



## Hinduism/Buddhism

There are four major Eastern religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.

Hinduism is diverse; there are over 33 million gods, numerous rituals, and beliefs which often make it difficult to pinpoint what really is "Hinduism." Hinduism (along with other Eastern religions) has had a huge effect on the Western world through influencing approximately one-third of Westerners to believe in reincarnation (and contributing to new views on psychology and medicine). In the westernized world Hinduism and Buddhism are becoming accepted even in many churches as Christians overlook certain beliefs and change many definitions that these religions hold to; simply look at the rise of Yoga to get an idea.

<http://www.equip.org/PDF/JAY001-3.pdf>

<http://www.equip.org/PDF/JAY001-2.pdf>

Hinduism adopts a view called Monism which believes that all of reality is reduced to one basic substance. In other words, there really is no distinction between the gods and humans. As Hindus say, "*Atman (self) is Brahman (ultimate reality).*" While this appears to be intellectually titillating, reincarnation and monism are in direct opposition to Scripture which teaches that humans die once and face judgment (Heb. 9:27) and there is a clear distinction between Creator and creation (Genesis 1-2; John 1:1-3). While many Westerners find this Eastern thinking to be odd, it is necessary that the Church be able to articulate the gospel to the billions of Easterners in our rapidly globalized planet.

### History of Hinduism

Hinduism is unique among the world religions in that it has no founder or date of origin. While most major religions derive from new ideas taught by a charismatic leader, Hinduism is simply the religion of the people of India, which has gradually developed over four thousand years.

The origins and authors of its sacred texts are largely unknown.

Today's Hinduism differs significantly from earlier forms of the Indian religion. Hinduism's roots date back as far as 2000 BC, making it one of the oldest surviving religions. Because of its great age, the early history of Hinduism is unclear. The most ancient writings have yet to be deciphered, so for the earliest periods scholars must rely on educated guesses based on archaeology and the study of contemporary texts.

### What is the history of Hinduism?

Hinduism is the oldest and one of the most complex of all religious systems. It is difficult to provide adequate history of Hinduism because it has no specific founder or theology. The development of this religion was influenced when light-skinned nomadic Aryan Indo-European tribes invaded Northern India from Russia and Central Asia attacking the Harappan people who lived there in 1500BC. The word, Hinduism, comes from the word, Indus, which is the name of an Indian River that existed about 5000 years ago.

Both groups (invaders and invaded) adopted the beliefs of the other so they became similar in their religious doctrines. The Aryans believed in multiple gods to worship and the Harappans believed in the sanctity of fertility.

The Aryan group developed what is called the *caste system*, which ranked society according to occupational class. That system is as follows:

- **Brahmins** are priests; Only boys become true priests and the day they are initiated they can no longer eat with women (including their mothers). The climax of the ceremony involves a priest whispering the words of a liturgical spell (or prayer) to a boy's father who whispers it to their boy; it is whispered into the right ear (which now becomes sacred because the prayer was uttered into that ear). This prayer can be uttered by the boy and when repeated it cleanses you from sin. No woman or low-caste members are allowed to hear that prayer.
- **Kshatriyas** are soldiers, king-warrior class;
- **Vaishyas** are the bourgeois, or middle class [businessmen/farmers], viewed as low class by those above them);
- **Sutras** are the laborers and craftspeople; servants, they are not allowed to listen to or recite the Hindu scriptures.
- **Harijahns** are "untouchables" (outcasts)—those thought to be descended from the Harappan (aboriginal people who are extremely poor and discriminated against). Criminals and those with unclean jobs (leather workers, barbers, etc).

The higher the person's caste, the more the person is blessed with the benefits and luxuries of life. The system was outlawed in 1948, but it is still important to the Hindu people and recognized as the proper way to categorize society.

The Hindu religion has branched out and now encompasses a wide variety of religious beliefs and organizations. Portions of the Hindu beliefs have found their way into other countries, and are the foundation of other religions such as Transcendental Meditation and Buddhism.

Originally the rituals in Hinduism could be performed by fathers because they were simple but over time they became more complex. This made it necessary to create the class of priests specially trained to perform the intricate rituals correctly, because the consequences for incorrectly performing a ritual were considered costly to your Karmic destiny. The Hindu scriptures, known as the Vedas, were written down to instruct the priests in how to conduct the rituals.

**The Vedas** were the oral traditions written down (over a 200-400 year period).

Because of how exclusive the priests became in appeasing the gods, they gained a power over the people that became unbearable. Around 600 B.C., the people revolted, and the form of Hinduism that emerged was more mystically oriented, focusing on the individual rather than the priest.

Between 800 and 300 B.C. the concluding portion of the Vedas were written, called the *Upanishads*, which are a consolidation of Vedic teachings. They expound on the idea that behind the many gods stands one Reality, called Brahman — an impersonal, monistic (“all is one”) force. The highest form of Brahman is *nirguna* (“without attributes or qualities”). The teachings of the Upanishads include a belief in

- **pantheism** (*"If everyone must approach you to obtain anything, why is it that people seem to obtain what they need by approaching others, such as demigods?" Krishna replied, "They approach demigods to receive immediate satisfaction, but factually I bestow such benedictions through the demigods"*),
- **karmic retribution** (*Prabhupada taught that even if you have a desire for one sweet ball you have to come back to the material world to take another body. Any kind of material desire is enough to bring you back to the material world, so you can come to the point of having to work it out again, until you come to the platform on which you have no material desire whatsoever!*),
- **reincarnation** (*"Many births both you and I have passed, Arjun. But I am fully aware of them all, whereas you are not, because my awareness is never covered by illusion"*)

In the 500's BC, during the later part of the Aryan period in India, the idea of reincarnation became very strong among Hindus. Most people believed that after you died, you would be reborn in another form, and then reborn again, and again, forever. But then people started to not like this idea. They didn't want reincarnation to just go on and on forever...so...

A young Indian prince named **Siddhartha Gautama Buddha** had an idea. He thought that you could get off the wheel of reincarnation if you were good and pure enough. He refused to be a prince anymore, and tried to spend his life being good and pure so he could get off the wheel. Most of Buddha's followers tried to be good while still living their normal lives - working in the fields or as soldiers, getting married, taking care of their parents and their children. But some of his followers adopted a **Jain** idea of getting away from the world so they could work full-time on being good and pure. These people were called monks or nuns (*A Jain is a follower of Jinas ["conquerors"]. Jinas are considered spiritually advanced human beings who rediscover the dharma, become fully liberated and teach the spiritual path to benefit all living beings.*)

In the 300's BC, one of the great Mauryan kings, Asoka, became a Buddhist, which helped Buddhism to succeed. Asoka convinced many other Indian people to become Buddhists.

At first, most Buddhists were in India. But soon Buddhism spread to China and other parts of East Asia. By the 600's AD most of the Buddhists in India had gone back to being Hindus again. They still remembered Buddha, but as one of many Hindu gods.

In China, on the other hand, Buddhism became stronger and stronger. Soon most of the Buddhists were in China and not India. In China, as in India, most Buddhist people continued to lead (more or less) ordinary lives, but some Buddhist men and women left their jobs and their families in order to live in Buddhist monasteries as monks or nuns.

### **Three major Hindu gods**

**Brahma, god of creation** . He is not to be confused with the Supreme Cosmic Spirit Brahman (Brahma is a neutered form of the noun for Nrahman). Brahmā's consort is Saraswati, the goddess of learning.

At the beginning of the process of creation, Brahmā created eleven *Prajapatis* (used in another sense), who are believed to be the fathers of the human race. He is also said to have created the seven great sages or the *Saptarishi* to help him create the universe. Since all these sons of his were born out of his mind rather than body, they are called *Manas Putras* or mind-sons or spirits.

Within Vedic and Puranic scripture Brahmā is described as only occasionally interfering in the affairs of the other devas (gods), and even more rarely in mortal affairs. According to the Puranas, Brahma is self-born (without mother) in the lotus flower which grew from the navel of Vishnu at the beginning of the universe. Another legend says that Brahmā was born in water. In this he deposited a seed that later became the golden egg. From this golden egg, Brahma the creator was born, as *Hiranyagarbha* (*The 'golden fetus'*). The remaining materials of this golden egg expanded into the Brahm-anda or Universe.

**Vishnu is the Supreme God in Vaishnavite tradition of Hinduism.** He is exalted as the highest God in the Bhagavad Gita. The Vishnu Sahasranama declares Vishnu as Paramatma (supreme soul) and Parameshwara (supreme God). It describes Vishnu as the All-Pervading essence of all beings, the master of—and beyond—the past, present and future, the creator and destroyer of all existences, one who supports, sustains and governs the Universe and originates and develops all elements within.

Vishnu is described as having the divine color of clouds (dark-blue), four-armed, holding a lotus, mace, conch and chakra (wheel). Vishnu is also described in the Bhagavad Gita as having a 'Universal Form' (*Vishvarupa*) which is beyond the ordinary limits of human perception ("Bhagavad-gita Chapter 11 Verse 3)

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu, teaches Arjuna the nature of the Supreme being and the different processes of Yoga, ultimately culminating in devotional surrender.

- "I am the goal, the sustainer, the master, the witness, the abode, the refuge, and the most dear friend. I am the creation and the annihilation, the basis of everything, the resting place and the eternal seed." (Gita 9.18)
- "But what need is there, Arjuna, for all this detailed knowledge? With a single fragment of Myself I pervade and support this entire universe." (Gita 10.42)
- "If hundreds of thousands of suns were to rise at once into the sky, their radiance might resemble the effulgence of the Supreme Person in that universal form." (Gita 11.12)
- "Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not despair." ( Gita 18.66)

**Shiva is usually worshipped in the form of Shiva linga.** In images, he is generally represented as immersed in deep meditation or dancing the *Tandava* upon Maya, the demon of ignorance in his manifestation of Nataraja, the lord of the dance.

Characteristics:

- **Third eye:** Shiva is often depicted with a third eye, with which he burned Desire (Kāma) to ashes.
- **Crescent moon:** Shiva bears on his head the crescent moon.
- **Ashes:** Shiva smears his body with ashes (bhasma)
- **Matted hair:** Shiva's distinctive hair style "the one with matted hair" (Chidbhavananda, p. 22.)
- **Blue throat:** Refers to a story in which Shiva drank the poison churned up from the world ocean. The Hari Vanśa Purana, on the other hand, attributes the color of Shiva's throat to an episode in which Vishnu compels Shiva to fly after taking him by the throat and nearly strangling him.
- **Sacred Ganga:** The Ganga river flows from the matted hair of Shiva.
- **Tiger skin:** He is often shown seated upon a tiger skin, an honor reserved for the most accomplished of Hindu ascetics, the Brahmarishis. "
- **Serpents:** Shiva is often shown garlanded with a snake
- **Trident:** Shiva's particular weapon is the trident.
- **Drum:** A small drum shaped like an hourglass is known as a *damaru*. This is one of the attributes of Shiva in his famous dancing representation.
- **Nandī:** Nandin, is the name of the bull that serves as Shiva's mount.
- **Mount Kailāsa:** Mount Kailash in the Himalayas is his traditional abode.

**Today there are three basic classifications into which the hundreds of Hindu sects can be divided:**

1) **The abstract monists**, who stress the philosophical oneness of the universe instead of religious or theistic ideas (**Transcendental meditation**) - *"The answer to every problem is that there is no problem. Let a man perceive this truth and then he is without problems - Maharishi Mahesh Yogi*

2) **The Vishnuites**, who are devoted to the worship (in many different manners) of the god Vishnu (in many different manifestations) as the supreme form of divinity (**ISKCON – International Society of Krishna Consciousness**) *Nobody is a sinner. Even while you are in the darkest hole of your life, you are still divine; you cannot lose your divinity. I tell you, there is no need for salvation, it is within you.--April 1978 Bhagwan Shree (Sir God) Rajneesh*  
*Disobedience is not a sin, but a part of growth--march 7, 1981 Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh*

3) **The Shivaites**, who are devoted to the worship of the god Shiva as the highest manifestation of divinity.

*It might be asked, by way of conclusion, What is the essence of Hinduism? A hard question. There are orthodox Hindus who deny the existence of God. There are others who while not denying God, relegate him to a second place, as a secondary or illusory phase of the Absolute. Amid such a variety of theological views, what remains as necessary to Hindu belief? Certainly*

*the doctrines of rebirth and that of an eternal soul. The picture of the world as a place where the immortal spirit within man is virtually endlessly implicated in the round of reincarnation has dominated the Indian imagination for about three millennia. In addition, a complex social system has given shape to the actual religion of the subcontinent over a long period.* Professor Ninan Smart

### **Most Hindus hold to the following beliefs:**

1. **The Impersonal Nature of Brahman.** Hindus see ultimate reality, Brahman, as being an impersonal oneness that is beyond all distinctions, including personal and moral distinctions.
2. **The Brahman-Atman Unity.** Hindus believe they are, in their true selves (*atman*), extended from, and one with, Brahman. Just as the air inside an open jar is identical to the air surrounding that jar, so our essence is identical to that of the essence of Brahman.
3. **The Problem Is Ignorance.** Humanity's primary problem is that we are ignorant of our divine nature. We have forgotten that we are extended from Brahman, and we have mistakenly attached ourselves to the desires of our separate selves, or egos, and thereby to the consequences of their resultant actions as determined by the law of *karma* (cause and effect).
4. **Samsara (Reincarnation).** *Samsara* refers to the ever-revolving wheel of life, death, and rebirth. Through the law of karma we are reaping in this lifetime the consequences of the actions we committed in previous lifetimes. A person's karma determines the kind of body — ranging from human to insect — into which he or she will be reincarnated in the next lifetime.
5. **Moksha (Liberation).** The solution to the problem of attachment and karma is moksha — to be liberated from the wheel of life, death, and rebirth. This can only occur when we truly realize that our separate self is actually an illusion and that only the undifferentiated oneness of Brahman is real. We must therefore strive to detach ourselves from the desires and actions of our ego in order to attain true enlightenment.

### **Scripture**

- The oldest form of Hindu scriptures, **Vedas**, means wisdom or knowledge, and contains hymns (*Mantras*), prayers and ritual texts composed during a period of a thousand years (*Brahmanas*), teachings on religious truth and doctrines (*Upanishads*).
- The **Upanishads** are a collection of secret teachings including mystical ideas about man and the universe. The word, *Brahman*, comes into focus within this group, which is the basis of reality, and *atman*, which is the self or soul.
- The **Ramayana**, which is one of two major tales of India. The work consists of 24,000 couplets based on the life of Rama, a righteous king who was an incarnation of the God Vishnu.
- The **Mahabharata** is the second epic and is the story of the deeds of the Aryan clans. It is composed of 100,000 verses written over an 800 year period. Contained within this work is a classic called the *Bhagavad Gita*, or the "Song of the Blessed Lord." It is one of

the most sacred books of the Hindus and the most read of all Indian works in the entire world. The story is centered on man's duty, which, if carried out, will bring nothing but sorrow. The significance of this story is based on Hindu belief of *bhakti*, (devotion to a particular god as a means of salvation). These two stories have become ideals for the people of India in terms of moral and social behavior.

- The **Puranas** are an important source for the understanding of Hinduism, and include legends of gods, goddesses, demons, and ancestors describing pilgrimages and rituals to demonstrate the importance of *bhakti*, *caste* and *dharma* (basic principles of the cosmos or an ancient sage in Hindu mythology worshipped as a god by some lower castes).

### God.

There is no single Hindu idea of God. Hindu concepts of deity can include any of the following: **monism** (all existence is one substance); **pantheism** (all existence is divine); **panentheism** (God is in creation as a soul is in a body); **animism** (God or gods live in nonhuman objects such as trees, rocks, animals, etc.); **polytheism** (there are many gods); **henotheism** (there is one god we worship among the many that exist); and **monotheism** (there is only one God).

### Salvation.

The three major paths to Hindu “salvation” include

- **karma marga** (method), the way of disinterested action; Works
- **bhakti marga**, the way of devotion;
- **jnana marga**, the path of knowledge or mystical insight.

**Jnana marga** achieves self-realization through intuitive awareness and mystical insight. **Bhakti marga** achieves self-realization through ritualistic sacrifice and discipline. **Karma marga** salvation is achieved through good works.

**Karma and Samsara.** Fundamental to Hindu thought is the idea that all souls are eternal and accountable for their own actions throughout time. Karma refers to the debt of one’s bad actions which must be atoned for (through various Hindu systems) in order for one to escape the wheel of *samsara*, or **reincarnation** (the soul inhabits successive human bodies) or **transmigration** (the soul inhabits successive bodies—human, animal, or even plants or inanimate objects).

### **Jesus**

The Hindus see their gods and *avatars* (incarnations) as manifestations of the impersonal Brahman. These manifestations come through Vishnu, the preserver deity. Hindus view Jesus as “*merely one of a number of avatars.*” They might be willing to incorporate Jesus into their pantheon, but would not be willing to accept Jesus as the exclusive incarnation of God.

### **Jesus and Vishnu’s incarnations...Consider the differences:**

#### **Vishnu**

At least ten incarnations (some claim more) in both

#### **Jesus**

The only incarnation of the Son of God

animal and human form.

While the stories of the avatars, or incarnations, of Vishnu might have some remote historical basis, their historicity is not essential. They are primarily mythical in nature. Even if it were shown that there is absolutely no historical truth to the stories, it would have no affect on their meaning and influence.

One of the purposes of Vishnu's incarnations was "for destruction of evil-doers" (*Bhagavad Gita* 4:8)

The avatars pointed to *a way* by which we can *attain* enlightenment over a period of many lifetimes: "But *striving zealously*, with sins cleansed, the disciplined man, *perfected through many rebirths*, then [finally] goes to the highest goal" (*Bhagavad Gita* 6:45).

Vishnu incarnates periodically as an avatar when the need arises, and then the avatar dies and is reabsorbed back into Brahman. Hinduism makes no claims concerning the bodily resurrection of the avatars.

If the objection to Jesus uniqueness comes up, encourage Hindu's to read through the Gospel of John and to judge the issue for himself or herself. Remind them that even Gandhi said, "***I shall say to the Hindus that your lives will be incomplete unless you reverently study the teachings of Jesus***"

**How to talk to...and...what things differ:**

in human form.

The historicity of Jesus' life is extremely important to the veracity of Jesus' claims and to the salvation the He accomplished on our behalf (1 Cor. 15:14, 17; 1 John 1:1-3). If Christ did not actually live, die, and rise from the dead, then Christianity is built on a lie and the gospel is without foundation.

The purpose of Jesus' incarnation was "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17; see also John 10:10).

Jesus pointed to Himself as *the way* by which to *receive* eternal life immediately (John 6:29, 40; 10:9-10; 14:6; 11:25-26).

Jesus' incarnation was a unique event. His sacrifice was "once for all" (Heb. 9:26); He died and rose from the dead; and His individual identity is maintained before, as well as after, the Incarnation.

**1. Ask and Listen.** Hinduism is a vastly diverse religion in which adherents share similar beliefs but do not have a common doctrinal creed. Don't assume, therefore, that you know what a Hindu believes.

Ask questions about his or her beliefs concerning God, man, sin, and salvation, and listen carefully to the answers. Listen closely to the way they describe **the way to enlightenment**. They might use words such as "achieve," "attain," "overcome," and "strive." Such expressions are significant because they reveal how enlightenment — the Hindu equivalent of salvation — is based on human effort, and not on God's grace. Then discuss passages such as Romans 3:19-24 and Ephesians 2:8-9, which speak of the futility of attempting to earn one's salvation and of how salvation is a gift from God to be received by faith.

**2. Be Aware of Differing Definitions.** Be aware of biblical terminology or concepts Hindus might misunderstand. For example, Hindus understand being "*born again*" as referring to reincarnation, a bondage from which they are striving to be liberated (**it is undesirable**). In Christian terminology, however, being "born again" means to be made new or to be regenerated by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. It is something to be desired.

**3. Offer Jesus' Forgiveness.** Bakht Singh, a convert from Hinduism and an Indian evangelist, once said, "*I have never yet failed to get a hearing if I talk to [Hindus] about forgiveness of sins and peace and rest in your heart*" Forgiveness is a need for Hindus because it is not available in their karma-based belief system. The law of karma is like a law of nature — **every cause has its effect and there is no place for mercy**. The fact that forgiveness is not available in Hinduism troubles many Hindus, for they are aware that the actions that bind them to this illusory realm keep accumulating, and the prospect of escape is hopelessly remote. Matthew 11:28, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*" The people that Jesus had in mind when He spoke these words were those who felt burdened by the impossibility of attaining salvation through their own efforts. **Matt 26:28; Luke 24:45-49; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14.**

#### **4. Keep God's Personal Nature in Mind.**

**First**, the image of a personal God will help you find ways to communicate the Christian perspective on spiritual issues.

- *What is the meaning of sin?* Sin is the breaking of a moral law: ultimately it is rejecting and rebelling against a personal God. *Why?* Because only persons — not impersonal forces such as Brahman — are able to make moral distinctions. Only a God who is by nature personal is sufficient to sustain the foundation necessary for moral law to have validity.
- *What are the consequences of sin?* Even on the human level, we are aware that sin breaks relationships.
- *How can sin be resolved?* Forgiveness is possible only in the context of God being personal, for only persons are capable of forgiving. Brahman, an impersonal oneness, is incapable of forgiving.

**Use the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) as an illustration of the personal nature of God.**

**Second**, the fact that God is personal has implications for the destiny of the individual after death. To “know” the impersonal Brahman of Hinduism is to merge into the oneness of Brahman and *to lose one’s identity* as a distinct and separate individual. There is a drive within each of us, however, that makes us want to cling to our existence as personal beings with all our might. It is also true that we are most fulfilled as persons when we are in a friendship or love relationship. Since that is where we are most fulfilled, think of how much greater our fulfillment is when we are in fellowship with a personal, holy, and loving God. (John 14:2-3; 17:3; Rev. 21:3).

**Third**, probably the most common Hindu objection to Christianity concerns the Christian belief that there is only one way to God. Hindus believe that each person can choose whatever way is best suited for him or her. Most Hindus see Ultimate Reality – Brahman – as being an undifferentiated oneness. If such a view of God were true, then it would follow that there are many ways to God, because God would be an underlying force and sin would be nothing more than a matter of ignorance.

But if God is by nature personal, then the issues of knowing God are different from those of “knowing” an impersonal, indifferentiated force. Relationships involve issues of morality and trust. If the morality and trust that underlie any relationship are broken, then that relationship will be broken. Sexual infidelity, for example, will break a marriage relationship. The implication of such a truth is that sin carries real consequences. It breaks our relationship with God.

If our primary problem is that we have broken our relationship with the Person of God, we can understand why there is only one way to God.

- **Consider this question:** How many ways are there to restore a relationship that you are responsible for having broken? **There is only one way, and it involves confessing your guilt and receiving forgiveness.** Salvation is a matter of reconciliation, and this reconciliation was historically made possible through the death of Christ on the cross (2 Cor. 5:18-19; Eph 2: 12-16).

**5. The Inclusiveness of Jesus.** While you want the Hindu to see how Jesus is unique, you will also want to share how Jesus Christ is inclusive toward others. Point out that:

- Christ beckons “all you who are weary and burdened” to come to Him (Matt. 11:28).
- The inclusive Christ associated with the most unlikely of people, even the social outcast (Luke 19:1-10) and the sinner (Luke 15:1-7).

The gospel of Jesus Christ is intended for the whole world. As John wrote: “I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9). Such an all-embracing Christ will naturally appeal to the Hindu.

## Buddhism

There are literally hundreds of forms of Buddhism, and all of them may be traced back to the essential teachings of a man named Siddhartha Gautama—the Buddha. ("The Buddha" is a Sanskrit title meaning "enlightened." It can be applied to others, but "is particularly applied to Gautama, the founder of Buddhism.")

It is historically impossible to create an accurate picture of the Buddha's life. Narratives about him were not written down till 400 years after his death and devotees greatly embellished the accounts of his life, actions, and words.

### **Buddha's birth:**

*The child comes forth from his mother while she is standing up and holding on to the branch of a sacred sal tree. He is completely free of any afterbirth and is immediately able to walk and talk. He takes seven steps in each of the cardinal directions and proclaims himself ruler of the universe. (C. George Fry, James R. King, Eugene R. Swanger, and Herbert C. Wolf, Great Asian Religions, page 65.)*

Despite exaggerations about the Buddha "we know very little about the circumstances of his life." What we do know is that the India into which he was born had been shaped religiously by Brahmanism, an ancient religion established there more than three thousand years ago by the Aryan conquerors of the indigenous people of the subcontinent (covered above in the section on Hinduism).

The Aryans were a powerful group of Indo-European-speaking people who unified the myriad religions and people groups under an umbrella of religious philosophy that became Hinduism.

These invading conquerors forced their foes to adopt Brahmanism for two reasons:

- (1) to maintain Aryan ethnic purity;
- (2) to subjugate the native Indians (India) both spiritually and socially.

Brahmanism was able to accomplish these goals because of its caste system, a rigid set of distinctions that divided all persons into the following social/religious classes:

1. *brahmins* (Aryan priests);
2. *kshatriyas* (warrior-nobility);
3. *vaishyas* (the bourgeois, or middle class [businessmen/farmers], viewed as low class by those above them);
4. *sudras* (servants, not allowed to recite or listen to the Vedas [Hindu scriptures]);
5. *outcasts* (the illegitimate, criminals, and those in unclean jobs [e.g., leather workers, barbers, etc.]).

Siddhartha Gautama, the son of King Suddhodana Gautama, a chieftain (*raja*) of the Shakya clan, a family within the *kshatriya* caste. It is believed that Siddhartha ("he who has accomplished his objectives") was born around 563 bc. His father apparently reigned over a small district on the Indian slope of the Himalayas in a region that borders between India and Nepal [North-eastern India]."

King Suddhodana believed that contact with human misery would prompt Siddhartha to leave home in search of spiritual truth so he immediately ordered his servants to forever shield the prince from all contact with evil and suffering. Siddhartha would be a prisoner of luxury. It is said that in order to distract Siddhartha from the cares of this world, King Suddhodana gave his son many possessions, including three palaces and 40,000 dancing girls.

Legend says that when Siddhartha reached the age of sixteen, five hundred women were sent to him as prospective brides. Eventually he chose as his bride his cousin Yasodhara. Siddhartha's life was unfolding as his father had planned until the young prince eluded his royal attendants and ventured into the outside world. Over a succession of several days he visited nearby Lumbini Park, where he made some disturbing observations.

- He first beheld an old man, broken and bent by age.
- On the next day, Siddhartha saw a diseased person, possibly a leper.
- During his third excursion, the prince viewed a corpse.
- When he took another trip on day four, he met an ascetic (a monk who practices self-denial).

Siddhartha was never the same. He concluded that life is nothing but an experience plagued by sorrow. Why is there so much suffering? How can men escape what seems to be an inescapable round of torment? Is there no end to pain and sorrow? To answer these and other questions, Siddhartha left home and began a spiritual quest for truth.

For about six years, young Gautama wandered about as a poor beggar, studying meditation and philosophy. His pilgrimage led him to two yogis (spiritual teachers). He attempted to follow their path of spirituality by eating nothing but seeds and grass, gradually reducing his diet to only a single grain of rice each day. In one experiment, "he ate only dung." (*Dictionary of Asian Philosophies* Page 23)

Then he met and joined a company of five monks with whom he practiced various methods of asceticism. He lay on thorns, wore rough-textured clothing, and refused to sit, choosing instead to always crouch on his heels. He "gave up cleansing his body until the dirt was so thick that it would fall from his body of its own weight." He would hold his breath "until it felt as though someone were forcing a heated sword through his skull." He even "slept in a yard where rotting human corpses were laid out to be eaten by vultures and scavengers."

Siddhartha hoped to attain an understanding of life through his self-denial, but failed. Instead he gained a realization that neither asceticism (what he was then enduring) nor extravagant living (as he had experienced in the royal court) brought "truth" any nearer.

There existed a better path—the Middle Way.

When Siddhartha demonstrated this realization by eating a normal meal in front of his fellow monks, they deserted him. Gautama headed for Gaya (a major city in the Northeast of India).

There he spread a mat under a fig tree on the banks of the Meranjana River and assumed the "lotus" position (sitting in a modified cross-legged position). He vowed to remain there until he understood life's mysteries. It was his thirty-fifth birthday.

After stilling his mind "like a hummingbird poised in mid-air," Siddhartha began meditating. Within several hours he allegedly saw an "infinite succession of deaths and births in an ever-flowing stream of life" (he had a vision that supported the doctrine of reincarnation, a foundational teaching of the Brahman religion in which he had been raised).

Siddhartha continued meditating until he reached complete enlightenment: "I realized that rebirth has been destroyed, the holy life has been lived, the job has been done, there is nothing after this" (*Buddhism in Translations*, pages 380–381). Along with his vision came an internal perception of how to obtain liberation from *samsara*, or the cycle of rebirths. The young prince had lost his ignorance about the nature of this world. He understood everything. He had become the "awakened one," the "enlightened one"—the Buddha.

According to Buddhist scriptures, Siddhartha remained under that tree in a state of bliss for seven weeks. It was common for monks who had obtained wisdom to retreat from society with their knowledge. Gautama chose to remain in the public and impart what he had learned.

Two months later and nearly one hundred miles from where he had achieved enlightenment, the Buddha gave his first sermon. He presented an address called the "Wheel of the Doctrine." It contained the Four Noble Truths, which would serve as the foundational teachings of Buddhism.

For more than forty years the Buddha continued instructing all who would listen. Then, tragedy struck. Chunda the blacksmith fed the Buddha either spoiled pig's flesh or poisoned mushrooms (truffles). The Buddha quickly fell ill with dysentery and died at the age of eighty.

### **Buddhism Basics**

All of the Buddha's teachings, collectively called the *dharma*, deal with one basic goal—how to escape *samsara*. *Samsara* is the cycle of rebirths that is known more commonly in the West as reincarnation.

Freedom from *samsara* leads to *nirvana*, which is commonly thought of as a state of complete deliverance from pain and sorrow, a state of bliss—the Eastern equivalent of heaven. The *dharma's* entire purpose is to teach Buddhists how to progress along the path toward *nirvana*. This journey is a progression that can be achieved only by following what the Buddha termed his Four Noble Truths, also called *Pativedhanana*, which translated means "the wisdom of realization."

**The First Noble Truth** - Life is full of sorrow and pain, says the Buddha. To believe that life without suffering is possible is to believe an illusion. Here, then, is the First Noble Truth, or

*dukkha* (literally, "a bone twisted out of its joint")—every dimension of life is saturated with pain."

According to the Buddha, people do not accept this truth, but instead choose to cope with pain by deceiving themselves into thinking that life is also filled with happiness. This is an illusion because happiness is fleeting and can never compensate for all the suffering that one experiences.

### ***The Second Noble Truth***

The Second Noble Truth, *tanha* ("attachment"), teaches that the suffering we encounter is all due to the "false desires of the senses that have been deceived into clinging to the impermanent world." (The Buddha by Yamamoto page 33) *Tanha* is closely related to the Buddha's contention that all things in life are meaningless and insignificant because they are temporary. Ignorance (*avidya*) of this truth is a major obstacle that must be overcome if one is to gain freedom from reincarnation.

Exactly how *avidya* (ignorance of life's impermanence) and *tanha* (attachment to impermanent things) interact is a rather complicated concept. Simplified, it breaks down like this: *Nothing has any real meaning or significance. According to the Buddha, everything in life is ultimately unreal because it is fleeting. But we ignorantly attribute reality to such things. By doing so, we give them a degree of ongoing significance and permanence and subsequently attach ourselves to them, which in turn causes suffering.*

The Buddha taught that the "self" is nothing but a temporary creation that suffers until *nirvana* is reached. To the Buddha, the "self" is merely a false image comprised of energy, memories, thoughts, hopes, and fears. Mistakenly viewing ourselves as anything more "is the underlying cause of all greed, anger, hatred, alienation, and aversion, as well as the destructive social behaviors that arise from them."

### ***The Third Noble Truth***

*Nirodha* ("cessation") is the Third Noble Truth. It teaches that the way out of suffering lies in the ability to disengage oneself completely from the false desires of the temporary self. It admonishes one to give up all mental, emotional, or physical cravings, because those desires are merely the manifestation of a person's delusion that the "self" is a permanent entity.

Hence, all desires are the ultimate cause of all suffering. Abandoning our earthly desires when coupled with meritorious positive actions in life, leads to the complete end of suffering—*nirvana*.

### ***The Fourth Noble Truth***

The Fourth Noble Truth is the Buddhist life ethic, and it provides practical steps that can be taken to speed one along his journey to *nirvana*. The Buddha taught that this sacred path has eight branches, which comprise various dimensions of an overall lifestyle that must be adopted by someone who desires to be delivered from suffering.

It is called the sacred Noble Eightfold Path (*Marga*):

1. *Right Views (understanding)*: Belief that the Four Noble Truths are true, accurate, and reliable.
2. *Right Aspirations (ambition)*: A "total commitment of body, mind, and will to the training and discipline required to extricate oneself from the human predicament." One must resolve to maintain thoughts "free from lust, ill will, cruelty, or untruthfulness" and "renounce the selfish self and sensual pleasures."
3. *Right Speech (communication)*: One's words "must be not only charitable but also free from egocentricity." One must abstain from "gossiping, lying, tattling ... harsh language, vain talk, or reveling" and speak "kindly, open, and truthful."
4. *Right Conduct (action)*: A "beneficent behavior extended universally to all living things coupled with an abstinence from alcohol and drugs, for a person must have complete control over his mind to accomplish the difficult task of redemption." One should abstain "from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct" and practice actions that are "peaceful, honest, and pure."
5. *Right Livelihood (vocation)*: A "proper means of support ... in which a person does not inflict pain on other people or creatures." **A butcher, soldier, fisherman, or exterminator would not fit this path.**
6. *Right Effort (endeavor)*: A willingness to reach "deep inside oneself to draw upon all the energy a person possesses." Showing such effort involves "self-training and self-control, self-discipline." The disciple "puts forth will, he makes effort, he stirs up energy, he grips and forces his mind."
7. *Right Mindfulness (mind control)*: Involves paying "close attention to one's mood, emotions, and feelings," because "all we are is the result of what we have thought." Right mindfulness also means examining "every state of feeling in body or mind."
8. *Right Concentration (deep meditation)*: A special practice of meditation in which "thought itself... [is] annihilated and the mind rests." This trance-like state of consciousness is induced through practicing intense concentration on one single object. It progresses through four stages, the end result being "rapture of utter purity of mindfulness ... wherein neither ease is felt or any ill."

By following this Fourth Noble Truth, a person supposedly will be able to eliminate all selfish and false desires, the key to obtaining *nirvana*. Those who reach complete "purity of thought and life" become an *arahat*, or someone who is "freed from the necessity of rebirth, ready for the peace of *nirvana*."

### Differences between Hinduism and Buddhism

#### NIRVANA

Those who reach *nirvana* are freed forever from all the anxieties, fears, and desires that possess ordinary people; they are freed "from the eternal round of decay, suffering, and death." They will never again be reborn. **After death, there is total annihilation.**

Such a concept of *nirvana* is slightly different than the one embraced by the Brahmins of Siddhartha's day and by modern Hindus. Brahmanism/Hinduism teaches that *nirvana* is reached

when an individual soul is united with the Universal Soul. This might be comparable to a raindrop (individual soul) falling into the ocean (Universal Soul).

The Buddha, on the other hand, believed that *nirvana* is reached when, like a candle flame being blown out, a soul's elements, along with all individual identity, are extinguished.

#### KARMA

A doctrinal corollary to reincarnation—*karma*—seeks to explain what factors determine the life into which a person will be reborn. This, too, is slightly reinterpreted by the Buddha. According to the Brahman/Hindu concept of *karma*, one's actions in this life determine the kind of life into which the self or "soul" is reborn.

The Buddha agreed that our good deeds and bad deeds accumulate either merit or debt, and that the ratio of merit to debt determines the state of our next life. But rather than teaching that an individual soul or "self" is reborn, the Buddha maintained that only "karmic matter," or the elements that comprise a person's identity (the "self"), is reborn. Even then, these elements are totally rearranged at rebirth, "much as a 'chariot' is a name for a certain grouping of parts that can be rearranged to be something else while still comprising the same parts."

In other words, the Buddha taught that when someone is reborn, that "person" is not really reborn at all. There is no personal "soul" that continues to exist after someone dies. What is reborn is nothing but rearranged karmic matter that was once a particular individual. The person, or the original "self" that once lived, no longer truly exists. Eventually, through successive rearrangements of *karma*, even those elements that comprised the various persons will be extinguished forever.

Unfortunately, becoming a Buddhist monk is the only way to reach *nirvana* from this present life. One must "abandon ordinary social living and join the monastic community, which Buddha established for those sincere in their quest for liberation." (*A Reasoned Look at Asian Religions page 121*) A person can reach *nirvana* only by leaving behind family, friends, and occupation, and joining a *sangha* (an alms-dependent order of Buddhist monks).

The average person can follow the Buddha's teachings but according to the Buddha, they will not be able to attain *nirvana* in this lifetime. Nor will they benefit from "the higher fruits of the *dharma* (such as inner tranquility)." The best they can hope for is to be reborn as an individual who, in that next lifetime, will become a monk. ***According to the oldest Buddhist tradition, a woman will never reach nirvana from this life, even if she becomes a Buddhist nun. She must be reborn as a man who becomes a monk.***

#### **Buddhist Branches**

The three main schools of Buddhist doctrine have developed over the centuries following the Buddha, include Theravada ("more monastic and conservative"), Mahayana ("more liberal and lay-oriented"), and Vajrayana, or Tibetan ("the most esoteric").

- **THERAVADA** – This tradition is often termed the "fundamentalist branch" of Buddhism because it has preserved what is probably the original form of Buddhism.
- **MAHAYANA Buddhism** includes individuals and schools who subscribe to teachings that are "modifications and amplifications of themes already present in the Theravadin heritage. Followers of the newer way called their belief system Mahayana, which means the "greater vehicle" of salvation, or the "expansive way." They disdainfully labeled the older schools Hinayana, which means the "lesser vehicle" of salvation, or the "exclusive way."
- **VAJRAYANA: WISDOM OF TIBET** (Tibetan Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism, and Lamaism—is called the "diamond way," which by implication means it is the precious, changeless, pure, and clear way.) It developed during the fifth to sixth centuries ad. as Buddhism spread through northern India, Nepal, and finally Tibet. Originally in Tibet was the Bon religion, "a mixture of shamanism [a form of witchcraft], magic, and primitive nature worship." Vajrayana was born when these practices, along with magical formulae designed to obtain magical powers, were incorporated into Buddhism. Included in the Vajrayana tradition are a number of advanced meditative techniques: yoga, special hand gestures (*mudras*), spells, and chants. It also derives many of its doctrines from Vedantic and Tantric influences.

The Tantras are a series of AD. sixth century scriptures associated with the worship of Shakti, Mother of the Universe. They are made available only to initiates of various Tantric religions (Tibetan Buddhism is only one of many Tantric belief systems). Study of these texts "is said to reveal clairvoyance, clairaudience, telepathy, psychometry, the power of sound, vocal expression, and the composition of music."

The word *tantra* basically means "loom" and refers more specifically to the threads of a loom. This expresses the foundational teaching of Tantraism—all things are interwoven into one ultimate reality. Tantraism is also based on a variety of sex rituals that involve "breathing exercises, meditation, and the prolonged sexual contact known as *maithuna*."

In *Open Secrets: A Western Guide to Tibetan Buddhism* page 64, the Tantric Buddhist ideal is to: *"Go ahead and do it, whatever it is, if you think you must and it doesn't harm somebody else. But pay attention; be fully aware of what goes on in your mind and body, of how it really feels."*

### **Buddhism and Christianity**

Most Buddhists are taught to live according to several precepts that are in total harmony with Scripture. Such precepts include refraining from stealing, not committing adultery, and not lying. God's Word reflects each of these values (see Exodus 20:14–16).

All Buddhists recognise that this life is temporal. Nothing here has any eternity. All things are finite, limited, and unable to sustain their own existence. So fleeting is this life that to grow attached to anything here is but a manifestation of one's ignorance of reality. This sentiment is reflected in several portions of Solomon's words in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes.

Buddhism teaches that all people are subject to suffering. The Bible again supports this belief. Pain, affliction, and human misery are spoken of often in Scripture (Genesis 3:16–19; Job 2:13 and Hebrews 11:36–38). God's Word additionally teaches us that although suffering is never a pleasant experience, it can be used to our benefit. Honorable character traits such as patience, humility, compassion, strength, faith, and repentance are all forged in the furnace of adversity (Psalm 119:67, 71; Lamentations 3:19–20; 2 Corinthians 1:4; 12:7; 1 Peter 1:7 and 5:10).

Buddhism and Christianity part company concerning a crucial perspective on suffering. Buddhists find no redeeming value whatsoever in suffering. Suffering is only something to escape. One does not grow *through* suffering, but *in spite of* suffering. Additionally, in Buddhism suffering does not intermittently intrude into human life, life *is* suffering:

*Old age is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering, being in contact with that which one dislikes is suffering, being separated from that which one likes is suffering, failure to realize one's desire is suffering (Vinaya Mahavagga 1.6.19).*

Christians, on the other hand, view suffering—whether it be through injury, illness, disappointment—as allowed by God and used by Him to shape and refine us for eternal life. The lessons we learn through suffering accumulate for us an eternal weight of glory (2 Corinthians 4:17). We are told to understand the good that can come out of trials and tribulations (James 1:2).

The most decisive point at which Buddhism departs from Christianity involves that mode of deliverance from the suffering and sin of this impermanent world. According to the Buddha, everyone must escape reincarnation through accumulation of good *karma* via good works, plus mental disengagement from the false desires of the world. Self-effort is the key to obtaining *nirvana*, a state most often defined as bliss marked by annihilation of the karmic elements that once comprised a temporary personality. To Buddhists, there is not even a "self" to enjoy the deliverance that will supposedly be obtained through their mental striving. The foundational doctrine of Buddhism—reincarnation—is clearly contradicted by the Bible. Hebrews 9:27 teaches us that we live only one lifetime, after which comes the judgment of our souls. Scripture further points out that those who have come to faith in Christ will be in God's presence immediately after death, not reincarnated (Philippians 1:21–23 and 2 Corinthians 5:8). Those who do not know Christ likewise will not be reincarnated, but go to a place of punishment (Job 21:30–34; Matthew 26:41 and 2 Peter 2:9).

Ultimately, believer and unbeliever alike will be resurrected bodily from the grave. Each person's soul will be reunited with their body in a glorified state (1 Corinthians 15:51–52 and 1 Thessalonians 4:14–18). God will then judge who is worthy to dwell with Him for eternity. Followers of Christ will be found worthy based on Christ's willing suffering and sacrifice on the cross as the atonement for their sins (Hebrews 2:9). Through His sacrifice we may come to God (1 Peter 3:18). Our faith in Christ (Romans 5:2; 10:9 and Ephesians 2:1–10) appropriates for us His work on the cross, and we receive the gift God offers—eternal life in His presence (John 3:16; Romans 6:23 and Revelation 22:5). Unbelievers—because they rejected God either directly (through rejection of the gospel), or indirectly (through rejection of the light of truth given to them regarding God's nature)—will be told to depart from God's presence (Matthew

7:23 and Revelation 20:10–14). This concept of positive or negative judgment is foresight to Buddhists because they do not recognize a personal God. The Buddha rejected subservience to a supreme God and, although he did not deny the existence of many equal gods, he felt that worship of such beings was simply another obstruction on the path to *nirvana*.

To the Buddha, gods were those who inhabited cosmos like all other living things. They also were no permanent. They, too, must eventually escape the cycle of rebirths. According to the Bible, however, there is only one personal, infinite, eternal, unchanging, transcendent God (Psalm 90:2; Isaiah 43:10; Malachi 3:6; Mark 12:29 and James 1:17). Scripture further reveals that God is a being to whom we are indeed accountable (Romans 2:16; 14:10; Hebrews 13:4 and James 4:12).

Resources:

[www.equip.org](http://www.equip.org)

[www.carm.net](http://www.carm.net)

**Kingdom of the Cults** - by Walter Martin (Author), Ravi Zacharias

**Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message** by Ravi Zacharias

**The Lotus and the Cross: Jesus Talks with Buddha** by Ravi Zacharias

**New Birth or Rebirth?: Jesus Talks with Krishna** by Ravi Zacharias