

Understanding Buddhism

"Everything changes, everything is connected, pay attention"
Jane Hirshfield



Buddhism is a way of living rather than a religion. It is based on the teachings of a historical figure, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived around the fifth century B.C.E. As it moved across Asia, Buddhism absorbed many indigenous beliefs and incorporated a wide range of imagery. Buddhism continues to evolve in many parts of the world.

Buddhism is a complex subject, a philosophy that has evolved in many different ways and various regions of Asia and now in the Western world. Providing simple definitions for the beliefs is difficult because there are now so many variations. Here we wish to provide a very general overview.

The historical Buddha-to-be, Siddhartha Gautama, was born around the 6th century B.C.E. into royalty at Kapilavastu, which lay in the foothills of the Himalayas near the present day Nepalese-Indian border. For most of his youth, the prince led a sheltered existence within the palace, where he enjoyed court life, married a princess, and had a son. Venturing forth from the palace, he finally witnessed disturbing sights he had never before experienced: sickness, old age, death. Deeply unsettled by what he had seen, the prince finally renounced his worldly life, and set out on a quest for truth, to confront human suffering and the continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara).

The Buddha sought to find an end to human suffering. He proposed a path to wisdom and freedom from suffering. The Buddha declared that he would meditate under a banyan tree until he achieved enlightenment. This phenomenal event occurred at Bodh Gaya in the contemporary state of Bihar, which is one of Buddhism's great pilgrimage sites.

As a result of his attainment of enlightenment, the prince Siddhartha Gautama was now truly the Buddha, the Enlightened One. He was also commonly referred to as Shakyamuni, the sage of the Shakya clan. The Buddha distilled the principles of enlightenment into a doctrine known as The Four Noble Truths. These are:

- Life is made of suffering.
- Suffering is caused by desires, attachment and craving for illusions.
- It is possible to end suffering by eliminating the causes.
- Suffering can be ended by following the Noble Eightfold Path, a set of resolutions characterized by a concern for right view, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration (meditation) which leads to moderation, positive actions, and wisdom.

The ultimate goal of most Buddhists is to reach nirvana, a state of bliss in which human desire, ego, and suffering are extinguished.