

Interpretations of the stories of Buddha's life

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There are various interpretations of these stories.

- + Some early Buddhist traditions such as **Theravada Buddhism** (see page 33) take the Buddha as their role model in the quest for enlightenment.
- + However, later Buddhist traditions, although they recognise the supreme achievement of the historical Buddha, also venerate other historically enlightened teachers, such as Bodhidharma or Dogen in Zen Buddhism (see page 49); semi-historical/legendary figures like Padmasambhava in Tibetan Buddhism, and other archetypal, non-historic Buddha figures such as Amida Buddha in Pure Land Buddhism (see page 52).
- + Some Buddhists question the truth of some of the stories surrounding the Buddha's life especially as there is no continuous biography of his life.
- + Other Buddhists are not interested in the claims of truth – they are more concerned with the message and/or symbolism of the events within the story.
- + In her book on the Buddha, the modern author Karen Armstrong points out that whatever it is that Buddhists think about the Buddha, they do not regard him as a God. The Buddha was a human being who achieved enlightenment and Buddhists believe that all humans can do likewise.

Theravada Buddhism

'The way of the elders', is followed mainly in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Theravada maintains the tradition of the early Buddhist disciples and the teachings of the Pali Canon. The Theravada is the only one of the many early schools of Buddhism that survives today and is one of the oldest institutions on Earth.

The Buddha's intellectual context

The Buddha did not develop his ideas in isolation. He was influenced by what was happening in India at that time, when the main religious traditions were undergoing significant challenges and changes. What we know today as Hinduism has a very long history and its ideas have a wide variety of origins. The two most significant are from the Indus Valley Civilisation and the Vedic beliefs, sometimes called Brahminism.

The Indus Valley Civilisation

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The Indus Valley Civilisation was an ancient civilisation located in what is Pakistan and northwest India today, on the fertile flood plain of the Indus River and its surrounding area.

Evidence of religious practices in this area date back approximately to 5500BCE. By 2600BCE, dozens of towns and cities had been established. The evidence suggests the people who lived there had a highly developed peaceful society and that they practised **meditation** and asceticism and worshipped fertility gods, possibly Shiva. (In modern Hinduism, Shiva is seen as an ascetic.) For some, the Indus Valley Civilisation marks the beginnings of Hinduism and may be the beginnings of asceticism and meditation in India.

Meditation The cultivation (bhavana) of the 'heart and mind' which involves increasing awareness (mindfulness) and transforming negative habits into creative states such as loving kindness (metta). Meditation also helps us to understand more about the nature of reality and to transform ignorance into wisdom.

Vedic Hinduism

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Vedic Hinduism started in the Ganges river basin around 2000BCE as the Indus Valley was abandoned and nomadic herders moved in from the north. The beliefs that developed were written down in four books called the Vedas. The Vedas present a multitude of gods, often related to natural forces such as storms, fire and wind. Followers of Vedic Hinduism believed that rituals were critical to maintain the order of the cosmos. The Vedas contain a hymn to Purusha, which shows how the four **castes** were formed.

Caste The caste system is the way Indian society has been structured based on occupation. It states that you are born into a caste and cannot leave it.

- + The Brahmins, or priests, came from Purusha's mouth.
- + The Kshatriyas, or warrior rulers, from Purusha's arms.
- + The Vaishyas, or the commoners (landowners and merchants), from Purusha's thighs.
- + The Shudras, or labourers and servants, from Purusha's feet.

Brahmins performed sacrifices and rituals in the belief that the gods would return their favour under the form of protection and prosperity.

The Upanishads

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The Upanishads are a collection of texts of religious and philosophical nature, written in India probably between c. 800BCE and c. 500BCE, at a time when Indian society started to question the traditional Vedic religious order. Some people during this time decided to engage in the pursuit of spiritual progress, living as ascetic hermits, rejecting ordinary material concerns and giving up family life. Even though the Upanishads do not offer a single comprehensive system of thought, they do develop some basic general principles, which are developed later by the Buddha.

Revision activity

Read the Upanishadic beliefs and make a note of how the Buddha used and adapted these ideas in his own teachings. Why do you think that he used and adapted these ideas?

Upanishadic beliefs

- + **Samsara:** the concept of samsara is that life is cyclical. A person is born, lives, dies and is reborn. This is an endless cycle.
- + **Reincarnation:** the idea that after we die our soul will be reborn again in another body, perhaps in an animal, in a human, or as a god.
- + **Release from samsara or Moksha:** Moksha means 'liberation' or release. Moksha is the liberation from the endless cycle of samsara.
- + **One god:** Brahman is the one underlying substance of the universe, the unchanging 'Absolute Being'. It is the undying and unchanging seed that creates and sustains everything. It is beyond all description and intellectual understanding.
- + **Meditation/yoga:** to escape the endless cycle of samsara, people need to attain enlightenment through the realisation that the soul (Atman) is identical with Brahman through the yogic practices and meditation.

Samsara 'Continuous movement' or 'wandering on'. It is often translated as the 'cycle of existence' as it is the cycle of birth and rebirth.

Asceticism/sramana movements

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There were a variety of sramana movements at the time of the Buddha. Each had a different focus or emphasis but all wanted to find out how to escape from the constant cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Another similarity was the use of meditation and yoga in their practice. This possibly originated in the Indus Valley but was not part of the Vedic rituals. However, it was the main spiritual practice of the sramana movement.

Sramana movements included:

- + **Makkhali Gosala (Ajivika)**, which believed in fatalism and determinism: that everything is the consequence of nature and its laws. The school denied that there is free will but believed that the soul exists and that everything has its own individual nature, based on how one is constituted from elements. It believed in karma and that consequences are not due to free will and cannot be altered, and that everything is pre-determined because of and including one's composition.

- + **Ajita Kesakambali**, which believed in materialism. This movement denied that there is an afterlife, any samsara, any karma or any fruit of good or evil deeds. It believed that everything (including humans) is composed of elemental matter and when one dies one returns to those elements.
- + **Pakudha Kaccayana**, which believed in atomism. This movement denied that there is a creator or knower and believed that everything is made of seven basic building blocks that are eternal, neither created nor caused to be created: earth, water, fire, air, happiness, pain and soul. It believed that all actions, including death, are the merging of one set of substances into another set of substances.

Jainism

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A particular sramana movement that became popular and still exists today is Jainism. Jainism focuses on the health and welfare of every being in the universe. Jains believe that plants, animals and humans have a soul or Jiva. They believe that each soul is equal in value and should be treated with respect and compassion. Jains are strict vegans and try to limit their impact on the world's resources. Like other sramana groups, Jains believe in reincarnation and aim to gain liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth so that the immortal soul lives for ever in a state of bliss. This is done by meditation, which helps eliminate karma from the soul. There are no gods or spiritual beings, only the three guiding principles of right belief, right knowledge and right conduct. The supreme principle of Jain living is non-violence (ahimsa).

Tip

Remember that the Buddha did not invent the ascetic way of life or meditation. These had existed in India for many hundreds of years before he was born. Therefore, we can see that many of these ideas like meditation and reincarnation find their way into Buddhism.

Conflict between Brahmins and Kshatriyas

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By the time of the Buddha, society had moved away from agriculture towards organised cities and trade. People were therefore less reliant on the Brahmin priests to ensure that the land was fertile and crops grew. The second tier in society, the kings and warriors, found that they were starting to have large kingdoms, wealth and considerable power over the lives of others. They no longer wanted to be seen to be subservient the Brahmin caste. Therefore, people started to look elsewhere for their religious beliefs. For many, Buddhism was seen to be more attractive because it did not agree with the caste system and treated all people as equals.

Revision activity

How was the Buddha influenced by the religious, cultural and economic situation in India at the time? Produce a mind map to collect together your ideas.

Try to think of examples where the Buddha's teachings are unique and not influenced by the religion, culture and economic situation of his time.

Chapter summary

- + Siddhartha Gotama was born in Northern India in approximately 500 BCE.
- + He was born into a royal/ruling family and lived a life of luxury.
- + He gave up his life of luxury at the age of 30 to become an ascetic and find out why people suffer.
- + The ascetic groups he joined and the techniques he learnt did not help so he meditated alone and discovered why people suffer.
- + This discovery is called enlightenment and Siddhartha became the Buddha.
- + The Buddha used many of the ideas that existed in Hinduism and Jainism at the time, such as meditation, samsara, karma and rebirth.
- + He lived at a time of change in people's religious beliefs from Vedic Hinduism to Upanishadic Hinduism and the challenges to the caste system.
- + He taught others his ideas and Buddhism spread rapidly.
- + The Buddha died at the age of 80.