

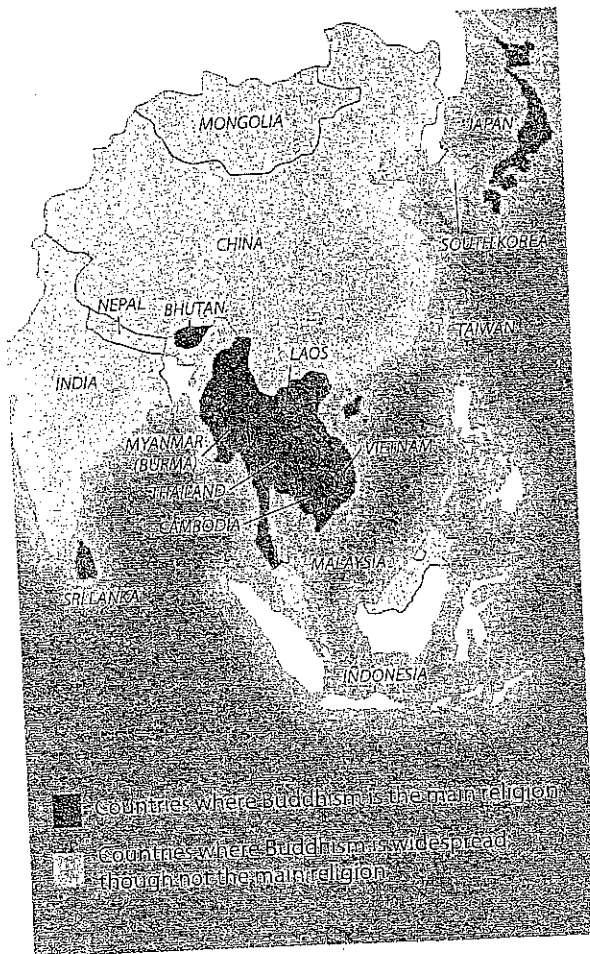
# Introduction

In this section you will

- learn about the Buddhist religion and its place in a multicultural society;
- read about how Buddhism has influenced Western culture.

## A religion without God?

You might think that in order for something to be a religion, you have to believe in God. While **Buddhism** is a religion, Buddhists do not have to believe in a god. Still, various forms of Buddhism believe in various gods, such as some Hindu gods that were revered when Buddhism began.



Countries where Buddhism is widespread today

Buddhism does have ideas about life and death, holy books, festivals, religious leaders, prayer, meditation, and special ceremonies to mark events such as birth, marriage, and death.

Buddhism began with the birth of **Siddhartha Gautama** in what is now Nepal around 563 B.C.E. About thirty-five years later, he became known as the **Buddha** and traveled through India until his death in 483 B.C.E.

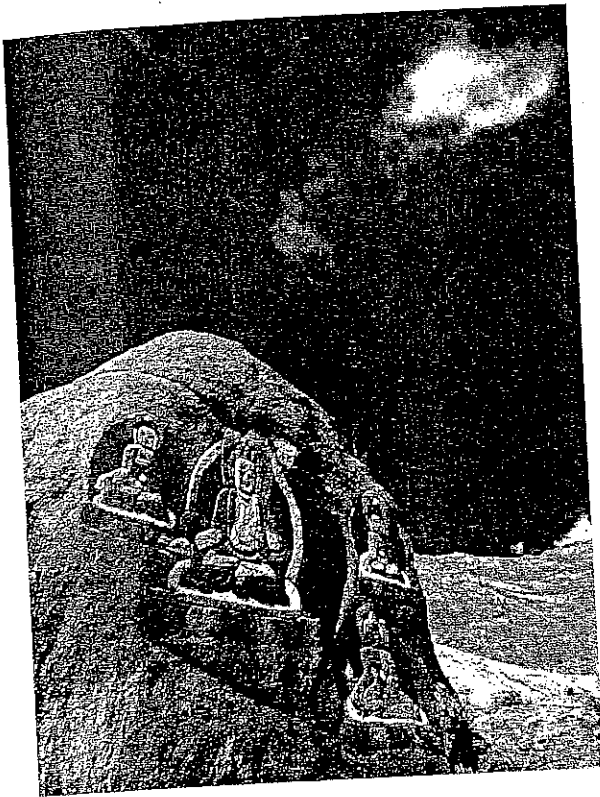
The movement he started soon spread across the neighboring countries of Sri Lanka, Tibet, and Nepal. People in other Asian countries such as Japan, China, and Korea also converted to Buddhism.

As you can see from the map, Buddhism isn't limited to Asia. When the British Empire had control of India, many people traveled to the region and learned about the traditions there. Travelers to Japan and China also returned to Great Britain to tell about the religion of the Buddha.

In the early years of the twentieth century, The Buddhist Society was founded in London to explain and promote Buddhism in Britain. One member was Christmas Humphreys, who later became a very famous trial lawyer and a judge.

In the 1960s, Buddhism became more popular in the West. Many young people thought that Buddhist pacifist (anti-war) principles, vegetarianism, and stress on finding the truth for oneself rather than looking for the solutions from a god, fitted with their beliefs. Another important Buddhist belief is that of rebirth, the belief that human beings and all other life-forms go through many lifetimes until they reach the state of **nirvana**, the end of suffering and the release from the wheel of rebirth.

Musicians such as The Beatles have quoted from Buddhist books such as the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*. Artists have found inspiration from the **mandalas** and other Buddhist pictures.



An example of Buddhist art

Many other young people found out about Buddhism when they were serving in Vietnam. The film director Oliver Stone became a Buddhist while serving there.

Buddhism has also become popular with many other people. They include the rock singers Tina Turner and musician Suzanne Vega and movie stars Richard Gere and Keanu Reeves. Movies such as *Kundun*, *Little Buddha*, and *Seven Years in Tibet* have shown that the interest in Buddhism continues to grow.

The Dalai Lama, the spiritual head of Tibet, is a well-known Buddhist leader. He was forced into exile in India following the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950s.

In Burma the political leader and Buddhist, Aung San Suu Kyi, has become an internationally known figure for standing up against a military government that seized power when her party had won a majority in an election.

Buddhism's teachings about rebirth, harmlessness (often including vegetarianism), nonviolence, and the use of meditation to find a way to truth have become popular. To many people, they seem to be a better alternative to what many were brought up to believe.

## Facts about Buddhism

Buddhism is one of the major world religions. In countries all over the world, it has influenced many areas of life including the arts and gardening and physical activities such as the martial arts. Here are some interesting facts about Buddhism.

- Although Buddhism began in India, India now has one of the lowest numbers of practicing Buddhists in Asia.
- The exact number of Buddhists in the world is not known. Estimates range from 230 million to 500 million Buddhists worldwide.
- There are a number of different traditions in Buddhism, including Theravada Buddhism, **Mahayana** Buddhism (e.g., Zen Buddhism), and Vajrayana Buddhism (e.g., Tibetan Buddhism).
- Many gardening ideas come from the Zen Buddhist tradition, such as moss gardens and the use of sand, rocks, trees, ponds, and streams.
- The martial arts kendo, kung-fu, judo, and karate all began as forms of physical training by Buddhist monks, as did the relaxing art of t'ai-chi.

# The Birth of the Buddha

In this section you will

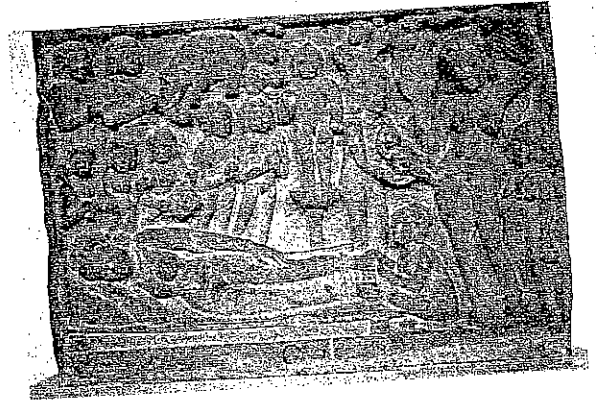
- learn about the birth stories told about the Buddha and their symbolic meanings;
- read about India at the time of the Buddha's birth.

## Queen Mayadevi's dream

Some Buddhists believe that the Buddha existed in a heavenly realm before he came to earth. They believe he also had lived through several thousand other lifetimes—both animal and human—before he was born.

In the country of the Sakyas (a tribe that lived in areas that we call India and Nepal today) there lived a King named Suddhodana who was married to Queen Mayadevi. The Queen was very beautiful, fearless, and good. She told her husband of her great feelings of joy and peace one evening.

The Queen returned to her room and fell asleep. As she slept that night, she had a dream of a six-



*Queen Mayadevi's dream*

tusked white elephant, who had a head the color of rubies. This was a sign that Buddha himself had left heaven and was entering the world through her.

## Explaining the dream

In the morning, the Queen told the King about her dream. The King decided to summon eight holy men to explain the dream.

They told him that the dream was a good sign. It meant that the Queen was pregnant and the baby would either be a great emperor or a great holy man.

*Lumbini Grove today*



Th

The  
of L  
exp  
follo

She  
a sa  
dov  
bra  
lucl  
tha

It is  
Buc  
any  
Noi  
the  
froi  
gol  
aro  
wil  
No  
the  
life

Wi  
th  
sh  
Si  
be  
w

S  
E  
M  
s

A  
a  
l

## The birth of the Buddha

The Queen and the King went to the woods of **Lumbini Grove** at the time the birth was expected. The Queen stepped from her chariot, followed by dancers and musicians.

She strolled until she was beneath the shade of a sala tree. As the tradition tells it, the tree bent down and the Queen took hold of a bending branch. As she looked into the sky, she saw the lucky stars of Pushya shining very brightly, a sign that great things were to happen.

It is said that as she stood there, the baby Buddha was born from her right side. Without any help, the child walked seven steps to the North, then the South, then the East, and then the West. At every step, a **lotus flower** sprang from the ground. His limbs shone as bright as gold. He seemed to beam light to all those around him. The child spoke: "No further births will I have to suffer, for this will be my last body. Now shall I destroy and pluck out the roots of the sorrow that is caused by the wheel of birth, life, and death."

When the King was told of the child's birth, he thought long and hard about what the boy should be called. He said, "I shall call him Siddhartha, meaning 'Perfect Fulfillment' because on the day of his birth all things were done to perfection."

Seven days after his birth, Queen Mayadevi died. Eventually, the King married Mayadevi's sister, Mahaprajapati, who cared for Siddhartha as if she were his birth mother.

A wise man called Asita came to see the baby and found 32 marks on the child that showed he would lead people to great truth. Asita began to weep, for he realized that he would not live long enough to see the child become the man who would teach people so many truths.

The King grew afraid of the talk of priests and wise men and decided to bring the boy up in such a way that he would not leave the palace for the wandering, religious life of a monk.

## Background to the Buddha

India at the time of the birth of Siddhartha Gautama was a place where things were rapidly changing. It was a place where there was a great deal of intellectual and spiritual activity. People were growing increasingly unhappy with the ways they had been taught to see the world. They were beginning to travel more and to experience different ways of living. They were also impatient with a lot of what the religion of the day—Vedic Brahmanism, the forerunner of Hinduism—had to say.

As people began to move away from villages into large settlements such as towns and cities, they began to ask questions about why the world was in the state it was. They were becoming more questioning of their religious and political leaders.

Siddhartha Gautama came from the Sakya tribe, people who lived near the Ganges River basin. This was a tribe of warriors and noblemen. They felt that they were a lot better than the rest of the people in the area. Yet, even among these wealthy and powerful people, many were giving up their homes to follow wandering religious teachers. They wanted, more than anything, to find the meaning of their lives. The Buddha's teaching, following Siddhartha's enlightenment, offered an attractive alternative way to look at life.

# The Discontented Prince

In this section you will

- learn how Prince Siddhartha became discontented with the life he was living, and the importance he came to attach to a search for meaning and truth;
- read about the Shramana movement in India.

## Chained to unhappiness

According to Buddhist tradition, Prince Siddhartha grew up in a loving, happy environment. His father gave him his own palace, with all the servants he could ever want. He had all his needs attended to.

When he was a young man, he once protected a swan from an arrow shot from a bow by one of his friends. It is a story still told today not only to show how much he cared for the bird, but also as a way of saying that he knew what unhappiness meant.

Yet his father the King went to great lengths to keep his son from knowing about pain. Perhaps the King still felt the pain of having lost his wife so soon after the birth of his son. Whatever the cause, the King made sure that any servants who were ill or old or who died were removed so that Siddhartha would not see them.



The young Prince Siddhartha

The king feared that if Siddhartha saw these people, he might well ask questions that would lead him to the religious life that the King did not wish for his son.

So that was how Siddhartha lived. He was banned from going into the city, for fear that he would see the truth of life.

Siddhartha fell in love with the beautiful princess **Yashodhara**. All seemed perfect, especially when their first son was born. But Prince Siddhartha called him "**Rahula**," which means "chain," a sign that he was very unhappy.

## Visits to the city

One day, as the story goes, Siddhartha was talking to **Channa**, the man who drove the King's chariot. He asked Channa to take him into the city. Channa refused, but Siddhartha insisted, and eventually the chariot driver took him there.

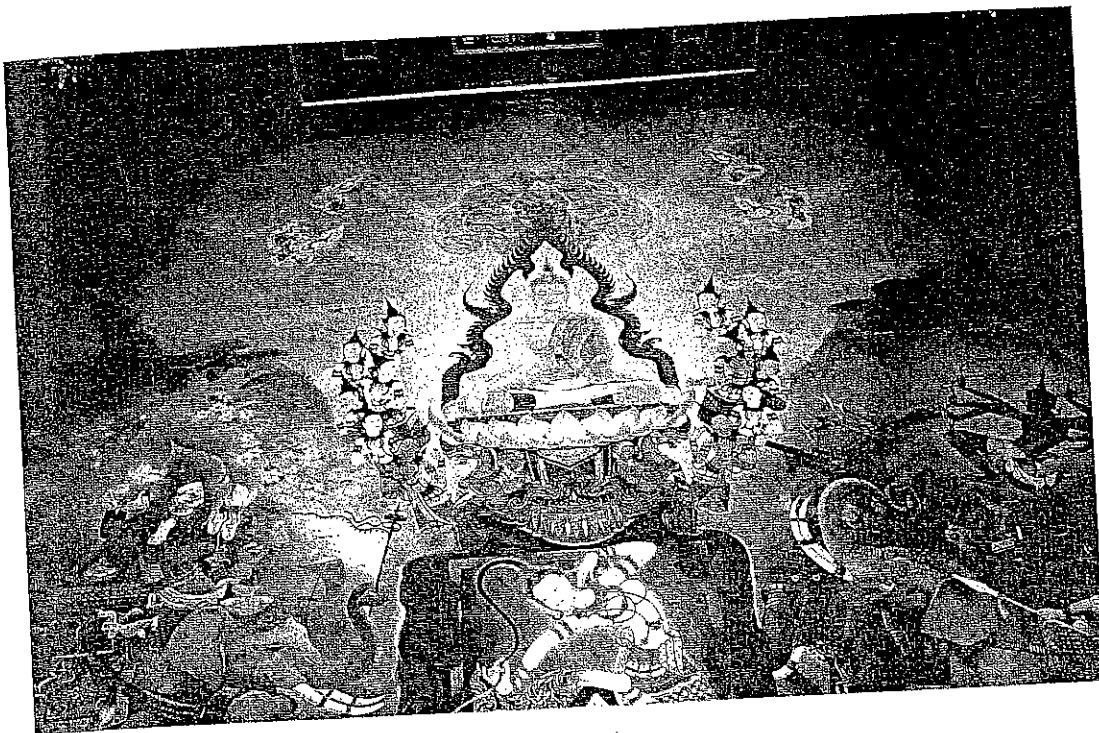
On his first visit, Siddhartha saw an old man, leaning almost bent double on a stick. He asked what was wrong with him.

"He is old," said Channa. "One day, we shall all be like him, both princes and ordinary people."

On a second visit to the city, Siddhartha saw a sick man lying at the side of the road. Channa told him that illness happened to all, a reality that none could escape from.

Siddhartha was confused. Why had his father hidden these truths of existence from him? On a third visit, he saw the body of a dead man, lying and decaying at the side of the road. Channa told him that all people die.

Siddhartha returned to the palace, confused and wanting answers. On a fourth journey to the city, Siddhartha saw a bald man, carrying a bowl and dressed only in a simple robe. He asked Channa who this man was. Channa told him that this was a holy man, an **ascetic**, who had given up everything for the cause of truth.



*Siddhartha cuts off his hair before his enlightenment.*

Siddhartha decided that he must leave the palace in order to get to the truth. Early one morning, when everyone in the palace had fallen into a deep sleep, Siddhartha awoke and woke Channa, whom he ordered to take him to the forest where the holy men lived.

As he dismounted from the chariot at the edge of the wood, Siddhartha gave his princely cloak to Channa. Taking a knife, he cut off his ponytail. Now he would begin his search for truth with the holy men.

### **The Buddha and the Shramanas**

When he became the Buddha, Siddhartha was often critical of the Shramana movement. However, over time he did come to share many of their central beliefs.

The word Shramana later came to mean a person who gave up the things of the world in order to practice Buddhism.

### **The Shramana movement**

Many people at the time of the Buddha were trying to find a better way to live, and there was a lot of discussion about how to improve the religion of the area, which had a system of social classes.

When Siddhartha left the palace, a new religious movement had begun to be established in India. It was called the Shramana movement. The Shramanas believed that renunciation was the path to enlightenment, or liberation. They were asking questions about beliefs such as reincarnation, the soul, and whether practicing asceticism would lead to liberation.

The Jain religion of India is an example of this movement that still survives today.

# The Enlightenment of the Buddha

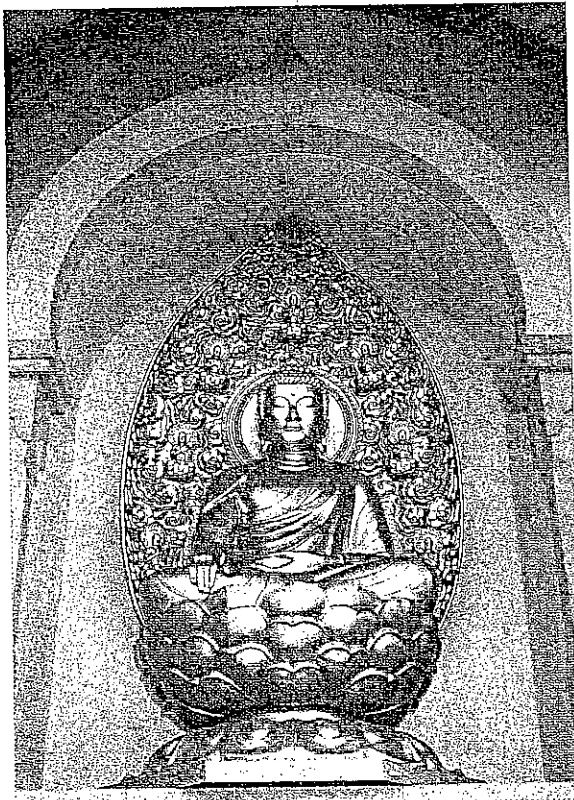
In this section you will

- understand the importance of the enlightenment of the Buddha to Buddhists;
- read about how the Buddha reached enlightenment.

## A flash of inspiration

The story goes that when the scientist Isaac Newton sat under an apple tree, an apple fell off. As he watched it, he realized that a force we call gravity was at work.

Alexander Fleming noticed that some mold on bread killed bacteria and, as a result of his work, we now have penicillin. Scientists can often see things that no one else has ever noticed.



The enlightened Buddha

Religious people have often regarded sudden flashes of inspiration as important, though they often say you may need to wait years to receive them.

## Siddhartha leaves the holy men

After he left the palace, Siddhartha joined a group of holy men who practiced **asceticism**. This is the belief that denying your body things, you can overcome desires and free yourself from suffering. Siddhartha slept on thorns, ate mud, and at one point tried to live on no more than one grain of rice a day.

One day, as he was meditating, he heard a passing musician tell a pupil, "If the strings are too tight, they will break and not play. If they are too slack, they also will not play."

Siddhartha realized that he would not find the truth either living the life of pleasure that he had had as a prince or by denying himself as he had been doing with the holy men. The truth would lie between the two opposites, what he later called the **Middle Way**.

Siddhartha went to the river and there a local girl gave him a drink. He accepted her offer of food. The holy men were appalled and would not listen to him, seeing him as a traitor.

## Siddhartha becomes the Buddha

As the story continues, Siddhartha left the holy men and went to a place called **Bodh Gaya**. He decided to sit under a bodhi tree, waiting there until he had reached full understanding of the big questions in life.

ha

dden  
h they  
receive

ad a  
icism.  
y things,  
rself from  
e mud,  
re than

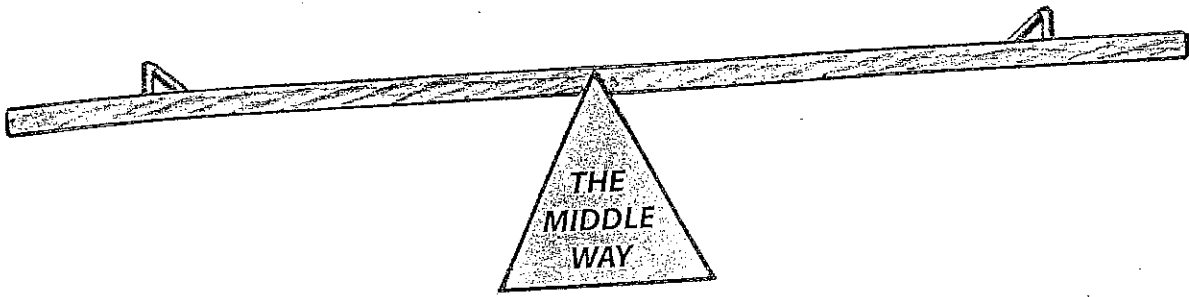
d a  
ngs are  
f they

find the  
at he had  
is he had  
th would  
e later

a local  
ffer of  
would  
r.

the

the holy  
Gaya. He  
ng there  
g of the



*The Middle Way lies between self-denial and self-indulgence.*

According to Buddhists, a devil figure called **Mara** tried to keep Siddhartha from the truth. First Mara sent his daughters to try to keep Siddhartha from his quest. These daughters were human incarnations of lust, ignorance, and greed. When Siddhartha ignored them, Mara gave him the illusion first that he was in the middle of a great storm and then that he was being attacked by a great army. But still Siddhartha continued to meditate.

Finally, Mara appeared as the exact image of Siddhartha. But Siddhartha saw through the deception and he resisted these attacks.

During the night that followed, Siddhartha came to understand the other lives he had had. He also realized the nature of suffering and that freedom from suffering could be found. The truth of suffering he identified in what he called the **Four Noble Truths** and the **Eightfold Path**, which he saw as a path to a way that gives people freedom or liberation.

He was no longer Siddhartha but the Buddha. "Buddha" means "the enlightened or awoken one." Siddhartha had "awakened" to what life was really about.

### After enlightenment

After the Buddha was enlightened, it enabled him to see the reality of the way things were in the world. There are many different accounts of what the Buddha went on to do, and the order of the stories differ. One tradition suggests that he may have seen a god called Brahma Sahampati, who told him that he had, indeed, found the truth. The Buddha at this point was not sure whether people were ready to hear his teaching, but the story says that Brahma Sahampati asked him to start teaching people.

The Buddha's followers did not believe him to be a god. Although one of the "six realms of rebirth" is that of the devas, or gods, the devas are not considered ultimate beings but are still on the wheel of rebirth just as the rest of us.



# Buddhist Teaching on Suffering

In this section you will

- learn about the importance to Buddhists of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path;
- read about the qualities which the Buddha considered important.

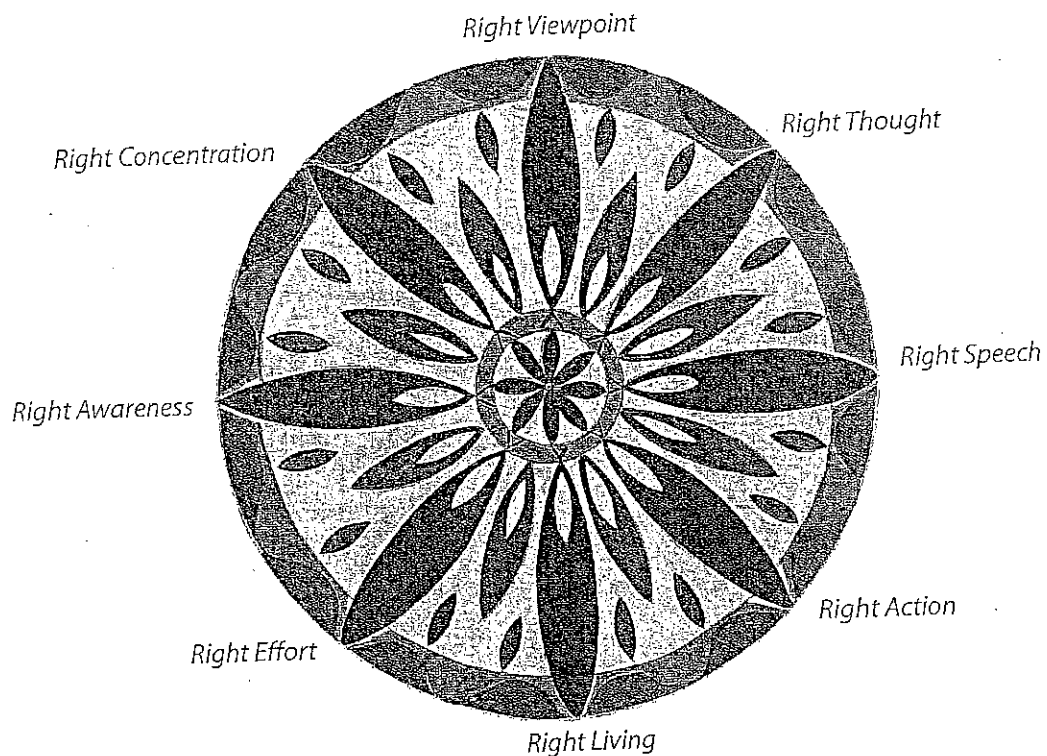
## The Buddha's teaching

The Buddha taught that there were Four Noble Truths.

1. Old age, sickness, and death will happen to us all—we all suffer.
2. Suffering comes from grasping (attachment).
3. If we give up attachment, suffering can end.
4. People should use their skills and follow the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha wanted people to realize the truths about life. He thought that the desires, the longings people have to own things, to have certain relationships or any other sorts of longings only lead to pain, because the things we long for cannot be permanent.

When the Buddha said that there was no such thing as a self, he was saying that humans are a continuous process of different parts and events that come together for a time. A Buddhist named **Nagasena** once wrote that the self was a little like a chariot. A chariot is made up of parts such as a wheel or an axle, so there really is no such thing as a chariot, but a collection of parts. What we call a self is made up of things such as physical form, feelings, perceptions, and thoughts, all of which are impermanent and always changing. What we need, he said, is to realize that we are believing an illusion if we think we are always going to remain the same.



The Eightfold Path

By fo  
belie  
see l  
  
The  
but i  
who  
  
1 R  
ti  
  
2 R  
ri  
  
3 R  
n  
v  
a  
  
4 R  
fr  
a  
  
5 R  
n  
B  
b  
v  
tl  
  
6 R  
tr  
ir  
  
7 R  
n  
s  
  
8 F  
v  
c  
  
Bud  
four  
kart  
anc

ng

By following the Eightfold Path, Buddhists believe they can find a way to end suffering and see beyond the illusion.

The Eightfold Path is not eight individual steps, but rather a way that needs to be taken as a whole. The eight steps are:

- 1 Right Understanding: understanding the truths that the Buddha has given.
- 2 Right Intention: following the path for the right reasons.
- 3 Right Speech: speaking in a way that does not dwell on the self. Speaking to others in a way that shows respect, is harmless, and avoids rudeness or dishonesty.
- 4 Right Action: living life in such a way as to follow the teachings of the Buddha by attempting to keep the **Five Moral Precepts**.
- 5 Right Livelihood: choosing a job that does not lead to arrogance or violence. Most Buddhists would avoid professions such as butchery or the armed forces because they would have to use violence in order to do their job.
- 6 Right Effort: **meditating** and making sure to do the right things in order to become indifferent to success.
- 7 Right Mindfulness: becoming aware through meditation of all that you do in thought, speech, and action.
- 8 Right Concentration: freeing yourself from worry, anxiety, and envy in order to think clearly.

Buddhists also believe they should develop four essential qualities: metta (loving kindness), karuna (compassion), mudita (sympathetic joy), and upekkha (serenity).

## Four truths—four qualities

As well as accepting the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha wanted his followers to develop four qualities that would make them better people. These qualities are attitudes toward other people. They are:

- **Metta**, or loving kindness, which should make us gentler toward each other. Metta always seeks to put the other person first, and to care about others before ourselves.
- **Karuna**, or compassion, which enables us to feel the pain of others and to help relieve their pain.
- **Mudita**, finding joy in other people's happiness. We should try not to be discontented when others succeed and we do not. Mudita is the opposite of envy and jealousy.
- **Upekkha**, finding peace and balance in whatever happens to us. Upekkha is an ability to remain calm in any crisis.

# Five Moral Precepts

In this section you will

- learn about the Five Moral Precepts taught by the Buddha;
- read about why many Buddhists are vegetarians and the Buddha's view on vegetarianism.

## Good intentions

A promise is an important commitment. It is very important to always keep our promises, large or small. It seems that people who cannot keep their promises in small things will not be able to keep their word on big things. The Buddha called on his followers to follow five **intentions** to live a good life. These solemn promises are called the Five Moral Precepts.

## Five intentions

The Buddha made suggestions based on his own experience and understanding rather than making rules that told his followers what to do.

His five suggestions were:

- 1 **To avoid taking life.** This intention was to extend to both animal and human life, so many Buddhists are vegetarians, and many are pacifists. Many Buddhists would say that this promise also means that they should try to be aware of the implications of abortion and euthanasia. There may be occasions where taking a life is unavoidable, but the intention not to cause harm is the main focus. Buddhists believe in **ahimsa**, which means avoidance of violence if at all possible.
- 2 **To avoid taking what is not given.** This is a promise not to steal. Some Buddhists say that this does not just refer to stealing possessions. It includes stealing someone else's ideas or reputation by claiming to have done something when you have not, perhaps taking credit for someone else's accomplishments.
- 3 **To avoid sexual misconduct.** Buddhists believe that they should live their lives in ways that do not hurt other people. Since sex is so important, they believe that it should take place in committed relationships.



*Avoid taking what is not given.*

*Avoi*

4 T

n

w

a

re

o

e

o

5 T

th

u

n

b

p

th

th

The E

prom

and t

and v

to ca



Avoid lying and gossip.

- 4 **To avoid speaking falsely.** This is a promise not to lie or gossip or wound someone by words. Buddhists believe that people should always try to tell each other the truth but in a respectful way. People should always listen to others' points of view. This intention also encourages Buddhists not to speak too much or too loudly.
- 5 **To avoid drink and drugs that can cloud the mind.** Buddhists believe that it is unskillful to get drunk. Similarly, they are not against using drugs for medical reasons, but they do not feel that taking drugs to the point of "heedlessness" is helpful because they feel it is a way to avoid reality rather than face it.

The Buddha believed that if people kept these promises, they would be able to grow in wisdom and understanding of what is **skillful**, or right, and what is lacking in skill, or that which is likely to cause suffering. The Buddha also believed that if people followed these promises, they would develop **karuna**, a compassionate love for all others.

## Buddhism and vegetarianism

Many Buddhists are vegetarians as a result of teachings such as the first **Moral Precept**, which is to avoid taking life. As the Buddhist writer Sagaramati put it in *Golden Drum* magazine:

"If one is trying to practice the teaching of the Buddha by being kinder and more compassionate to all creatures, it is quite obvious that one relatively easy step is withdrawing from the meat of animal flesh. Surely in our age, no form of meat eating is entirely blameless."

There are also Buddhists who do eat meat, for example, Mahayana Buddhists in Japan and Tibet. Some Buddhists eat meat because they get all their food from begging and must eat whatever is put in their bowls. Some believe the Buddha himself was not a vegetarian.

iven. This is  
uddhists say  
stealing  
g someone  
aiming to have  
ve not, perhaps  
's

Buddhists  
eir lives in  
eople. Since  
re that it  
d relationships.

# Nirvana, Karma, and Rebirth

In this section you will

- learn about nirvana, karma, and rebirth, which are very important ideas to Buddhists;
- read about what Buddhists do to reach the goal of nirvana.

## The promise of a paradise

Human beings have often longed to find a place where they can live good lives and where all things will be easy. Humans have dreamed of finding a paradise where they will be able to live freely.

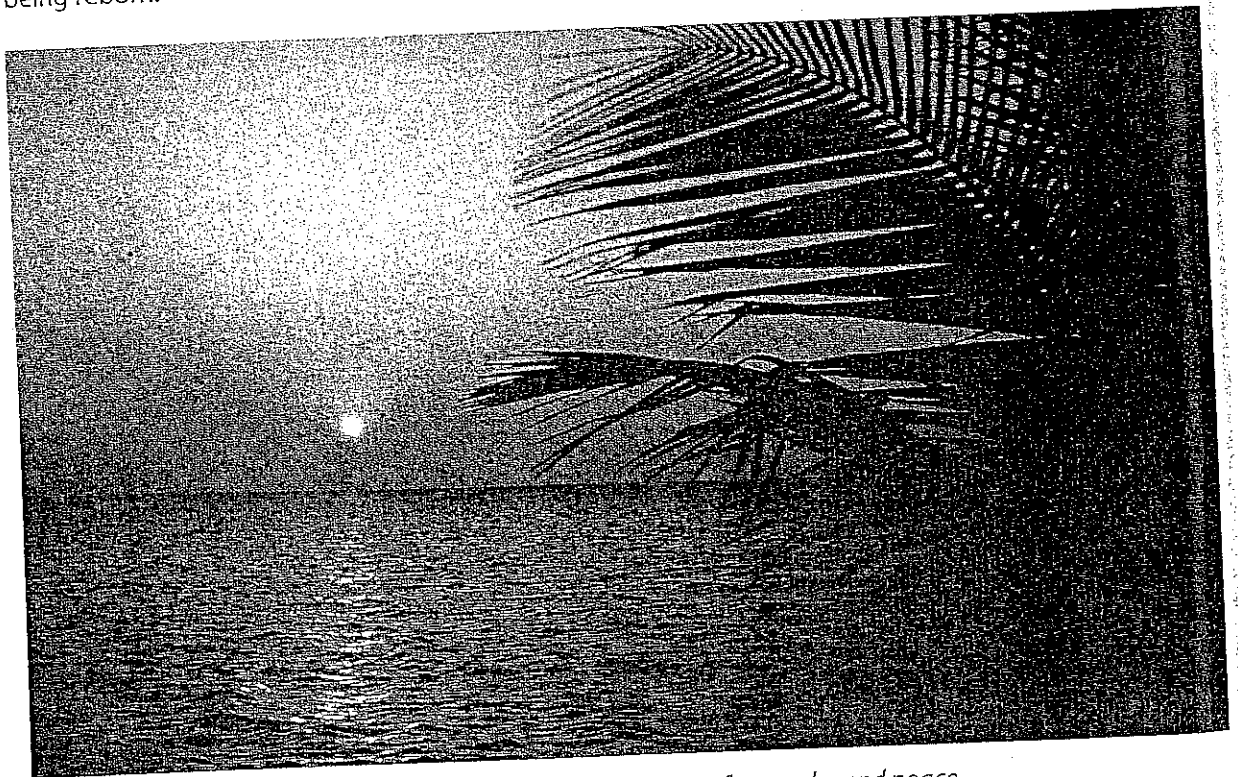
Buddhists believe that the ultimate goal is to reach **nirvana**. This is not a place, but a state of being that Buddhists believe they will reach when they have overcome the dream of having a self, are freed from suffering, and are no longer being reborn.

## Rebirth

Buddhists believe that we are trapped on a **wheel of life**. They believe that we will be reborn many times due to the **karma** we develop through ignorance and attachment.

Buddhists believe that, unaware, we may be reborn as humans or animals. Sometimes a particular rebirth is for a reason, for example, to teach a particular quality. A very proud person might be reborn as an insect as a way of learning humility.

Buddhists believe that when you are reborn as a human being, you should not waste the opportunity this gives you, because it is only as a human being that you will be able to reach **enlightenment**. Only human beings have the mental capacity to reach enlightenment. The Buddha once said that the chances of being born a human being were the same as those



*Liberation means freedom from suffering and the experience of true calm and peace.*

of a  
to sv

WI  
arc

Ther  
you l  
som  
a bar  
you l  
hom

On tl  
good  
of se

Budc  
unde  
Karr  
has a  
follo  
follo  
resu  
pres

In B  
lifet  
it is  
can  
the  
det  
or t  
orc

Kar  
car  
the  
ka  
by  
ex  
ric  
wi  
cc

of a blind turtle's being able in 100 years to swim through a ring in a vast ocean.

## What goes around, comes around

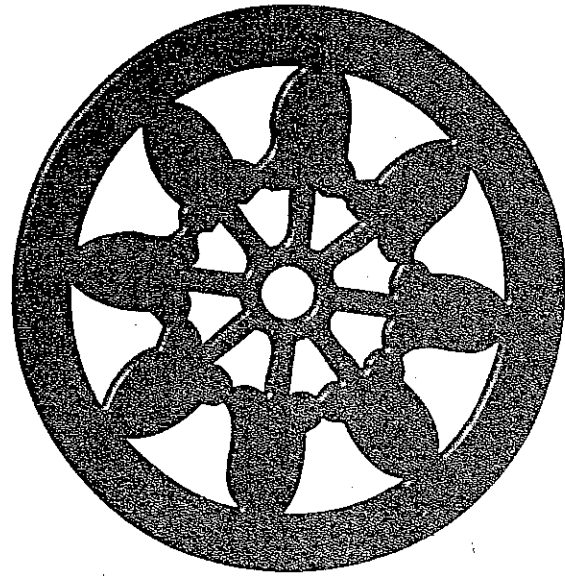
There are consequences to every action. Perhaps you have said something unpleasant about someone else and they have found out, causing a bad feeling between both of you. Or perhaps you have tried to get out of doing your homework, only to be kept after school.

On the other hand, you might do something good for someone else and have the satisfaction of seeing them benefit from your actions.

Buddhists believe that the rebirths that we undergo are a result of the karma we have. Karma is the effect of our actions. Every action has a reaction. If people do good, then good will follow. If people choose to do evil, then evil will follow—or as you sow so you will reap. The results of karma can be experienced in the present lifetime, even day by day.

In Buddhism, karma can carry over from one lifetime to another and therefore Buddhists feel it is vital that people try to live the best life they can, since they will often have to make up for the bad karma of previous lifetimes. Karma will determine whether people reach enlightenment or have to live 1,000 lifetimes as a lesser animal in order to get to the truth.

Karma does not only work for individuals but can also have an effect on the whole nation or the whole planet. Buddhists talk about collective karma, when the consequences of actions taken by whole countries can often change things. For example, Buddhists would argue that the way rich nations treat the poorer nations of the world may well affect the karma of a whole country or a group such as the United Nations.



*The wheel of life*

### Reaching nirvana

There are many different ways in which a Buddhist might make it easier to get to the ultimate goal of nirvana. The following are two ways:

- **Dana.** This is the idea that we should try to be generous. Some Buddhists, for example, give to charities that help people in developing nations.
- **Sila.** This is the idea that all moral actions should be skillful (appropriate), and that they should help make it possible for people everywhere to live free of the delusions and desires that Buddha warned against.

# Buddhist Symbols

In this section you will

- find out about some of the important symbols of the Buddhist tradition and their meaning;
- read about mudras, which are symbolic hand positions used by Buddhists.

## Read the signs

Symbols can have a number of uses. They can warn us about something, such as a dangerous road ahead. They can give us instructions and they can give us information. In the religious world, signs and symbols can act in these ways, as well many others.



*Meditating helps Buddhists gain peace.*

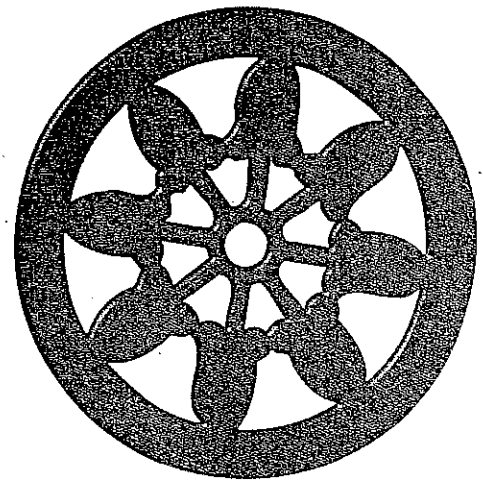
## The lotus flower

The lotus flower is an important symbol for Buddhism. It means "transformation," and is a symbol of purity and growth. The beautiful lotus flower can be found on the surface of a lake. Its roots are buried deep within the mud of the lake. The Buddha saw this as a symbol for human life—we may be stuck in the mud of human existence, but we can still come to an enlightenment in the midst of the murk.

One of the important Buddhist scriptures is called the **Lotus Sutra**. In meditation, some Buddhists sit in the lotus position, with each foot resting on the opposite thigh, to help them gain peace.

## The wheel of life

The wheel of life is another important symbol. The eight spokes in the wheel stand for the Eightfold Path that the Buddha advised people to follow. It reminds Buddhists that they are all trapped on the cycle of birth-death-birth from which they can escape only when they stop being attached to being "someone living somewhere." By letting go and entering into the state of **nirvana**, Buddhists experience a boundless state of freedom and oneness with the universe.



In  
th  
pc  
ha  
of  
th.  
Th  
six  
gh  
Th  
sta  
thi

B  
Th  
wh  
the  
lot  
Th  
of  
sta  
he

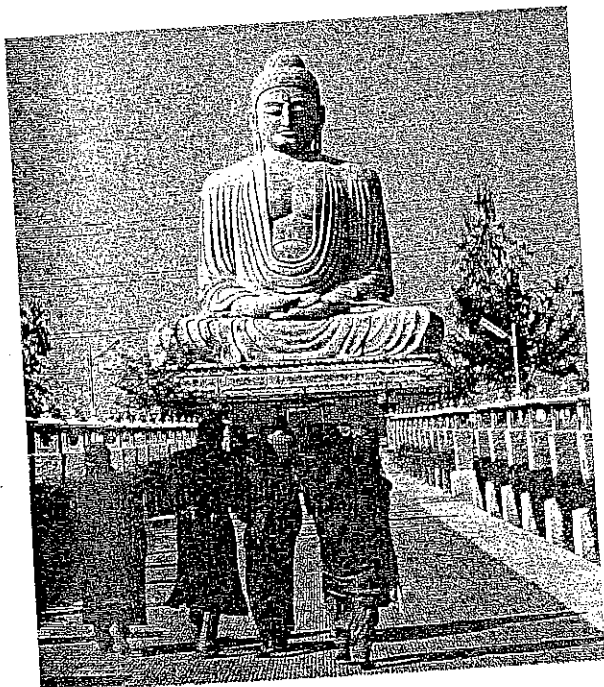
In the center of the wheel of life are the cockerel, the snake, and the pig. They stand for the three poisons that can corrupt the mind—greed, hatred, and ignorance (or delusion). Over the top of the wheel is Yama, a demon who reminds us that this is a world of change and decay.

The six realms inside the wheel represent the six possible types of rebirth: hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, human beings, titans, and gods. These six realms can also be understood as states of mind that we can experience every day, throughout the day.

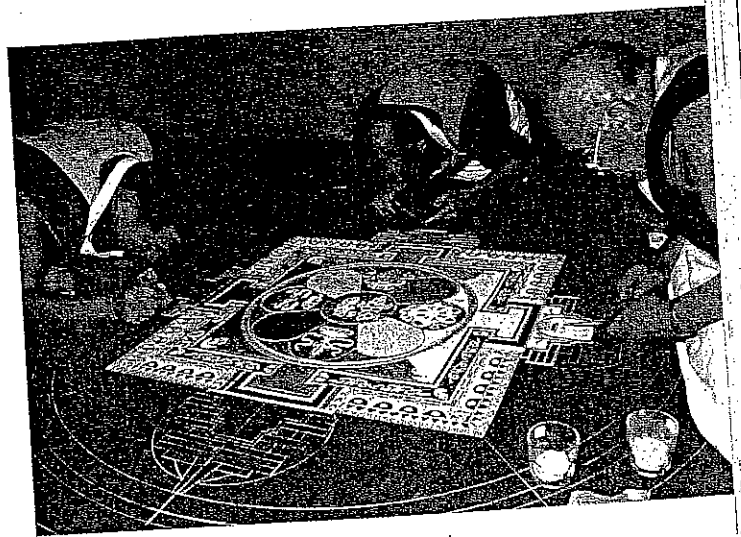
## Buddha rupas

There are many different images of the Buddha, which are called **rupas**. A sitting Buddha shows the importance of meditation. The Buddha in the lotus position shows him teaching the **Dharma**.

There are other images that remind Buddhists of their religion. For example, a riderless horse stands for the sacrifice the Buddha made when he left the palace to join the holy men.



*A sitting Buddha rupa*



*Making a mandala with colored sand*

Another way of showing beauty in a world of constant change and decay is by making **mandalas**. These are special patterns, sometimes made from colored sand to show that they can never remain permanent.

## Mudras

In Buddhism, a number of hand positions are symbolic of ways of being. These different hand positions are known as **mudras**. They are often shown on rupas, or images of the Buddha, found in shrines.

A Buddhist may show an open hand as a way of showing an effort to become more generous. This position is called a **dana-mudra**, because *dana* is the word used in the language of the Buddhist scriptures to mean generosity. In the **dhyana mudra**, the hands are held flat in the lap with the palms facing upward. This mudra shows a state of contemplation.



# Meditation

In this section you will

- learn about the Buddhist practice of meditation as a way to develop self-understanding, and as a way to gain calm and insight;
- read about the use of mantras in Buddhism, and the Mani mantra in particular.

## Thinking it through

If you get stuck on a math problem, you may need to think about it for quite a while before you come to a solution. If you are in an argument, you would be wise to think before

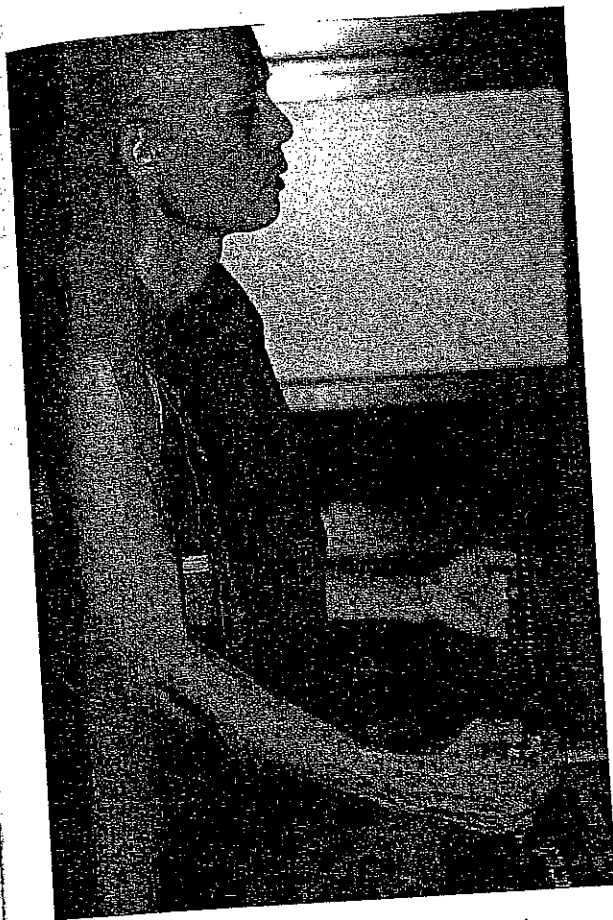
you speak! We often need time to think through things so that our actions will not result in destructive or negative consequences. Meditation, on the other hand, is a way to find inner calmness that does not involve "thinking."

## Buddhist meditation

The Buddha had his experience of enlightenment as a result of meditation. For Buddhists today, meditation is a powerful technique to help them work with the mind in order to gain understanding. Meditation enables them to train the mind to make it fit, just as jogging enables a body to get fit. The following is how a Buddhist might meditate.



*Solving a problem by thinking*



*Meditation is an important Buddhist practice.*

Breathe in slowly through your nose and as you do so, feel relaxed. Use your breath as a focus of your attention so that your mind does not wander off with thoughts. As you breathe out, feel the tensions in your body leaving you. Try to concentrate on the rhythm of your breathing.

As you feel your breath, notice how thoughts and sensations arise in your mind. You may get caught up in these and lose awareness of your breath. When this happens, simply notice that you have drifted away from your focus and return to the breath. Meditation involves being fully aware of everything but getting caught up by nothing, so it is not the same as thinking. With practice, meditation can lead to a still, peaceful mind, relaxed but fully aware.

Meditation has many aims. Meditation can help Buddhists realize the meaning of the great truths of the Buddha and enable them to gain awareness of things in their own lives that need changing and developing. Because it leads to clarity, understanding, and calm, meditation also leads to freedom from suffering. It is helpful to use some characteristics that the Buddha thought were supportive. These were called the **Brahma Viharas**, or "spiritual friends," and include the following:

1. **metta**, or loving kindness—being gentle and tender to all;
2. **karuna**, or compassion—an understanding and concern for others;
3. **mudita**, or sympathetic joy—showing delight in the success of others;
4. **upekkah**, or evenness of mind—showing a balanced approach to life.

Meditation can be practiced both alone and in groups at the local Buddhist center or temple.

## Mantras

For many Buddhists, chanting a phrase or mantra in their times of worship or meditation helps them greatly. Mantras are often given to individual Buddhists by Buddhist teachers. However, a common mantra, used by Tibetan Buddhists, is the Mani mantra.

Each day, Buddhists chant the words of the Mani mantra: "Om Mani Padme Hum." This comes from the Lotus Sutra. In English, it means, "Hail to the Jewel of the Lotus." According to Buddhist teaching, the Mani mantra is "the essence of all happiness, prosperity, and knowledge, and source of the great liberation."

Sometimes Buddhist mantras are written on prayer flags or on prayer wheels in Buddhist temples and holy places so that, symbolically, the wind can blow the peace of the mantras across the world.

# The Festival of Wesak

In this section you will

- learn about the Buddhist festival of Wesak and its importance to Buddhist people;
- read about the festival of Hana Matsuri in Mahayana Buddhist countries.

## Celebrations

It is very important that we have times to celebrate, times when we can have parties to mark important events. It may be New Year's or birthday, or when we see our team win an event.

We all need to enjoy the good things in life, to feel that life is worth living, and to show what we think is most important.

## Wesak

**Wesak** (called "Buddha Day" by some Buddhists) is the most important festival of the Buddhist year. It celebrates the most important events in the life of the Buddha—his birth, his enlightenment, and when he died and entered into the state of **parinirvana**. Some Buddhists believe that all of these three things happened on the same day in different years. The celebration takes place at the time of the full moon in late May or June.



*Washing the images of the Buddha*

We

In The  
Many  
taking  
of inc  
wisdom  
are a  
incen  
devo

Peop  
order  
the B  
their  
them  
Budd

Hous  
are w  
earlie  
how i  
Birds  
imag  
celeb

We

In Sr  
life c  
are l  
and  
It is  
oth  
anc  
hav  
fes

## Wesak in Thailand

In Thailand, Wesak is a very important occasion. Many Buddhists visit a monastery on that day, taking with them flowers, a candle, and a stick of incense. The candle's lighted wick is a sign of wisdom, while the melted wax and the flowers are a sign that nothing is permanent. The incense represents truth and is a sign of devotion to the Buddha.

People may walk around a stupa three times, in order to show their commitment to following the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha in their lives. Some water bodhi trees, to remind them that it was under such a tree that the Buddha came to understand the truth.

Houses are cleaned and statues of the Buddha are washed. Fish that have been caught days earlier are released back into the river to show how the Buddha's teaching brings freedom. Birds are often released from cages as another image of the freedom that Buddhists are celebrating.

## Wesak in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, huge paintings of events from the life of the Buddha are put on display. Lanterns are hung. Street performers such as acrobats and dancers perform.

It is a time to share the best things in life with other people, so often wayside stalls of food and drink are set up to help people who may have traveled long distances to come to the festival ceremonies.

## Extra moral precepts

During the festival, Buddhists may decide to follow five more moral precepts. These are normally kept just by monks and nuns. They are:

- not eating after midday;
- not sleeping on a comfortable bed;
- not watching any form of entertainment, such as television;
- not wearing jewelry or perfume;
- not handling any money.

## Hana Matsuri

In Japan, the birth of the Buddha is celebrated in the festival of Hana Matsuri, or "flower festival." Hana Matsuri takes place in the spring, and spring flowers are taken to shrines and used to decorate statues of the Buddha that show him as a child. Temples hold displays to illustrate stories about the Buddha's birth. Traditional dancing takes place, and people sell food in stalls in the streets.

# Other Buddhist Festivals

In this section you will

- find out about the meaning and traditions attached to other important Buddhist festivals;
- read about the Buddhist festival of Vassa.

## New Year

New Year is often an important celebration for both religious and nonreligious people. It enables people to reflect on what has happened in the past year, to take stock. It is also a time to think about the future. Some people make resolutions to change or improve themselves in the year ahead.

## Songkran

In Thailand, New Year's doesn't take place on January 1, but in the middle of April. The festival of **Songkran** is a time to celebrate the new year.



*Songkran can get you very wet!*

Songkran is a festival that relies on water. Thai people splash each other with water as part of the celebration of a new beginning. There are colorful parades, boat races, masks, and dances. A princess of the festival is elected.

When the festival ends, Thai people put on new clothes. They also release into rivers fish they have previously caught, a symbol of the release that enlightenment brought to the Buddha.

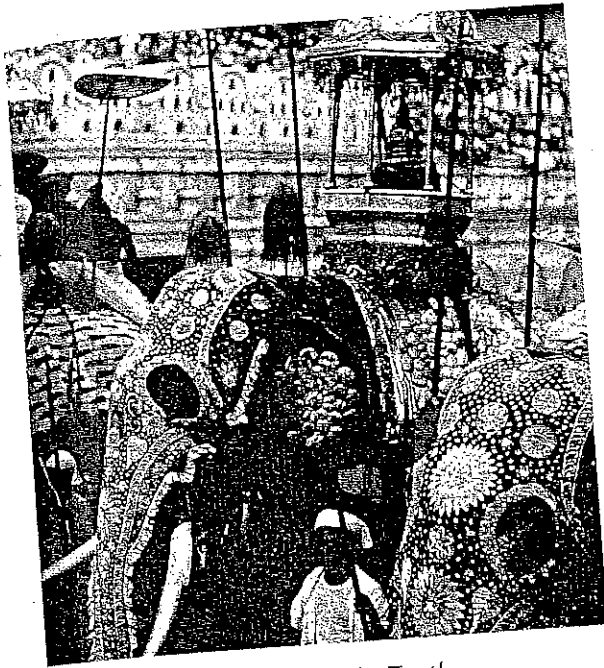
## Festival of the Tooth

The Festival of the Tooth takes place on the island of Sri Lanka. Buddhists believe that one of the Buddha's teeth has been kept in a specially built **stupa**. The tooth is kept inside a series of nested caskets and is not brought out until the festival takes place.

*Eleph*

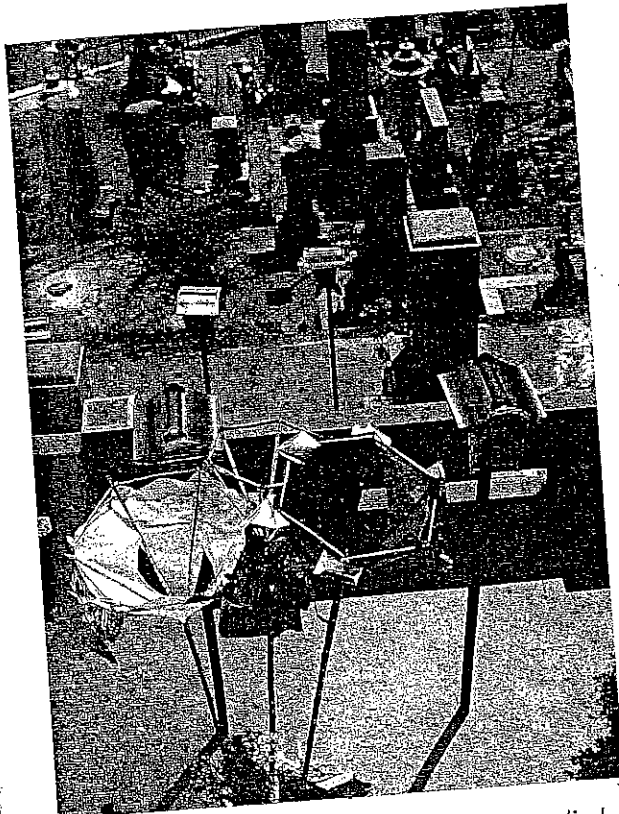
*On th  
is a p  
deck*

*Obon*



*Elephants at the Festival of the Tooth*

On the night of the full moon in August, there is a procession of elephants, led by one that is decked out in a golden costume.



*Obon is a time to remember those who have died.*

The procession includes dancers, jugglers, and other street entertainers, as well as the monks who care for the casket.

## Obon

Obon is a festival celebrated by Japanese Buddhists on July 13. It celebrates a time when the Buddha rescued the mother of one of his disciples from hell. It is a time to pay respects to ancestors, so Buddhists clean the graves of their departed relatives with water and also adorn them with flowers.

Prayers are offered for the dead relatives and then incense is burned in order to encourage their spirits to return to the world from which they came. At the end of the festival, a huge bonfire is lit at Mount Daimonjiyama outside the city of Kyoto.

## The festival of Vassa

Another important Buddhist festival is the festival of Vassa. This takes place in the month of August, and celebrates the time when the Buddha first started sharing his teaching at the Deer Park in Benares in India. At the beginning of the festival of Vassa, monks and nuns go to their monasteries for a time of teaching.

In some countries at Vassa, Buddhist boys are dressed up as the young Siddhartha and take part in a procession that ends in the local temple or vihara. They may at this point have their heads shaved and enter the monastery. The monks may be offered bowls and new robes by Buddhists in the local area as a mark of respect for the work they do in heading the religious life of the community.

# Birth

In this section you will

- find out about the way some Buddhists celebrate the birth of children and learn about the ideas attached to these ceremonies;
- read about the Pravrajya ceremony.

## Birthdays

Birthdays can be very important to all of us. Most of us love to receive presents and cards, to know that other people have given us signs that they love and care for us.

## Birth ceremonies in Buddhism

Buddhists often mark the birth of a child with what is called a birth blessing. Here, the child is given a blessing on entering the world but its Buddhist name as a lay person or an adult will be given later.

In some countries, such as Myanmar (Burma), the family will gather at the birth of a child to celebrate. They will give the child a cradle and put gifts in it.

The gifts are those considered to be helpful for the child. If the child is a boy, the presents are normally things such as books and tools—for example, a hammer. If the child is a girl, she may be given a needle and some thread.



*Birthdays can be important celebrations*



*A child*

When a Buddhist shaved his hair line previously is a new should possible superst of Buddha

Monks be asked the question they may from the scriptur

In Thailand monks karma given to teachin

In some may be as a sign



*A child is very precious to its parents.*

When a child is about a month old, in some Buddhist countries, his or her hair might be shaved off, because some Buddhists believe that hair links the child back to the bad **karma** of its previous life. It is a way of saying that a new life is a new start and that the problems of the past should be forgotten to make a better future possible. Other Buddhists think that this is just a superstition based on a mistaken interpretation of Buddhist ideas.

Monks are invited to the ceremony. They may be asked to give the child a name that reflects the qualities that the child might aspire to. Or they may name the child after a great Buddhist from the past. Monks will normally chant scriptures on behalf of the child.

In Thailand, the parents will often give the monks food as a gift in order to win good karma for the child. In other countries, food is given to the monks to recognize that their teaching nourishes the spiritual life.

In some Buddhist countries, a sacred thread may be wound around the wrist of the child as a sign inviting blessing.

In **Theravada** countries, monks may sprinkle the child with water, symbolizing a wish for the child to be blessed in the future. A wax candle may be dripped into some water, as a sign that the child belongs to the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water.

## Importance of family life for the Buddha

The Buddha believed that family life was very important to help us grow as people.

He compared the family to a group of trees in the forest. They are able to support each other and give each other protection against the wind. We need our families to help us, he said.

### The Pravrajya ceremony

In Myanmar (Burma), it is very common for Buddhist boys to join a monastery when they are only ten years old, or even younger. This gives them the opportunity to gain good karma, as well as a good education. Some of the boys stay on to become monks. The Pravrajya ceremony takes place at this stage.

During the Pravrajya ceremony, the boy dresses up as a prince and acts out the story of how Siddhartha Gautama left his palace to seek enlightenment. The boy rides on a donkey or pony, leading a procession through the streets until he reaches the monastery. Here, he removes his fine clothes and replaces them with an orange robe. His hair and his eyebrows are shaved off. The boy then promises to obey ten moral precepts followed by monks, and he is given a new name. His family may give the boy gifts, such as a spare robe or an alms bowl.



# Death

In this section you will

- learn about the Buddhist beliefs surrounding death and how Buddhists mark the passing of a person;
- reflect on how to deal with questions of grief and bereavement.

## The hard truth

We know that we will all die, but it is still hard to know how to deal with our grief when a loved one dies. Different religions have varying beliefs about death and different practices surrounding it, and most offer ways to give solace to the survivors.

*A Buddhist cemetery*



*A Buddhist funeral procession in Myanmar (Burma)*



Bu  
Bud  
In S  
of n  
to ir  
to tl  
The  
clas  
dec  
tie a  
and  
Sev  
1.  
1  
2  
3  
The  
mo  
A r  
an  
hc  
Sc  
pl  
at  
T  
a  
v  
a

## Buddhist funerals

Buddhist funerals are not the same worldwide.

In Sri Lanka, funeral ceremonies are not times of mourning but can become an opportunity to improve the **karma** of the dead as they move to the next life.

The body is washed and then the hands are clasped together. A thread is wound around the deceased's hands as a sign of three things that tie a person to this world—money, marriage, and children.

Several items are placed in the coffin:

1. a small ladder, which will enable the mind of the deceased to leave the body behind;
2. flowers and incense, which are signs that life is impermanent and leads only surely to death;
3. a small set of flags, which will help the dead person to arrive in the heavens.

The funeral normally takes place in a local monastery. The body is then cremated on a pyre. A monk later gathers the ashes of the deceased and recites a scripture reminding the relatives how short life is.

Some of the bones of the deceased may be placed in a half-circle to show the reality of life, and then turned to the east to symbolize death. The pieces of bone and ash are then collected and buried in an urn. If the person who has died was felt to be especially holy, he or she may have a relic preserved in a **stupa**.

## Funerals in Mahayana countries

In countries such as China, Taiwan, and Korea, special attention is given to honoring dead ancestors, reflecting the influence of Confucianism. When a person dies, a monk places a memorial tablet on the family shrine in the home of the person who has died.

The monk then applies "last water" to the deceased and washes the body.

Friends and neighbors often celebrate with a vegetarian meal. They also burn incense at the graveyard.

Families continue to mourn formally after the death of their relative as a way of securing good karma for the person who has died. Relatives may also give gifts to the monks for their support during this time.

One Buddhist writer has written:

No weeping, nor yet sorrowing,  
Nor any kind of mourning aids,  
Departed one, whose kin remain,  
(Unhelped by their action) thus.

From *Minor Readings* by Bhikkhu Naranoni

## Chinese Buddhist funerals

In a Chinese Buddhist family, when a person dies, the funeral ceremony can last up to 49 days. The first seven days are the most important, although the number of days given to the ceremony will depend on how rich the bereaved family is. Prayers are said every day for the whole 49 days if the family can afford it; if not, the period may be shortened to three to seven days. Normally, the daughters of the family are expected to pay for the cost of the funeral ceremony.

Chinese Buddhists follow the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, so they believe that between the death and rebirth of a person there is a time when that person is in a state of waiting. It is important, during this waiting time, for the family to try to earn good karma for the dead relative by praying and doing good works.