

Learning About World Religions: Buddhism

What are the main beliefs and teachings of Buddhism?

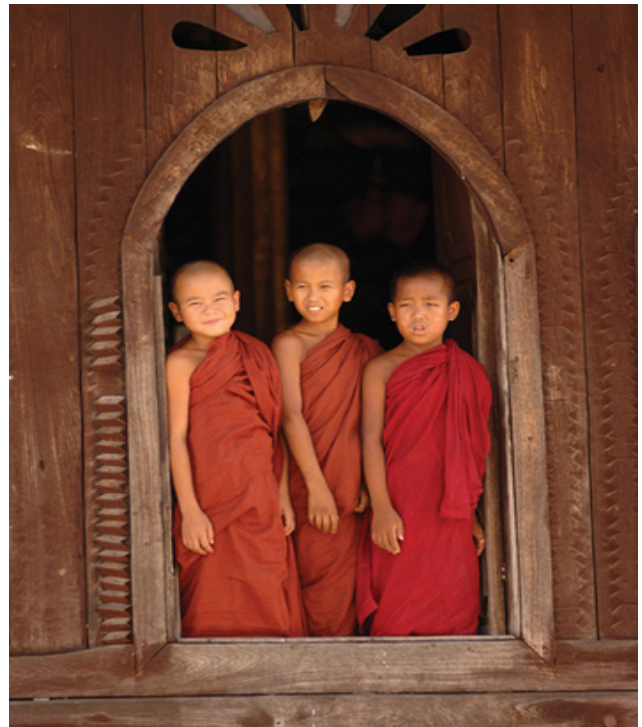
16.1. Introduction

Hinduism, which developed in ancient India, is the oldest of the world's major religions. In this chapter, you will learn about Buddhism, another religion with roots in ancient India.

Buddhism is a religion based on the teachings of the Buddha (BOO-duh), which means "Awakened One." The Buddha was a man who lived in India from about 563 to 483 B.C.E. Before he became known as the Buddha, he was a young prince named Siddhartha Gautama (si-DAHR-tuh GOW-tuh-muh).

Prince Siddhartha grew up surrounded by wealth in the palaces of his father. At the age of 29, Siddhartha left his royal life to go in search of spiritual peace. During his journeys, he learned great truths that changed his life. By sharing these truths with others, he began the religion of Buddhism.

Buddhism was different from Hinduism in several ways. Whereas Hinduism was based on complicated rituals and beliefs in many gods, Buddhism was a way of life based on simple teachings. Unlike ancient Hinduism, Buddhism **embraced** all people regardless of their caste. It taught people how to reach enlightenment, or happiness that comes from the knowledge of deep truth. Buddhists believed that once they reached the level of enlightenment, they would escape from the cycle of rebirth.



In this chapter, you will learn about Buddhism through stories that are told about the Buddha's life. You will find out what Prince Siddhartha discovered during his life and how his teachings became the basis of Buddhism.

16.2 Prince Siddhartha's Birth



Prince Siddhartha was born about 563 B.C.E. in the northern part of India, near the Himalayas. His father, Suddhodana, was a powerful king. His mother was Queen Maya.

According to Buddhist tradition, before her son was born, the queen had a dream. In the dream, she was carried high over the

Himalayas to a silver mountain and set on a silver couch. A white elephant with six tusks walked around her and then struck her in the right side.

The king and queen asked the Brahmins, or Hindu priests, to explain her dream. "You are carrying a child who will be a great man," they told the queen. The Brahmins declared that the prince's future held two possible paths. As a prince, he could rule the universe. But if he left his royal life to see the suffering in the world, he would become the [Buddha](#), one who is enlightened.

The queen gave birth to Prince Siddhartha in a garden. Stories say that after the prince's birth, a soft, warm rain of heavenly flowers fell on the baby and his mother. According to Buddhist tradition, the infant prince already looked a few years old and could walk and talk. Siddhartha began his remarkable life by taking a few steps and declaring, "I am the leader of the world and the guide to the world."

16.3 The Prince's Royal Life

Prince Siddhartha's father wanted his son to be a great and powerful ruler. The king was worried about the **predictions** made by the Brahmins. If the prince saw the world's suffering, he might give up his royal duties to seek a spiritual path. The king decided to protect his son from all of the horrors of the world. He raised the prince in a world of perfect wealth and beauty. He provided Siddhartha with only the finest gardens, houses, education, and food. Servants took care of the prince's every need, from washing his clothes to playing music for his amusement. The prince enjoyed his life filled with lavish pleasures, yet he always felt curious about the world outside the palace walls. Some days, he would sit under a rose apple tree and think and wonder about the world beyond his reach.



At the age of 16, Prince Siddhartha married a beautiful young noblewoman. The wedding feast lasted seven days and seven nights. For 12 years, the couple lived together in perfect peace, enjoying the prince's many palaces. When Siddhartha turned 29, they had a son

16.4 The Prince Discovers Three Forms of Suffering

After Siddhartha became a father himself, the king gave him more freedom to travel outside the royal palaces. According to Buddhist tradition, during his journeys, the prince discovered three forms of suffering.

On his first trip, the prince and his chariot driver saw a thin man who walked with the aid of a stick. "Why does that man look so terrible?" the prince asked. His driver replied that the man was old. He told the prince that everyone's body weakens as it ages.

On the second trip, the prince and his driver saw a man lying on the ground and crying out in pain. "What is the matter with that poor man?" the prince asked. The driver explained that the man was sick.

On the third trip, the prince saw a group of people walking slowly down the road. The group carried a figure wrapped in white cloth. "Death came for

that man,” Siddhartha's driver said quietly. “One day, it will come for you, too.”



The prince was deeply troubled by his discovery of aging, sickness, and death. Unable to sit at home with his thoughts, he set out a fourth time. This time, he met a man who glowed with inner peace and calm. The man was an **ascetic** (uh-SEH-tik). An ascetic is someone who gives up worldly pleasures such as

possessions, fine clothes, money, and even shelter.

“How can you sit there so peacefully when there is so much suffering in the world around you?” the prince asked the man. The ascetic replied, “To be free of suffering, one must give up the desires, pleasures, and comforts of the world. I find peace by helping others find peace.”

16.5 The Prince Becomes an Ascetic



Prince Siddhartha's experiences with suffering **transformed** him. Suddenly, his royal life seemed empty. He wanted to find the happiness and peace that the ascetic had found. Siddhartha decided to give up his old life and search for **enlightenment**. Becoming enlightened would mean finding deep truth and freedom from

suffering.

One night, the prince asked his driver to take him to the forest. At the edge of the dark woods, Siddhartha removed his royal robes, sandals, and jewels. He cut off his hair with a knife. He put on a simple robe and carried

only a small bowl for [alms](#), or gifts of food. Wishing his driver farewell, Siddhartha began his life as an ascetic.

Siddhartha met other ascetics as he wandered the forests and fields. Like him, they wanted to understand the nature of the world. They believed that they could reach enlightenment through meditation. While meditating, the ascetics sat quietly and focused their minds on spiritual questions. Siddhartha quickly became an expert at meditation.

The ascetics also [denied](#) themselves many basic needs. For example, they stayed up all night without sleeping. They sat in the hot sun without shelter. They held their breath for several minutes. They also fasted, or stopped eating, for many days at a time. They hoped to find spiritual truth through self-denial.

Siddhartha continued to follow the way of the ascetics for some time. He became terribly thin from lack of food. According to Buddhist tradition, he became so thin that he could touch his stomach and feel his backbone. Eventually, he became unhappy with this extreme way of living. And he had not yet found the key to enlightenment.

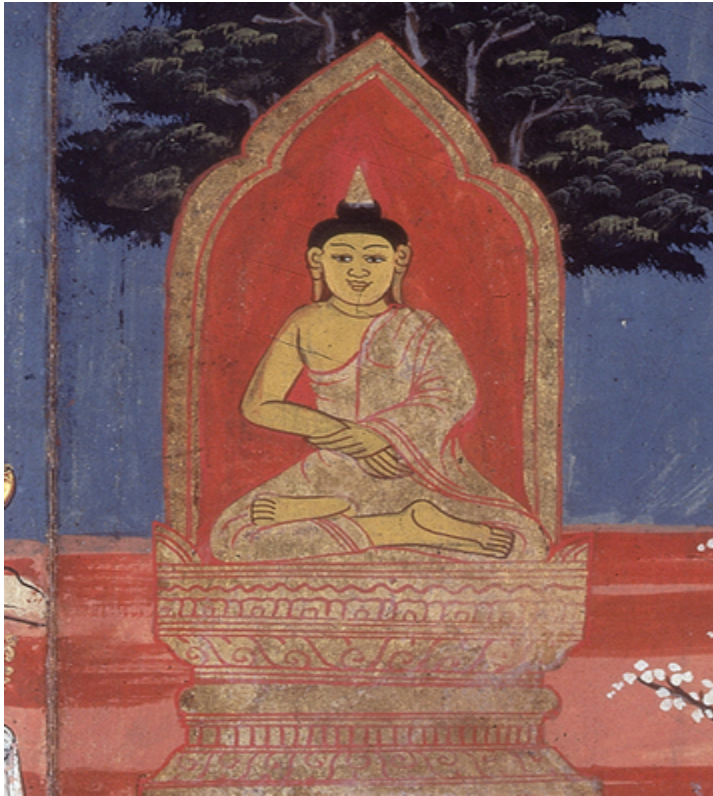
16.6 The Prince Becomes the Buddha

Siddhartha had learned that giving up bodily pleasures did not bring enlightenment. He decided to find a balance between the extremes of pleasure and pain. He would be neither a prince nor an ascetic. Instead, he would [seek](#) a “middle way” as a path to enlightenment.

The prince's new way of thinking caused the other ascetics to abandon him. But he was content to be alone. Although he had not yet found enlightenment, he believed that he was now on the right path.

A full moon rose on Siddhartha's 35th birthday. He bathed in the river and rested quietly in a grove of trees. When he awoke, he had a strong feeling that he would soon become enlightened. Then a grass cutter gave him eight handfuls of soft grass as a present. Siddhartha walked until he reached a tree that would become known as the Bodhi (BOH-dee), or Enlightenment, tree. He placed the grass at the foot of the tree and sat down. He vowed to meditate under the tree until he reached enlightenment.

According to Buddhist tradition, while Siddhartha was meditating, a wicked god named Mara tried to frighten him. Then Mara sent his three daughters—Discontent (unhappiness), Delight, and Desire—to try to tempt



Siddhartha. But Siddhartha resisted them all. He then meditated through the rest of the night about the nature of reality and the way to reach [nirvana](#), or true happiness and peace. During the night, his mind filled with the truths he had been seeking. He saw his past lives and the great cycle of rebirth. He saw the importance of karma. Eventually, he saw how to gain freedom from the continuous cycle, and therefore end all suffering. By morning, the young prince had become the Buddha, the Awakened One. He had

reached enlightenment.

The truths that the Buddha discovered under the Bodhi tree are the basic principles of [Buddhism](#). They are often called the [Four Noble Truths](#). The Buddha would spend the rest of his life sharing these truths with the people of India.

The Four Noble Truths


1. Suffering is present in all things, and nothing lasts forever.
2. Suffering is caused by cravings (desires and wants).
3. The way to end suffering is to give up all cravings.
4. The way to give up all cravings is to live life according to the [Eightfold Path](#).

16.7 The Buddha's Teachings

Behind Buddhism's Four Noble Truths is the idea that all things change. The Buddha saw that even when one finds pleasure, it does not last forever, and one suffers when it is lost. To end suffering, he taught, people should travel the Eightfold Path. This path follows the "middle way."

The Buddha could have selfishly escaped into enlightenment. Instead, he chose to teach others the path that he had found. In time, his followers spread his teachings throughout India and other parts of Asia.

The Eightfold Path



The Buddha said that one could end suffering and find enlightenment by following these eight teachings.

- 1. Right understanding**
Develop a deep understanding of the Four Noble Truths.
- 2. Right purpose**
Live a life of selflessness (not selfishness), love, and nonviolence.
- 3. Right speech**
Be careful and truthful in what you say. Do not lie or gossip.
- 4. Right action**
Do not kill, steal, or lie. Be honest.
- 5. Right way to earn a living**
Do not work at a job that causes harm to people or living creatures.
- 6. Right effort**
Promote good actions and prevent evil actions.
- 7. Right mindfulness**
Be aware of but not attached to your emotions, thoughts, and feelings.
- 8. Right concentration**
Focus your mind with such practices as meditation.