



### The Story of the Buddha

Siddhartha, also known as Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, was born about 2500 year ago. This was a time of rapid change in the lives of people. The Buddha belonged to a small gana known as the Sakya gana, and was a Kshatriya. When he was a young man, he left the comforts of his home in search of knowledge. He wandered for several years, meeting and holding discussions with other thinkers. He finally decided to find his own path to realisation, and meditated for days on end under a peepal tree at Bodh Gaya in Bihar, where he attained enlightenment. After that, he was known as the Buddha or the Wise one. He then went to Sarnath, near Varanasi, where he taught for the first time. He spent the rest of his life travelling on foot, going from place, teaching people, till he passed away at Kusinara. The Buddha taught that life is full of suffering and happiness. This is caused because we have cravings and desires (which often cannot be fulfilled). Sometimes, even if we get what we want, we are not satisfied, and went even more (or want other things). The Buddha described this as thirst or tanha. He taught that this constant craving could be removed by following moderation in everything. He also taught people to be kind, and to respect the lives of others, including animals. He believed that the results of our actions (called karma), whether good or bad, affect us both in this life and the next. The Buddha taught in the language of the ordinary people, Prakrit, so that everybody could understand his message. He also encouraged people to think for themselves rather than to simply accept what he said.

### Upanishads

Around the time that the Buddha was preaching and perhaps a little earlier, other thinkers also tried to find answers to difficult questions. Many of these thinkers felt that there was something permanent in the universe that would last even after death. They described this as the atman or the individual soul and the Brahman or the universal soul. They believed that ultimately, both the atman and the barman were one.

Many of their ideas were recorded in the Upanishads. These were part of the later Vedic texts, Upanishad literally means 'approaching and sitting near' and the texts contain conversations between teachers and students. Often, ideas were presented through simple dialogues.

Most Upanishadic thinkers were men especially Brahmins and rajas. Occasionally, there is mention of women thinkers, such as Gargi, who was famous for her learning, and participated in debates held in royal courts. Poor people rarely took part in these discussions. One famous exception was Satyakama Jabala, who was named after his mother, the slave women Jabali. He had a deep desire to learn about reality, was accepted as a student by a Brahmin teacher named Gautama, and became one of the best-known thinkers of the time. Many of the ideas of the Upanishads were later developed by the famous thinker Shankaracharya.

### Jainism

The most famous thinkers of the Jainas, Vardhamana Mahavira, also spread his message around this time, i.e. 2500 years ago. He was a kshatriya prince of the Lichchavis, a group that was part of the Vajji sangha. At the age of thirty, he left home and went to live in a forest. For twelve years he led a hard and lonely life, at the end of which he attained enlighten. He taught a simple doctrine : men

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and women who wished to know the truth must leave their homes. They must follow very strictly the rules of ahimsa, which means not hurting or killing living beings.”All beings,” said Mahavira “long to live. To all things life is dear “Ordinary people could understand the teachings of Mahavira and his followers, because they used Prakrit. There were several forms of Prakrit, used in different parts of the country, and named after the region in which they were used. For example, the Prakrit spoken in Magadha was known as Magadhi.

Followers of Mahavira, who were known as Jainas, had to lead very simple lives, begging for food. They had to be absolutely honest and were especially asked not to steal. Also, they had to observe celibacy. And men had to give up everything, including their clothes. The teachings of Mahavira and his followers were transmitted orally for several centuries. They were written down in the form in which they are presently available at a place called valabahi, in Gujarat, about 1500 year ago

### The Sangha

Both the mahavira and the Buddha felt that only those who left their homes could gain true knowledge. They arranged for them to stay together in the Sangha, an association of those who left their homes.

The rules made for the Buddhist sangha were written down in a book called the Vinaya Pitaka there were separate branches for men and women. All men could join the Sangha. However; children had to take the permission of their Parent and slaves that of their masters. Those who’s worked for king had to take his Permission and debtors that of creditors. Women had to make their husbands’ permission.

Men and women who joined the sangha led simple lives. They meditated for most of the time, and went to cities and villages to beg for food during fixed hours. That is why they were known as Bhikkhus (the prakrit word for renounce - beggar) and Bhikkhunis. They taught others, and helped one another. They also held meetings to settle any quarrels that took place within the sangha.

Those who joined the sangha included Brahmin. Kshatriyas , merchants, laborers, barbers, courtesans and slaves.

### Monasteries

To begin with, both Jain and Buddhist monks went from place to place throughout the year, teaching people. The only time they stayed in one place was during the rainy season, when it was very difficult to travel. Then their supporters built temporary shelters for them in gardens, or they lived in natural caves in hilly areas.

At time went on, many supporters of the monks and nuns, and they themselves, felt the need for more permanent for more permanent shelters and so monasteries were built. These were known as viharas. The viharas were made of wood, and then of brick. Some were even in caves that were dug out in hills, especially in western India. The land of which the vihara was built was donated by a rich merchant or a landowner, or the king. The local people came with gifts of food, clothing and medicines for the monks and nuns.

