

Buddhism began humbly in a small village in what is now the southern plains of Nepal, when Siddhartha Gautama, the son of a local ruler, a prince destined to be king, made the decision to leave his home and family and his royal future, and set out in search of spiritual enlightenment. This was not, however, a selfish abandonment of responsibility. Rather, he had seen and felt the sufferings of human beings in the world, and was deeply affected by this fundamental aspect of human existence, to the point that he was compelled to set out on a quest to alleviate this suffering, with no other motive than an intense compassion for his fellow human beings. After several years of intense spiritual striving, he discovered a clear and straightforward path to attain salvation, a means to escape the sufferings of the world, and he made the decision to share his discovery by teaching. The religion that Siddhartha Gautama founded, Buddhism, has in the course of its 2,500-year history spread to nearly every region of the world. To do so, it has had to adapt to a vast array of different cultural, linguistic, and geographical settings.

As it has spread, it has by necessity also changed, expanding to adapt to its myriad settings, incorporating local beliefs and prac-

tices, and shifting to accommodate the often-fluid social and political contexts in which it was situated. The Buddhist tradition embodies an incredible variety of beliefs and practices. There is no central Buddhist organization, no single authoritative text, no simple set of defining practices. Buddhism is, to its core, a pluralistic religion. It has absorbed local traditions, responded to historical events, and philosophically evolved and re-evolved. In many ways, it has been a religious tradition in perpetual flux.

Despite its incredible diversity, though, and its ever-changing character, there are also elements that cut across the many contexts in which Buddhism and Buddhists have flourished—beliefs and practices that, although perhaps slightly different depending on their specific settings, could be recognized and practiced by all Buddhists. For instance, Buddhists throughout the world recite the ancient formula known as the Three Refuges: “I go for refuge in the Buddha, I go for refuge in the *Dharma*, I go for refuge in the *Sangha*.” Furthermore, certain core philosophical tenets and beliefs that are said to have been articulated by the Buddha himself over 2,500 years ago still serve as the spiritual and ethical

core for Buddhists throughout the world—the impermanence of all things, *karma*, *nirvana*, and renunciation. Thus, as much as we must pay attention to the diverse contexts and beliefs and practices and specific manifestations of Buddhism, we can also fruitfully examine the Buddhist tradition as a whole.

Perhaps the single most significant unifying factor for the world’s diverse Buddhist populations is the figure of the Buddha himself. Although the various schools of Buddhism have very different specific understandings of and attitudes toward the Buddha, each of them, without exception, recognizes, respects, and reveres him. What makes the Buddha so significant in Buddhism is not simply the fact that he is the founder of the religion, though. The Buddha serves as the template for every Buddhist, the model for the life of the individual. It is not enough simply to receive and understand his teachings, or to worship him. Rather, one must strive to be like the Buddha—to replicate his life, essentially.

In the pages that follow, we will explore the origins of this rich and complex religious tradition, examining the social and philosophical context out of which the Buddha and Buddhism emerged. We will delve into the person and personality of the Buddha and examine the central doctrines of the religion that he founded; we will explore the religious community that formed around this founder and his teachings, and see that his followers were able to spread their teacher’s message after his death.

Features and Illustrations

Throughout the book, the reader will find several features and illustrations which enrich the presentation of the origins of Buddhism. These features include: a chronology of key events which immediately follows this preface; illustrations (titled as *Figures*) and a map detailing significant locations and important sculpture in the early story of the tradition; and textboxes titled *Personalities in Buddhism* that provide brief descriptions of a number of important historical figures in the Buddhist tradition as well as boxes titled *From a Classic Text* that excerpt foundational primary sources dealing with the early period of the religion. Additionally, a glossary of selected terms, an extensive annotated bibliography, together with an index for easy reference to specific topics in the text, may be found at the conclusion of the book.

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A companion website is offered to support the use of this book, providing additional resources for both instructors and students. These materials will assist teachers in planning and enhancing their courses, and students will find helpful materials to improve their study and comprehension of the subject.

CHRONOLOGY OF SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN THE EMERGENCE OF BUDDHISM



