

Brahmaviharas—"the divine abodes"—and their "near enemies"

- Compassion (karuna)
  - vs. pity, despair
- Metta (goodwill, lovingkindness, benevolence, *agape*)
  - vs. attachment
- Sympathetic (or empathetic) joy (mudita)
  - vs. envy, jealousy, comparison of self with others
  - Note that while there isn't really an English term for this we have a borrowed from German a term for the opposite, *schadenfreude*...interesting...
- Equanimity (upekkha)
  - vs. indifference

Five Aggregates or Khandas

1. Form or Rupa
2. Consciousness or Vinnana
3. Feelings or Vedana
4. Perception or Sanna
5. Mental states or Sankhara

Another awkward translation but incredibly useful for observing how the mind gets distracted during meditation

Five hindrances to meditation

1. Focusing on pleasant thoughts: sensual desire
    - Joseph Goldstein: retreat romance fantasies. And/or lunch
2. Focusing on unpleasant thoughts: ill-will
    - Joseph Goldstein: retreat revenge fantasies. Notably towards those with respiratory ailments
3. Too little energy: sloth and sleepiness
    - Stand up, and if that doesn't work, take a nap
4. Too much energy (agitation/restlessness and remorse)
    - Go for a walk; watch the caffeine
5. Doubt
    - Any of this familiar?: "I'm never going to get this meditation thing", "I'm a terrible meditator", "This is completely pointless"

"If evil, unskillful thoughts — imbued with desire, aversion or delusion — still arise in the monk while he is attending to the relaxing of thought-fabrication with regard to those thoughts, then — with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth — he should beat down, constrain, and crush his mind with his awareness." Vitakkasanthana Sutta: The Relaxation of Thoughts " (milder remedies are first suggested)

Seven factors of awakening

1. mindfulness
2. investigation
3. energy
4. joy
5. tranquility
6. samadhi
7. equanimity

Stages of awakening

1. Stream-enterer
2. Once-returner
3. Non-returner
4. Arahat

You too can achieve these! First two are pretty straightforward and involve getting past the poisons and the hindrances, particularly doubt.
https://www.spiritrock.org/practice-guides/four-stages-of-enlightenment

As we will see, the Mahayana drops these in favor of the bodhisattva's focus on the liberation of all beings

From the Pali Canon:

In the Pali Canon's Samyutta Nikaya, several discourses juxtapose the five hindrances with the seven factors of enlightenment (*bojjhanga*).[a] For instance, according to SN 46.37, the Buddha stated:

> "Bhikkhus, there are these five obstructions, hindrances, corruptions of the mind, weakeners of wisdom. What five? Sensual desire... ill will... sloth and torpor ... restlessness and remorse... doubt....
>
> "There are, bhikkhus, these seven factors of enlightenment, which are nonobstructions, nonhindrances, noncorruptions of the mind; when developed and cultivated they lead to the realization of the fruit of true knowledge and liberation. What seven? The enlightenment factor of mindfulness... [discrimination of states... energy... rapture... tranquility... concentration...] equanimity....[5][b][c]

source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_hindrances

Ten perfections (paramita)

1. *Dāna pāramī*: generosity, giving of oneself. As a former sangha treasurer, I love the primacy of this!
2. *Sīla pāramī*: virtue, morality, proper conduct
3. *Nekkhamma pāramī*: renunciation
4. *Paññā pāramī*: wisdom, discernment
5. *Viriya pāramī*: energy, diligence, vigour, effort
6. *Khanti pāramī*: patience, tolerance, forbearance, acceptance, endurance
7. *Sacca pāramī*: truthfulness, honesty
8. *Adhiṭṭhāna pāramī* : determination, resolution
9. *Mettā pāramī*: goodwill, friendliness, loving-kindness
10. *Upekkhā pāramī*: equanimity, serenity

source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C4%81ramit%C4%81

FIVE DAILY RECOLLECTIONS*

1. I am of a nature to grow old;
I cannot avoid aging.

2. I am subject to illness and infirmity;
I cannot avoid illness and infirmity.

3. I am of a nature to die;
I cannot avoid death.

4. I will be parted from all that is dear
and beloved to me.

5. I am the owner of my actions and heir to my actions.
Actions are the womb from which I have sprung.
My actions are my relations; my actions are my protection.
The fruits of all my actions,
Both wholesome and unwholesome,
Skillful and unskillful,
I will inherit.

*NUMERICAL DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA – AN ANTHOLOGY OF SUTTAS FROM THE ANGUTTARA NIKAYA (Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikku Bodki, trans.);
and as conveyed in the teachings of Ayya Khema.

Bodhisattva Vows (Mahayana)

Sentient beings are numberless, I take a vow to save them

The passions of anger, greed, and delusion are inexhaustible, I take a vow to extinguish them

The gates of the dharma are infinite, I take a vow to pass through them

The Buddha-way in supreme, I take a vow to complete it

The Kwan Um School of Zen
Americas | Asia | Europe

These vows are recited in morning practice before bows, and at the end of the evening during retreats.

1. Sentient beings are numberless. We vow to save them all.

2. Delusions are endless. We vow to cut through them all.

3. The teachings are infinite. We vow to learn them all.

4. The Buddha Way is inconceivable. We vow to attain it.

The Four Great Bodhisattva Vows

The Bodhisattva Vows exist in many different forms; at Upaya they are chanted as follows:

Creations are numberless, I vow to free them.
Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to transform them.
Reality is boundless, I vow to perceive it.
The awakened way is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it.