

INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM

BUDDHISM'S BEGINNINGS

Buddhism is one of the most widespread religious philosophies today. Its beginnings date to the 6th century BCE, when Indian Prince Siddhartha Gautama (b. 563 – d. 483 BCE) denounced his noble lifestyle for the life of an ascetic seeking enlightenment.

KEY IDEAS

Buddhism sought to:

- reject control of the brahminic priesthood¹
- establish an independent morality—morals as separate from ritual rules
- offer salvation to everyone, no matter what caste²
- encourage people to follow the Middle Way—that is, to reject the two extremes—the profitless life of sensual indulgence or the equally profitless way of self-torture and denial. It is the Middle Way, rather, that brings enlightenment or *nirvana* (the escape into the universal world where all passion, longing, and being cease).

Buddhism teaches the Four Noble Truths and opens the way to enlightenment to all who follow the Eightfold Path.

The Four Noble Truths:

- 1) Life is suffering
- 2) Suffering is caused by desire
- 3) Desire can be eliminated

The means of realizing the first three truths and eliminating desire is by following the Eightfold Path

The Eightfold Path:

- 1) Right views
- 2) Right intentions
- 3) Right speech
- 4) Right actions
- 5) Right livelihood
- 6) Right effort
- 7) Right mindfulness
- 8) Right contemplation

Buddhist ethics also encourage non-injury, forgiveness of enemies, and friendliness to all creatures.

¹ Brahmins occupied the highest class in Hindu society and were the only ones believed to be capable of escaping the cycle of rebirth through asceticism and sacrifices according to a ritual known only to them.

² A caste is one of the four major hereditary social classes into which Hindu society is divided. The four castes are: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaisayas (cultivators), and Sudras (serfs).

LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

Stories concerning the life of the Buddha in art traditionally begin with a scene of Tushita Heaven, where the historical Buddha awaits to be born.

Birth

The Buddha was immaculately conceived. His mother, Queen Maya, dreamed of a white elephant striking her right side and entering her womb. His birth was also unusual. He emerged from Maya's right side as she reached up to pick flowers from the Sala tree at Lumbini Grove at Kapilavastu. He was born into the Sakya clan and lived near the border of Nepal. April 8 is celebrated as Buddha's birthday throughout many parts of the Buddhist world, including China, Japan and Korea.

The historical Buddha is referred to by several names:

Siddharta Gautama (given name)
Sakyamuni ("Sage of the Sakya Tribe")
Buddha ("Awakened One")

First Bath

He was bathed in a golden bowl attended by nine dragons. Sakyamuni raised his right hand and uttered a "lions roar," proclaiming himself lord over heaven and earth.

First Seven Steps

Sakyamuni's first seven steps were marked by lotuses that sprang up under his feet.

Early Life

Sakyamuni's mother died seven days after he was born. Until he was twenty-nine years old, he led a luxurious, sheltered life in his father's palace. Sakyamuni's father was the son of a king of the Sakya clan of the warrior caste. A soothsayer told him soon after Sakyamuni's birth, that the child would grow up to be either a great king or a great religious leader. In an effort to promote the former, Sakyamuni's father confined him to the palace where he would only see good and pleasurable things. There Sakyamuni married Yashodhara and fathered a son named Rahula.

Four Encounters

At twenty-nine, Sakyamuni left in a chariot to see the world outside of the confines of the palace. There he encountered for the first time, an old man, a sick man, and finally a corpse. These taught him that suffering and death are inevitable. He then met a mendicant monk, and resolved to renounce his life as a prince and to seek a way to relieve mankind of its suffering.

Renunciation

After leaving the palace, Sakyamuni became an ascetic for six years, fasting and practicing austerities.

Sakyamuni Coming Down the Mountain	Discouraged because his asceticism did not lead to enlightenment, Sakyamuni came down from the mountain and broke his fast, rejecting the ascetic path to salvation.
Enlightenment	Around 528 B.C.E. at Bodhgaya, Sakyamuni sat down under a Pipal tree and vowed not to move until he attained enlightenment. (The Pipal tree would later be known as a Bodhi tree, or tree of enlightenment.) There, he resisted the attacks and temptations of Mara (the spirit of evil). Finally, on the night of a full moon, he achieved enlightenment. Seeing no one around to witness this event, he called the earth to witness by touching the ground. The <i>bhumispara mudra</i> (symbolic hand gesture) symbolizes this event.
First Sermon	Sakyamuni gave his first sermon at Deer Park in Benares. There he set into motion the wheel of the <i>dharma</i> (or religious truth and law). The <i>dharmacakra mudra</i> (gesture of the turning the wheel of the law) signifies this sermon in which he set forth the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.
Nirvana	<p>The Buddha died at age eighty at Kushinagara. Nirvana also refers to the state of enlightenment when earthly desires are extinguished and the enlightened individual escapes the cycle of reincarnation.</p> <p>Upon his death, the Buddha's mother wept in heaven causing him to rise from his coffin and preach to her. After his death, Sakyamuni's body was wrapped in 1,000 layers of fine cloth and cremated. The relics were then divided into eight equal parts and distributed to eight cities, each of which erected a memorial mound over its share.</p>
BUDDHISM AFTER THE BUDDHA	<p>Buddhism spread widely throughout Central, East and Southeast Asia. Different schools, movements and sects of Buddhism developed as the philosophy spread. Although Buddhism throughout the world is vastly diverse, its basic foundations are the same.</p> <p>Buddhism is "a doctrine of salvation, aimed at the acquisition of liberating insight and at the complete extinction of attachment, and consequently, of continued rebirth into the world of suffering."³</p> <p>Buddhist beliefs and doctrine can be classified into several movements, schools and sects, each associated with particular historical periods, geographic regions/cultures and variations in belief and practice.</p>

³ *World Religions*. MacMillan Reference Now Encyclopedia, 1998.

BUDDHISM
IN JAPAN
AND KOREA

Buddhism was introduced in Japan by a Korean delegation in the mid-6th century after taking hold in Three Kingdoms Korea by the late 4th century. First adopted by the Japanese and Korean states as an official doctrine for national protection, Mahayana Buddhism was abandoned in favor of more personal devotional belief systems (Esoteric, Pure Land, Zen/Son) over the course of time, even when the official ruling class rejected it in favor of other philosophies like Confucianism.

Hinayana/
Theravada
Movement

Hinayana is an early, austere form of Buddhism. It is probably closer than any others to the original doctrine of Sakyamuni. Its beliefs are based on moral discipline and meditation rather than on belief and sacrifice. Enlightenment can only be attained through the literal following of the Buddha's path. Hinayana is still practiced in many countries today, especially in Southeast Asia.

Theravada ("Doctrine of the Senior Monkhood") strove to safeguard the purity of the Buddha's teachings, trying to shield it from contaminating superstitions. Theravada Buddhism is extremely close to Hinayana Buddhism.

There are two main types of Theravada Buddhism: the rationalist and the pious believers.

Rationalists believe that Buddha was a man, not a god. Buddha was remarkable because he proposed to abolish suffering without the help of a deity (for the gods, too, are bound to the wheel of life), but by purely human means. The rationalist's goal is to reach Nirvana through his own good works. Rationalists live by a moral code based on kindness and restraint. The monks try to set an example of virtue and rational behavior, perfecting their minds and educating others.

Pious believers also follow this same sort of moral code, but they believe that the Buddha is a god, open to prayer. They believe that by saving up acts of merit, it will entitle them to specific rewards in future lives. The pious believer, like the rationalist, is ultimately responsible for their own salvation. This contrasts with Mahayana and Esoteric Buddhism, where bodhisattvas play an active role in salvation, and Buddha is a more remote cosmic essence than an approachable god.

Hinayana/Theravada iconography: The Buddha is represented by symbols such as the lotus, throne, wheel of the law, and stupa. Scenes from Buddha's life are also popular, as well as jataka tales (stories of the Buddha's previous lives), and Yakshas and Yakshis (Dravidian nature spirits).

Mahayana
Movement
“The Greater
Vehicle”

Mahayana is a later form of Buddhism that challenged the Hinayana/Theravada movement. Compared with Hinayana, it is a greatly expanded pantheon, with Sakyamuni becoming only one Buddha among many. The Buddha is no longer just a teacher, but a god, a force which existed before all worlds and is eternal. The remote, highly abstract *nirvana* is augmented by many paradises; each presided over by its own Buddha. Salvation is easy and open to everyone, through belief and the help of the Bodhisattvas.

Mahayana iconography: The Buddha is represented as a young, ideally proportioned male figure, dressed in simple monks' robes. Buddha has thirty-two sacred identifying marks. The three usually represented by artists are:

ushnisha: a cranial extension (not a bun!) which is the mark of the Buddha and is symbolic of his omniscience.

urna: a mark of the Buddha, placed between his eyebrows. It symbolizes his power to illuminate the world with the light that radiates from this spot. Artists indicate it in many ways, including as a whorl of hair, a jewel, or as a raised dot.

elongated earlobes: these are the result of the heavy earrings the Buddha wore as a prince. They symbolize his renunciation of materialism.

OTHER MAHAYANA DEITIES

Bodhisattva

These are beings who, although they could become Buddhas and enter *nirvana*, choose instead to help others in search of truth and salvation. They are usually depicted as young and beautiful figures, who wear elaborate jewelry symbolizing their ties to the material world. Early *bodhisattvas* appear to be male, while later *bodhisattvas* appear to be female. They are, however, like Christian angels, theoretically sexless.

Guardian Deities

These include the Dravidian spirits borrowed from Hinayana, as well as Vedic (Hindu/Indian) deities. These serve as lesser gods within the pantheon. Their function is to guard Buddhism and its believers against evil. They are commonly placed at temple entrances or on the corners of altar platforms.

Priests,
Patriarchs,
Arhats

These are historical or semi-historical champions of the Buddhist faith. An *arhat* is one who has attained enlightenment through rigorous practices, but refrains from entering *nirvana* in order to sustain the Buddha's law. Unlike the *bodhisattvas*, *arhats* do not help others towards salvation. Arhats (Lohans) are often depicted as lumpy old men in the wilderness.

Three Jewels

The Buddha, the *dharma* (Buddha's Laws), and the *Sangha* (the community of monks) are the three things necessary to support and continue the Buddhist faith.

The Esoteric/
Tantric Buddhist
Movement

Esoteric or Tantric Buddhism began to evolve in India during the 5th-6th centuries and flourished in Bengal and beyond from the 7th-12th centuries. Also referred to as Vajrayana ("Diamond Vehicle"). Esoteric Buddhism was widely adopted by members of the aristocratic class in Japan and Korea.

It brought Hindu gods and mystical concepts into Buddhism and changed its character dramatically. In Esoteric Buddhism you may become enlightened in this life, in this body.

There is the belief that there is a part of the all-pervading essence of the cosmic Buddha in everyone, but to reach it you must go through many different methods.

Esoteric Buddhism's basic scripture is the *Lotus Sutra*, in which Buddha revealed to his disciples the universality of the Buddha potential: everyone has the Buddha nature within them.

To reach the Buddha nature one must use the three mysteries: speech, body, and mind.

- *mantra*—"true words" chants—"om mani padme hum" ("the jewel is in the lotus")
- *F*—symbolic hand gesture
- meditation on an image

The deities of Esoteric Buddhism were divided according to the duality that they felt pervaded the entire world:

- material world vs. spiritual world
- potential vs. immediate
- female vs. male
- dark vs. light

The titles of these two worlds:

- womb vs. diamond

This duality was illustrated in one of the most important ritual elements used in Esoteric Buddhism, a *mandala* or cosmic diagram of the universe. It places the universal Buddha at the center and surrounds him with deities of descending importance. Mandalas can be paintings, sculpture and architecture. The mandalas help the devotee to understand and overcome the duality of this world.

The Esoteric/
Tantric Buddhist
Movement, cont.

Another important ritual object in esoteric Buddhism is the *vajra* or diamond scepter. The *vajra* represents a thunderbolt made of diamond. The diamond is the symbol of the highest spiritual power one can attain.

While a diamond can cut all surfaces, it too can be cut and shaped—it is pure, radiant, and unbreakable.

vajra

Sexuality appears in Esoteric Buddhist art in the images of deities embraced in a *yab-yum* (Tibetan “father-mother”) position. Sexual intercourse is metaphorical for the mystic union of opposites and extinction of dualism. It represents the dissolved line between the physical and spiritual worlds.



Death appears in images of angry forms of deities. These images are meant to overpower ignorance and evil. According to esoteric Buddhism one can only attain enlightenment by overcoming the attachment to the self—including the fear of one’s own death. Helping one to confront and overcome this fear are ritual implements constructed out of human bones and skulls.

The methods used to gain enlightenment in this life are revealed only to the initiate. Because of Esoteric Buddhism’s secret ways and methods, salvation of this sort is only available to a select few. Esoteric Buddhism offers a “direct” route to salvation. The ascent is steep, rocky, and dangerous—it is not recommended for those not fully qualified to make the climb.

Pure Land School
Of Buddhism

Belief in Amitabha (C: A-mi-t’o-p’o; J: Amida), the Buddha of Western Paradise or the Buddha of Infinite Light. Pure Land Buddhism developed in India and was transmitted to China in the 3rd century. It was transmitted to Korea and Japan by the 6th century. Faith in Amitabha can lead to rebirth in a kind of heaven (Pure Land of Western Paradise), free from the struggle of life on earth.

Zen/Ch’an School
Of Buddhism

Legend has it that in the early 6th century an Indian monk named Bodhidharma (Japanese: Daruma) preached Buddhism to the Liang Dynasty ruler in China. Because his views were unconventional, he had to flee, crossing the immense Yangtse River on a slender reed. He continued to preach in northern China until his death. He was the twenty-eighth Buddhist patriarch and the first of the Chinese-born sect of Ch’an Buddhism. A later legend grew up stating that the beginning of Ch’an Buddhism was the day that Buddha was scheduled to give a lecture to his followers and just sat there, silently holding a flower. Zen Buddhism was popularized in Japan during the Kamakura period (1185-1382).

Zen/Ch'an School
Of Buddhism, cont.

The basics of Ch'an/Zen Buddhism are as follows:

One cannot find the Buddha outside oneself, for there is no Buddha except the Buddha nature that is within one's own heart. Nothing can be gained by worship, ritual, images, or sacred texts. Only through meditation can one come to understand the Buddha nature and become enlightened in this life.

Monks help their students towards enlightenment by encouraging them to think outside of the normal track, for this is the only way to enlightenment. Nothing is written down. It is passed orally from teacher to pupil.

The highest truth is known as the First Principle, which because of its very nature was difficult to say anything about. When a Ch'an/Zen master was asked, "What is the First Principle?" He answered, "If I were to tell you, it would become the Second Principle."

To reach the Buddha nature, one must meditate with a clear mind. Thus one still sees Ch'an or Zen monks performing tedious, repetitive tasks, such as raking rocks in a bare garden. Or, when a novice might ask about the Buddha nature, the master could illogically scream back, "Go wash the bowls!" When necessary, to force the student out of their regularly channeled thinking, the master might give the student a hard whack with a stick.

The masters would ask enigmatic questions, referred to in Japanese as *koans*, that were unanswerable by ordinary logic and thinking. The most famous of these is "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

Through these measures, masters hope to bring about enlightenment for their students. Enlightenment, or the union with the First Principle, comes in a lightning flash of intuition. It is sudden and startling. One understands that emptiness is not a void, that light and dark, knowledge and truth are the same. That oneself and the Buddha are the same.

Son School Of
Buddhism

In Korea, Son Buddhism (or Chogye-jong), similar to Zen Buddhism, developed around 1200. It emphasizes traditional discipline, meditation and the study of sutras.