



A-level

BUDDHISM

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Mv Revision Planner

- [illegible]

1 The life of the Buddha

Traditional accounts of the life of the Buddha (Siddhartha Gotama)

The **Buddha** is the founder of the Buddhist tradition. He lived more than 2,500 years ago in Northern India. His teachings spread rapidly; today there are 500 million Buddhists worldwide. Buddhism is the fastest growing religion in the world and today is divided into two broad groups: Theravada and Mahayana.

- + Theravada Buddhism tends to follow the very earliest recorded teachings of the Buddha and is mainly found in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar.
- + Mahayana Buddhism follows later teachings and is mainly found in China, Tibet, Vietnam, Korea and Japan.



Figure 1.1 The spread of Buddhism 500BCE–600CE

Buddhists all believe that the Buddha started the religion as it is today. There is much detail about the life of the Buddha in the earliest scriptures, known as the **Pali Canon**. However, the modern Buddhist scholar **Bhikkhu** Nanamoli reminds us that it is only in later literature that we learn details about the early life of the Buddha, when he was still known as Siddhartha.

Buddha Awake or 'The enlightened one', the title used for the historical Siddhartha Gotama after he gained enlightenment. There are other visionary Buddhas such as Amida Buddha.

Pali Canon The scriptures written in Pali. Known as the Tripitaka or 'three baskets', covering the rules for the monastic order, the teachings of the Buddha and Buddhist philosophical and psychological analysis.

Bhikkhu Monk.

The Buddha's birthplace

The Buddha was born Siddhartha Gotama in the small republic of Sakya on the present-day border between India and Nepal. The capital city was Kapilavatthu. Siddhartha is sometimes referred to as the sage of the Sakya clan, or Sakya-muni.

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Before the Buddha's birth

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According to Buddhist mythology, however, Siddhartha was not the first Buddha. Some stories suggest that in a distant past life Siddhartha (at that time called Sumedha) met a previous Buddha, Dipankara, and was so impressed by his teachings that he resolved to become a Buddha himself. Over many lifetimes, Sumedha met other past Buddhas (stories vary between 6 and 23) and took on many forms (gods, humans and animals). In his penultimate life he lived in the god realm **Tusita heaven** and waited for a time when humans had forgotten the path to enlightenment, at which point he took his final rebirth as Siddhartha, becoming the Buddha who could teach Buddhism again.

Tusita heaven The realm of the delighted gods. The next Buddha (Maitreya) is in Tusita heaven waiting his turn.

The Buddha's birth and hedonistic upbringing

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Siddhartha's mother, Mahamaya had a dream about a white elephant, which was interpreted as showing Siddhartha would have a great destiny: if Siddhartha saw suffering, he would become a holy man but if he did not see suffering, he would be a great leader. In the mythological account this is also seen to be the moment when Siddhartha passed from Tusita heaven into his mother's womb.

Mahamaya travelled from Kapilavatthu to her family home to give birth. She stopped at Lumbini, a grove or garden, to enjoy the flowers. Mahamaya went into labour, took hold of a sal tree and gave birth. Warm and cool water appeared from the sky, like rain, washing Siddhartha and refreshing his mother. Siddhartha took seven steps and said he was the foremost being and this would be his last rebirth. (Modern Buddhists understand this story as mythological rather than a literal account.)

Mahamaya died a week after giving birth, so Siddhartha was raised by his aunt (his father's second wife). He lived a life of luxury, with fine clothes and fragrances, female musicians, palaces and pleasure gardens. He was intelligent, compassionate and well educated in the religious traditions of the time. He married Yasodhara at 16 and had a son, Rahula, when he was 29.

The four passing sights

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Even in his sheltered existence, Siddhartha became aware of sickness, old age and death. This was confirmed when he left the palace with his charioteer Channa. On four occasions, he saw four sights: an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a wandering saffron-robed Sramana (wandering holy person). The shock of seeing so much suffering caused Siddhartha to question his whole life and made him resolve to find out why such suffering existed and what caused it.

Now test yourself

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Write down what each of these four sights mean, how they affected the young Siddhartha and what insights he gained from dwelling on them. (Think about terms like dukkha, anicca, anatta and nirvana.)

The Buddha's renunciation of the life of luxury and his life as an ascetic

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To try to find out why suffering exists and what causes it, Siddhartha left his wife and son one night while they were asleep and joined a group of Sramanas (see page 15). The Sramanas were ascetics: they gave up all material possessions to concentrate on developing their understanding of religious ideas and pursuing spiritual goals.

Siddhartha first joined the group led by Alara Kalama and quickly mastered the meditation state known as the 'sphere of nothingness', a mystical trance attained by deep concentration in which the mind goes beyond perceiving objects and dwells in the blissful awareness of no-thing. This did not help Siddhartha find out why suffering happened, so he left them even though he was offered the leadership of the group.

Siddhartha then joined Uddaka the son of Rama and quickly mastered the 'sphere of neither perception nor non-perception' which is a subtle state of consciousness well beyond what we ordinarily experience.

Siddhartha also practised physical asceticism, wearing very little, living in the forests and eating very little. He was the most ardent ascetic and lived, it is said, on a grain of rice a day. When his hair had fallen out and he was on the brink of death, he realised that this approach was not the way to discover and overcome the causes of suffering so he abandoned it and ate rice milk and regained his strength. The other Sramanas were angry with him and he left their company.

The Buddha's enlightenment

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After leaving the Sramanas, Siddhartha found a secluded wood and sat under a pipal tree (Bodhi Tree). (The place where this tree stood is now called Bodhi Gaya.) He remembered an easy and naturally absorbed state of mind he had once experienced while watching his father plough a field during a festival. He realised pleasure should not be abandoned in his search for **enlightenment**. This state was very pleasurable and joyful, although not linked to pleasures of the physical senses. He resolved to meditate under the tree until he was enlightened.

However, the tempter Mara, the personification of all the forces opposed to enlightenment, wanted to stop Siddhartha from gaining this knowledge, and tried to tempt Siddhartha with sense pleasures and desires. Siddhartha ignored him. Mara tried to scare him with violence but Siddhartha did not move. Mara then said that no one could bear witness to Siddhartha's good deeds and he did not deserve to be enlightened. Siddhartha touched the earth and as it quaked, a goddess arose from the Earth bearing witness to his good deeds (this has become the **earth-touching Mudra**). Mara fled, leaving Siddhartha free from all greed, hatred and ignorance.

Siddhartha then deepened his meditation. He began to understand the true nature of **karma** in the lives of all beings and saw all of his own past lives. His enlightenment came when he suddenly fully comprehended the root of all suffering, how to end it and how to attain a state beyond suffering. From this point onwards he became the Buddha, a title which means Awakened or Enlightened One.

Enlightenment The moment of understanding something new/to comprehend or discover the truth.

Earth-touching Mudra

Mudras are ritual bodily movements, often hand gestures. When the Buddha touches the earth and a goddess arises who bears witness to Siddhartha's many lifetimes of virtuous actions and his right to defeat Mara.

Karma/Kamma Volitional (chosen) actions of body, speech or mind which produce effects in terms of happiness and suffering for oneself and others. There are four functions of karma when related to rebirth.

The Buddha's teaching

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After enlightenment, the Buddha sat under the tree for seven weeks until the god Brahma begged him to share his enlightenment with others. The Buddha wanted to share his enlightenment with his old ascetic teachers, but they had died, so he sought out his former ascetic companions. They were now living some 100 miles away in a deer park at Isipatana (now Sarnath) near Benares (in India). As the Buddha approached them, they realised that he was somehow different and accepted him as their teacher. The first sermon the Buddha gave led to one of his former ascetic companions becoming enlightened. In the next few days, all of his former companions understood his teachings and also became enlightened. The Buddha's first sermon contains the Four Noble Truths and **Eightfold Path** (see page 24). It is called the first turning of the dhamma wheel (Dhammacakkapavattana sutta) because

Eightfold Path Also known as the Middle Way, a way of life made up of eight limbs which help to transform a person from ignorance and bondage in samsara towards enlightenment. Also called the Three-fold Way because it can be divided into wisdom (right view), ethics (right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood) and meditation (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration).

it sets in motion the **Dhamma**, or the truth about suffering and how to bring it to an end.

From there the Buddha's teachings spread rapidly and he soon built up a large following. Some chose to give up their worldly possessions, as the Buddha had, and live an ascetic lifestyle. These individuals became the first monks and nuns, which he called the Sangha.

The Buddha taught for 45 years between his enlightenment and his passing away. In that time, he:

- + established specific rules for the monastic Sangha of monks and nuns
- + established a lay community which supported the monastic Sangha's material needs (food, clothing and shelter) and the Sangha in turn supported the lay community's spiritual needs
- + gave teachings on the nature of suffering (**dukkha**), how it arises (**tanha**) and that it can be overcome (**nirodha**), and the path to doing so (**magga**). These were remembered, passed on orally and, in time, recorded in what became the Pali Canon.

This early form of Buddhism is commonly described as Nikaya Buddhism or the common vehicle. There were many different schools of Buddhism in the years following the Buddha's death, and it is from these that all forms of Buddhism were to develop. Today the only school of this early Buddhism that continues to exist is called the Theravada, which means 'the way of the elders'.

One of the most important aspects of the Buddha's teachings was his insistence that people did not just believe what he said. The Buddha said that people had to experience what he taught for themselves. This is recorded in the Pali Canon when the Buddha teaches:

Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumoured by many. Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.

(Kalama sutta)

Buddhists call this **Ehipassiko**, which means to come and try.

The Buddha's death

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When the Buddha was 80, he had become very ill with dysentery and knew that he was about to die. He gave his last teachings about how all things are subject to decay. He said that the monks and nuns, or Sangha, had his teachings and rules and no longer needed him to guide them. He lay on a couch between two trees and passed away (**paranirvana**). His followers cremated his remains and divided them by ten to send them to various places that were important in the Buddha's life. Stupas (burial mounds) were built over them.

Revision activity

- 1 Summarise the life of the Buddha into ten short bullet points. To do this you will need to pick out the ten most important events in his life.
- 2 Rank the events in order of importance. Which is the most important event in the Buddha's life? Why do you think this might be? Why might someone disagree with your view?

Dhamma/Dharma The teachings of the Buddha. Recorded in Theravada in the Pali Canon and in Mahayana in sutras such as the Heart Sutra and Lotus Sutra. But can also mean the truth (universal truth or nature of reality).

Dukkha/Duhkha Translated as suffering or the unsatisfactory nature of unenlightened life. There are three types of dukkha.

Tanha Craving, literally 'thirst' for sense pleasures.

Nirodha Cessation.

Magga Path.

Ehipassiko Literally means 'which you can come and see for yourself'. This is the reasoned reflection and testing of the benefits of a particular path. If that path is consistent with what is beneficial, the path is followed.

Paranirvana On the death of a Buddha they are no longer limited or bound to the body. This marks permanent release from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The Buddha said it was not possible to state in words or fully understand the mystery of paranirvana. Paranirvana festivals take place in February to mark the Buddha's death and final nirvana beyond.

Interpretations of the stories of Buddha's life

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There are various interpretations of these stories.

- Some early Buddhist traditions such as **Theravada Buddhism** (see page 33) take the Buddha as their role model in the quest for enlightenment.
- However, later Buddhist traditions, although they recognise the supreme achievement of the historical Buddha, also venerate other historically enlightened teachers, such as Bodhidharma or Dogen in Zen Buddhism (see page 49); semi-historical/legendary figures like Padmasambhava in Tibetan Buddhism, and other archetypal, non-historic Buddha figures such as Amida Buddha in Pure Land Buddhism (see page 52).
- Some Buddhists question the truth of some of the stories surrounding the Buddha's life especially as there is no continuous biography of his life.
- Other Buddhists are not interested in the claims of truth – they are more concerned with the message and/or symbolism of the events within the story.
- In her book on the Buddha, the modern author Karen Armstrong points out that whatever it is that Buddhists think about the Buddha, they do not regard him as a God. The Buddha was a human being who achieved enlightenment and Buddhists believe that all humans can do likewise.

Theravada Buddhism

'The way of the elders', is followed mainly in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Theravada maintains the tradition of the early Buddhist disciples and the teachings of the Pali Canon. The Theravada is the only one of the many early schools of Buddhism that survives today and is one of the oldest institutions on Earth.

The Buddha's intellectual context

The Buddha did not develop his ideas in isolation. He was influenced by what was happening in India at that time, when the main religious traditions were undergoing significant challenges and changes. What we know today as Hinduism has a very long history and its ideas have a wide variety of origins. The two most significant are from the Indus Valley Civilisation and the Vedic beliefs, sometimes called Brahminism.

The Indus Valley Civilisation

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The Indus Valley Civilisation was an ancient civilisation located in what is Pakistan and northwest India today, on the fertile flood plain of the Indus River and its surrounding area.

Evidence of religious practices in this area date back approximately to 5500BCE. By 2600BCE, dozens of towns and cities had been established. The evidence suggests the people who lived there had a highly developed peaceful society and that they practised **meditation** and asceticism and worshipped fertility gods, possibly Shiva. (In modern Hinduism, Shiva is seen as an ascetic.) For some, the Indus Valley Civilisation marks the beginnings of Hinduism and may be the beginnings of asceticism and meditation in India.

Meditation The cultivation (bhavana) of the 'heart and mind' which involves increasing awareness (mindfulness) and transforming negative habits into creative states such as loving kindness (metta). Meditation also helps us to understand more about the nature of reality and to transform ignorance into wisdom.

Vedic Hinduism

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Vedic Hinduism started in the Ganges river basin around 2000BCE as the Indus Valley was abandoned and nomadic herders moved in from the north. The beliefs that developed were written down in four books called the Vedas. The Vedas present a multitude of gods, often related to natural forces such as storms, fire and wind. Followers of Vedic Hinduism believed that rituals were critical to maintain the order of the cosmos. The Vedas contain a hymn to Purusha, which shows how the four **castes** were formed.

Caste The caste system is the way Indian society has been structured based on occupation. It states that you are born into a caste and cannot leave it.

- ✚ The Brahmins, or priests, came from Purusha's mouth.
- ✚ The Kshatriyas, or warrior rulers, from Purusha's arms.
- ✚ The Vaishyas, or the commoners (landowners and merchants), from Purusha's thighs.
- ✚ The Shudras, or labourers and servants, from Purusha's feet.

Brahmins performed sacrifices and rituals in the belief that the gods would return their favour under the form of protection and prosperity.

The Upanishads

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The Upanishads are a collection of texts of religious and philosophical nature, written in India probably between c. 800BCE and c. 500BCE, at a time when Indian society started to question the traditional Vedic religious order. Some people during this time decided to engage in the pursuit of spiritual progress, living as ascetic hermits, rejecting ordinary material concerns and giving up family life. Even though the Upanishads do not offer a single comprehensive system of thought, they do develop some basic general principles, which are developed later by the Buddha.

Revision activity

Read the Upanishadic beliefs and make a note of how the Buddha used and adapted these ideas in his own teachings. Why do you think that he used and adapted these ideas?

Upanishadic beliefs

- ✚ **Samsara:** the concept of samsara is that life is cyclical. A person is born, lives, dies and is reborn. This is an endless cycle.
- ✚ **Reincarnation:** the idea that after we die our soul will be reborn again in another body, perhaps in an animal, in a human, or as a god.
- ✚ **Release from samsara or Moksha:** Moksha means 'liberation' or release. Moksha is the liberation from the endless cycle of samsara.
- ✚ **One god:** Brahman is the one underlying substance of the universe, the unchanging 'Absolute Being'. It is the undying and unchanging seed that creates and sustains everything. It is beyond all description and intellectual understanding.
- ✚ **Meditation/yoga:** to escape the endless cycle of samsara, people need to attain enlightenment through the realisation that the soul (Atman) is identical with Brahman through the yogic practices and meditation.

Samsara 'Continuous movement' or 'wandering on'. It is often translated as the 'cycle of existence' as it is the cycle of birth and rebirth.

Asceticism/sramana movements

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There were a variety of sramana movements at the time of the Buddha. Each had a different focus or emphasis but all wanted to find out how to escape from the constant cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Another similarity was the use of meditation and yoga in their practice. This possibly originated in the Indus Valley but was not part of the Vedic rituals. However, it was the main spiritual practice of the sramana movement.

Sramana movements included:

- ✚ **Makkhali Gosala (Ajivika)**, which believed in fatalism and determinism: that everything is the consequence of nature and its laws. The school denied that there is free will but believed that the soul exists and that everything has its own individual nature, based on how one is constituted from elements. It believed in karma and that consequences are not due to free will and cannot be altered, and that everything is pre-determined because of and including one's composition.

- + **Ajita Kesakambali**, which believed in materialism. This movement denied that there is an afterlife, any samsara, any karma or any fruit of good or evil deeds. It believed that everything (including humans) is composed of elemental matter and when one dies one returns to those elements.
- + **Pakudha Kaccayana**, which believed in atomism. This movement denied that there is a creator or knower and believed that everything is made of seven basic building blocks that are eternal, neither created nor caused to be created: earth, water, fire, air, happiness, pain and soul. It believed that all actions, including death, are the merging of one set of substances into another set of substances.

Jainism

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A particular sramana movement that became popular and still exists today is Jainism. Jainism focuses on the health and welfare of every being in the universe. Jains believe that plants, animals and humans have a soul or Jiva. They believe that each soul is equal in value and should be treated with respect and compassion. Jains are strict vegans and try to limit their impact on the world's resources. Like other sramana groups, Jains believe in reincarnation and aim to gain liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth so that the immortal soul lives for ever in a state of bliss. This is done by meditation, which helps eliminate karma from the soul. There are no gods or spiritual beings, only the three guiding principles of right belief, right knowledge and right conduct. The supreme principle of Jain living is non-violence (ahimsa).

Tip

Remember that the Buddha did not invent the ascetic way of life or meditation. These had existed in India for many hundreds of years before he was born. Therefore, we can see that many of these ideas like meditation and reincarnation find their way into Buddhism.

Conflict between Brahmins and Kshatriyas

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By the time of the Buddha, society had moved away from agriculture towards organised cities and trade. People were therefore less reliant on the Brahmin priests to ensure that the land was fertile and crops grew. The second tier in society, the kings and warriors, found that they were starting to have large kingdoms, wealth and considerable power over the lives of others. They no longer wanted to be seen to be subservient the Brahmin caste. Therefore, people started to look elsewhere for their religious beliefs. For many, Buddhism was seen to be more attractive because it did not agree with the caste system and treated all people as equals.

Revision activity

How was the Buddha influenced by the religious, cultural and economic situation in India at the time? Produce a mind map to collect together your ideas.

Try to think of examples where the Buddha's teachings are unique and not influenced by the religion, culture and economic situation of his time.

Chapter summary

- + Siddhartha Gotama was born in Northern India in approximately 500 BCE.
- + He was born into a royal/ruling family and lived a life of luxury.
- + He gave up his life of luxury at the age of 30 to become an ascetic and find out why people suffer.
- + The ascetic groups he joined and the techniques he learnt did not help so he meditated alone and discovered why people suffer.
- + This discovery is called enlightenment and Siddhartha became the Buddha.
- + The Buddha used many of the ideas that existed in Hinduism and Jainism at the time, such as meditation, samsara, karma and rebirth.
- + He lived at a time of change in people's religious beliefs from Vedic Hinduism to Upanishadic Hinduism and the challenges to the caste system.
- + He taught others his ideas and Buddhism spread rapidly.
- + The Buddha died at the age of 80.

Explanation questions

An excellent explanation could have the following:

- + an explanation, *not* a description. For example, think about the difference between describing a table to someone and explaining what a table is.
- + examples. These show that you understand what you are explaining.
- + technical terms. Use the Buddhist terms or the English translation of them. This means your work will be precise and demonstrate good knowledge.
- + scholarly views and quotes. This could be quotes from Buddhist writers or from the Buddha or Buddhist texts. If you cannot remember quotes word for word, then paraphrase them (give an idea of what they said).

Example question (Eduqas/WJEC) (AO1)

- 1 Explain how seeing the four sights might have had an impact on the life of the Buddha. [20]

Example question (Edexcel) (AO1)

- 2 Explore the main features of the accounts of the Buddha's awakening under the Bodhi Tree. [8]

Evaluation questions

An excellent evaluation could have the following:

- + examples, scholarly views and quotes
- + arguments for and against – why people might agree and disagree with a particular point of view
- + an evaluation of these views. Which view is stronger/weaker and why might this be?
- + critical analysis. This means explaining why there is a weakness or strength rather than just saying what that weakness or strength is. It also includes being critical of the criticisms – asking how valid the criticisms are and how much they challenge a set of ideas.

Example question (AQA/Eduqas/WJEC)

- 3 'It is important to know the life of the historical Buddha in order to understand Buddhism.'
Evaluate this claim. [AQA 15; Eduqas 30]
This is an AS level question focusing on AO2 skills.

Example question (OCR)

- 4 To what extent is the Buddha a product of his time? [30]
This is an AS level question focusing on both AO1 and AO2 skills.