



Background Information on Buddhism

Directions: The following information will help your group create a character collage on Buddhism. Each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Buddhism is a belief system based on the life and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha. Gautama was a prince who lived in India from 563 to 483 B.C. According to legend, Gautama led a luxurious and sheltered life in his palace. One day his comfortable life was shattered when he saw a man who was very sick, another who was old and feeble, and a third who had died. Gautama realized that life was an endless cycle of pain, and the only way to escape it was by seeking wisdom. So, Gautama left the palace and for six years tried to find wisdom through harsh discipline and suffering. For days at a time he ate only a single grain of rice each day. Despite his efforts, Gautama felt only pain, not wisdom and insight about life. Finally, at the age of 35, after meditating deeply for many days in the shade of a tree, Gautama suddenly felt that the truth about life became clear to him. Thereafter, he was known as the Buddha, or the "Enlightened One."



- **Who was the Buddha?**
- **Why did Gautama begin his quest for wisdom and truth?**
- **How did he discover the truth about life?**

Many of the important foundations of Buddhism were stated in a sermon the Buddha gave shortly after his meditative experience. Buddha taught these four main ideas, known as the Four Noble Truths.

- **First Noble Truth** Suffering and sorrow are part of life. The Buddha believed people everywhere were subject to pain, sickness, and death.
- **Second Noble Truth** The cause of suffering and sorrow is people's self-centered desires. People seek pleasure that cannot last and leads only to more suffering. If people did not want wealth, power, pleasure, and fame, they would not be disappointed and unhappy when they do not have these things.
- **Third Noble Truth** The way to escape suffering is to overcome desires and reach a state of "not wanting."
- **Fourth Noble Truth** People can overcome their desires and reach the state of enlightenment (release from pain and selfishness), or *nirvana*, by following the Middle Path. The Middle Path involves leading an ethical (morally correct), compassionate life, in which one meditates and participates in rituals.



- **Summarize the Four Noble Truths in your own words.**
- **What do Buddhists believe causes suffering in life?**
- **How does a person follow the Middle Path?**

The Middle Path offered people practical guidelines for how to end suffering. The guidelines were known as the Eightfold Path, which those who sought enlightenment had to master one step at a time, like ascending (going up) a staircase. According to the Buddha, the steps of the Eightfold Path included right knowledge, right purpose, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation. By following the Eightfold Path, anyone could attain nirvana and escape suffering. In addition, the Buddha believed in a cycle of rebirth—that individuals were reincarnated (reborn in another body without memories from previous lives) and subjected to lifetimes of suffering until they reached enlightenment.



- **What is the Eightfold Path?**
- **According to the Buddha, what happens to people who do not reach enlightenment?**

In the years after the Buddha's death, there were two important developments in Buddhism. First, Buddhism evolved from a philosophy of life into a religion. In many branches of Buddhism, the Buddha is now worshipped as a god and Buddhists pray to Buddha, asking him to help them reach enlightenment. Second, travelers and missionaries spread Buddhism, and it became a major religion throughout East Asia. Buddhism was brought to China in A.D. 200 by Buddhist monks and traders, who traveled from India and Central Asia to China. In the centuries that followed, Buddhism grew in popularity until its influence rivaled that of the major native Chinese belief systems, Confucianism and Daoism.

Despite efforts starting in 1949 by the Communist government to repress (prevent or put down) Buddhism—such as arresting Buddhist monks and priests and closing Buddhist monasteries and temples—it continues to be an important religion in China. In the mid 1970s the Chinese government allowed a limited revival of Buddhist institutions. In modern times, Buddhist rituals continue to be followed in many important ceremonies.



- **How did Buddhism change after the Buddha's death?**
- **When and how did Buddhism reach China?**
- **What role does Buddhism play in Chinese society today?**

Quotes from the Teachings of the Buddha

Quote 1: *"Like fish caught in a net, desires trap us as we swim downstream in the violent flood of birth and death. Turn away from desires and leap out of the torrent... of misery."*

Quote 2: *"The mind is flighty, and hard to grasp; the mind pursues all its desires. To tame the mind is great goodness. Subdue the mind and know tranquility."*

Quote 3: *"Diligently cultivate moral precepts, concentration, and wisdom. Put an end to greed, hatred, and stupidity."*