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# Roots of Hinduism and Buddhism

## TERMS & NAMES

- reincarnation
- karma
- Jainism
- Siddhartha Gautama
- enlightenment
- nirvana

### MAIN IDEA

The religious beliefs of the Vedic Age eventually developed into Hinduism and Buddhism.

### WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Almost one-fifth of the world's people today practice one of these two religions.

**SETTING THE STAGE** At first, the Aryans and non-Aryans followed their own forms of religion. Then as the two groups intermingled, the gods and forms of their religions also tended to blend together. This blending resulted in the worship of thousands of gods. Different ways of living and different beliefs made life more complex for both groups. This complexity led some people to question the world and their place in it. They even questioned the enormous wealth and power held by the Brahmin priests. These priests officiated at elaborate state ceremonies and sacrifices. Out of this turmoil, new religious ideas arose that have continued to influence millions of people today.

## Hinduism Develops Over Centuries

Hinduism is a collection of religious beliefs that developed slowly over a long period of time. Some aspects of the religion can be traced back to ancient times. In a Hindu marriage today, for example, the bride and groom marry in the presence of the sacred fire as they did centuries ago. Verses from the *Vedas* are recited daily by the faithful. Also, some non-Aryan gods known in Vedic times, such as Krishna of the *Mahabharata*, continue to be worshiped.

From time to time, scholars have tried to organize the many popular cults, gods, and traditions into one grand system of belief. However, Hinduism—unlike religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam—cannot be traced back to one founder with a single set of ideas.

Vishnu grew to become a major Hindu god after the age of the *Vedas*. He is seen here as the whole Universe in all its variety. He is blue, the color of infinity.



**Origins and Beliefs** Hindus share a common world-view. They see religion as a way of liberating the soul from the illusions, disappointments, and mistakes of everyday existence. Sometime between 750 and 550 B.C., Hindu teachers tried to interpret and explain the hidden meaning of the Vedic hymns. As they meditated on the *Vedas*, they asked: What is the nature of reality? What is morality? Is there eternal life? What is the soul? The teachers' comments were later written down and became known as the *Upanishads* (oo-PAHN-ih-shahdz).

The *Upanishads* are written as dialogues, or discussions, between a student and a teacher. In the course of the dialogues, the two explore how a person can achieve liberation from desires and suffering. This is described as *moksha* (MOHK-shah), a state of perfect understanding of all things. The teacher distinguishes between *atman*, the individual soul of a living being, and *Brahman*, the world soul that contains and

### Background

Both the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* are counted among Hinduism's sacred books.



unites all atmans. The interconnectedness of all life is a basic concept in all Indian religions. Here is how one teacher explains the unifying spirit of Brahman:

#### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Thou art woman, Thou art man, Thou art the lad and the maiden too. Thou art the old man tottering on his staff: Once born thou comest to be, thy face turned every way! A dark-blue moth art Thou, green [parrot] with red eyes. Pregnant with lightning—seasons, seas: Thyself beginningless, all things dost Thou pervade. From thee all worlds were born.

*Svetasvatara Upanishad. IV. 3–4*

When a person understands the relationship between atman and Brahman, that person achieves perfect understanding (*moksha*) and a release from life in this world. This understanding does not usually come in one lifetime. By the process of **reincarnation** (rebirth), an individual soul or spirit is born again and again until *moksha* is achieved. A soul's **karma**—good or bad deeds—follows from one reincarnation to another. Karma influences specific life circumstances, such as the caste one is born into, one's state of health, wealth or poverty, and so on.

**Hinduism Changes and Develops** Hinduism has gone through many changes over the last 2,500 years. The world soul, Brahman, was sometimes seen as having the personalities of three gods: Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the protector; and Shiva, the destroyer. Vishnu also took on many forms or personalities, for example, as Krishna, the divine cowherder, and as Rama, the perfect king. Over the centuries, Brahma gradually faded into the background, while the many forms of a great Mother Goddess grew in importance.

Hindus today are free to choose the deity they worship or to choose none at all. Most, however, follow a family tradition that may go back centuries. They are also free to choose among three different paths for achieving *moksha*. They are the path of right thinking, the path of right action, or the path of religious devotion.

**Hinduism and Society** Hindu ideas about karma and reincarnation strengthened the caste system. If a person was born as an upper-caste male—a Brahmin, warrior, or merchant—his good fortune was said to come from good karma earned in a former life. However, a person who was born as a female, a laborer, or an untouchable might be getting the results of bad deeds in a former life. With some exceptions, only men of the top three varnas could hope to achieve *moksha* in their present life. The laws of karma worked with the same certainty as the world's other natural laws. Good karma brought good fortune and bad karma resulted in bad fortune.

Together, the beliefs of Hinduism and its caste structure dominated every aspect of a person's life. These beliefs determined what one could eat and how one ate it, personal cleanliness, the people one could associate with, how one dressed, and so on. Today, even in the most ordinary activities of daily life, Hindus turn to their religion for guidance.

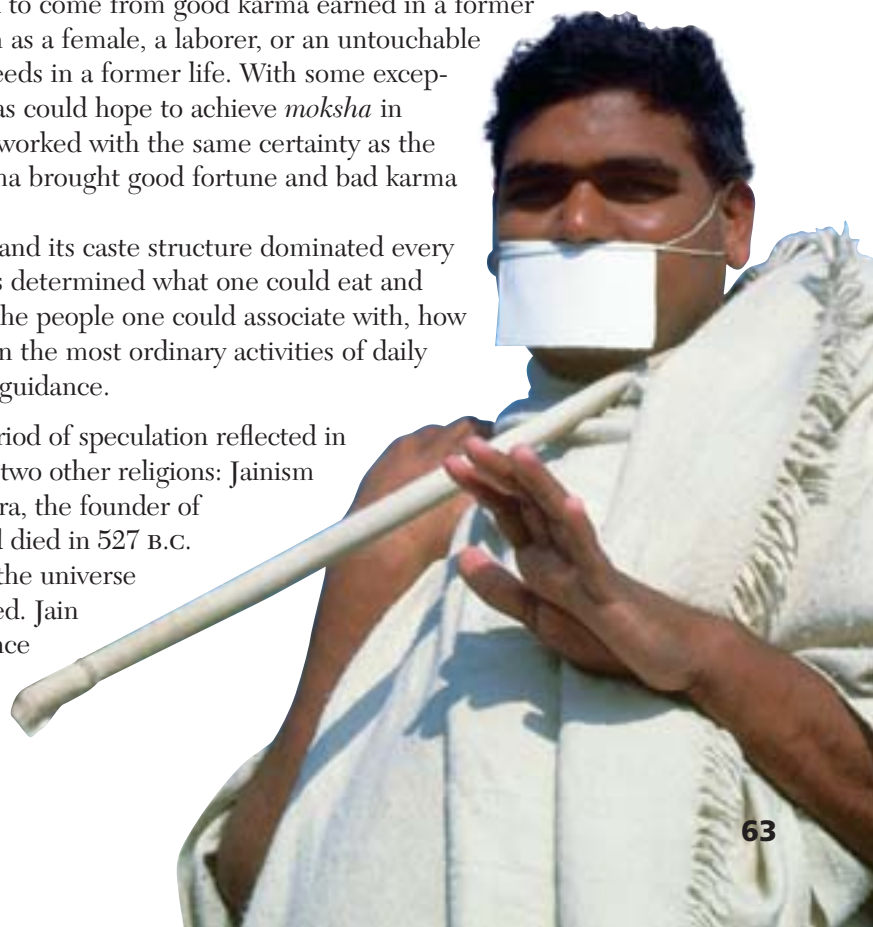
**New Religions Arise** The same period of speculation reflected in the *Upanishads* also led to the rise of two other religions: Jainism (JY-nihz-uhm) and Buddhism. Mahavira, the founder of **Jainism**, was born about 599 B.C. and died in 527 B.C. Mahavira believed that everything in the universe has a soul and so should not be harmed. Jain monks carry the doctrine of nonviolence to its logical conclusion. They sweep ants off their path and wear gauze masks over their mouths to avoid breathing in an insect accidentally.

#### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

##### A. Making

**Inferences** How might the lack of a single founder result in Hinduism changing more over time than other religions?

A Jain man wears a mask and carries a brush to prevent harm to small creatures.



#### Background

The doctrine of non-violence (*ahimsa*) is important both to Hindus and Jains.



In keeping with this nonviolence, followers of Jainism looked for occupations that would not harm any creature. So they have a tradition of working in trade and commerce.

Because of their business activities, Jains today make up one of the wealthiest communities in India. Jains have traditionally preached tolerance of all religions. As a result, they have made few efforts to convert followers of other faiths. Because of this tolerance, Jains have not sent out missionaries. So, almost all the nearly 5 million Jains in the world today live in India.

#### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

##### B. Synthesizing

How far might the Jain respect for life extend?

## HISTORYMAKERS



### Siddhartha Gautama c. 563–483 B.C.

According to Buddhist tradition, signs predicted even before his birth that Siddhartha Gautama would be a great man. His mother Mahamaya had dreamt of a beautiful elephant that was bright as silver. When asked to interpret the dream, Brahmin priests declared that the child to be born would either be a great monarch or a Buddha (an enlightened one).

Tradition also relates that at Gautama's birth, he exhibited the signs of a child destined for greatness. There were 32 such signs, including golden-tinged skin, webbed fingers and toes, a knob on the top of his skull, a long tongue, a tuft of hair between his eyebrows, and a thousand-spoked wheel on each foot. Some images of the Buddha display these traits.

## The Buddha Seeks Enlightenment

Buddhism developed out of the same period of religious questioning that shaped modern Hinduism and Jainism. The founder of Buddhism, **Siddhartha Gautama** (sihd·DAHR·tuh GOW·tuh·muh) was born into a noble family that lived in Kapilavastu, in the foothills of the Himalayas in Nepal. According to Buddhist legend, the baby exhibited the marks of a great man. A prophecy indicated that if the child stayed at home he was destined to become a world ruler. If the child left home, however, he would become a universal spiritual leader. To make sure the boy would be a great king, his father isolated him in his palace. Separated from the world, Siddhartha married and had a son.

**Siddhartha's Quest** Siddhartha never ceased thinking about the world that lay outside the palace, which he had never seen. When he was 29, he ventured outside the palace four times. First he saw an old man, next a sick man, then a corpse being carried to the cremation grounds, and finally a wandering holy man who seemed at peace with himself. Siddhartha understood these events to mean that every living thing experiences old age, sickness, and death and that only a religious life offers a refuge from this inevitable suffering. Siddhartha decided to spend his life searching for religious truth and an end to suffering. So, soon after learning of his son's birth, he left the palace.

Siddhartha wandered through the forests of India for six years seeking **enlightenment**, or wisdom. He tried many ways of reaching an enlightened state. He first debated with other religious seekers. Then he fasted, eating only six grains of rice a day. (It was said that his stomach became so empty that by poking a finger into it, he could touch his backbone.) Yet none of these methods brought him to the truth, and he continued to suffer. Finally, he sat in meditation under a large fig tree. After 49 days of meditation, he achieved an understanding of the cause of suffering in this world. From then on, he was known as the Buddha, meaning “the enlightened one.”

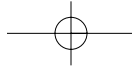
**Origins and Beliefs** The Buddha preached his first sermon to five companions who had accompanied him on his wanderings. That first sermon became a landmark in the history of the world's religions. In it, he laid out the four main ideas that he had understood in his enlightenment. He called those ideas the Four Noble Truths:

<b>First Noble Truth</b>	Everything in life is suffering and sorrow.
<b>Second Noble Truth</b>	The cause of all suffering is people's selfish desire for the temporary pleasures of this world.
<b>Third Noble Truth</b>	The way to end all suffering is to end all desires.
<b>Fourth Noble Truth</b>	The way to overcome such desires and attain enlightenment is to follow the Eightfold Path, which is called the Middle Way between desires and self-denial.

#### Vocabulary

fasted: did not eat.





The Eightfold Path was like a staircase. For the Buddha, those who were seeking enlightenment had to master one step at a time. Most often, this mastery would occur over many lifetimes. Here is how he described the Middle Way and its Eightfold Path:

#### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

What is the Middle Way? . . . It is the Noble Eightfold Path—Right Views, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. This is the Middle Way.

*The Buddha, from Samyutta Nikaya*

By following the Eightfold Path, anyone could reach **nirvana**, the Buddha's word for release from selfishness and pain. The Buddha's teachings included many ideas from the Hindu tradition. However, they also differed sharply from that tradition.

As in Hinduism, the Buddha accepted the idea of reincarnation. He also accepted a cyclical, or repetitive, view of history, where the world is created and destroyed over and over again. However, the Buddha rejected the many gods of Hinduism. Instead, he taught a way of enlightenment. Like many of his time, the Buddha reacted against the privileges of the Brahmin priests, and thus he rejected the caste system. The final goals of both religions—*moksha* for Hindus and nirvana for Buddhists—are similar. Both involve a perfect state of understanding and a break from the chain of reincarnations.

#### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

**C. Comparing** In what ways are Buddhism and Hinduism similar?

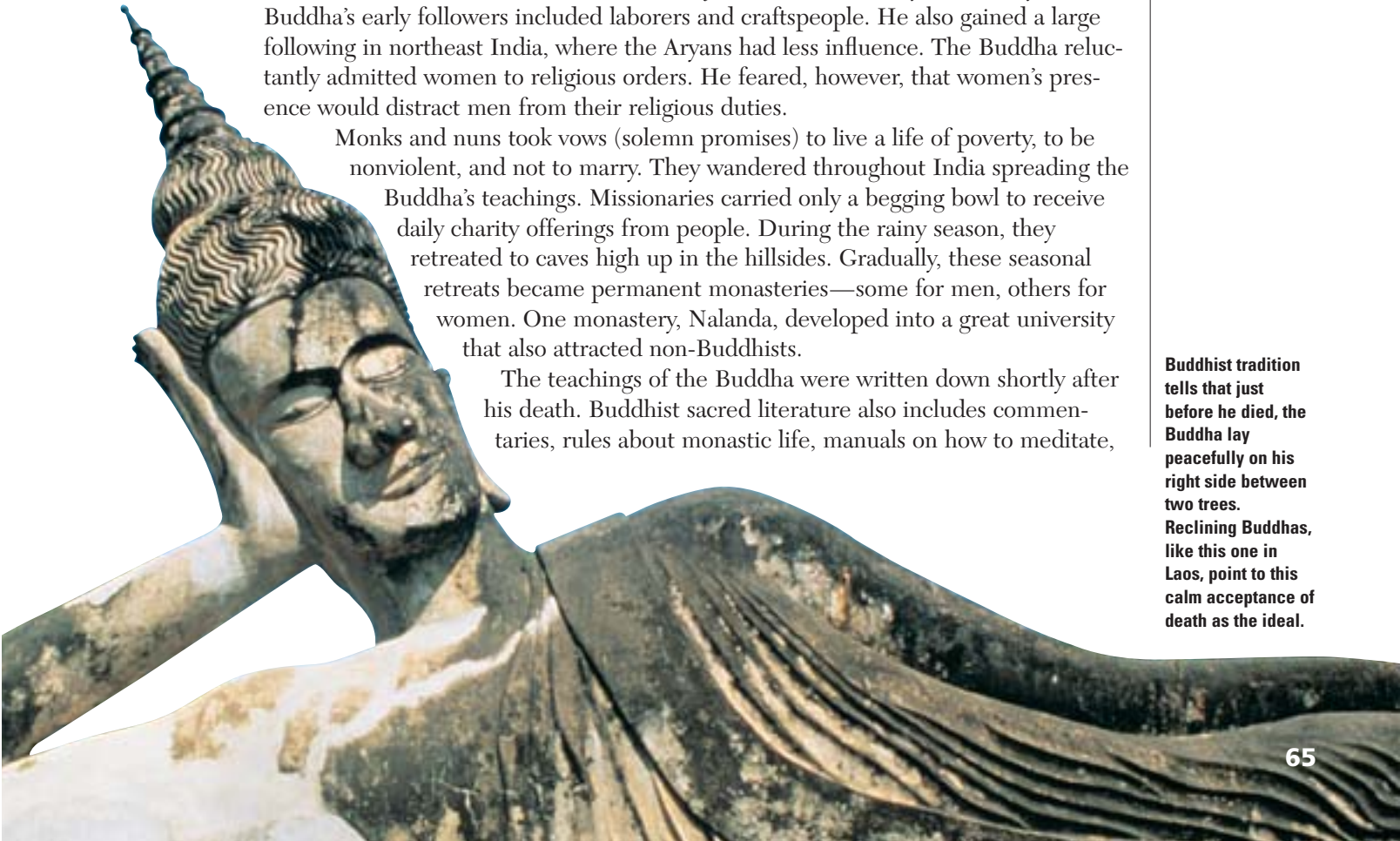
**The Religious Community** The five disciples who heard the Buddha's first sermon were the first monks admitted to a *sangha*, or Buddhist religious order. At first, the *sangha* was a community of Buddhist monks and nuns. However, *sangha* eventually referred to the entire religious community. It included Buddhist laity (those who hadn't devoted their entire life to religion). The religious community, together with the Buddha and the *dharma* (Buddhist doctrine or law), make up the "Three Jewels" of Buddhism. Every day, Buddhists all over the world recognize the importance of the Three Jewels of their faith by declaring: "I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the law. I take refuge in the community."

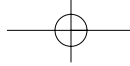
**Buddhism and Society** Because of his rejection of the caste system, many of the Buddha's early followers included laborers and craftspeople. He also gained a large following in northeast India, where the Aryans had less influence. The Buddha reluctantly admitted women to religious orders. He feared, however, that women's presence would distract men from their religious duties.

Monks and nuns took vows (solemn promises) to live a life of poverty, to be nonviolent, and not to marry. They wandered throughout India spreading the Buddha's teachings. Missionaries carried only a begging bowl to receive daily charity offerings from people. During the rainy season, they retreated to caves high up in the hillsides. Gradually, these seasonal retreats became permanent monasteries—some for men, others for women. One monastery, Nalanda, developed into a great university that also attracted non-Buddhists.

The teachings of the Buddha were written down shortly after his death. Buddhist sacred literature also includes commentaries, rules about monastic life, manuals on how to meditate,

Buddhist tradition tells that just before he died, the Buddha lay peacefully on his right side between two trees. Reclining Buddhas, like this one in Laos, point to this calm acceptance of death as the ideal.





and legends about the Buddha's previous reincarnations (the *Jatakas*). This sacred literature was first written down in the first century B.C.

**Buddhism in India** During the centuries following the Buddha's death, missionaries were able to spread his faith over large parts of Asia. Buddhist missionaries went to

Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia in the third century B.C. Buddhist ideas also traveled along Central Asian trade routes to China.

However, Buddhism never gained a significant foothold in India, the country of its origin. Several theories exist about Buddhism's gradual disappearance in India. One theory states that Hinduism simply absorbed Buddhism. The two religions constantly influenced each other. Over time, the Buddha came to be identified by Hindus as one of the ten incarnations (reappearances on earth) of the god Vishnu. Hindus, thus, felt no need to convert to Buddhism. They believed it had already become a part of their own religion.

Nonetheless, despite the small number of Buddhists in India, the region has always been an important place of pilgrimages for Buddhists. Today, as they have for centuries, Buddhist pilgrims flock to visit spots associated with the Buddha's life. These sites include his birthplace at Kapilavastu, the fig tree near Gaya, and the site of his first sermon near Varanasi. Buddhists also visit the *stupas*, or sacred mounds, that are said to contain his relics. The pilgrims circle around the sacred object or sanctuary, moving in a clockwise direction. They also lie face down on the ground and leave flowers. These three actions—circling a shrine, lying face down as a sign of humility, and offering flowers—are important rituals in Buddhist worship.

**Vocabulary**  
pilgrimages: travels to holy places.

## CONNECT to TODAY

### Buddhism in the West

Throughout the 20th century, large numbers of Asians have immigrated to live in the West, particularly in North America. Many of them naturally brought their Buddhist religion with them. Today, Buddhist temples have become a common feature of many large cities in the West.

Since the 1950s, many non-Asians who were dissatisfied with the religions of the West have turned to Buddhism for insight into life's meaning and for peace of mind. They have particularly responded to Zen Buddhism, which stresses everyone's ability to reach enlightenment during this lifetime. Today, Buddhism can claim 920,000 Asian and non-Asian believers in North America alone.

**Trade and the Spread of Buddhism** As important as missionaries

were to the spread of Buddhism, traders played an even more crucial role in this process. Along with their products, traders carried Buddhism beyond India to Sri Lanka. Buddhist religion was also brought southeast along trade routes to Burma, Thailand, and the island of Sumatra. Likewise, Buddhism followed the Central Asian trade routes, called the Silk Roads, all the way to China. From China, Buddhism spread to Korea—and from Korea to Japan. The movement of trade thus succeeded in making Buddhism the most widespread religion of East Asia. Throughout human history, trade has been a powerful force for the spread of ideas. Just as trade spread Buddhism in East Asia, it helped spread cultural influences in another major region of the world: the Mediterranean basin, as you will learn in Section 3.

## Section 2 Assessment

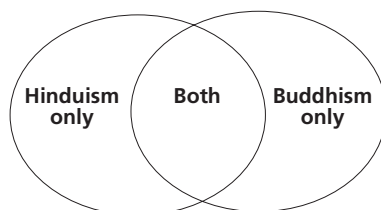
### 1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify

- reincarnation
- karma
- Jainism
- Siddhartha Gautama
- enlightenment
- nirvana

### 2. TAKING NOTES

Compare Hindu and Buddhist beliefs and practices using a Venn diagram like the one below.



### 3. MAKING INFERENCES

How might the belief in reincarnation provide a form of social control?

**THINK ABOUT**

- karma
- the belief in the interrelatedness of all life
- caste

### 4. THEME ACTIVITY

#### Religious and Ethical Systems

Create an illustrated information board showing the life of Siddhartha Gautama. Include family background, accomplishments, and a list of his religious and ethical beliefs.