

# History Research Center

## Buddha and Buddhism

A major religion of Asia and beyond, Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 563–ca 483 BCE). The son of Suddhodana and Maya Gautama, Siddhartha was born at Lumbini in the Nepal valley. His titles, Buddha (the enlightened one) and Sakyamuni (sage of the Sakya clan), were bestowed on him by public proclamation.

When he reached the age of 29, Buddha left his wife and son to spend five years in meditation and in trying to achieve enlightenment. Following a strict ascetic regimen, he found what he sought, coming to understand how to overcome pain, how to become a vessel for truth, and how to achieve rebirth.

Knowledge, he believed, and the practice of four truths could overcome pain, which he identified with human existence. The identity of existence and pain was the first truth. The second was that desire causes pain. If one can overcome desire, one will no longer suffer—the third truth. To overcome desire—the fourth—one must follow the eightfold path whose elements were these:

1. One must gain right knowledge of the four truths above.
2. One must rightly resolve to restrain malice.
3. One must cultivate right speech, which will be both true and kindly.
4. One must behave rightly and respect life, property, and decency.
5. One must labor at the right occupation.
6. One must strive to rid the mind of evil qualities and habits and keep and cherish the good ones.
7. One must exercise right control of one's sensations and thoughts.
8. One must learn right contemplation in four stages.
  - a Isolation that leads to joy.
  - b Meditation that leads to inner peace.
  - c Concentration that leads to bodily happiness.
  - d Contemplation that produces indifference to both happiness and misery.

Buddha's teaching first attracted a following of men and then, at the request of his foster mother, Mahaprajapati, a group of women who, as monks and nuns, were willing to commit themselves to a monastic life. In their monasteries, they practiced abstinence from sexual intercourse, theft, causing harm to living creatures, and boasting of human accomplishments or perfection. Buddha also founded a third order for the laity. The initiates agreed to be kind, speak purely, be generous in almsgiving, eschew drugs and intoxicants, and be faithful to their spouses. They also were to be instructed in the eightfold way. Buddha did not promulgate any theories concerning the nature of deity, nor did he deny any conceptions of deity that other religions already espoused.

As Buddhism developed, it sent missionaries in all directions. Some went to western Asia and even into Macedonia in the Grecian archipelago. Others went to Ceylon, where the faith proved triumphant. As the Buddhists encountered the adherents of other faiths over the next several centuries, a good deal of mutual exchange of ideas and doctrines occurred. As a result, we see Buddhist elements in Zoroastrianism, Gnosticism, and elsewhere. At least by the first century CE, and almost certainly earlier, Buddhism found a congenial reception in China, where it developed a regional variant by melding with traditional Chinese ancestor worship. We also see in Buddhism an accretion of elements of several religions and of the polytheistic beliefs of the Indian subcontinent.

Just before the beginning of the Common Era, warfare and political dislocations caused the adherents of Buddhism to fear that the doctrinal splintering that was already well advanced in the Buddhist faith would gain impetus. The monks of several monasteries perceived, moreover, that the centuries-long practice of entrusting Buddha's teachings to memory and oral preservation subjected Buddhist doctrine to unintentional corruption. Moreover, oral transmission ran the risk of losing all the teachings in the event of warfare. Accordingly, some 500 monks from several monasteries met to confer. They undertook to record, in the Pali language of northern India, what became the Buddhist canon: the *Theravāda* (The elder's tradition). It contained the three essential texts of Buddhism: the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (Treatises); the *Sutta Pitaka* (The sermons of Buddha); and the the *Tripitaka* (Three

Baskets).

Just as in the parallel case of the Christians, writing down these matters provoked further controversy, especially about the Buddhists' monastic rules. It seems that, unbeknownst to the authors of the [canonical texts](#), Sanscrit versions of some of the material may have existed already, and that these varied from the canon. Even in the absence of alternate texts, monastic practice varied enough to provoke disagreement. In the late third century CE, therefore, a group of schismatics adopted another text, the *Vaipulya Pitaka*, as the authoritative statement of Buddhist belief. The regional monarch, however, found the work heretical and burned it.

A further period of text making followed in the early fifth century CE, when a Buddhist monk and scholar named Buddhaghosha wrote the *Visuddhimagga* (way of purification), which incorporated the teaching of the conservative Burmese school of Buddhism.

### **Further Information**

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