Chapter Overview

Buddhism was born in the sixth-century BCE in the foothills of the Himalayas. It spread from India throughout southern and southeastern Asia until it took root in China and later Japan. This tradition offers timeless wisdom for dealing with life's real problems. Buddhism teaches that our only hope for salvation comes through the realization that all of life is in some way unsatisfactory.

The goals of the chapter are these:
1. To sketch out a biography of Siddhartha, founder of Buddhism
2. To lay out the foundational tenets of Dharma, the wisdom of Buddha, especially the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Path of Liberation
3. To show the distinctiveness of Buddhism's understanding of karma, reincarnation, and Nirvana
4. To explain distinctions between important expressions of Buddhism; namely, Theravada (also known as Hinayana, the Lesser Vehicle), and Mahayana (also known as the Greater Vehicle), Zen, and Pure Land

Students should find the chapter section on the life of the Buddha lively and engaging. It may be good to remind them throughout the chapter that Buddha is a religious title and not a proper name. In history, we would not find a family called Mr., Ms., and baby Buddha— one would not have invited the Buddha's over for dinner. The rest of the chapter may be a challenge to students' powers of concentration. Approximately 50% of Chapter 5 is devoted to topics concerning Dharma and the different expressions of Buddhism. The perennial problem of missing the forest for the trees may be encountered due to the details involved with this rather massive section of material. To help students keep their attention focused and thoughts organized as they work through the information, an initial outline of significant topics and subtopics may prove useful. One could make the following three-part outline available to students.

I. Dharma (the truths of reality, and the right conduct for each person's state of evolution)
   A. The Four Noble Truths
   B. The Eightfold Path of Liberation
   C. Reincarnation
   D. Karma
   E. Nirvana

II. The Two Major Expressions of Buddhism
   A. Theravada (Teaching of the Elders, The Lesser Vehicle)
   B. Mahayana (The Greater Vehicle)
   1. Prevalent in south Asian countries
      a. Sri Lanka
      b. Burma
      c. Thailand
      d. Cambodia
      e. Laos
   2. Also known as the Southern School

   1. Dominant in
      a. Nepal
      b. Tibet
      c. China
      d. Korea
      e. Mongolia; Japan
   2. Also known as the Northern School

III. Other Expressions of Buddhism
    A. Zen
    B. Pure Land

IV. The life of the Buddha
According to our best scholarly judgments, the Buddha was born in 563 B.C.E. in northern India in the foothills along the Himalayas. The word Buddha is actually a title, meaning Enlightened One. The Buddha’s given name was Siddhartha and his family name was Gautama, a family of the royal noble class. Tradition has it that the birth of this wise person came under special circumstances. His mother is said to have dreamed that a white elephant (a form of the Buddha) came to her and entered her womb. Legends say that at the time of the Buddha’s birth, priests foretold that this child would become either a great king or a person who would renounce earthly life in order to share his enlightenment with the rest of the world.

This might be a good time to inform students that tales of extraordinary events attending the birth of a famous religious figure were common in antiquity. For example, the great Jewish prophet Moses was said to have miraculously escaped death by floating down the Nile River in a special wicker basket as a baby. Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of Christianity, was said to have been conceived miraculously, and so on.

Allegedly a seer declared that this child would have one of two destinies. Either he would become a great political leader who would unite the entire subcontinent under his rule, or he would become a renowned religious leader touching the hearts of millions with his teachings. The deciding factor in which destiny he would achieve would be whether or not he witnessed the Four Sights. Siddhartha’s father, who was the equivalent of a king or a feudal lord, tried his best to protect his son from the troubles of the world and to make a good life for him in their palace. All of this was to encourage his son to aspire to kingship. Stories tell of Siddhartha’s life of leisure in a palace with female musicians and a harem of dancers. He married and had a son. However, curiosity for ordinary life inflamed this young man. He was enticed from his home to take a chariot ride one day. The legend has it that the gods arranged for Siddhartha to witness the Four Sights—this is precisely what his father had wanted to keep from him. The sights were these: a bent aged man, an ill person, a dead person, and finally a monk devoted to the eternal realities rather than transient pleasure. His chosen path was now decided, he would serve humanity as a great religious leader.

At the age of 29, Siddhartha became disillusioned with his life of luxury and left his home to wander as an ascetic. This could be a useful time to reflect with students on the symbolic age of 30 in relation to great religious leaders. For whatever reason, the age of 30—or very close to it—is frequently cited in ancient stories as the time when the leader undertakes his mission or undergoes a life altering conversion of some sort. Siddhartha was 29, legend has it, when his conversion began. Jesus of Nazareth was said to have begun his ministry when he was 30. Students could be asked to be on the lookout throughout the rest of the book for other religious leaders who are associated with the age of 30.

Various traditions report the story of Siddhartha’s travels. He lived for several years in solitude. He studied with Hindu yogis. Next, he tried pushing his body to the limits of asceticism, fasting until he came close to death. But Siddhartha found that these extreme lifestyles brought him nothing. From this experience emerged the Buddha’s emphasis on the Middle Way: the way of neither intemperance nor self-denial. In other words, it is a life intent on providing the body what it needs for food, water, and rest, but limiting excesses in order to enhance mental and physical functioning.

Traditional accounts of Siddhartha’s enlightenment experience have much with which to capture the imagination, given the concurrence of the natural and the mystical involved with his Supreme Enlightenment. On the evening of a full moon, in May, he sat under a fig tree at Gaya. Siddhartha vowed to remain under the tree until enlightenment came upon him. While sitting meditating, he experienced four states of contemplation:

First, the recollection of all his previous lives;
Second, a vision of the wheel of deaths;
Third, a vision of the wheel of rebirths;
Fourth, a revelation of the existence of suffering, its origins, and the means for subduing it.

After this enlightenment, Siddhartha was tempted by the evil spirit Mara to keep these insights to himself, being told that nobody else could possibly understand what he now knew. Mara suggested he should simply be released to Nirvana, but he resisted this temptation,
deciding some will indeed understand. After this awakening, Siddhartha became the Buddha, *the one who woke up*. His meditation is said to have lasted 40 days.

The Buddha then traveled to Benares to teach and preach about his realization. On this journey he preached his famous sermon in the Deer Park, where he explained the Four Noble Truths. The first noble truth is that all life is suffering (*dukkha*).

The second is that suffering is caused by our desire for things to be different from what they are, or, to remain the way we want them. The third truth states that the way to end suffering is to end desire. The fourth truth says that the way to end desire is through a life of morality, concentration and wisdom, as outlined in a code of ethics called the Eightfold Path.

These Noble Truths illustrate the theme of Buddhism that happiness is not a reasonable goal in life, because unhappiness is always the companion of happiness. Things are always in a state of change, so that even when we are completely happy, eventually something will change to result in dissatisfaction. Buddhism teaches that suffering is useful in helping us to see things as they really are. There is nothing that is permanent; everything is impermanent (*anicca*). Furthermore, there is no continual I or self. This teaching of Buddhism has become known as the *anatta* doctrine.

For the rest of his life, the Buddha traveled in India, preached the Dharma, and received many followers in the Ganges River Valley. He organized these disciples into a monastic order, the *sangha*. The Buddha probably had great powers of rational intellectual skill, which he used to logically work through the problems of existence for all humanity. He spent time with laypeople, as well as monks, teaching them about the way to end desire and suffering. After many years, the Buddha is said to have become sick after eating some spoiled mushrooms or pork given to him by a blacksmith. At the point of death, however, he pushed on to Kusinara and converted a young man along the way. He sent word to the blacksmith not to blame himself for serving the bad food, because it was an offering made with the best of intentions.

**Some lessons of Buddhism**

Buddhism professes several practical and reasonable suggestions about life and living. The reason we follow desires down the road to suffering is that we fail to grasp the true nature of the world--that everything is impermanent. In our ignorance, we are desperate to hold onto whatever looks permanent or powerful or lucrative. We must learn to recognize *dukkha*, the reality of dissatisfaction or discomfort in all of life's situations. Buddhism also reaches that there is really is no such thing as a *self*, but rather that this person named I is also always changing. If we can understand these truths about ourselves and our world, then we can become free in this life and escape rebirth in another existence.

Buddhism readily admits that for most people it is difficult to achieve such realizations by simply pondering about the nature of existence. Most people need more direct and simple methods for liberation. A Buddhist teacher once remarked that, “If you cannot understand no-self (*annatta*), then strive to become a good self.” The Eightfold Path is the prescription for liberation through morality. The eight steps of the path offer good grist for discussion about contemporary problems. These guidelines for good thought and action are as relevant in today’s world as they were when first written.

Nirvana poses conceptual problems because different forms of Buddhism have taught very different doctrines about enlightenment. At this point, it is important to introduce the two major expressions of Buddhism. First is the Theravada tradition of southern Asia, also known as Hinayana or the Lesser Vehicle. The Theravada tradition emphasizes the monastic life and meditation. It took root as the type of Buddhism that flourished in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Kampuchea (Cambodia), and Laos. Second, Mahayana Buddhism, by contrast, emphasizes enlightenment through compassion for other creatures. It developed in China, Japan, and Northern Asia. This tradition respects human tendencies for devotion and metaphysical beliefs, and works with them instead of opposing them. Mahayana teaches that the ideal is to be aware of the suffering of other people. The saint or *Bodhisattva* is a being who postpones his own enlightenment in order to work to ease the suffering of the world. Although Mahayana teaches beliefs in Nirvana and in heavenly forms, on higher levels of understanding, it also asserts that attachment to these concepts is unnecessary.
Other expressions of Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism embraces the indigenous Vajrayana tradition in which the energies of the body can be trained to transform the mind. This type of Buddhism uses esoteric practices that include sexual union as a form of religious ritual. The ornate and colorful ritualism of Tibetan Buddhists has embraced the simplicity of native Tibetan shepherds and mountain climbers. Unfortunately, Tibetan Buddhists were persecuted by members of the Chinese communist state. The Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, fled his home country. This form of Buddhism stands in virtually direct contrast to Zen Buddhism, a form of religion that uses mystical mind-to-mind transmissions of truth and wisdom. Zazen, or sitting meditation, is a central method for achieving discipline in Zen Buddhism. Zen Buddhism is also renowned for its koans, or riddles such as, Listen to the sound of one hand clapping. These are far more than complex problems to be solved; rather, they present the listener/thinker with a paradox which is intended to drive the learner to insight.

This kind of Buddhism originated in China and later spread to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. The stark Zen paintings of masters who used calligraphy and brush painting as a form of spiritual discipline show the austerity of this approach to life.

Pure Land Buddhism uses a more devotional approach toward religious practice, turning to the Amida Buddha. Some believers interpret the Pure Land teachings to mean that an afterlife, much like a Western heaven awaits the faithful if they appeal to the grace of the Amida Buddha. Michiren Buddhism, on the other hand, stresses the importance of taking action in this life to work toward social justice and peace.

Key Terms

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