

Buddhism

Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world. Founded 2,500 years ago, the tradition is notable for having paths that are less deity-focused than most religions and for certain insights on the mind that have affected modern psychology.

Buddha's Life Story



The Buddha is born around 2500 years ago during the "**Axial Age**," a transitionary time in four key areas (i.e. Greece, China, Israel, and India) when key thinkers emerge who birthed many dominant religious and philosophical systems. **The Axial Age sees the rise of Greek philosophy, Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism**, and **Jainism while Judaism and Hinduism undergo major transformations** that gave them the form we recognize today. If one studies "the classics" in any of these four regions, you start with thinkers from this period whose impact on the globe is undeniable.

The Axial Age in India

- **Social upheaval**: new farming technologies cause population booms and people flock to cities while new war implements lead to escalating conflicts.
- **Religious questioning**: some challenge the Vedic sacrifices (which seem ineffective amidst the turmoil) while others question the caste system.
- **Religious transitions**: new notions of karma and reincarnation emerge.
- **Shramanas** (wandering mendicants) experiment with new spiritual techniques, spreading new ideas and questioning everything. **One of them became the Buddha**.






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Buddha's Response is Threefold



Buddhists mark the birthday of the Buddha by bathing a statue of the infant.

1) **Rejects some things**
   a. Ritualism/sacrifices
   b. Caste

2) **Accepts some new developments**
   a. Reincarnation
   b. Moral karma

3) **Innovates**
   a. Dispenses with the gods
   b. Practical focus (pushing aside metaphysical speculations)
   c. Anatta (no soul)

Life of the Buddha

- Where modern biographies emphasize character development, ancient biographies tend to see character as innate. **Heroes do not develop traits through choices or mentors**, rather they display them early.

- The Buddha's biography is **symbolically rich**. He is born under a tree (trees link heaven and earth with roots and high branches), during a full moon (light in the darkness), with a new star in the heavens (earthly events are mirrored in the heavens), attended by divine beings, and even features the newborn walking with lotus flowers appearing wherever he steps.

- **Sages prophesy he will be a great king or a great sage.** His father, wanting an heir, shields the boy from suffering so as not to encourage spiritual pursuits.







- **Confounding of the Elders**: Often religious founders stun their elders at a young age. Here, **young Siddhartha enters a deep meditation** during a festival. Priests and elders are shocked when they realize that the tree's shadow stayed still (despite the sun's movement) keeping the boy cool as he meditated.

- At age 29, he sees the **four sights: old age**, **sickness, death and finally serenity**. These sights change him and make his pampered life in the palace seem empty. He leaves his wife and son to pursue an answer to a problem: **the problem of human suffering.**

Spiritual Quest



- He **learns meditation** from two of the great masters of his age and surpasses them.

- He tries **austerity**, denying the body to break its hold on the mind. He nearly dies of starvation.



- He finally finds enlightenment under a tree. It occurs under a tree, during the full moon so that his **physical and spiritual births mirror one another**.

This popular image shows the moment of enlightenment, when Siddhartha touches the earth.

Teachings

- **Four Noble Truths**
  - **Life is Dukkha** (unsatisfactory).
  - The cause of **suffering is Tanha** (thirst, desire).
  - There is an **end to suffering (nirvana).**
  - The **path to end suffering is the eightfold path**.



As a Tibetan Buddhist monk, the Dalai Lama wears gold and burgundy robes to represent wisdom and compassion.





The eight-spoke wheel is the very symbol for Buddhism, representing the Buddha's eightfold path

- **The Eightfold Path**
  - Right **Understanding**
  - Right **Intention**

  → **Wisdom**

  - Right **Speech**
  - Right **Action**
  - Right **Livelihood**

  → **Ethics**

  - Right **Effort**
  - Right **Mindfulness**
  - Right **Concentration**

  → **Mental Discipline**

Meditation



- A primary tool for Buddhist insight is meditation.
- The Buddha may have originated **vipassana meditation** which trains one to watch our bodies and minds without judgement and without reacting.
    - The goal is to **free us from "monkey mind"** where our emotions, moods, etc. get pulled by every thought or sensation, like a monkey jumping around in a cage.
    - Instead, we **become a watcher**, observing the self but less enslaved to our thoughts and bodily sensations.
    - The **goal is freedom, equanimity,** and the ability to act with more skill and choice.

The Three Marks of Existence

Through meditation and insight, the Buddha discerned three marks of existence:

1) Dukkha – that life is **unsatisfactory**.

2) Annica – that all things are **impermanent:** joys, sufferings, physical objects, and life itself. The Buddha suggests we struggle to grasp the full extent of impermanence and often resist it.





3) **Annata** - that **there is no self**.
- The most original teaching of the Buddha as it suggests **the concept of an enduring self is in illusion**.
- The self instead is a series of causes and effects, **more verbs than noun**.
- Self is composed of **five aggregates (body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations & consciousness)** all of which constantly change.
- It's change and flux all the way down.
- This insight is to yield a sense of wisdom and freedom to act as we choose, unhindered by the past.
- It also suggests a **deep interrelationship** among all things.

Other Teachings of the Buddha

- The main problem in life is **ignorance**.
- **Gods are sidelined** as not relevant. Suffering is caused by ignorance and karma.
- **Dismisses idea of saviour figures** ("be lamps unto yourselves").
- Suggests his own teachings are like a raft to be used when helpful and set aside when not.
    - He encourages followers to test his teachings. **Some see him as very empirical**.
- **Focus on human suffering**. He discouraged too much metaphysical speculation.







Reflecting on Buddhist Teachings



- Is Buddhism a Religion or a Philosophy?
  - Many "religions" today claim to not be a religion
  - How Buddhism does not seem like a religion
    - The Buddha **sidelines divine figures**
    - The psychological emphasis is very strong
      - **Scientist of the mind** (empirical emphasis)
  - How Buddhism does seem like a religion
    - Some teachings go **beyond empirical or scientific claims**
      - (karma, reincarnation, hell realms)
    - The tradition has **many religious elements**
      - e.g. Chant, prayer, asceticism, prayer beads, offerings,altars)
    - Eventually Buddhism adds god-like Buddhas





- Psychology over Sociology
  - Buddhism seems **exceptionally strong on psychology**; but deals less with structural factors or sociology
  - Psychological focus
    - The Buddha's insights have had significant influence on psychology (empirically tested)
    - Same with meditation
    - Stresses the person's thoughts and **mental processes**
  - Historically the tradition has **paid less attention to structural factors** (sociology)
    - – Some efforts to change this
      - Socially engaged Buddhism begun in 20th C

The Three Jewels (or Triple Gem)

- **The Buddha**
- **The Dharma** (his teachings)
- **The Sangha** (the community)
  - The community of monks **keeps the Buddha's teachings alive** for centuries by chanting them in memorizable ways until they are written down.



Buddhist monks ritually beg for food. The laity provides sustenance, gaining merit and karmic rewards for doing so.

  - The monks have a **reciprocal relationship with the laity**. The laity supports the monks and the monks chant, meditate, and perform ritual. These actions grant the monks **karmic merit** which is **partly transferred to the layfolk who support them.**
  - Sangha sometimes means monks and sometimes means the whole Buddhist community.

Branches

- **Theravada**
  - Oldest surviving branch.
  - Prevalent in southeast Asia (Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka).
  - Teaches **"monkey grace" or self-effort**.
  - The Buddha is a guide showing the way but **one must achieve one's own enlightenment**.
  - No petitionary prayer and **generally less ritual**.
  - **Only monks can possibly attain enlightenment**.





- **Mahayana**
  - Largest branch.
  - Prevalent in China, Korea, Japan.
  - Teaches **"cat grace" or other effort**.
  - Has **many Buddhas who become saviour-like figures**.
    - Most notably, **Amitabha Buddha** who creates a Pure Land or Western paradise if you chant his name.
  - **Embraces petitionary prayer and ritual**.
  - **Anyone can achieve enlightenment,** aided by the grace of Buddhas.

- **Vajrayana**
  - Newest and smallest branch.
  - Prevalent in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan.
  - **Esoteric**.
  - Works on **guru-student model**.
  - Uses the senses to enhance one's spiritual journey.
    - **Embraces ritual fully**.



The sand mandala shows an image meant to represent the mental and spiritual journey. After spending days creating it, it is immediately swept away to show impermanence.

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Quote & Story

"We have the tendency to run away from suffering and to look for happiness. But, in fact, if you have not suffered, you have no chance to experience real happiness."

"Buddhism teaches us not to try to run away from suffering. You have to confront suffering. You have to look deeply into the nature of suffering in order to recognize its cause, the making of the suffering."

"People have a hard time letting go of their suffering. Out of a fear of the unknown, they prefer suffering that is familiar."

Thich Naht Hanh, on suffering.

Source: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/world/asia/thich-nhat-hanh-quotes.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9CMany%20people%20are%20alive%20but,Only%20this%20moment%20is%20life.%E2%80%9D

The Parable of the Arrow

The Buddha was sitting in the park when his disciple Malunkyaputta approached him. Malunkyaputta had recently retired from the world and he was concerned that so many things remained unexplained by the Buddha. Was the world eternal or not eternal? Was the soul different from the body? Did the enlightened exist after death or not? He thought, "If the Buddha does not explain these things to me, I will give up this training and return to worldly life."

Thus, he approached the Buddha with this question, who replied:
It's just as if a man were wounded with an arrow thickly smeared with poison. His friends and companions, kinsmen and relatives would provide him with a surgeon, and the man would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble warrior, a priest, a merchant, or a worker.' He would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know the given name and clan name of the man who wounded me… until I know whether he was tall, medium, or short… until I know whether he was dark, ruddy-brown, or golden-colored… until I know his home village, town, or city… until I know whether the bow with which I was

Story Cont'd

wounded was a long bow or a crossbow… until I know whether the bowstring with which I was wounded was fiber, bamboo threads, sinew, hemp, or bark… until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was wild or cultivated… until I know whether the feathers of the shaft with which I was wounded were those of a vulture, a stork, a hawk, a peacock, or another bird… until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was bound with the sinew of an ox, a water buffalo, a langur, or a monkey.' He would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was that of a common arrow, a curved arrow, a barbed, a calf-toothed, or an oleander arrow.' The man would die and those things would still remain unknown to him.

Whether the view is held that the world is eternal or not, Malunkyaputta, there is still birth, old age, death, grief, suffering, sorrow and despair – and these can be destroyed in this life! I have not explained these other things because they are not useful, they are not conducive to tranquility and Nirvana. What I have explained is suffering, the cause of suffering, the destruction of suffering and the path that leads to the destruction of suffering. This is useful, leading to non-attachment, the absence of passion, perfect knowledge.

Thus spoke the Buddha, and with joy Malunkyaputta applauded his words.

– Majjhima-nikaya, Sutta 63

Source: https://antilogicalism.com/2016/05/06/the-parable-of-the-arrow/