

## BUDDHISM

The religion known as Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama. He lived between 560 B.C. and 480 B.C. Siddhartha was a prince in Nepal, a country north of India in the Himalayan foothills. As a young man, he was surrounded by luxury and great wealth. His parents made sure he never saw anything that was sad or unpleasant.

One day, Siddhartha left the palace and journeyed to the outside world. For the first time, he saw old age, sickness, and death. These sights shocked him and changed the course of his life.

Siddhartha gave up his kingdom and left his wife and children to search for the reasons why men experience suffering and sadness. He wandered for six years through northern India without finding the answer. He practiced asceticism or the practice of self-denial in order to achieve an understanding of ultimate reality. He eventually abandoned asceticism and instead turned to an intense period of meditation. While meditating under a tree, the answer came to him. When this happened, he became known as "Buddha," meaning the "Enlightened One," the one with spiritual knowledge. Buddha preached his first sermon in Deer Park in the Indian holy city of Varanasi (also known as Benares.) He dedicated the rest of his life to helping people overcome suffering.



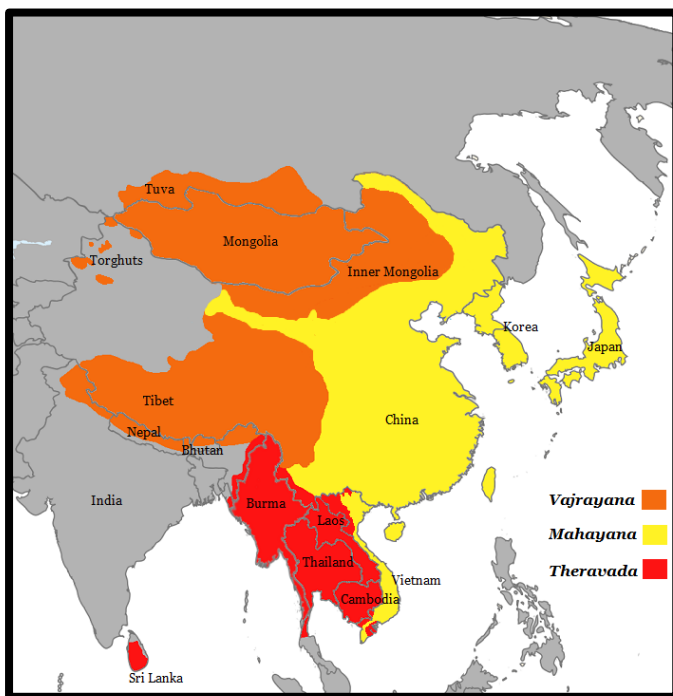
Buddha denied the reality of the material world. The physical surroundings of humans, he believed, were simply illusions. The pain, poverty and sorrow that afflict human beings are caused by their attachment to things of this world. Once people let go of their worldly cares, pain and sorrow can be forgotten. Then comes bodhi, or wisdom. Achieving wisdom is a key step to achieving nirvana, or ultimate reality-the end of the self and a reunion with the Great World Soul.

Buddha preached the "Four Noble Truths." The first truth was that suffering is a part of life. Also, because of man's actions in this life, he may be reborn into more suffering in the next life. The second truth stated that the origin of man's suffering is his desire for things he cannot have, and his attachment to material objects. The third truth taught that man must overcome his desires in order to get rid of suffering and find peace. The fourth truth showed man how to overcome desire by following the "Noble Eightfold Path." The Eightfold Path consisted of eight practices: (1) right faith (2) right resolve to resist evil (3) right speech (4) right action (5) right living (6) right effort (7) right thought, and (8) right meditation.

According to Buddha, man needed to go through several rebirths before he could overcome his desires. Those who finally rid themselves of all desires would reach “nirvana.” In nirvana, man’s soul would stop its cycle of rebirth and become one with the universe. While Siddhartha accepted the idea of reincarnation, he rejected the Hindu division of human beings into rigidly defined castes. He taught instead that all human beings could reach nirvana as a result of their behavior in this life. This made Buddhism appealing to the downtrodden peoples at the lower end of the social scale.

Buddhism also differed from Hinduism in its simplicity. Siddhartha rejected the multitude of gods that had become identified with Hinduism. He forbade his followers to worship either his person or his image after his death. For that reason, many Buddhists see Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion.

Buddha encouraged his followers to become monks and nuns in order to spread his teachings. At first, Buddhism was slow to spread in India because it was opposed by powerful Brahman priests who were leaders of the Hindu religion. However, during the 200s B.C., the Indian ruler Asoka made Buddhism the official religion. He sent missionaries to spread Buddhism to Central and East Asia. After Asoka’s death, many Buddhist ideas were gradually absorbed into Hinduism, and Buddhism declined in importance in India. Today, Buddhism has less than a million followers in India, but it remains popular in China, Korea, Japan, and many countries of Southeast Asia.



Over the centuries, Buddhists divided into different “sects,” or groups, just as Christians split into the Catholic, Orthodox and various Protestant sects. One sect is called Theravada Buddhism. As Buddha wanted, it stresses that Buddha was simply a teacher, and that the holiest of lives is that followed by Buddhist monks. It is widely practiced in Sri Lanka and most of Southeast Asia except Vietnam. Another sect, known as Mahayana Buddhism, was greatly influenced by Christian teachings. These Buddhists believe that Buddha was more than a teacher, that he was a god. They believe that nirvana is a paradise like the Christian heaven, and that bodhisattvas (Buddhist saints on their way to enlightenment) can help men to reach nirvana. It diffused from India into Central Asia and then followed the Silk Road into East Asia. It is predominantly practiced in China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan. A third sect, sometimes considered part of the Mahayana school is practiced in Tibet and Mongolia. Known by several different names, on the map to the left it is called

Vajrayana. This is the branch of Buddhism associated with the Dalai Lama. In Japan, Mahayana Buddhism became syncretic with Shintoism and is known as Zen Buddhism. This variation became popular among the samurai warriors.

Buddhism greatly influenced art and architecture throughout Asia. Statues of Buddha and Buddhist temples are familiar sights. In India, stupas hold Buddhist relics and pillars erected by Asoka mark important sites from the life of the Buddha and places of pilgrimage. Some of the columns carry inscriptions addressed to the monks. While in East Asia, Buddhist temples take the form of pagodas, sacred pyramid-shaped towers that are frequently seen in China, Japan, and Korea. A pagoda has roofs curving upward in such a way that each story of the tower meets the next story above.

