
Unit N

THE CENTRAL IDEAS OF BUDDHISM

This unit consists of three lessons. Students will (1) read about the life of the Buddha and reflect on some very different ways of defining success; (2) learn about the Bodhisattva ideal and the Bodhisattva Guanyin, the Buddhist “Goddess of Mercy”; and (3), look at the Buddhist view of morality.

*Carved Out of a Hillside in the Early Eighth Century,
the Leshan Buddha near Chengdu (Sichuan province),
Is over Two Hundred Feet High*



(Source: Photograph courtesy of Renqiu Yu, 2002)

LESSON 1

THE STORY OF THE BUDDHA AND THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

Essential Question: How might the story of the Buddha’s life make us reconsider our understanding of success?

Learning Experience: Students will see how the Buddha’s life story embodies two contrasting views of success. They will also think about how the Four Noble Truths might change our perspective concerning worldly goals.

Anticipatory Set: Students will read “The Story of the Buddha” as a success story. The Buddha’s life begins with one kind of success: He is born a prince—wealthy, handsome, and of high social status. It ends with another kind of success—religious enlightenment, and freedom from suffering, old age, and death.



In the course of their reading, students will consider the essential question: How might the story of the Buddha's early life make us reconsider our own understanding of success?

Context: The story of Buddhism begins in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE with Siddhartha Gautama (Siddhartha was his first name, Gautama his family name), a prince whose father ruled a kingdom located in what is today Nepal. At the age of twenty-nine, Siddhartha left the palace to become a wandering religious ascetic. He wanted to find the source of human suffering—and the way to become free from it. At the age of thirty-five, he achieved enlightenment and became known as the “Buddha,” the “Enlightened One.” This was the beginning of the Buddhist religion. Buddhism is the first world religion, a universal system of beliefs that spread to Sri Lanka, Central Asia, China, Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

The Buddha's teachings drew on fundamental concepts shared by practically all his contemporaries. Early Indian thought had evolved a view of humankind's place in the universe based on some of the following ideas:

Rebirth: “. . . upon death a person is neither annihilated nor transported to some other world in perpetuity, but rather returns to worldly life, to live and die again in a new mortal form. This continuing succession of life, death, and rebirth is termed *samsara* (circling, wandering) . . .”¹

Karma: “What determines a person's form of rebirth? Is there anything other than eternal rebirth?” Karma “means action in a very broad sense . . . the moral character of one's actions in this lifetime determines the status of one's rebirth in the next.”

Liberation (or deliverance, *moksha*): “. . . individuals may attain liberation through lack of desire, since desire is what engenders *samsara* in the first place.”

Liberation is achieved by doing away with involvement in the world: “. . . the renouncer . . . would leave home and family to live in relatively isolated and austere circumstances, sleeping on the ground, restricting the diet, practicing control of the breath, and bringing the senses under control . . . withdrawing from all that might bind one to the world, with the ultimate goal of escaping from rebirth itself” (Davis 1999: 16, 17).

The goal of every Buddhist is “Nirvana.” Nirvana literally means “a blowing out” (like a candle) or “extinction.” Buddhism offers salvation from rebirth, and Nirvana is the end of rebirth. The path to freedom is expressed in the Four Noble Truths:

1. The Noble Truth of . . . suffering is this: Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering; dissociation from the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering . . . ²
2. The Noble Truth of the origin of suffering is this: It is this thirst (craving) which produces re-existence and re-becoming, bound up with passionate greed, it finds fresh delight now here and now there . . .
3. The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering is this: It is the complete cessation of that very thirst, giving it up, renouncing it, emancipating oneself from it, detaching oneself from it.

¹ “Reincarnation” and “transmigration” are also commonly used instead of “rebirth.” But since Buddhists do not believe in the existence of a self, it is better to translate *samsara* as “rebirth.”





4. The Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of suffering is this: It is simply the Eightfold Path, namely right view; right thought; right speech; right action; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; right concentration (Rahula 1959: 93).

Although realizing Nirvana is the goal of every Buddhist, few people can withdraw from the world and devote themselves entirely to a religious life. The Five Precepts are the minimal obligations that make a person a Buddhist:

1. Do not take life.
2. Do not steal or take anything that belongs to others. Prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.
3. Do not engage in sexual misconduct.
4. Do not lie, speak poorly of others, or gossip. Practice loving speech and active listening.
5. Do not use alcohol and recreational drugs.

These obligations apply to both monks and laypeople (“householders”). Although Buddhism warns against attachment to things, it is neither a pessimistic faith nor does it deny people success or the enjoyment of worldly pleasures. It does, however, emphasize to lay followers that worldly goals are never pursued without a concern for morality:

If you want honor, wealth, or, after death, a blissful life among the gods, Then take good care that you observe the precepts of a moral life (*Dharmapada*, 4b.; Conze 1959: 84).

Rationale: This lesson introduces basic concepts of Buddhism through the life of Siddhartha Gautama. It asks students to compare conventional notions of success with the success embodied in the Buddha’s life story.

The British Museum—Illuminating World Cultures

The British Museum’s website has a section on ancient India that tells the life story of the Buddha in simple words and pictures. The visuals consist of Buddhist art from the museum’s collection.
http://www.ancientindia.co.uk/buddha/story/sto_set.html

Time: One class period.

Instructional Resources: “Story of the Buddha” (Handout for Lesson 1, pp. 234-235); Story Map and Note Taking Guide (pp. 236-237).

Some documents are primary sources and some are secondary materials selected from various books and articles. Primary sources are marked with an asterisk. *

Procedure: Have students read the story of the Buddha (pp. 234-235). As they read, they will:

- Use the Story Map on p. 236 to map the structure of the story.

² The Sanskrit word “*dukha*” is usually translated as “suffering.” This is probably too strong. “Unsatisfactory” or “unsatisfactoriness” is more accurate.





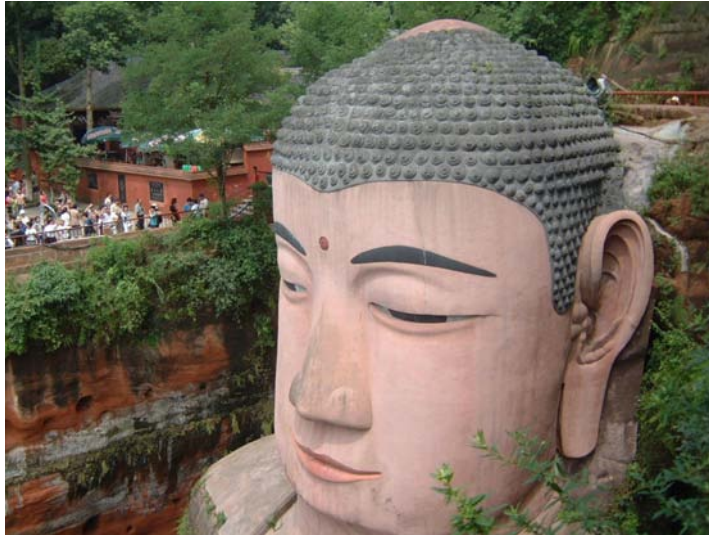
- Use the Note Taking Guide to detail the two types of success the story embodies. Make sure students refer to specific passages in the story as part of their responses.
- Go over the Four Noble Truths at the end.

Whole Group Reflection: What do the Four Noble truths have to say about success?

Instructional Modification: Read the story of the Buddha out loud for auditory learners. Write the following question on the board for visual learners: How would the Buddha respond to our lists?

Application: Students create a T-chart entitled “Success,” and make a list of five things that Americans regard as success. How would the Buddha respond to our lists?

Head of the Leshan Buddha



(Source: Photograph courtesy of Renqiu Yu, 2004)

LESSON 2

MAHAYANA BUDDHISM AND THE BODHISATTVA GUANYIN

Essential Question: Who is Guanyin and what does she tell us about how people find solutions to the problems of life?

Learning Experience: In reading two brief texts about Guanyin, the most beloved figure in East Asian Buddhism, students will learn about both the Bodhisattva ideal and the devotional side of Buddhism.³

In learning about Guanyin, students will gain insight into “self-power” and “other-power,” two basic aspects of religious practice.

Context: In the Mahayana tradition, there is a belief in beings who delay their entrance into nirvana in order to help others reach enlightenment. These beings, called bodhisattvas (*bodhi* is “wisdom,” *sattva* is “being”), take on god-like qualities.

³ To enrich students’ understanding of Guanyin, the following video, filmed on location in China, is an excellent resource: *Kuan-yin Pilgrimage* (R.C. Video, 56 minutes, 1988).



One of the most beloved bodhisattvas in East Asia is the deity Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy. In Indian scriptures, Guanyin was originally male. In China, however, Guanyin becomes a female figure. She listens to the sounds of the world and hears the cries of suffering. Her goal is to help all sentient beings. She is the epitome of compassion and represents some of the new religious ideas that Mahayana Buddhism brought to China:

The idea of Guanyin—a compassionate universal savior who responds to anyone’s cry for help regardless of class, gender, or even moral qualifications—was an idea unfamiliar to the Chinese. This was a new deity who could not only bring spiritual enlightenment, but also save one from worldly difficulties and grant one material satisfactions as well as a “good death” and postmortem salvation. No native god or goddess in China prior to Guanyin possessed all these abilities (Yu 2001: 5).

Rationale: Students will compare two ways of coping with the problems of life, what Buddhism refers to as “self-power” and “other-power.”

“Other-power” is when we entrust ourselves to bodhisattvas, saints, or other spiritual beings through prayer, making vows, etc. “Self-power” involves personal effort—in Buddhist terms, this refers to following the Five Precepts (p. 242) or to meditation and other practices that lead to enlightenment.

Modern society has its own types of self-power and other-power. Hundreds of self-help books are published every year; people also consult counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and so forth. As for other-power, many people still turn to traditional religion or seek out psychics, astrologers, and the like.

Time: One class period.

Instructional Resources: This lesson consists of two brief texts:

- A passage about Guanyin’s powers from the *Lotus Sutra*, one of the central texts of East Asian Mahayana Buddhism.
- A Chinese miracle story: Guanyin saves a condemned criminal (fifth to sixth century CE).

Some documents are primary sources and some are secondary materials selected from various books and articles. Primary sources are marked with an asterisk. *

Anticipatory Set: What is the difference between solving problems by “self-power” and “other-power?” Ask students: Why do people pray or make vows to bodhisattvas, saints, and other religious figures? Why do people go to social workers or family counseling? What is the saint’s role? What is the counselor’s role?

Procedure: Define bodhisattva as a being who delays entering nirvana in order to help others achieve it. One important bodhisattva is Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy.

Make two columns on the board: label the first “self-power”; the second “other-power.” Tell students that in reading about Guanyin, they will learn about “other-power.”

Read the two texts and answer the questions.

Whole Group Reflection: After reading the two selections, have students define “other-power” and give additional examples (saints in Catholicism, for example) for the blackboard.

What is the difference between entrusting ourselves to Guanyin (“other-power”) and seeking the help of a guidance counselor or psychologist (“self-power”)?



Have students give examples of “self-power” for the blackboard list.

Instructional Modification: The teacher can read the two passages out loud to students, or split students into groups and have them read only one excerpt. One group can read Section 1 and answer questions 1, 2, and 4, the other group can read Section 2 and answer questions 2, 3, and 4.

Application: Write your own story about a miracle of Guanyin.

LESSON 3

BUDDHIST MORAL TEACHINGS

Essential Questions: How do Buddhists define right and wrong, good and evil, and moral behavior? For Buddhists, what is a moral life?

Learning Experience: Students will learn about basic Buddhist ethical and moral concepts—the Eightfold Path, the Four Noble Truths, and the Five Precepts.

Anticipatory Set: Is Buddhist morality universal, applicable to all times and cultures?

Context: Buddhism offers salvation from rebirth through Nirvana, the end of rebirth. This is accomplished by realizing the true nature of existence, what Buddhists call “Wisdom.” The key to achieving Wisdom is meditation, part of the Eightfold Path. The goal of meditation is

. . . cleansing the mind of impurities and disturbances, such as lustful desires, hatred, ill-will, indolence, worries and restlessness, skeptical doubts, and cultivating such qualities as concentration, awareness, intelligence, will, energy, the analytical faculty, confidence, joy, tranquility, leading finally to the attainment of the highest wisdom which sees the nature of things as they are, and realizes . . . Nirvana (Rahula 1974: 67, 68).

These goals are difficult to achieve, particularly for lay followers unable to become monks or nuns. Consequently, Buddhism is also concerned with life in the world. The Eightfold Path, the Four Noble Truths, and the Five Precepts give the fundamental concepts of Buddhist thought and their relation to living a good life:

- The Four Noble Truths explain why people should devote themselves to a religious life.
- The Eightfold Path describes this religious life in detail.
- The Five Precepts outline the minimum conduct required of Buddhists.

These ideas are based on three important concepts that Buddhism inherited from Indian religious thought:

- **Rebirth:** When a person dies, he or she returns to life to live and then to die again.
- **Karma:** A person’s form of rebirth depends on how moral a life he or she has previously lived. This is called “karma,” Sanskrit for “action.”
- **Liberation:** People can be freed from being continually born and reborn by learning to be without desires (Davis 1999: 16, 17).

Since the concepts of karma, rebirth, and liberation inform the moral and religious lives of Buddhists throughout the world, the Buddhist answers to questions such as “Why do I do the things I do?” and



“What should I do to lead a good life?” (see the Handout, p. 243) attempt to place everyday conduct and morality within a universal and cosmic scheme.

Rationale: Students will examine the foundations of Buddhist morality—the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Five Precepts. They will explore their own moral beliefs and compare them with the reasons that Buddhism gives for living morally.

Time: One or two class periods.

Instructional Resources: Two handouts, “Basic Buddhism and Buddhist Morality” (The Four Noble Truths, the Eight Fold Path, and the Five Precepts), and “Buddhist Moral Behavior—Student Questionnaire.”

Some documents are primary sources and some are secondary materials selected from various books and articles. Primary sources are marked with an asterisk. *

Procedure: Working in pairs or small groups, students read “Basic Buddhism and Buddhist Morality” and fill in the questionnaire. They should discuss and compare answers.

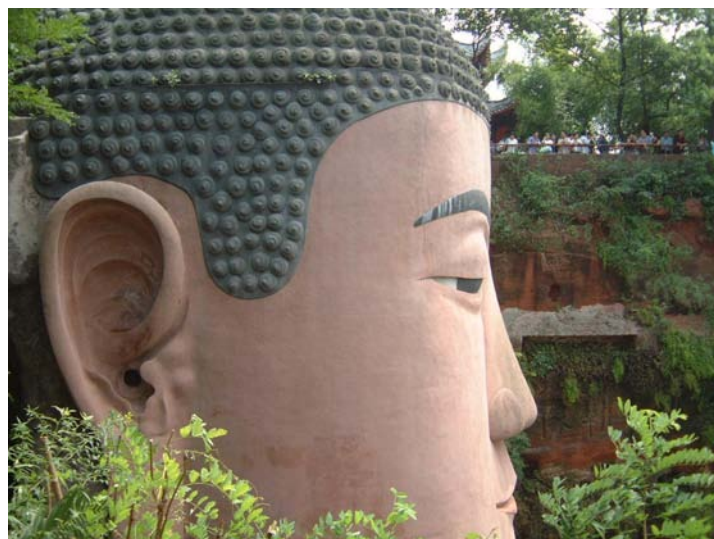
In answering the question in Column 4, “Why do I do it or not do it?,” students should be encouraged to look at personal experience, family life, religion, their community, American culture as a whole, and so forth.

The class should then go over the questionnaire together and finally ask “Why would Buddhists do it or not do it?,” using the Four Noble Truths, the Eight Fold Path, and the Five Precepts as a guide.

Whole Group Reflection: Does Buddhist morality differ from your own (or your community’s) understanding of morality? Where does it agree or disagree? Do Buddhist reasons for behaving well differ from your or your community’s reasons?

Application(s): Write a letter to yourself from a Buddhist monk giving you advice based on the Eightfold Path or have students develop a television series teaching Buddhist morality.

Side view of the Leshan Buddha’s head



(Source: Photograph courtesy of Renqiu Yu, 2004)



LESSON 1: HANDOUT

THE STORY OF THE BUDDHA¹

1. A young prince of the Shakya clan named Siddhartha was born in Northern India in the sixth century BCE. Shortly after he was born, a fortuneteller visited the palace and told the king, his father, that Siddhartha would either be a great ruler, or a man devoted to seeking religious truth. His father was worried that Siddhartha might leave the kingdom. He decided to make him so happy that he would never have reason to leave.

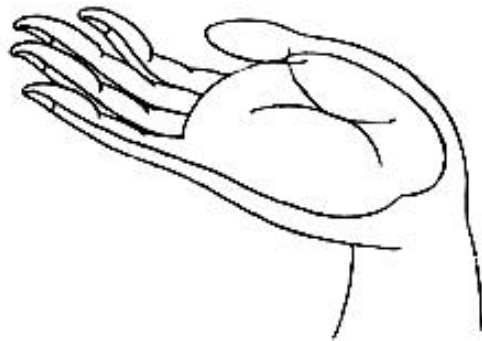
The King surrounded him with beautiful women to tempt and entertain him. He thought that Siddhartha would never want to go anywhere outside the palace. The King also arranged for Siddhartha to be married. In time, Siddhartha's wife had a son named Rahula.

2. But Siddhartha became curious about the world outside the palace. He set his heart on journeying beyond its walls. Hearing about his son's plan, the king arranged a pleasure trip. He commanded that all common folk with any type of affliction should be kept away from the royal road in order to protect his son. At the beginning, Siddhartha was greeted by all the king's joyful subjects. It seemed to him that the whole world was as content as he was.

As Siddhartha continued, however, he came upon three people. First he encountered a very old man. The man was wrinkled, decrepit, and bent with age. Siddhartha asked his charioteer about the man. The charioteer explained that old age will come to everyone and that it cannot be stopped. The young prince shuddered at the idea and contemplated its meaning.

Siddhartha next encountered someone who was ill. The man was burning and trembling with fever, coughing so uncontrollably that he could scarcely catch his breath. Again, Siddhartha was dismayed at suffering in the midst of a world that seemed so full of joy to him. He was amazed that people continued living at a leisurely pace when the threat of illness was so near.

The Mudra Symbolizing "Beyond Misery"



BUDDHASHRAMANA MUDRĀ

(Source: Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc.)

Mudras are hand gestures used in Buddhist sculpture and painting to symbolize various ideas and actions.

(To learn more about *mudras*, visit <http://www.buddhanet.net/mudras.htm>)

¹ Loosely based on passages in "The Legend of the Shakyamuni Buddha." In Edward Conze (tr.), *Buddhist Scriptures*. London: Penguin Books, 1958, pp. 35-56.





Then Siddhartha came upon a funeral procession with family members wailing in mourning. He was so touched by this display of emotion that it became difficult to go on. He kept asking himself, “How can people continue in their everyday lives when they are surrounded by such suffering? How can I enjoy the pleasures of the palace knowing that we cannot escape illness, old age and death? These pleasures that we seek are truly impermanent.”

Finally he met a wandering beggar, a man who had given up his family, home, and possessions in order to seek enlightenment.

3. After leaving the palace, Siddhartha joined a group of men who called themselves “ascetics.” They practiced meditation, fasted, and denied themselves all the comforts of life that ordinary people loved. After a time, Siddhartha realized that this path of self-denial was not the answer. It was just an extreme—as extreme as seeking pleasure by doing everything one wanted to do. Siddhartha was looking for a Middle Path between these two extremes.

4. After leaving the ascetics, he had to nurse himself back to health as a result of their practices. He sought shelter under a Bodhi (“wisdom”) tree.

While meditating under the Bodhi tree, Siddhartha recalled all of his past lives. He reflected on the passing away of all living things, and “in the supreme nobility of his mind, he performed an act of supreme pity.”

It was then that he attained nirvana and became the Buddha, or “Enlightened One.” While meditating, the Buddha realized the Four Noble Truths:

1. All life is full of suffering. It is imperfect, impermanent. Suffering can occur at any moment without warning.
2. Suffering is caused by desire, something Buddhists call “thirst” or “craving.” This thirst can be not only for long life, pleasure, wealth, and power, but also for ideas, opinions, and beliefs. Being attached to these things makes us unhappy, because none of them last forever. For example, we are attached to looking young and will do anything to stay young, even though everyone must age.
3. To end suffering, we must end desire. We must truly realize that the world is impermanent.
4. To end desire, we must follow the Eightfold Path. This is the “Middle Path” that avoids extremes. It consists of right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

