

Buddha's birthday

In May each year, Buddha's birthday is celebrated with candlelit processions, the hanging of lanterns in temples and the day-long chanting of prayers. It is a day when Buddhists take time to think of and pray for the less fortunate in the world.

1. What do you know about Buddhism? Can you answer the questions?

- a. How old is Buddhism?
- b. In which countries is Buddhism practised?
- c. How many Buddhists are there in the world today?
- d. Do you know any celebrities who are Buddhists?
- e. Why is Buddhism not considered a religion?
- f. How did Buddhism originate?
- g. What is the *Middle Way*?
- h. What does the word 'Buddha' mean?
- i. What is *karma*?
- j. What is *nirvana*?
- k. What is every Buddhist's aim?
- l. What is the *eight-fold path*?

2. Read the information below and on worksheet B to find the answers to the questions in 1.

Introduction

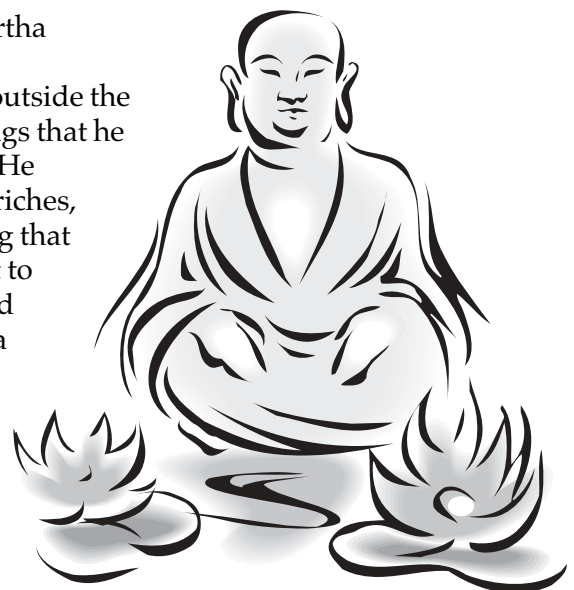
The many forms of Buddhism have helped to shape the lives and outlooks of its followers for over two-and-a-half thousand years. Most of today's 500 million Buddhists live in eastern Asian countries such as Thailand, Tibet, India, Japan and Korea, but in recent years, Buddhism has become fashionable in the west, where it is seen as a spiritual contrast to the materialistic lifestyle. Celebrities such as the singer Tina Turner, the actor Richard Gere and the golfer Tiger Woods are all advocates of Buddhism.

Buddhism is not technically a religion as it is not centred on a god, but a system of philosophy and a code of morality.

How it began

Buddhism was originated in northern India when Siddhartha Gautama, an Indian prince born around 560 BC, achieved enlightenment. When, as a young man, Siddhartha went outside the palace walls for the first time, he was shocked by four things that he saw: an old man, a sick man, a dead man and a holy man. He started to ponder the meaning of life and, renouncing his riches, he set out to find an answer to why people suffer. Believing that most human suffering was caused by people's attachment to their desires, he developed a way of life in which he looked after the basic needs of his body, but did not seek any extra comforts or luxuries. He called this the *Middle Way*. Siddhartha became a Buddha, or 'Enlightened One'.

For the rest of his life he travelled around India on foot, teaching and helping others to free themselves from the suffering. Siddhartha died around 480 BC when he was 80 years old.



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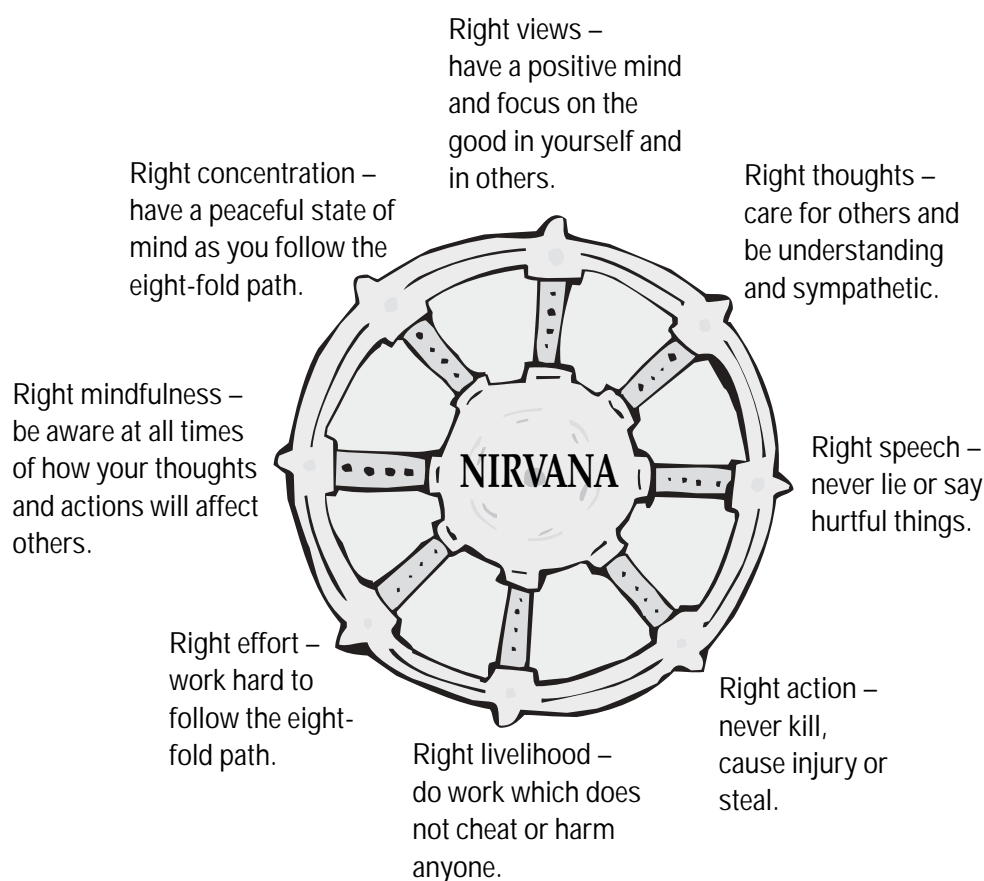
Karma and nirvana

There are three fundamental beliefs at the heart of Buddhism:

- When people die, they are reborn into another life time after time.
- People cause their own suffering through their attachment to their desires, resulting in greed, jealousy, anger, hatred and other negative feelings. This creates a force called *karma*.
- If individuals can reduce these feelings, the force of *karma* becomes less strong and eventually disappears completely. When this happens, the individual is freed from the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. This freedom is called *nirvana*. It is every Buddhist's aim to reach *nirvana*, even if it takes a thousand lifetimes.

The eight-fold path

Buddha taught that there was a path that anybody could follow which would help them overcome suffering and be freed from endless reincarnation. This forms the basis of Buddhism today.



3. In pairs or small groups, discuss the following questions.

- Which of the ideas of Buddhism are similar to those of your religion, or the religions of your country? If you are Buddhist, can you explain more about it?
- Which ideas of the eight-fold path do you feel are the most important?
- How did your religion, or the religions of your country, originate?

Teacher's notes

Task

To find out about Buddhism by reading a text.

To discuss issues of Buddhism and relate this to the students' own religion or religions in his/her country.

Preparation

Make one copy of worksheets A and B for each student.

Procedure

- 1 Tell the students that Buddha's birthday is celebrated around the world on different dates in May, and in April in Japan and Korea. Elicit a few facts about Buddhism.
- 2 Give the students a copy of the worksheets A and B and ask them to discuss the questions in (1) in pairs or small groups. Ask the students to report to the class their suggestions for answers to the questions.
- 3 Ask the students to read the text to find the answers to the questions, making notes of the answers. This can be done as a collective effort with the students working in pairs or small groups. You could put the students into groups of four and ask each student to read one of the sections and report back to pool the information.
- 4 Check the answers with the whole class and ask further questions to check comprehension and to encourage more detailed reading. For example,
Why has Buddhism become popular in the west? By whom was it founded? What did Siddhartha see that made him start to ponder the meaning of life? What is every Buddhist's aim?
Alternatively, you could ask the students to ask each other questions, possibly dividing them into teams.
- 5 Then ask the students to discuss the questions in (3). The students report to the class anything interesting from their discussions.

Answers

a. two-and-a-half thousand years old b. most eastern Asian countries c. about 500 million d. Tina Turner, Richard Gere, Tiger Woods e. It is not centred on a god. f. It was founded by Siddhartha Gautama as a consequence of his search for an answer to why people suffer. g. a way of living where the individual looks after their basic needs and does not seek luxuries h. Enlightened One i. a force determined by how much negative feeling and suffering an individual has j. freedom from the cycle of reincarnation k. to reach *nirvana* l. a way of living with eight principles

Follow up

The students could prepare a poster or a presentation about their religion or about religions in their country.

Websites

For more information about Buddhism, visit the following websites:

home.earthlink.net/~srama/

www.religioustolerance.org/buddhism.htm

www.buddhanet.net/budnetp.htm