

Introduction to Buddhism

Buddhism, one of the major world religions, began in India around the sixth century, B.C.E. The teachings of Buddhism spread throughout Central and Southeast Asia, through China, Korea, and Japan. Today, there are Buddhists all over the world.

THE LEGEND OF SHAKYAMUNI

According to Buddhist tradition, Shakyamuni (a name meaning “Sage of the Shakya Clan”) is the founder of Buddhism (he is also sometimes referred to as “Siddhartha Gautama”). Shakyamuni was born around 490 B.C.E. to a royal family who lived in a palace in the foothills of the Himalayas. From the moment he was born, Shakyamuni did not lead a typical life. For example, legend states that Shakyamuni was born from his mother’s hip while she remained standing in a grove of trees. In his youth, Shakyamuni’s father provided him with everything he wanted and encouraged him to excel in his studies. However, he would not permit Shakyamuni to leave the palace grounds. Shakyamuni grew up with many luxuries and married a beautiful princess, but he still was not happy. He longed to see what was beyond the palace gates, thinking that a clue to his search for the meaning of life lay beyond the safety and luxury of the palace.

At the age of 29, Shakyamuni left the palace on four separate occasions to explore. He was deeply affected by what he saw. During his first trip outside the palace, he saw a very old man who was bent over and had trouble walking. As Shakyamuni passed by in his carriage, the old man peered up at him, his eyes squinting from his severely wrinkled face. In his second outing, Shakyamuni observed a sick man, wailing in pain. During his third excursion, Shakyamuni came upon the still and lifeless body of a dead man. Shakyamuni was shocked and saddened by the sights of old age, sickness, and death. During his fourth outing, he saw a wandering monk, a seeker of religious truth. These four outings and what Shakyamuni saw (old age, sickness, death, and a seeker of religious truth) are called the “Four Sights.” Meeting the monk inspired Shakyamuni to leave the palace, his wife, and his newborn son. He wanted to understand more about life, why human beings suffered, and how one could help relieve suffering in the world. Thus, he began his religious quest.

Shakyamuni began his search for enlightenment. According to Buddhist belief, enlightenment is the experience of true reality, an “awakening” through which one could comprehend the true nature

of things.² Shakyamuni thought he could reach enlightenment by practicing asceticism, a lifestyle of severe discipline. Sometimes he would not eat or drink for long periods of time. After six years of enduring many hardships, Shakyamuni realized that he had not come to a deeper understanding of life. He realized that neither luxury nor starvation would lead to enlightenment and instead decided to follow a moderate path or the Middle Way. He went to a village called Bodh Gaya where he became awakened to a true understanding of life. The moment of his enlightenment took place while he was seated in meditation under a tree. In his enlightenment, he gained the power to see his former lives, the power to see death and rebirth of all types, and finally the realization that he had eliminated all desires and ignorance within himself. He had become a Buddha, a title meaning “awakened one.” The Buddha gave his first sermon, known as the “First Discourse,” explaining his realization to the group of ascetics with whom he used to practice. These men became his first disciples. He continued to spread his knowledge throughout towns in India for 45 years thereafter, gaining increasing numbers of followers until his death at the age of 80.

THE BASIC TENETS OF BUDDHISM

A. The *Dharma*, Reincarnation, and *Karma*

Buddhists believe that human beings have the potential to become free from suffering by practicing meditation and cultivating a lifestyle prescribed by the Buddha. The Buddha gave many lectures before his death. His teachings are referred to as the *Dharma*.

The wheel is a very important symbol in Buddhism because it depicts the cycle of life and death. Buddhists believe that after beings die, they are reborn or reincarnated into a new form. This new form could be a deity, human, animal, some lower creature like a hungry ghost (a being with a small head and huge stomach, and therefore always hungry), or an inhabitant of hell.³ It is believed that all positive thoughts and actions cause good *karma* and may direct one into being reborn in a higher form. The consequences of one’s negative deeds, bad *karma*, may result in rebirth in a lower form. This endless cycle of rebirth, called *reincarnation*, reflects the impermanent nature of human existence.

B. The Four Noble Truths

As part of the *Dharma*, Buddha taught about the Four Noble Truths. These are:

1. Life is suffering.
2. Suffering is caused by craving.
3. Suffering can have an end.

4. There is a path which leads to the end of suffering.

The Four Noble Truths form the basis of Buddhist thought. It is believed that suffering, in part, is due to the impermanence of life. Even if one is happy at a given time, this happiness is not permanent. Since it is believed that life is suffering, the ultimate goal in Buddhism is to end the cycle of suffering, the cycle of repeated death and rebirth. The achievement of this goal is called *nirvana*.

C. *Nirvana*

The goal of Buddhism is to become enlightened and reach *nirvana*. *Nirvana* is believed to be attainable only with the elimination of all greed, hatred, and ignorance within a person. *Nirvana* signifies the end of the cycle of death and rebirth. According to the Four Noble Truths, “life is suffering” so ending the cycle of rebirth is something to be desired. Some Buddhists think of *nirvana* as a type of heaven where there is no suffering; other Buddhists view *nirvana* as a state of mind free from suffering. According to Buddhist belief, a final *nirvana* is attained at the time of an enlightened being’s death, and is no longer part of the cycle of reincarnation and death.⁴

D. How to Achieve *Nirvana*

Buddhists believe that the path toward *nirvana*, called the Middle Way or the Eightfold Path, outlines how people should live in order to reach *nirvana*.

The Eightfold Path consists of three categories: moral conduct, concentration, and wisdom.

Moral conduct consists of:

1. right speech (refraining from falsehood, malicious talk, and abusive language)
2. right action (refraining from stealing, killing, and unchastity)
3. right livelihood (earning a living through proper means, not killing living beings, making astrological forecasts, or practicing fortune-telling)⁵

Concentration consists of:

4. right effort (energetic will to prevent or get rid of evil and promote goodness)
5. right mindfulness (to be diligently aware, mindful, and attentive)
6. right concentration (to rid oneself of unwholesome thoughts and achieve pure equanimity and awareness)⁶

Wisdom consists of:

7. right thought (selflessness and detachment, universal thoughts of love and nonviolence)
8. right understanding (understanding of things as they are, a full understanding of the Four Noble Truths)

E. *Bodhisattvas*

Some schools of Buddhism including those of Chinese Buddhism believe that becoming a *bodhisattva* is a more important goal for individuals than achieving *nirvana*. A *bodhisattva* is a being who has attained enlightenment, but vows not to enter into final *nirvana* until all living things are released from suffering. *Bodhisattvas* choose to be reborn so that they can continue to work to relieve the suffering of others and try to make them aware of the Buddha’s teachings. In China, *bodhisattvas* are sometimes worshiped as much as the Buddha. For example, the female *bodhisattva* Guanyin became widely worshiped in Buddhist temples throughout China. In Buddhism, Guanyin is the Chinese Bodhisattva of Compassion.

III. INDIA DURING BUDDHA’S LIFETIME

Buddha’s ideas applied to people regardless of their rank in life, and stated that individuals are in charge of their own destiny. These ideas were in stark contrast to the ideas that were dominant during Buddha’s lifetime. Buddha was born during a time when Brahmanism was the main religion in India. Among other practices, Brahmanism encouraged the sacrifice of animals and the offering of gifts to Brahmanic priests for salvation. The society at the time of Buddha’s lifetime was also rigidly divided into castes. The caste system determined who people could marry, and what kinds of jobs they could have. Buddhism differed in that it did not believe in social distinctions between human beings or claims to superiority based on birth. Buddhism was accessible to anyone. Buddhism also did not support animal sacrifices. In fact, Buddha believed that compassion should be cultivated among all living beings.

IV. BUDDHIST TEXTS

After the death of Buddha, there was no one to take his place or to lead the new religion. Different schools of Buddhism formed, each with their own unique characteristics. Over the centuries, Buddhism has spread and changed. However, there are Buddhist works such as the *Pali Canon*, the “First Discourse” (Buddha’s first speech after gaining enlightenment), as well as many *sutras* such as the *Lotus Sutra*, popular in China and Japan, that have provided important continuity to the religion.⁸

V. BUDDHISM IN CHINA

A. History

When Laozi (the man credited as the founder of Daoism) left China to travel westward, some Chinese legends state that he traveled to India and became known as the Buddha. Although Buddhism was a religion that began outside of China, many countries, including China, adapted it and made it their own.⁹

Merchants, traders, and Buddhist pilgrims helped spread Buddhist ideas to China by the second century C.E. Buddhism offered the Chinese new ideas such as *karma*, reincarnation, hell, monks, and

monasteries. Buddhism encountered opposition in China, especially from Confucians, but was able to grow and thrive.

The Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), which had established Confucianism as their state doctrine, had collapsed by 220 C.E. The disorder caused by the collapse of the Han Dynasty made it easier for a religion such as Buddhism to be accepted because people, including the defeated Chinese aristocracy, became freer to choose their religious practices. Buddhism and its ideas also provided comfort to many during this troubled and tumultuous time. By the time of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (317–589 C.E.), Buddhism had become established at all levels of Chinese society.

For a long period during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 C.E.), Buddhism was not only accepted in China, but it also flourished. Buddhist temples owned large amounts of land and did not have to pay taxes. Many Buddhist monasteries became very wealthy. When the Tang Dynasty fell on hard times, however, many Daoist and Confucian bureaucrats resented the wealth of the Buddhists. As a result, in 844–45 C.E., the government took Buddhist lands and profits away from them and destroyed their temples. This persecution ended with the death of the emperor who had begun it.¹⁰ Once again, Buddhism became accepted even though the temples did not regain their wealth. In the following years, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism adopted aspects of each other's religious ideas and thoughts.¹¹

During the Cultural Revolution, Buddhism was once again suppressed. However, Buddhism and its influences still remain woven into Chinese culture.

B. Pure Land and Chan Buddhism

Buddhism in China was undoubtedly quite different from Buddhism as it was originally practiced in India. Two major schools of Buddhism that originated in China are Pure Land Buddhism and Chan Buddhism.

Pure Land Buddhism is based on the idea that buddhas or advanced bodhisattvas can create blissful paradises known as "Pure Lands." These pure lands can be reached through successful rebirths and devotion to the buddha of the pure land. According to tradition, there once was a king named Amitabha who became a monk after learning about Buddhism. When he became a buddha, he came into possession of the pure land called the Western Paradise. Individuals can supposedly reach the Western Paradise through devotion to the Amitabha Buddha. Calling the name of Amitabha, especially at the hour of one's death, is supposedly enough for an individual to ensure a rebirth in the Western Paradise.¹²

Chan Buddhism developed in China in the sixth and seventh centuries. According to legend, the monk Bodhidharma was the first patriarch of Chan Buddhism. He is said to have meditated for nine years, cutting off his eyelids to stay awake. Chan Buddhism emphasized the importance of meditation in achieving

enlightenment. Meditation, to the Chan Buddhists, was more important than *sutra* chanting, religious rituals, or worship of buddha images.

C. Tibetan Buddhism

Buddhism in Tibet is quite different from traditional Chinese Buddhism. Tibet adopted Buddhism centuries after China and did not model itself on Chinese Buddhism. Rather, in the seventh century, Tibet actively studied and imported aspects of Indian, rather than Chinese, civilization.¹³ As a result, Tibetan Buddhism is closer to Indian Buddhism than Chinese Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism also adopted many rituals of Bon, Tibet's native religion. Another unique characteristic of Tibetan Buddhism is how some lamas, including the Dalai Lama, are identified through reincarnation. Advanced lamas supposedly can know the identity of their rebirths. Many reincarnations of lamas have been found among the children of wealthy or influential patrons. These children are then trained and guided until they are ready to take on the responsibilities of a lama.¹⁴ The Dalai Lamas are considered to be the manifestations of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, choosing to reincarnate and delay final nirvana to help humankind.

VI. THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism spread from India to China and also to other countries in Asia, such as Korea, Japan, Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Prince Shotoku of Japan, for example, wished to learn more about Buddhism to help Japan become stronger like the larger and more advanced China. During the Tang Dynasty, Japan embraced Chinese Buddhism. This was just the beginning of Japan's adoption of many things Chinese, including China's system of government and bureaucracy.¹⁵

Over the years, Buddhism has gained followers and has spread to other countries. China and other countries have adapted Buddhism to fit their own societies. Undoubtedly, this flexibility has contributed to its influence and longevity in the world.

Resources

2 Schuhmacher and Woerner, pp. 11–12.

3 Ch'en, p. 5.

4 Keown, pp. 55–56.

5 Ch'en, p. 6.

6 Rahula, pp. 48–49.

7 Rahula, p. 49.

8 Littleton, p. 82.

9 Reat, p. 137.

10 Reat, p. 147.

11 Reat, p. 148.

12 Schuhmacher and Woerner, pp. 8–9.

13 Reat, p. 220.

14 Reat, p. 240.

15 Reat, p. 189.