

Buddhism for Beginners

The historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, lived around 600 b.c.e, in what are now India and Nepal. The son of a warrior-king, Siddhartha grew up in luxury, carefully sheltered from the harshness of the world outside the palace, his every desire satisfied. His father, fearing a prophecy that predicted that his son might become a great spiritual leader, wished to keep Siddhartha attached to worldly pleasures so that the Prince would grow up to inherit his father's kingdom, rather than renouncing the world to become a sage. One day, however, Siddhartha ventured outside the palace and saw an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a renouncer. This was his first encounter with age, death, and sickness, and he was so struck by the suffering inherent in life that he decided to renounce the world and set out, leaving his wife and newborn son behind, to find a cure for the suffering of humanity.

For years he wandered through India, first practicing the harshest of austerities, and later modifying them, creating a middle between the decadent lifestyle he had previously led, and the extremely severe lifestyle of the renouncer. Following this Middle Way, he attained Enlightenment under a Bo tree in Bodh Gaya, India, and walked several hundred miles to Sarnath to preach his first sermon. Speaking about the dangers of attachment to worldly things, about the necessity of universal compassion, he gained widespread support and a devoted following. Orders of monks and nuns formed to practice his teachings; for half the year they wandered, begging, and during the rainy season they stayed in monasteries, practicing diligently and listening to the Buddha. At the age of eighty, the Buddha died, but his legacy grew and spread throughout Asia, traveling as far as the Middle East and Eastern Russia, into China, Mongolia, and Tibet, and across Southeast Asia. Even after Buddhism died out in India as a result of the twelfth century Muslim invasions, it continued to evolve and spread in other parts of the world.

Buddhism today is divided into three categories based on teachings and practice as well as geographical location. Theravadan Buddhism, sometimes referred to as Hinayana Buddhism, sticks to the actual teachings of the Buddha himself, and is found mainly in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, and other areas of Southeast Asia. Theravadan belief maintains the Buddha-hood and the attainment of Nirvana are the highest goals, but such accomplishments take thousands of lifetimes. Theravada Buddhism is the oldest form of Buddhist tradition, and as such is known as the Tradition of the Elders.

Mahayana Buddhism, the Great Vehicle tradition, relies on a series of texts and commentaries in addition to the original teachings of the Buddha himself. These *sutras*, or revealed texts, are considered as important as the teachings themselves. Within the *sutras*, the concept of a *bodhisattva*, or buddha-in-the-making, assumes a central importance. It is on this point that Mahayana Buddhism differs most significantly from its Theravadan predecessor; whereas Theravadans emphasize the idea of attaining Nirvana, Mahayana Buddhists consider this goal to be selfish, since by attaining Enlightenment and then leaving the world behind, an individual deprives the world of his or her insight. Instead, state the Mahayana texts, the ideal goal is to become a *bodhisattva*, an enlightened individual who has taken a vow to be reborn as a human again and again, until all suffering ceases. Mahayana Buddhism spread through East Asia, into China, Japan, and Korea, where it was further modified by local religious traditions such as

Taoism and Shinto beliefs, but the idea of compassion and the *bodhisattva* remain essential to Mahayana beliefs everywhere.

The third form of Buddhism is the Vajrayana, or Esoteric Tantric tradition, which arose around 600c.e. in India, and subsequently spread to Tibet and Mongolia. A marriage of Buddhist beliefs and Hindu Tantric practices, the Vajrayana tradition states that, through specific yogic and meditational practices, a person can reach Enlightenment within one lifetime, and then return as a *bodhisattva*. Practices such as the making of sand mandalas, the spinning of prayer wheels, and the counting of mantras on prayer beads are all part of the ritual practices of the Vajrayana tradition. Monasticism is equally important, with young men and women encouraged to become monks and nuns. Although Vajrayana Buddhist practices are found in Japan and China, they are the most developed and widely practiced in the Tibetan and Mongolian traditions, where lineages of reincarnated *bodhisattva* such as the Dalai Lama were not only the religious leaders, but the political heads-of-state as well. With the Chinese occupation of Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism is preserved in exile in India and is finding increasing popularity in the West. Although there are disparities between the three branches of Buddhism, all of them are based on the same teachings, and all of the branches emphasize the ideals of nonviolence, universal compassion, and detachment. The essential summation of Buddhist philosophy, common to all three branches, can be found in the Four Noble Truths of Buddha's first sermon. These truths are:

1. The Truth of Suffering- the understanding that happiness constantly passes away, that everything is impermanent, and that our attachment to impermanent things causes our suffering.
2. The Truth of the Understanding of the Causes of Suffering- the understanding that when you eliminate desire and delusions, you eliminate suffering
3. The Truth of Nirvana- the understanding that you can achieve a cessation of suffering, and that a state of Enlightenment exists
4. The Truth of the Path—the understanding that a path exists leading to the cessation of suffering, and that, in order to achieve Nirvana, you must follow that path

The path referred to in the Fourth Noble Truth is the Eightfold Path, which details the behavior of a person who wishes to attain Enlightenment. This path includes admonitions against lying, anger, hatred, encouraging practitioners to lead a moral and disciplined life. Following the Eightfold Path is the first step on the road to Enlightenment, and the basis on which all other Buddhist practices are founded.

All traditions of Buddhism also believe in reincarnation and the concept of karma, by which situations in this life are the result of the karma of past lives, and all actions in this life will have an effect on future lives. A human rebirth is considered the most advantageous, since humans alone are capable of making the decision to follow the Buddhist path. Individuals who follow the Eightfold path will gain better karma, which will help them earn a better rebirth and lead them along the path to Enlightenment. A person who does not lead a moral and compassionate lifestyle, however, will be reborn as an animal, a ghost, or even a Hell-being, and will have to wait through hundreds of future lives to obtain another opportunity to progress towards Enlightenment.