

GREAT THINKERS
OF THE
EASTERN
WORLD



*The major thinkers and the philosophical and religious classics
of China, India, Japan, Korea, and the world of Islam*

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BUDDHA (SIDDHĀRTHA GAUTAMA)

Born: c. 563 B.C., Kapilavastu, India

Died: c. 483 B.C., Kushinagara, India

Major Works: The Buddha's sayings were recollected and written down many years after his death. The *sūtras* (dialogues), which form a part of the Pali *Tripitaka*, are generally conceded to be the closest approximation to what the Buddha actually taught.

Major Ideas

Life in this world is basically one of suffering.

A person's good or bad actions (karma) result in better or worse reincarnation.

The highest goal consists in release (nirvāna) from the cycle of reincarnations.

Nirvana is achieved by following the Noble Eightfold Path.

Everyone should treat all beings as one would treat oneself.

A Buddhist strives to obtain the happiness of all living beings.

A person should accept a doctrine only if his own experience verifies it.

The Buddha was one among a handful of individuals in the story of mankind in whom humanity reaches its highest fulfillment. His noble character, his penetrating intellect, his love of humanity, and his transcendent wisdom has led to his adoration by millions. He was a philosopher, a doctor of the mind, and a religious leader. His disciples and followers represented a wide spectrum of social classes and included kings, bankers, housewives, and courtesans. The religion he founded spread from India to all of Asia and has enriched the lives of millions for more than twenty-five centuries. So tolerant and gentle was the Buddha's teaching that there is not a single example of persecution or the shedding of a drop of blood in converting people to Buddhism.

India in the Buddha's time, was undergoing a widespread social transformation. The age of iron had arrived. Smaller states and republics were being taken over by larger, imperialistic states. The established Vedic religion had degenerated into ritualism. Society had stratified into rigid divisions, with the lower castes bearing the burden of economic exploitation and social discrimination. Young, bright minds were seeking theories that would show individuals how to live meaningfully in an uncertain age.

The first fruit of the new intellectual striving was

the philosophy of the *Upanishads*. In this philosophy the ultimate reality underlying the empirical world was designated *Brahman*. *Brahman* is transcendent, pure consciousness. The essence of a human being is also pure consciousness, the *Ātman*. *Brahman* and *Ātman* are one. Through ignorance, *Ātman* gets associated with a body and lives the life of a person. The right and wrong acts committed by a person form his *karma*. Good *karma* results in beneficial results in this life or in a future incarnation. Bad *karma* results in future harm. A person gets born again and again to reap the rewards of his acts. The world of *karma* and reincarnation is called *samsāra*. The ultimate goal, the *summum bonum*, is escape from *samsāra* to the final freedom, *moksha*.

Many bright, energetic young seekers after a new ideology were not satisfied with the Upanishadic philosophy. Although it was a significant departure from the Vedic ritualism, it did not go far enough. The Upanishadic way was tied to the Vedic tradition and its social values. The Buddha belonged to this stream of seekers in the non-Vedic tradition.

Siddhārtha Gautama

The Buddha was born about 563 B.C. His given name was Siddhārtha and the family name was

Gautama. Siddhārtha Gautama also came to be known as Shākyamuni ("Sage of the Shākyas") because he was born in the clan of Shākyas. The Shākyas were a warrior tribe inhabiting an area just below the Himalayan foothills. Gautama's father was a chieftain and Gautama was brought up as a prince. He lived a life of luxury. Even though his father arranged studies and training befitting a future king, Gautama was shielded from the knowledge of the trials of ordinary everyday life. Following tradition, Gautama's father arranged his marriage to Yashodharā, who bore him a son named Rāhula. For Gautama, the luxurious life of the palace was not enough. His father's attempts to shield him from harsh realities of life did not succeed. On his rare visits outside the palace Gautama noticed an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. He realized that the infirmities of old age and the pain of sickness and death highlight the inevitable sufferings of human life. He began wondering if there was a way of life that could conquer suffering and lead to tranquility of mind.

The search for a path that would radically overcome the sufferings inherent in the human condition became the driving force in Gautama's life. He decided to renounce his kingdom and his family and became a wandering ascetic. At first he pursued the path of Yogic meditation with two *Brāhmin* hermits. He succeeded in achieving high planes of meditative consciousness. But he was not satisfied by this path as it did not answer to his quest. Next he tried the path of severe austerities, including suspension of breathing and prolonged fasting. So severe were Gautama's austerities that he came close to death. But this path too did not answer to his quest.

Finally, he resolved to take his seat under the Bodhi Tree facing east and not to arise until he attained enlightenment. On the night of the full moon, Gautama ascended the four stages of trance (*dhyana*). All of the trances were characterized by concentration and accurate cognition. During the last hours of the night, Gautama acquired enlightenment (*Bodhi*) and became the Buddha (the Enlightened One).

The Four Noble Truths

The Buddha had seen the path that leads to the end of all suffering and to liberation (*nirvāna*). He now pondered whether the world was ready for such a deep teaching, but he finally decided to teach his doctrine. He traveled to Sarnath and gave his first sermon in the Deer Park. The Buddha was now thirty-five years old.

His first sermon is called "Turning the Wheel of *Dharma*." The Buddha calls his path the Middle Way, since he rejects both asceticism and hedonism as one-sided extremes.

There are two extremes in this world, O monks, which the religious wanderer should avoid. What are these two? The pursuit of desires and indulgence in sensual pleasure, which is base, low, depraved, ignoble and unprofitable; and the pursuit after hardship and self-torture, which is painful, ignoble and unprofitable.

There is a middle way, O monks, discovered by the *Tathāgata* [the Buddha], which avoids these two extremes. It brings clear vision and insight, it makes for wisdom and leads to tranquility, awakening, enlightenment, and nirvana . . .

The Buddha proceeds to proclaim his *Four Noble Truths*:

"Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of pain (*dukkha*): birth is painful, old age is painful, sickness is painful, death is painful, sorrow, lamentation, dejection and despair are painful. Contact with unpleasant things is painful, not getting what one wishes is painful . . .

"Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of the cause of pain: that craving which leads to rebirth, combined with pleasure of lust, finding pleasure here and there, namely the craving for pleasure . . ."

"Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of pain: the cessation of that . . ."

ing, abandonment, forsaking, release, non-attachment."

"Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of the way that leads to the cessation of pain: this is the *Noble Eightfold Path*, namely, right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration . . ."

Like a good physician, the Buddha has diagnosed the malady, found its cause, and prescribed a cure.

Behind this rather simple-sounding diagnosis and prescription lay a profound philosophical discovery. The first part of that discovery is what the Buddha called the "Three Characteristics of Being":

All constituents of being are transitory. Everything is impermanent. Beings come, become and go. What we believe to be enduring objects—physical objects and persons—are nothing but sequences of transitory events. It is our cravings and needs which drive us to create the illusion of permanence. We want to grasp and hold on to objects and persons or we hate and fear them. All this presupposes permanent objects.

All constituents of being are lacking in an ego.

Our greatest illusion is that we ourselves are an enduring ego, which persists through a lifetime and even gets reborn. All the attachments of "I" and "mine" flow from this illusion. I, the enduring self, want to grasp and hold pleasures, collect property, fear or love others. But, says the Buddha, there is no enduring I. I is just a convenient label for a series of interconnected events.

All constituents of being are painful. According to the Buddha, the impermanent, transitory flux of events can never be the source of real happiness and peace; rather, they engender unhappiness because of our craving nature which can never be satisfied by the impermanent.

The second part of Buddha's philosophical discovery goes beyond impermanence to his theory of causation or the law of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*):

When this is present, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises. When this is absent, that does not come to be; on the cessation of this, that ceases.

In his theory of causation, the Buddha was following the middle path between Eternalism and Annihilationism. The Eternalists, following Vedic teachings, proclaimed that man's true self (*ātman*) is eternal. The Buddha argued against this theory, both because it was unproved and because it fed the flames of human cravings and created unhappiness. The Annihilists, on the other hand, claimed not only that everything was impermanent, but also that there were no connections between events and everything was a chance occurrence. The Buddha saw this to be a mistaken doctrine, both because it was patently false and because if this view was accepted there would be no cure for any disease nor a sure path to liberation.

The Buddha's law of dependent origination is the Middle Way. Everything is impermanent all right, but all happenings are conditioned by others and, in turn, form a condition for other happenings. In short, every event has a cause and causes others. In his "Discourse on Causal Relations" the Buddha mentions four characteristics of causation: (1) objectivity, (2) necessity, (3) invariability, and (4) conditionality. This law of dependent origination, which the Buddha discovered during the night of his enlightenment, forms the fulcrum for his entire system. Not only do his characteristic doctrines such as impermanence, no-self, and suffering flow from the law of dependent origination, but his diagnosis and cure for the sufferings attendant on the human condition are also based on it. This law also enabled the Buddha to give a Buddhist interpretation of the law of *karma* and rebirth. The Buddha conceptualized a person as consisting of five groups (*skandhas*): (1) bodily form, (2) feelings, (3)

perceptions, (4) impulses, and (5) consciousness. At any given point in time, a person is a specific configuration of his *skandhas*. His state at a later time is a causal consequence of his earlier state. A potent factor in the causal sequence is a person's moral action. His wrong acts make his later state less favorable, whereas his right acts make it more propitious. This is the Law of *Karma*. Furthermore, this sequence does not end with a person's bodily death. The consciousness factor gets carried over to another newborn body. That is reincarnation with karmic residue. Since human suffering thus persists from life to life, the goal of nirvana, which is liberation from suffering and rebirth, gains supreme importance.

The Noble Eightfold Path

The aim of Buddhist practice is to end transmigration and attain final peace. The most essential and characteristic part of the teaching is a scheme of training and study to attain this aim. The excellent Noble Eightfold Path summarizes the training. The first two items, right views and right intentions, constitute Wisdom; the next three, right speech, right action, and right livelihood, constitute Morality; and the last three, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, constitute Concentration. The movement from Wisdom to Morality to Concentration forms an upward spiral. The aspirant starts with a glimmer of wisdom, which motivates him to morality and beginning level concentration. Concentration, in turn, deepens the wisdom. Greater wisdom strengthens morality, which leads to higher levels of concentration. The growth spiral eventually leads to nirvana.

Buddhist morality is anchored in five principles of conduct. Right Action consists in abstaining from (1) taking life, (2) taking what is not given, (3) misconduct in pleasures, (4) false speech, and (5) intoxicating drink. Right Speech means abstention from telling lies; from backbiting, slander, and talk that may bring about hatred, enmity, and disharmony; from harsh, rude, malicious language; and from idle gossip. Right Livelihood means that one

should abstain from making one's living through a profession that brings harm to others.

These three factors—Right Action, Right Speech, and Right Livelihood—of the Noble Eightfold Path constitute morality. This moral conduct aims at promoting a happy and harmonious life both for the individual and for society. It is the indispensable foundation for all higher attainments.

In the scheme of Buddhist training the most important part is not moral conduct, which though essential is only a preliminary, but meditation, in which the truths about the nature of the universe and one's own being are contemplated and the consciousness becomes gradually abstracted and detached.

One powerful technique of meditation or concentration is called self-possession. It consists in mindfulness (*vipassana*) meditation on the body, the emotions, thoughts, and *dhammas* (elements), such as the five *skandhas*. For example, the Buddha explains meditating on emotions:

In this connection, monks, a monk feeling a pleasant emotion understands that he is feeling a pleasant emotion, feeling an unpleasant emotion understands that he is feeling an unpleasant emotion . . . he lives observing the nature of origination of emotions or observing the nature of cessation of emotions . . . thus he lives unattached . . .

Similar directions are given for mindfulness of the body, thoughts, and principles (*dhammas*). The goal is self-possession, leading to non-attachment.

Enlightenment is non-attachment and equanimity. There is no craving, therefore no suffering. Said the Buddha, "Knowledge arose in me and insight; my freedom is certain, this is my last birth; now there is no rebirth." This is nirvana, the Buddha's goal of life. Nirvana has been described as the Great Peace, perfection, extinction. The Buddha said that nirvana is indescribable.

The Buddha was questioned about whether the saint (who has achieved nirvana) exists or does not exist after death. He said that this question

others such as "Is the world eternal or non-eternal?" tend not to edification and therefore are improper. The main problem is suffering and end of suffering. Metaphysical disputes merely distract one from the goal. The Buddha claimed that a person who insists that metaphysical questions be answered before he would follow the path to enlightenment is like a man wounded by a poisoned arrow, who would not let the surgeon remove the arrow until he found out who shot the arrow, what his name was, and so on.

Among the founders of religions the Buddha was the only teacher who did not claim divine authority in any form. He attributed all his realization, attainments, and achievements to human endeavor and human intelligence. His philosophy is entirely based on observation and reasoning. His characteristic doctrines such as impermanence and dependent origination have an empirical justification. His rejection of metaphysical speculation is based on the philosophically sound insight that such questions are unanswerable on the basis of observation. For example, he compares the question "Does the saint exist after death or does he not?" to the question "Does the flame that has gone out, gone north or not?"

Many scholars have claimed that the Buddha was an empiricist and positivist philosopher. This is a dubious claim. Experience, for the Buddha, was a wider concept than ordinary sense perception. The Buddha claimed to have observed his own past lives and the reincarnations of other beings during the trance state before his enlightenment. So experience for the Buddha includes experience during yogic meditation. Then there is the question whether the Buddha countenanced anything that could be termed unconditional or transcendental. Divergent answers to this question form the nucleus for the two major schools of Buddhism, Theravāda and Mahāyāna.

Theravādins believe that everything is conditioned and impermanent. Nothing is transcendent. The Buddha was a human being, though a unique one, exalted above all others. The Theravādin form of religion consists in following the Noble Eightfold

Mahāyānists, on the other hand, believe that there is the unconditional and the transcendent. Only the everyday, empirical world is conditioned and impermanent. They cite the Buddha's claim that nirvana is indescribable, as indicating the existence of the unconditioned. The Mahāyāna goes on to claim that the Buddha himself and many other beings form a part of the transcendental realm, and erects a full-fledged popular religion on that basis.

The Buddha taught his path of liberation for forty-five years. He maintained that only a person who has left the world and become a monk can achieve the final goal of nirvana. He encouraged his followers to form a community that came to be known as the *sangha*. But the Buddha also preached to the lay community, many of whom became his lay followers. It was understood that beyond the immediate aim of individual nirvana lies the objective of the happiness of the whole human society and the still higher objective of the happiness of all living beings. The basic Buddhist precept was to consider all beings as like oneself. Buddhists are encouraged to cultivate a set of four social emotions—friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and impartiality. In a recommended meditation exercise, the meditator is asked to pervade the four directions successively with thought charged with friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and impartiality by considering all beings as one considers oneself and by having thought that by being large, sublime, immeasurable, generous, and nonviolent, pervades the whole universe.

The Buddha's teachings paint a picture of the good society. The most important aspect of this society is that it is classless. All beings are equal before the moral law. The Buddha favored a republican government. His own community (the *sangha*) was organized on the republican model. The Buddha's refusal to appoint a successor and denying for himself the prerogative of exclusive guardianship of the *sangha* underline his republican preference. The Buddha's recommendations for a republican government were that the assembly should be held frequently and should aim at unanimity in its proceedings. Principles to be followed

include "Elders should be honored and listened to" and "Women and girls should be protected."

The Buddha was well aware of the fact that republican governments were being replaced by monarchies. For the king, the Buddha recommends a policy of conciliation. The king should consult the wise men of his society frequently. He should uphold the ancient principles, such as honoring the elders. It is the king's duty to provide protection, safety, and shelter for not only the whole of society, but even beasts and birds. Policy of conciliation implies that punishment should be mild and taxes moderate. It is the king's duty to teach his subjects the five principles of good conduct, namely non-violence, non-covetousness, abstinence from sexual misconduct, truthfulness, and temperance. It is the king's duty to prevent poverty, the root of so many evils, by grants to the poor. The three economically productive classes of the society are to be given aid in producing prosperity: The farmers are to be supplied seed and fodder for cattle; traders are to be supplied with capital for their ventures; and the workers are to get decent wages. Ashoka, who ruled from 269 to 232 B.C., became a model emperor by following the precepts of the Buddha.

After forty-five years of strenuous and energetic teaching, the Buddha passed away at the age of eighty.

Everything, whether stationary or movable, is bound to perish in the end. Be ye therefore mindful and vigilant! The time for my entry into Nirvana has arrived! These are my last words.

NARAYAN CHAMPAWAT

Further Reading

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———, ed. *Buddhist Scriptures*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1959. A Buddhist anthology that contains selections from all phases of the central tradition of Buddhism.

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Warder, A. K. *Indian Buddhism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980. A comprehensive, scholarly treatment of Buddhist thought, using original materials from Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese writings.

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