

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)