

Name: _____

Vesak Festival (Buddha's Birthday)

The Story of the Buddha

Buddhism is one of the world's major religions. The religion is 2,500 years old and is followed by 350 million Buddhists worldwide.

Buddhism is the main religion in many Asian countries. It is different from most Western religions because it is *not* centered on man's relationship with God. Buddhists do not believe in a personal creator God.



Buddhism is a religion about suffering and the need to get rid of it. A key concept (idea) of Buddhism is *Nirvana*, the most enlightened, and blissful state that one can achieve—a state without suffering.

Buddhism began in the 4th or 5th century B.C.E. in northeastern India. It is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who is known as the Buddha or 'awakened one'.

Siddhartha Gautama was born into a royal family around the year 580 BCE in the village of Lumbini in Nepal. Soon after his birth, a sage (wise man) told his father that Prince Siddhartha was not destined to become king. Instead, he would give up his right to the throne and all worldly possessions to become a wandering beggar.

His parents were determined not to let this happen. They kept their son shut up within the palace walls, away from the sufferings of life. Consequently, the prince knew nothing about sickness, old age, or death.

However, as he grew older, Siddhartha became more and more curious about what went on outside the walls of his palace. At about the age of 30, after he had grown up, married, and had a child, he left the palace for the first time.

Outside the palace walls, Siddhartha saw a man weak and frail from old age. Then, he came across a sick man in great pain. Finally, he saw a dead body being taken for burial.

The prince was troubled by these things and asked his servant to explain to him what he had seen. The servant said that old age, sickness and death come to us all. Everyone will die one day and leave the world.

This answer was not enough for Siddhartha. He wanted to know why there was there so much suffering and what could be done about it. That night,

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while his wife and son were asleep, Siddhartha left the palace and took up the life of a wandering beggar. He spent the next five years looking for answers to his questions.

One day, he sat down to rest under a large fig tree and started meditating (thinking deeply). After 49 days of meditation, Siddhartha suddenly understood the meaning of life; he had attained *enlightenment*. From that day on he was known as Buddha or the 'Awakened One.'

Siddhartha spent the rest of his life teach the path to *enlightenment* to all who would listen. According to his teachings, all life is suffering and the only way to escape from suffering is through unselfish behavior.

Buddhists believe that there is a cycle of birth, life, death and then rebirth. This goes on and on. Unless someone gains *enlightenment*, they will be reborn. With rebirth comes suffering. If a person can gain *enlightenment*, they will no longer act selfishly and can break out of the cycle.

Breaking out of the cycle is called Nirvana. It is the end of rebirth and the end of suffering. It is a state of perfect peace and total selflessness.

In Japan, Buddha's birthday (Vesak) is celebrated every year on April 8. In countries that follow a lunar calendar, the date varies from year to year, but it usually falls sometime in April or early May. Buddhists commemorate the day by lighting candles and lanterns to symbolize *enlightenment*.

In recognition of the day, we are going to read a popular Buddhist story about self-sacrifice, called *The Monkey King*. Legend has it that the Monkey King was really the Buddha in disguise.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03cv3rq>

1. What is the moral (lesson) of the story?
2. What makes the story of the Monkey King a Buddhist story? (How does it teach what the Buddha taught?)