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Gautam Buddha

"The Buddha was the greatest teacher of humanity. His religion was social reform without the use of force." - Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar

Buddha was the first great democrat of the world, who taught the equality of men. Gautama Buddha stands among the most luminous figures in the history of human thought — not as a god, prophet, or emissary of divine command, but as a man who, through profound insight, inquiry, and unshakable compassion, discovered a path beyond suffering.

Gautam Buddha, originally named Siddhartha of clan Gotama, was born in the 6th century BCE in Northern India. His father, King Suddhodana, ruled the small kingdom of the Sakyas, located in what is now Nepal, and his mother was Queen Maya. Following the customs of the time, Siddhartha married young, at the age of sixteen, to a kind and beautiful princess named Yasodhara.



He spent his early years surrounded by luxury and comfort inside the royal palace. However, when he came to understand the deeper truths of life such as- impermanence, discontent, and existential uncertainty— he was deeply moved and resolved to find a way to overcome human suffering. At the age of twenty-nine, shortly after the birth of his only son, Rahul, he renounced his royal life and set out as a wandering ascetic in search of truth. For six years,

he travelled through the Ganges plains, learning from famous teachers and practicing strict forms of asceticism. Yet, none of these practices brought him the answers he sought. In the end, Siddhartha abandoned traditional methods and there after Buddha never bowed down to anything—neither Veda, nor caste, nor priest, nor custom and chose his own path — one that would ultimately lead him to Enlightenment and transform the world forever.

One evening, seated beneath a tree by the river Neranjara near Gaya in modern Bihar, Siddhartha Gotama attained Enlightenment at the age of thirty-five. The tree, thereafter known as the Bodhi Vriksha or "Tree of Wisdom," became a symbol of spiritual awakening. From that moment, he came to be known as the Buddha — the "Enlightened One." After his Enlightenment, the Buddha delivered his first sermon to five ascetics, his former companions, at Isipatana (modern-day Sarnath near Varanasi). For the next forty-five years, he travelled across India, teaching all who were willing to listen whether kings and peasants, Brahmins and outcasts, the wealthy and the poor — without making the slightest distinction between them. His message transcended all barriers of caste, status, and birth. As historian Romila Thapar notes, "The Buddha rejected the hierarchies of his time and offered a path based on ethical conduct, personal effort, and inner realization, accessible to every individual regardless of social standing." Therefore, the Dhamma he preached was truly universal, inviting all humanity towards freedom and awakening.

Rooted in the Buddha's wisdom and teachings, Buddhism prospered like a great banyan tree, offering shade to the world. Buddhism is "a philosophy that is, in a very deep sense, scientific, appealing to reason rather than authority, and insisting upon thought rather than belief," as described by Bertrand Russell. The Buddha's attitude toward knowledge and belief was fundamentally critical and scientific. He insisted that doctrines should not be accepted blindly: *'Do not accept anything because it is given by tradition... nor because it is found in the scriptures... but after observation and analysis, when it agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it'*. Thus, Buddhism encourages personal verification rather than submission to authority. Truth, according to the Buddha, must be realized individually; no external authority can substitute for direct experience. Buddhism is neither a faith nor a belief system, but a method for seeing things as they really are.

Buddha's philosophy rests on the idea of finding a balanced way of living. Buddha urged his followers to avoid the two extremes of indulgence in worldly pleasures and the harshness of severe asceticism. Instead, he taught the *Madhyam Marg* — the Middle Path — a life of moderation, wisdom, and inner peace.

At the heart of the Buddha's message lies the trinity of the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path (Ashtanga Marga), and the Five Precepts (Panchshila).

Buddhism is rooted in the **Four Noble Truths (Cattāri Ariyasaccāni)**, which provide a framework for understanding and overcoming suffering (dukkha). The first truth acknowledges that suffering is an inherent part of life, while the second identifies desire (tanha) as its cause. The third truth reveals that suffering can be eliminated (nirodha), and the fourth presents the **Eightfold Path (Ariya Ashtanga Marga)** as the way to end suffering. This path includes practices such as right understanding (Sammā Ditthi), right intention (Sammā Sankappa), right speech (Sammā Vācā), and right action (Sammā

Kammanta), guiding individuals toward ethical living, wisdom, and mental discipline. Additionally, the **Five Precepts (Panchshila)** offer a moral foundation for lay practitioners, urging them to refrain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication. Together, these principles form a holistic approach to liberation, emphasizing personal effort, mindfulness, and compassion, ultimately leading to enlightenment (bodhi) and freedom from the cycle of suffering.

Richard Gombrich, a British scholar of Buddhist studies, emphasizes Buddha's historical significance not only as a religious leader but also as a social and philosophical reformer who challenged the existing social structures of his time. As Gombrich notes, "*Buddhism, for the first time in history, put forward the idea that suffering is universal and that the eradication of it is attainable by anyone who is willing to practice the right way. Gautama Buddha, as a historical figure, was not just a preacher but a revolutionary figure in terms of ideas.*"

In essence, as R.C. Majumdar observed, "Gautam Buddha stands out as one of the greatest personalities India has ever produced, whose life and teachings transformed not only Indian society but also the thought of the entire Eastern world." Buddha's thoughts regarding human suffering, compassion, and the path to liberation have left an indelible mark on history. His teachings continue to inspire millions, offering a timeless guide for those seeking peace, wisdom, and personal transformation in today's world.

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- 1) Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 1974.
- 2) Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*, 2002.
- 3) Gethin, Rupert. *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
- 4) Drishti IAS. *Buddhism in India*. Accessed April 28, 2025. <https://www.drishtiias.com/to-the-points/paper1/buddhism-in-india>