

1 The life of the Buddha

Traditional accounts of the life of the Buddha (Siddhartha Gotama)

The **Buddha** is the founder of the Buddhist tradition. He lived more than 2,500 years ago in Northern India. His teachings spread rapidly; today there are 500 million Buddhists worldwide. Buddhism is the fastest growing religion in the world and today is divided into two broad groups: Theravada and Mahayana.

- + Theravada Buddhism tends to follow the very earliest recorded teachings of the Buddha and is mainly found in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar.
- + Mahayana Buddhism follows later teachings and is mainly found in China, Tibet, Vietnam, Korea and Japan.

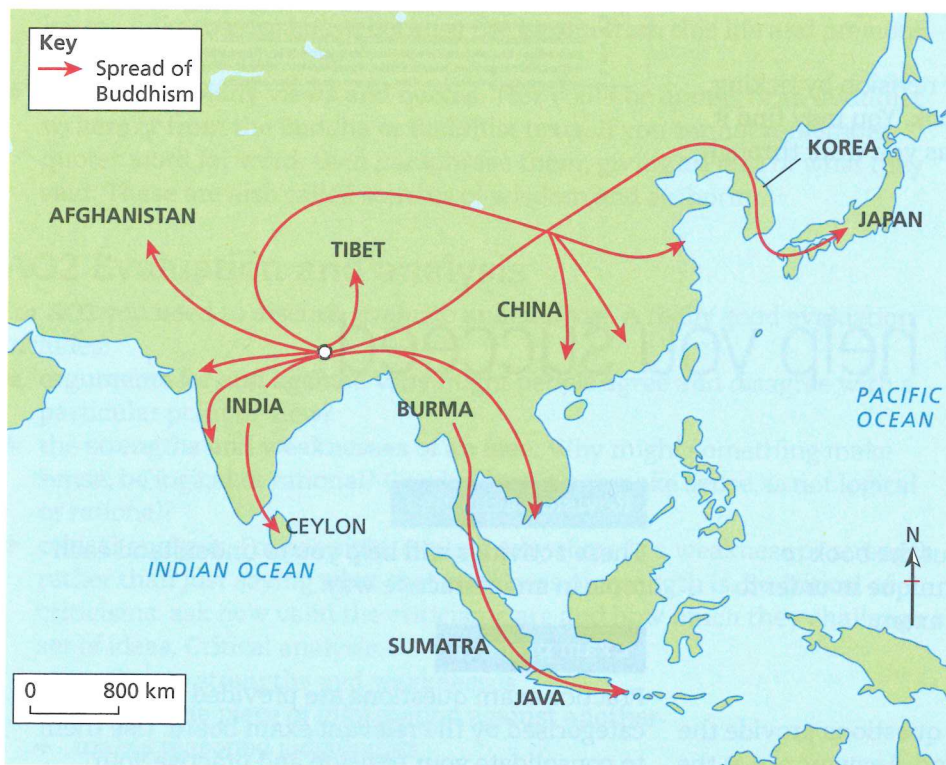


Figure 1.1 The spread of Buddhism 500BCE–600CE

Buddhists all believe that the Buddha started the religion as it is today. There is much detail about the life of the Buddha in the earliest scriptures, known as the **Pali Canon**. However, the modern Buddhist scholar **Bhikkhu** Nanamoli reminds us that it is only in later literature that we learn details about the early life of the Buddha, when he was still known as Siddhartha.

Buddha Awake or 'The enlightened one', the title used for the historical Siddhartha Gotama after he gained enlightenment. There are other visionary Buddhas such as Amida Buddha.

Pali Canon The scriptures written in Pali. Known as the Tripitaka or 'three baskets', covering the rules for the monastic order, the teachings of the Buddha and Buddhist philosophical and psychological analysis.

Bhikkhu Monk.

The Buddha's birthplace

The Buddha was born Siddhartha Gotama in the small republic of Sakya on the present-day border between India and Nepal. The capital city was Kapilavatthu. Siddhartha is sometimes referred to as the sage of the Sakya clan, or Sakya-muni.

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Before the Buddha's birth

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According to Buddhist mythology, however, Siddhartha was not the first Buddha. Some stories suggest that in a distant past life Siddhartha (at that time called Sumedha) met a previous Buddha, Dipankara, and was so impressed by his teachings that he resolved to become a Buddha himself. Over many lifetimes, Sumedha met other past Buddhas (stories vary between 6 and 23) and took on many forms (gods, humans and animals). In his penultimate life he lived in the god realm **Tusita heaven** and waited for a time when humans had forgotten the path to enlightenment, at which point he took his final rebirth as Siddhartha, becoming the Buddha who could teach Buddhism again.

Tusita heaven The realm of the delighted gods. The next Buddha (Maitreya) is in Tusita heaven waiting his turn.

The Buddha's birth and hedonistic upbringing

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Siddhartha's mother, Mahamaya had a dream about a white elephant, which was interpreted as showing Siddhartha would have a great destiny: if Siddhartha saw suffering, he would become a holy man but if he did not see suffering, he would be a great leader. In the mythological account this is also seen to be the moment when Siddhartha passed from Tusita heaven into his mother's womb.

Mahamaya travelled from Kapilavatthu to her family home to give birth. She stopped at Lumbini, a grove or garden, to enjoy the flowers. Mahamaya went into labour, took hold of a sal tree and gave birth. Warm and cool water appeared from the sky, like rain, washing Siddhartha and refreshing his mother. Siddhartha took seven steps and said he was the foremost being and this would be his last rebirth. (Modern Buddhists understand this story as mythological rather than a literal account.)

Mahamaya died a week after giving birth, so Siddhartha was raised by his aunt (his father's second wife). He lived a life of luxury, with fine clothes and fragrances, female musicians, palaces and pleasure gardens. He was intelligent, compassionate and well educated in the religious traditions of the time. He married Yasodhara at 16 and had a son, Rahula, when he was 29.

The four passing sights

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Even in his sheltered existence, Siddhartha became aware of sickness, old age and death. This was confirmed when he left the palace with his charioteer Channa. On four occasions, he saw four sights: an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a wandering saffron-robed Sramana (wandering holy person). The shock of seeing so much suffering caused Siddhartha to question his whole life and made him resolve to find out why such suffering existed and what caused it.

Now test yourself

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Write down what each of these four sights mean, how they affected the young Siddhartha and what insights he gained from dwelling on them. (Think about terms like dukkha, anicca, anatta and nirvana.)

The Buddha's renunciation of the life of luxury and his life as an ascetic

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To try to find out why suffering exists and what causes it, Siddhartha left his wife and son one night while they were asleep and joined a group of Sramanas (see page 15). The Sramanas were ascetics: they gave up all material possessions to concentrate on developing their understanding of religious ideas and pursuing spiritual goals.

Siddhartha first joined the group led by Alara Kalama and quickly mastered the meditation state known as the 'sphere of nothingness', a mystical trance attained by deep concentration in which the mind goes beyond perceiving objects and dwells in the blissful awareness of no-thing. This did not help Siddhartha find out why suffering happened, so he left them even though he was offered the leadership of the group.

Siddhartha then joined Uddaka the son of Rama and quickly mastered the 'sphere of neither perception nor non-perception' which is a subtle state of consciousness well beyond what we ordinarily experience.

Siddhartha also practised physical asceticism, wearing very little, living in the forests and eating very little. He was the most ardent ascetic and lived, it is said, on a grain of rice a day. When his hair had fallen out and he was on the brink of death, he realised that this approach was not the way to discover and overcome the causes of suffering so he abandoned it and ate rice milk and regained his strength. The other Sramanas were angry with him and he left their company.

The Buddha's enlightenment

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After leaving the Sramanas, Siddhartha found a secluded wood and sat under a pipal tree (Bodhi Tree). (The place where this tree stood is now called Bodh Gaya.) He remembered an easy and naturally absorbed state of mind he had once experienced while watching his father plough a field during a festival. He realised pleasure should not be abandoned in his search for **enlightenment**. This state was very pleasurable and joyful, although not linked to pleasures of the physical senses. He resolved to meditate under the tree until he was enlightened.

However, the tempter Mara, the personification of all the forces opposed to enlightenment, wanted to stop Siddhartha from gaining this knowledge, and tried to tempt Siddhartha with sense pleasures and desires. Siddhartha ignored him. Mara tried to scare him with violence but Siddhartha did not move. Mara then said that no one could bear witness to Siddhartha's good deeds and he did not deserve to be enlightened. Siddhartha touched the earth and as it quaked, a goddess arose from the Earth bearing witness to his good deeds (this has become the **earth-touching Mudra**). Mara fled, leaving Siddhartha free from all greed, hatred and ignorance.

Siddhartha then deepened his meditation. He began to understand the true nature of **karma** in the lives of all beings and saw all of his own past lives. His enlightenment came when he suddenly fully comprehended the root of all suffering, how to end it and how to attain a state beyond suffering. From this point onwards he became the Buddha, a title which means Awakened or Enlightened One.

The Buddha's teaching

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After enlightenment, the Buddha sat under the tree for seven weeks until the god Brahma begged him to share his enlightenment with others. The Buddha wanted to share his enlightenment with his old ascetic teachers, but they had died, so he sought out his former ascetic companions. They were now living some 100 miles away in a deer park at Isipatana (now Sarnath) near Benares (in India). As the Buddha approached them, they realised that he was somehow different and accepted him as their teacher. The first sermon the Buddha gave led to one of his former ascetic companions becoming enlightened. In the next few days, all of his former companions understood his teachings and also become enlightened. The Buddha's first sermon contains the Four Noble Truths and **Eightfold Path** (see page 24). It is called the first turning of the dhamma wheel (Dhammacakkapavattana sutta) because

Enlightenment The moment of understanding something new/to comprehend or discover the truth.

Earth-touching Mudra Mudras are ritual bodily movements, often hand gestures. When the Buddha touches the earth and a goddess arises who bears witness to Siddhartha's many lifetimes of virtuous actions and his right to defeat Mara.

Karma/Kamma Volitional (chosen) actions of body, speech or mind which produce effects in terms of happiness and suffering for oneself and others. There are four functions of karma when related to rebirth.

Eightfold Path Also known as the Middle Way, a way of life made up of eight limbs which help to transform a person from ignorance and bondage in samsara towards enlightenment. Also called the Three-fold Way because it can be divided into wisdom (right view), ethics (right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood) and meditation (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration).

it sets in motion the **Dhamma**, or the truth about suffering and how to bring it to an end.

From there the Buddha's teachings spread rapidly and he soon built up a large following. Some chose to give up their worldly possessions, as the Buddha had, and live an ascetic lifestyle. These individuals became the first monks and nuns, which he called the Sangha.

The Buddha taught for 45 years between his enlightenment and his passing away. In that time, he:

- + established specific rules for the monastic Sangha of monks and nuns
- + established a lay community which supported the monastic Sangha's material needs (food, clothing and shelter) and the Sangha in turn supported the lay community's spiritual needs
- + gave teachings on the nature of suffering (**dukkha**), how it arises (**tanha**) and that it can be overcome (**nirodha**), and the path to doing so (**magga**). These were remembered, passed on orally and, in time, recorded in what became the Pali Canon.

This early form of Buddhism is commonly described as Nikaya Buddhism or the common vehicle. There were many different schools of Buddhism in the years following the Buddha's death, and it is from these that all forms of Buddhism were to develop. Today the only school of this early Buddhism that continues to exist is called the Theravada, which means 'the way of the elders'.

One of the most important aspects of the Buddha's teachings was his insistence that people did not just believe what he said. The Buddha said that people had to experience what he taught for themselves. This is recorded in the Pali Canon when the Buddha teaches:

Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumoured by many. Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.

(Kalama sutta)

Buddhists call this **Ehipassiko**, which means to come and try.

The Buddha's death

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When the Buddha was 80, he had become very ill with dysentery and knew that he was about to die. He gave his last teachings about how all things are subject to decay. He said that the monks and nuns, or Sangha, had his teachings and rules and no longer needed him to guide them. He lay on a couch between two trees and passed away (**paranirvana**). His followers cremated his remains and divided them by ten to send them to various places that were important in the Buddha's life. Stupas (burial mounds) were built over them.

Revision activity

- 1 Summarise the life of the Buddha into ten short bullet points. To do this you will need to pick out the ten most important events in his life.
- 2 Rank the events in order of importance. Which is the most important event in the Buddha's life? Why do you think this might be? Why might someone disagree with your view?

Dhamma/Dharma The teachings of the Buddha. Recorded in Theravada in the Pali Canon and in Mahayana in sutras such as the Heart Sutra and Lotus Sutra. But can also mean the truth (universal truth or nature of reality).

Dukkha/Duhkha

Translated as suffering or the unsatisfactory nature of unenlightened life. There are three types of dukkha.

Tanha Craving, literally 'thirst' for sense pleasures.

Nirodha Cessation.

Magga Path.

Ehipassiko Literally means 'which you can come and see for yourself'. This is the reasoned reflection and testing of the benefits of a particular path. If that path is consistent with what is beneficial, the path is followed.

Paranirvana On the death of a Buddha they are no longer limited or bound to the body. This marks permanent release from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The Buddha said it was not possible to state in words or fully understand the mystery of paranirvana. Paranirvana festivals take place in February to mark the Buddha's death and final nirvana beyond.