



# Buddhism

## The origins of Buddhism

The founder of Buddhism was Siddhartha Gautama Sakyamuni, a prince who lived in northern India about 2500 years ago.

According to tradition, he lived a luxurious life in the royal palace when he was young but after his marriage he began to wander in the world outside the palace. There he saw poverty, old age, sickness and death. The prince was very disturbed by this and was desperate to find out what caused all the suffering.

His search for answers began when he left the palace to talk to Hindu holy men. They gave the prince all sorts of advice, but he was not satisfied. He spent years meditating and fasting and almost died of starvation. Still he found no answers.

Finally, the prince decided that fasting was not going to help him find the cause of suffering. After eating a proper meal, he sat under a tree to meditate.

## Enlightenment

This time, the prince reached a higher state of understanding, called 'enlightenment', and became the Buddha. (Buddha means 'enlightened one'.)

He realised that people suffer because they have desires. They are never satisfied, they want things to change and they want to own things. Buddha taught people that if they could get rid of their desires they would get rid of suffering.

Like Hindus, Buddhists believe in reincarnation—that a soul can be born again in a new body after death. But Buddha saw that living life after life only means more and more suffering. In a way, the purpose of reincarnation is so that a soul can learn to be free of desire. Once that happens, the soul is not born again and will enter Nirvana, which is sometimes thought of as paradise.

## The development of Buddhism

Buddha did not claim to be a god, and he did not talk about God. At first, his followers did not make statues or pictures of him. Later, however, temples were built to include Buddha images, and some people began to pray to him.

## Buddhism in Korea

Buddhism spread from India throughout Asia. In AD 400, Buddhism came to Korea by land from China and by sea from India. It was the state religion between AD 600 and 1392, when it was replaced by Confucianism. The Pulguksa Temple and Sokkuram Grotto that Laura and Alex visit in *Inside King Sejong's Gate* date from this period.

After 1392, Buddhism became less important as a religion in Korea, overall, but communities of monks remained in the mountains and Buddhism was still part of the religion of many villages. Buddhism never died out in Korea.

In modern times, Buddhism has become more popular. Today, about 20% of South Korea's people now say they are Buddhists.