

**Chapter 11**  
**Buddhism**  
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**Chapter Summary**

Buddhism traces its origins back to a teacher known as the Buddha. Tradition claims a man named Siddhartha Gautama lived sometime in the fifth and sixth centuries BC, probably between 563 and 483. He was purportedly a prince in the northern Indian kingdom of Shakyas, likely the borderland of modern Nepal and India. The Buddha's birth is surrounded by numerous stories and legends, one which claims he was born of a virgin, similar to what Christians believe about Mary the mother of Jesus.

More popular and significantly older than some of these legends is the story of the Buddha's mother's dream in which a white elephant appeared, circled her several times, and then miraculously entered her womb through her side. Startled by the dream, she summoned various wise men and prophetic figures to obtain an interpretation. Since white elephants are very rare in India, yet within the Hindu tradition are regarded as sacred, the diviners agreed the dream pointed to some great event. They concluded it must mean the child about to be born would become either a great warrior with a vast kingdom or a great religious leader whose wisdom would impress the entire world.

Another legend advances that while passing through Lumbini, the Buddha's mother gave birth to him near Rummidei, in modern Nepal. This spot would become a center of Buddhist pilgrimage and the great Indian king Ashoka (299–237 BC) erected a monument on the spot where the Buddha was said to have been born. Still another story conveys how a great Hindu sage recognized the significance of the child and predicted the boy would become a great teacher. Other Hindu priests made similar prophecies.

Siddhartha's life was not easy and Buddhist texts relate many stories of miraculous events that accompanied his childhood, somewhat like those told of the child Jesus in the apocryphal gospels. Around the age of sixteen, Siddhartha was married to Yasodhara who bore him at least one son, Rahula. During this time, Siddhartha is said to have lived in great luxury that bordered on decadence. Somewhat like Sleeping Beauty in the Western fairy tale, he was shielded from everyday life and that which might lead him to leave home or associate with the wrong kind of religious person.

At about age thirty, a series of experiences dramatically changed Siddhartha's life. Depending on which tradition one uses—and there are several—four encounters shook the young prince's complacency and significantly altered his way of life. Reportedly, while out riding one day, he encountered in rapid succession a young child full of energy and joy, a decrepit old man in great pain, a very sick younger man near death, and a funeral procession carrying a decaying corpse. Seeing the passage from life to death in such short order prompted the young prince to question his existence, ask about the purpose of life, and vow to find life's true meaning.

After brooding over the significance of these encounters, Siddhartha made the momentous decision to leave his home, abandon his family, and seek spiritual truth. This act of wrenching

himself free from family and normal social commitments is known as Siddhartha's "Great Renunciation." This began a six-year period of wandering during which he visited numerous sages and holy men who practiced various forms of arduous spiritual exercises and meditation. None of these, however, provided him with the knowledge or satisfaction he sought.

Disillusioned, he is said to have sat under a fig tree one day where he struggled with a godlike being and experienced a series of temptations related to political power, sexual seduction, demonic attacks, and intellectual prowess. During a long and terrifying night, Siddhartha gained ever deeper levels of consciousness, seeing visions of his past lives and gaining an understanding of the essence of all things. Now he had resolved all his questions, found answers to the puzzle of existence, and gained true understanding.

Life, he recognized, means suffering, which is the essence of all things in this earthly existence. He now realized that the only solution to the anguish of life comes from embracing what he came to call the middle way.

Following this enlightenment, the Buddha spent several weeks meditating on the truths he had discovered, considering how best to communicate them to others, and wondering whether his truth was the truth for him alone. He eventually decided to share his newly discovered truth and began making disciples. Humans, he came to believe, are like lotus plants. Some lotuses float on water, some beneath the surface, and others fluctuate between the two. Still others are capable of seeing the truth and obtaining it for themselves, while others will never see the truth and never be enlightened. Still others will fluctuate between truth and error and need someone who can save them from themselves. He therefore concluded that most humans need someone to show them the way even though they must walk the path for themselves.

Since many of his former companions with whom he had sought spiritual truth were alive and still seeking truth, the Buddha decided to find them and proclaim his good news to them. They initially wanted nothing to do with him but finally acknowledged he spoke the truth when he startled them by crying out: "Surely, my friends and fellow monks, you have to admit that I've never spoken with such authority before." For the rest of his life, the Buddha traveled India preaching the truth as he had discovered it. As his converts grew in number, he sent out what Christians call evangelists or traveling preachers to spread the word. The Buddha lived forty years after his enlightenment and his last words are claimed to have been: "All things are conditional and transient; try to attain your salvation with diligence."

After the Buddha's death around 483 BC, his disciples held a great council where they formulated an authoritative canon and established the rules for the order of monks. A schism divided the movement into two groups, the Hinayanists and the Mahayanists. The Hinayanists argued that only monks can possibly attain enlightenment. The Mahayanists countered that pious members of the laity could attain enlightenment by their own efforts. The Hinayana tradition developed into what is today known as Theravadin Buddhism and spread from India to Sri Lanka and throughout Southeast Asia. Mahayana Buddhism spread from India into Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. The best-known school of Japanese Buddhism is Zen.

Buddhism did not penetrate Western societies until the late nineteenth century when a number of British colonial officials converted to what they claimed was Buddhism, which was often merely a

sanitized version of deism or agnosticism. In America, Buddhism was popularized through the activities of the Theosophical Society founded in 1875 and by the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. The Buddhist Churches of America was established in California in 1899.