

Lesson 2

Student Handout 2.4—The Buddha (born Siddhartha Gautama), 563-483 BCE

Siddhartha Gautama was born a prince in Northern India. According to legend, it was predicted at Siddhartha's birth that he would become either a great ruler or a great teacher. His father, the king, wanted Siddhartha to succeed him as ruler. For this reason, his father tried to prevent him from seeing or experiencing anything sad, which might cause him to become religious and teach others. Therefore, Siddhartha enjoyed his early years in the palace in luxury without knowing about things such as old age, sickness, or death. Eventually, the young prince decided to go outside of the palace. There, for the first time, he saw an old person with wrinkled skin who had difficulty walking. Siddhartha understood that he himself would also become old. He also saw a sick person and a dead person. All this made Siddhartha feel much suffering. During another trip, he saw a holy man who appeared to be happy and at peace. Siddhartha learned that this person had given up his home and everything he owned. The holy person was trying to find wisdom and peacefulness by living a pure and simple life.

From then on, Siddhartha searched for a way to end suffering and become happy. He decided to follow the path of a holy person. He gave up everything he owned. He left his wife and young child and a life of luxury in the palace. He traveled around India for years, but he still did not find a way to end suffering. Finally, he decided to sit under a tree and meditate (become quiet and relaxed and clear his mind of thoughts) until he became enlightened (understood the truth about the world and such things as why there is suffering and how to end it). After meditating for several hours, he became enlightened and became known as the "Buddha," or the one who knows the truth.



**Two Golden Statues of
Buddha in a Temple
Shanghai, China**
Photo by J. Rothblatt



**Buddhists burn incense and chant
in a temple
Shanghai, China**
Photo by J. Rothblatt

In order to share the truths he found with others, the Buddha became a teacher. (Remember: this is one of the career paths predicted for him at birth and the one that his father did not want him to take.) There are two main beliefs of Buddhism, that is, the teachings of the Buddha and his followers.

One is the “Four Noble Truths,” which the Buddha discovered when he meditated beneath the tree. These truths are:

- Life is full of suffering from birth to death.
- People suffer because they desire (try to get) things that do not last, for example, money and possessions.
- The way to end suffering is to stop desiring things.
- The way to get rid of desire is to follow the “Eightfold Path.”

According to Buddhism, the “Eightfold Path” means to lead a good life. People who follow this path are freed from suffering and gain happiness. These steps are:

- Right understanding. It is important to be certain that you understand the teachings of the Buddha correctly
- Right thought. Think thoughts that are pure and good.
- Right speech. Speak words that are truthful and not harmful.
- Right action. Treat people well, as you would like to be treated.
- Right work. Do not harm others as you earn a living.
- Right effort. Keep trying to become a better person; stop bad habits.
- Right mindfulness. Be mindful (or aware) of what you are doing and what is going on around you; always think about how you live
- Right meditation. Meditate correctly each day to clear your mind of desires and be able to find peace and truth

When and why did Buddhism arrive in China? Buddhism probably first entered China along the “silk roads,” that is, the system of trade routes that connected China to lands farther west as far as the Mediterranean sea and Europe. Trade on the silk roads goes back thousands of years. By about 100 BCE, Buddhist missionaries began traveling on the routes along with traders. Trade routes opened contact and communication between people and places. In addition to goods, people and ideas spread along the trade routes.

By 68 CE, a Chinese Han emperor asked some advisers to visit India to learn more about this “western religion,” that is, Indian religion. They returned to China with Buddhist monks. New religions and beliefs often become popular during difficult times when people are searching for answers to why there is suffering. When dynasties were ending in China there was much unrest, and the Chinese tended to embrace Buddhism more. For example, at the end of the Han dynasty, Buddhism became more popular.