

#5 Buddhism is a teaching that began in India during a time of religious turmoil around the fifth century B.C. Numerous religions sprang up in response to the Brahman tradition of human sacrifice that was prevalent at the time. Social upheaval also occurred as political leaders failed to unite tribes. The region was split into many small kingdoms with each one having little power or authority. People responded by exploring other forms of worship and leadership. One of those was Buddhism, founded by Siddhartha Gautama.

The Founder of Buddhist Philosophy

The exact years of Siddhartha Gautama's birth and death are debated among Buddhists. Most Buddhists in Southeast Asia believe he died in 543 B.C., but Buddhists in Japan place his life about 100 years later. The facts of his birth and early childhood have, perhaps, evolved into myth as much as fact, but the fable of his conception and birth show that he was chosen from an early age.

Princess Maya, wife of the noble warrior Suddhodana, leader of the Sakya tribe, became pregnant. Soon after her conception, she had a dream that a great white elephant touched her with a lotus blossom. The princess bore a son, Siddhartha Gautama, but she died seven days after giving birth. A holy man came down from the Himalayan Mountains, looked at the baby, and said he would either be a world conqueror or become the holy one. His father preferred the former so gave him a princely life and kept him away from religious influences. By the age of 16, he owned three palaces—one for the hot season, one for the cold season, and one for the rainy season. His father arranged a marriage to Rahula, and she was blessed with a son.

The story of how and why Siddhartha Gautama left that wealth and security for a life of begging and teaching has two slightly different versions. One says that in his youth, he became so filled with disgust for death, disease, and suffering that he made it his life's work to find a way out of it. Another story says that when he was allowed to leave his family compound as an adult and saw, for the first time, the suffering around him, he was propelled to find a better way. So Siddhartha Gautama chose a life of devotion to enlightenment, which earned him the title Buddha, or awakened one.

Historical Development of Buddhism in Two Directions

Both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism acknowledge Siddhartha Gautama as the religion's founding father, but the differences in the teachings are quite profound. The Theravada school claims to remain faithful to the true tradition of the Buddha's teachings. Mahayana, meaning "the means of salvation available to a larger number of people" is an adaptation used in Korea and Japan. The followers of that tradition refer to the first group as Hinayana, "the means of salvation restricted to a smaller number of people," or simply the greater and lesser vehicles.

The Mahayana branch of Buddhism includes many sects with a variety of beliefs differing slightly from one to another. The Lotus Sutra is the prevalent text used in Mahayana Buddhism, most common in the northern countries of Asia: China, Korea, and Japan. The Theravada branch is prevalent in the southern countries of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia.

Theravada Buddhism emphasizes the importance of monks and nuns retaining their monastic lifestyle. It teaches that wisdom is the highest attribute. In Mahayana Buddhism, lay people can participate in meditation and worship and can seek enlightenment in the same way that monks and nuns do. Also, compassion is considered the best way to gain salvation. In some sects of Mahayana Buddhism in Japan, the priests can marry and have families like Protestant ministers can.

The Written Word

Buddhism was only one of dozens of religions that started during the late sixth to early fifth centuries B.C. in India, and many of them do not exist today. Although those religions emphasized different aspects of worship and finding inner peace, many of them shared similar vocabulary to describe the path. Today, Buddhism had evolved into many sects, just like Christianity, but most still share the vocabulary also shared by fifth-century-B.C. Ajivikas and Jainas.

Nirvana is one of the shared words; it means a state of transcendent freedom. The word literally means "stop." Stop the evils of passion, aggression, and ignorance, and stop struggling to survive. When a person has reached that state, often through yoga, or union, she or he has reached nirvana.

Like the other major world religions, Buddhism does have a written text. Interestingly, however, it is the fact that the original written texts were in two different languages from two parts of the world that caused the Theravada and Mahayana splits. The Buddha himself did not write anything down, but his followers passed down his sermons and teachings orally.

For almost 500 years after the Buddha's death, it was a tradition to recite the Buddha's sermons and teachings aloud to audiences. That Theravada text was first written down in the Pali language of India in around 43 B.C. About 200 years later, Mahayana Buddhists compiled the text in Sanskrit. The Lotus Sutra is part of that text and is considered one of the greatest and earliest works of literature in the world.

Most Buddhist sects agree on several teachings involving numbers: the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Three Jewels. Although facts of the Buddha's early life may be sketchy, his sermons have been preserved for thousands of years. Looking at those philosophies provides a context for understanding that religion.

The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path of Buddha

The first truth is that life is *dukkha*, or suffering. Life is often given the visual image of a wheel with many spokes that are out of balance or of bones that have slipped from their sockets. Something is dislocated, not in balance. The second truth is that suffering is caused by *tanha*, craving or desire. It is the craving or clinging to a dream that is unrealistic or unattainable that causes friction and suffering in the world. The third noble truth is that to end suffering, craving must end. The first two truths deal with struggles, but the third one brings hope. If selfishness can be controlled, suffering can end. The last truth is that the way to end the selfish desires that cause suffering is to follow the Eightfold Path of Buddha.

How to follow the Eightfold Path is defined quite differently from sect to sect and from culture to culture. The basic components of the path are nonetheless generally agreed upon. Sometimes the path is grouped into the three categories of wisdom, virtue, and concentration. The guidelines for examining life are understanding, thought or intention, speech, action, livelihood or work, effort, mindfulness, and concentration or absorption in the here and now.

During the past 2,500 years, books have been written about the exact how-to of following the path. The goal, however, remains clear: to stop all passion, aggression, and ignorance; to stop proving that we are good and deserve to survive. The very fact that a human exists is proof that he or she can survive, so Buddhist teachings emphasize the need to stop manipulating things to be what we want them to be. Instead, accept things as they are.

Major Similarities and Differences with Other Religions

One major difference when comparing Buddhism with Islam or Christianity is the concept of humans in relation to God. Buddhism does not believe in a creator-god or even a single god. The central deity, so to speak, of Buddhism is the human spirit. The idea that a god would be in control of the chaos in the universe is foreign to Buddhism.

A story is told about Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama, who is perhaps the most famous living Buddhist today. A Westerner once asked him what his thoughts were on self-hatred—the concept that a human being could do harmful things to one's self and to others. That idea was so foreign to him that it took quite a bit of time for the translator and the Dalai Lama to even understand the question. His answer was simply, "I cannot imagine that such a thing exists in human thought." In other words, if the human spirit is divine, how could anyone think to harm the god within one's self?

Buddhism: From Japan to the United States

When Buddhism was introduced to Japan through Korea and China in around the fifth century, a debate began about whether the *kami*, the Japanese gods or spirits that lived in all of nature, would approve of those new religious ideas. Until that time, the local customs did not even have a name, but when Buddhism was introduced, the Japanese decided to call their traditions Shinto, or the Way of the Gods.

In Japan today, it is said that the ideal life is to receive the Shinto blessing or baptism when a baby is 100 days old and then to get married in a Christian church when an adult, but the ultimate end to a good life is to die a Buddhist and receive the ritual 49 days of constant prayer and candle burning. Japan today has as many sects of Buddhism as the United States has Christian denominations.

Zen Buddhism is one of the Mahayana sects prevalent in Japan today. D.T. Suzuki translated many texts into English at the end of the 19th century and is the person credited with making Zen a household word in the United States and England. Zen appeals to Westerners because of its emphasis on self-discipline and meditation that can be incorporated into everyday life.

Conclusion

Prior to the 20th century, Buddhism was centered in Asia, split into the two main branches of Theravada and Mahayana and adapting to cultures as it grew into many sects. With the translation of texts into English and as more travelers traversed the Pacific Ocean, Westerners in Europe and North America began converting to Buddhism at a rapid pace. Even many who do not follow the Buddhist path sympathize with the concerns of Tibetan Buddhists represented by the Dalai Lama.

That religious philosophy founded by a prince who gave up wealth and power to find wisdom and inner peace influences many aspects of world culture today. Peace talks by world governments are often flavored by Buddhist practices. Meditation and yoga are common practices for many people who are not Buddhists. Thousands of people, including school children, gather to hear the Dalai Lama speak on peace and the importance of getting along as neighbors in the world. Buddhism continues to thrive 2,500 years after Siddhartha Gautama was born in India.

Buddhism Questions:

1. Who is the founder of Buddhism?
2. What is the meaning of Buddha?
3. What does Nirvana mean?
4. Buddhists believe life is essentially what?
5. Buddhism is a branch off of what religion?
6. If Buddha did not write down his sermons, how were they passed on?
7. What are the two main branches of Buddhism ?
8. What does Theravada consider the best way to gain salvation?
9. What is considered one of the greatest and earliest works of Buddhist literature?

10. What are the three teachings most Buddhists agree on?

1.

2.

3.

11. What is the meaning on “tanha”?

12. What are the three categories to follow the eightfold path?

1.

2.

3.

13. What country is Theravadan most dominant?

14. Instead of Buddhists believing in a single creator, they believe in what?

15. What are the four noble truths?

1.

2.

3.

4.

16. Who is the most famous living Buddhist today?

17. What does “kami” mean?

18. Buddhism centered in what country at first?

19. What type of government talks are favored by Buddhists?

20. What is the main concept of Zen?