

Introducing *The Story of God, With Morgan Freeman*

Morgan Freeman, the actor who played God in the 2003 film *Bruce Almighty*, has undertaken a six-part series on world religions called *The Story of God*. The 78-year-old actor traveled almost 100,000 miles to trace the origins of the great world religions. He visited sacred sites—a Maya temple in Guatemala, the ghats of Varanasi in India, Vatican City in Rome, the pyramids of Egypt, and more. He interviewed monks and Monsignors, imams and rabbis, scientists and scholars. The result is a survey of themes that these religions share. They all ask the same great questions, but may answer those great questions in a variety of ways.

- How did we get here? Who or what created the universe? What do the creation stories of different religions have in common? What does the scientific theory of the Big Bang tell us?
- Is there a God? How has the idea of one or more supreme beings evolved over time? Is there any evidence in our brains that we are predisposed to believe in God?
- What is evil? Where does it come from? How is the need to control evil related to the rise of civilizations?
- Can miracles be real? How can we understand the existence of “impossible” happenings?
- How will the world end? Will there be a fiery apocalypse? What will bring about the end of the world as we know it?
- What happens after we die? How has belief in the afterlife evolved?

Humans have speculated about these questions for eons. Now Morgan Freeman takes the viewer with him as he attempts to learn more about how humans have tried to answer these questions across continents and millennia.

This curriculum guide has been prepared for use in secondary classrooms to help students understand more about the history and belief systems of the five major living religions the viewer encounters in the series: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Notes to the Teacher

Teaching about world religions makes some teachers uncomfortable, but it is an important element of social studies classes such as world history, Advanced Placement World History, and Advanced Placement Human Geography. Moreover, it is an important part of any citizen’s education. As the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) said in a position paper:

Public schools can and should do more to take religion seriously in a world where religion—for better and for worse—plays a critical role in shaping events at home and abroad.

The Supreme Court concurred. In *Abington v. Schempp* more than a half century ago, Associate Justice Tom Clark wrote in his opinion:

[I]t might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religions or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization.

The root cause of teacher discomfort is in many cases a misunderstanding of the First Amendment to the Constitution on the part of teachers and administrators. To clarify the issue, the First Amendment Center has published “A Teacher’s Guide to Religion in the Public Schools,” a clear and concise set of guidelines for handling this subject appropriately that was developed by a consortium of diverse religious groups. A copy of this guide can be downloaded from <http://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/resources/publications/>. (A fuller treatment of the subject, *Finding Common Ground* by Charles C. Haynes, can be downloaded at the same site.) The NCSS has summarized the main principles in “A Teacher’s Guide” as follows:

- The school’s approach to religion is *academic, not devotional*.
- The school strives for student *awareness* of religions, but does not press for student acceptance of any religion.
- The school sponsors study about religion, not the *practice* of religion.
- The school may expose students to a diversity of religious views, but may not *impose* any particular view.
- The school educates about all religions; it does *not promote or denigrate* any religion.
- The school may inform the student about religious beliefs, but should not seek to *conform* him or her to any particular belief.¹

This curriculum guide from *Journeys in Film* contains five lessons, one on each of the five largest living world religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each lesson extends over several days and incorporates information about the history of the religion, its major beliefs, its founder if one is identifiable, and more. Each lesson is free-standing and can be incorporated into your curriculum where appropriate. Each uses clips from episodes of the series *The Story of God, With Morgan Freeman* to illustrate important points. Each conforms to the guidelines outlined above and each is aligned with Common Core standards.

¹ http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/study_about_religions



Buddhism

Enduring Understandings

- Buddhism was founded in India by Siddhartha Gautama, a prince who gave up worldly possessions to seek enlightenment.
- Buddhism is not concerned with theology, but rather with practical ways of living an upright life.
- Buddhism spread into South and East Asia, but in modern times has also spread to the West.
- Buddhism practices mindfulness through meditation.

Essential Questions

- Who founded Buddhism? What motivated him?
- What are the basic beliefs and practices of Buddhism?
- Where do Buddhists live?
- What is mindfulness? How can it be achieved?
- How do Buddhists express their beliefs through art?

Notes to the Teacher

The study of Buddhism brings you into interesting territory if you always associate religion with belief in the divine. For thousands of years, Buddhism has given people a way of life without requiring a belief in a god. Buddha himself was pragmatic and did not entertain theoretical discussion, but rather focused on what could help people in their immediate pain and suffering. He explained his pragmatism with a story of a man shot with an arrow: Should he inquire into the material the arrow is made from, the length of the shaft, the maker of the arrow, his background, etc.? Or should he focus on removing the arrow and healing the wound? (In fact, Buddha claimed that he found a cure to human suffering, and that this was contained in his teachings.) So as your students learn about the teachings of Buddhism, they explore the question of whether these teachings require anyone either to adopt or to give up any beliefs.

In order to better understand the world of Buddhism, the best place to start is with the story of the life of Prince Siddhartha Gautama, the man who became Buddha. Then move to the teachings of Buddhism, and the spread of the religion, and finally try some experiential learning with meditation and art.

Starting in the latter part of the sixth century BCE, Buddha set an example of traveling and teaching during the dry season and taking a retreat with his monks during the rainy season; they continued to follow this seasonal pattern after his death. The teachings spread gradually in all directions, for a time, until in the year 262 BCE. King Ashoka of India, tired of constant warfare, became a follower of the Buddha and sent out monks to teach the Dhamma (the teachings of the Buddha) more

purposefully and systematically. Then Buddhism spread more rapidly throughout Asia to the countries on the map that are today predominantly Buddhist. Now there are anywhere from 350 million to a billion Buddhists in the world.

Buddhism came to America in the 1950s through the 1970s. Writers such as Alan Watts (*The Way of Zen*), Jack Kerouac (*Dharma Bums*), and Robert Pirsig (*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*) brought the ideas of the Buddha into mainstream awareness. Centers were developed and teachers came from various countries in Asia, including India, Tibet, and Japan, to teach Buddhist philosophy and meditation practice.

In the first part of this lesson, students read a story about the history of the Buddha, who was born Siddhartha Gautama. After they understand how he became the Buddha, they talk about contemporary situations in which they have discovered suffering. They write a journal entry about what kinds of advice might help to deal with such suffering today. Make a photocopy of **HANDOUT 1** for each student before the lesson.

Part 2 is concerned with the basic teachings of the Buddha. You will need copies of **HANDOUTS 2** and **3** for each student. After reading about the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, students will consider the relevance of these ancient teachings for situations in the contemporary world.

For Part 3, you will need a large world map or student atlases. Students will first learn about the most heavily Buddhist countries in the world and then locate them on a map. All are in South and East Asia. Then they will answer questions about how Buddhism spread. The discussion afterward will include their answers, additional information from the notes above, and ideas about why Buddhism became popular in the United States in the decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

Part 4 is a meditation exercise. Although this has no specific religious content, it would be wise to discuss it with your administrator before undertaking it. Some school districts support mindfulness and meditation as a tool to help children become calmer and more focused. See, for example, the article “When Mindfulness Meets the Classroom” at <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/08/mindfulness-education-schools-meditation/402469/>. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Design has many articles on the subject. The Web page <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/contemplative-pedagogy/> focuses on the practice from Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching. However, be aware that some parents may see this as some type of religious indoctrination, so if any students are uncomfortable with this exercise, let them work quietly on something else so as not to distract the rest of the class. In this exercise, students simply practice five minutes of relaxation, breathing, and observation of their thoughts.

If you would like to pursue this topic, *Journeys in Film* has a free curriculum guide to the film *Dhamma Brothers*, a documentary about the use of Vipassana meditation in an Alabama prison. Lessons 7 and 8 in the curriculum have information about the effect of meditation on the brain and a number of other meditation exercises. The lessons can be downloaded at <http://journeysinfilm.org/films/the-dhamma-brothers/>.

To prepare for Part 5 of the lesson, assemble a slide show from photos of mandalas (geometric figures representing the universe) being made by monks. Photos of both finished mandalas and mandalas in process can be found by Googling “Tibetan sand mandala Smithsonian.” (A few years ago, the Smithsonian’s Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., hosted a group of Tibetan monks who made a mandala from colored sand over a period of two weeks. For more information about this, see <https://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/online/mandala/mandala.htm>.)

Lesson 2 (BUDDHISM)



Run a photocopy of **HANDOUT 5: TIBETAN MANDALAS** for each student. You should also bookmark and prepare to show the videos that are listed on the handout. After discussion of mandalas in class, students should go home and download a black-and-white line drawing of a mandala of their choice and gather materials for coloring it. Alternatively, you can download a variety of mandalas for the class by Googling “mandala” and going to Images. There are also books of mandalas for coloring, such as *The Mandala Coloring Book: Inspire Creativity, Reduce Stress, and Bring Balance with 100 Mandala Coloring Pages*, by Jim Gogarty.

You can also have students design their own mandalas, using symbols that are important to them. Students then have time to color the mandala in class in silence and to reflect on the activity. If you wish to exhibit them, mount the finished mandalas on a classroom wall, but don’t neglect to offer them the chance to destroy their work as the Tibetan monks always do. Do not force them to do so, however.

If you wish to do an actual sand painting in class, rather than just coloring, there is an extensive art lesson for doing so in the *Journeys in Film* curriculum guide for *The Cup*, which can be found at <http://journeysinfilm.org/films/the-cup/>. The art lesson leads students to make a mandala that is meant to be kept. *The Cup*, a film about a young Tibetan monk who is obsessed with World Cup soccer, is based on a true story. It was filmed at a Buddhist monastery, the “actors” are mostly Tibetan monks, the director is himself a Buddhist monk, and it gives an excellent picture of Tibetan Buddhist practice. (Just be sure you get the right film—there are several of the same title.) *Journeys in Film* has a full curriculum you can download free for this film.

Duration of the Lesson

Three to five periods

Assessment

Class discussion

Journal entries

Mandalas

Materials

Copies of **HANDOUTS 1–5** for each student

Pen or pencil

Journal or notebook

Coloring materials

Projector and computer for showing slides and videos

COMMON CORE STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.7

Integrate quantitative or technical analysis (e.g., charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Procedure

Part 1: The Historical Origins of Buddhism

1. Tell students that they are going to begin a lesson on the religion of Buddhism and the culture that it influenced. Ask students if they know anyone who practices Buddhism. Explain that, unlike Hinduism, which also originated in India, Buddhism has a specific founder, who is called the Buddha. Write the name Siddhartha Gautama on the board and explain that this was his name before he became the Buddha.
2. Give students **HANDOUT 1: SIDDHARTHA'S DISCOVERY** and read aloud as they follow along.
3. Ask the students if they understand why Siddhartha left everything else and went on a quest. Most people do not abandon their everyday lives the way he did. Why was his new understanding of illness, old age, and death so shocking to him? (He was 29 before he realized the fact that we grow old and die.) What was the problem he was trying to solve? (That this life does not last forever; that we will be reborn—reincarnated—and the cycle will simply repeat itself; this is inevitable and happens to everyone, continually; that we are helpless in the face of this fact.)
4. Ask students if they have ever thought about the question that Siddhartha considered—why there is suffering in the world. When or how did they become aware of such suffering? Have them give examples from current events or their own experiences, if they are comfortable doing so.



5. **Journal Reflection:** Have the students brainstorm in their journals, individually, what possible teachings or guidelines could help human beings deal with suffering. Tell them to think of little daily problems, as well as the fact of our own death. You may remind them that Buddha did not refer to a god in his teachings, but let them write freely about anything they want to write down.

Part 2: The Core Teachings of Buddhism

1. Remind students that the Buddha came to his teachings through a long process of observing himself and others, and coming to a working hypothesis about what makes people happy in this life, much the same as the process that a doctor goes through in treating a patient. List the following steps on the board and explain each one:

- a. **Observation of symptoms:** to determine the problem or symptom
- b. **Diagnosis:** to determine the cause
- c. **Prognosis:** to determine the chance of recovery
- d. **Prescription:** to offer a solution or course of treatment

2. Distribute **HANDOUT 2: THE CORE TEACHINGS OF BUDDHISM: THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS**. Read aloud the section on the Four Noble Truths. Then go back to the board and write a summary of each one next to the steps on the board. (Observation of symptoms = there is suffering. Diagnosis = suffering is caused by attachment. Prognosis = there can be an end to suffering. Prescription = following the Eightfold Path is a way to the end of suffering.)

3. Distribute **HANDOUT 3: THE CORE TEACHINGS OF BUDDHISM: THE EIGHTFOLD PATH**. Have students read through the handout. Point out to them that the Eightfold Path builds from views about the world (1 and 2) to moral behavior (3, 4, and 5) to practices of meditation and mindfulness (6, 7, and 8). You can have them bracket these steps on their handouts if you wish.

4. Ask students to examine the list of guidelines, and then encourage a free-flowing class discussion using a hypothetical “typical student.” You could ask how a typical student’s daily life would change if he or she were to follow the Eightfold Path. When students have identified a number of changes, ask them what aspect of the Eightfold Path the student might find most difficult? (Answers will vary.)

5. Ask students if they see any overlap between the Eightfold Path and the Ten Commandments. What similarities and differences do they see?

6. Have students write in their journals in response to the following prompt: Select one step in the Eightfold Path. Describe a real-life situation where following that step might have prevented or alleviated suffering and explain why.

Part 3: The Spread of Buddhism

1. Ask students how, in their knowledge of world history, religions have spread throughout history. (By preaching, the adoption of a religion by a ruler, by forcible conversion.)

2. Show students the map of Asia, give them a copy of a map, or have them locate one in their atlases or textbooks. Pass out **HANDOUT 4: THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM**. Give students time to study the map and locate the countries on the population chart. Then have them work with a partner to suggest answers to the two questions on the handout.
3. Have a discussion about the spread of Buddhism using the first question on the handout about why Buddhism attracted so many followers and why it would interest both kings and commoners alike. (It answers questions that are universal; frustration, dissatisfaction, and longings of thoughtful people of any rank or station.) Tell them about the spread of Buddhism in Asia using information in Notes to the Teacher, above.
4. Move on to discuss student answers to the second question—why Buddhism could exist easily beside other religions. Ask students why this was possible for Buddhism. (Buddhism did not compete with a system of deities, even in its original home of India. It focused on paying attention to the mind, emotions, and sensations, in order to escape the identification with transient things that cause suffering. Belief in God is tangential to its purposes, which are practical.)
5. Point out that students now know about how Siddhartha’s dissatisfaction with his parents’ world led him to leave home, search for the truth, and discover the Dhamma. Ask them to compare his search with what they know about the searching of young people in the United States in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. What were these young people questioning in the culture and traditions they had grown

up with? (Some answers: Consumerism, overseas military action, racial discrimination, limitations on opportunities for women.) Tell students that some popular books for the counterculture were about Buddhism; for example, Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*, Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Alan Watts’s *The Way of Zen*, and the works of D.T. Suzuki. If you have some of these books with you, show them to the students. Ask them what it was about Buddhist teachings that would have appealed to young people of those years. (Answers will vary.)

Part 4: Mindfulness: The Art of Stopping Time

1. Share with students the following Zen story of the Man and the Horse:

The horse is galloping quickly, and it appears that the man on the horse is going somewhere important. Another man, standing alongside the road, shouts, “Where are you going?”

And the first man replies, “I don’t know! Ask the horse!”

This is also our story. We are riding a horse, we don’t know where we are going, and we can’t stop. The horse is our habit energy pulling us along, and we are powerless. We are always running, and it has become a habit... we have to learn the art of stopping—stopping our thinking, our habit energies, our forgetfulness, the strong emotions that rule us.¹

2. The first form of meditation will be “just sitting.” There is no other directive than to sit—still and in silence—and observe what happens. Provide straightforward, clear

¹ Hanh, Thich Nhat. *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teachings* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998). Page 24.

Lesson 2 (BUDDHISM)



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instructions for students to prepare themselves and for the first time try this exercise for five minutes.

- Whether in a chair or on the floor, find a posture that is comfortable, relaxed, and that you will be able to maintain for five minutes without having to adjust your body.
 - Bodily sensations: Do a mental sweep of all your body, from your toes up to your forehead. As you consider each part of your body, let it relax.
 - Feelings: Imagine you are sitting on a riverbank, and the river is the flow of emotions through you. Do you get bored? Frustrated? Distracted? Do you remember some past hurt or joy? Identify the feeling, recognize it, greet it. There is no need to judge it, or reject it. Let it flow past and observe it with curiosity.
 - Thoughts: Buddhism calls these mental formations. Again, as with feelings, simply observe and recognize your thoughts as they float past, like a cloud in the sky.
 - Breath: Start exhaling by pulling in your abdomen. When you have exhaled completely, you will naturally inhale. Let the air flow in and your abdomen gently expand.
3. When the time period allotted is over, have students remain in silence and write quietly in their journal for another few minutes about what they observed, before having a discussion about the experience. What did they notice? (Often beginners report that they didn't notice their thoughts; they were swept up in their thoughts. Thoughts will come and one leads to another, and they end up daydreaming more than observing their sensations, feelings, and thoughts.)

4. Explain to students that a regular practice of such meditation can actually have a physical effect on the brain. Encourage them to do research on the subject if they are interested.

Part 5: The Art of the Mandala

1. Without prior explanation, show the slides you have assembled of Tibetan sand mandalas.
2. After students have seen the photos, ask them to write down a definition of a mandala in their notebooks and then have several volunteers share their definitions.
3. Distribute **HANDOUT 4: TIBETAN MANDALAS**. Read aloud the brief history and function of mandalas in Tibetan Buddhism. Watch one or both videos listed on the handout, depending on the time you have available.
4. Ask students how they would feel about their work being destroyed when it is finished. (Most would object.) Why? (Reasons may vary.) What does this say about our approach to material things and art itself?
5. Tell students that for the Tibetan monks in the video, creating the mandala is a sacred act. Each mandala is made with specific symbolic meaning. Then tell them that today people often color mandalas, and that doing so is perceived as a form of relaxation. If you did Part 4, remind them of the mindfulness exercise and how one of the steps to mindfulness is relaxation. Ask if they think coloring would be a good way to relax.

6. For homework, have students Google the word “mandala” and find images. There are many black-and-white drawings of nonsacred mandalas on the Web. Have them download their favorite design and bring it in, along with crayons, colored pencils, fine-line markers, or anything else they would like to use to color it.
7. Allow them to work on coloring in their mandala with great care and attentiveness, allowing them to lose themselves in the process of it for 10–15 minutes, as seems appropriate for your particular students. Tell them they must maintain silence while they are working. After time has elapsed, even though they will not be finished, ask what their thoughts were as they colored. Were they thinking about the mandala? About other things? Or were their minds blank? Have them finish their mandalas for homework.
8. If you wish, post the completed mandalas on the wall for a gallery walk.
9. Ask the students if they wish to destroy their mandala, just as the monks brush away their sand paintings. Ask them to reflect on their feeling about this in a journal entry, whether they decide to destroy it or not.

Additional Resources

A. Print Materials: General works on Buddhism

Hanh, Thich Nhat. *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teachings* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998)

Hesse, Hermann, *Siddhartha*. New York: Penguin Classic, 2002. A Western European novel about the quest for enlightenment.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Howard Cutler, *The Art of Happiness*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.

Humphreys, Christmas. *The Wisdom of Buddhism*. London: Curzon Press, 1987.

Smith, Huston. *The World’s Religions*. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.

B. Print Materials: American texts originally from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s

Watts, Alan. *Cloud Hidden*. New York: Vintage, 1974.

Watts, Alan. *The Way of Zen*. New York: Vintage, 1999.

Kerouac, Jack. *Dharma Bums*. (New York: Penguin, 2005.

Pirsig, Robert. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. New York: HarperTorch, 2006.

C. Miscellaneous print text

Phillips, Jenny, and Robert Cole. *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers: Meditation Behind Bars*. Onalaska, Washington: Parayatti Publishing, 2008.

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D. Internet resources

<http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgboeree/buddhawise.html>
General introduction to Buddhism, by Professor C. George Boeree

<http://www.buddhanet.net/index.html>
A clearinghouse of information on Buddhism

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/world_religions/buddhism.shtml
The BBC's guide to world religions

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0512/feature4/index.html>
National Geographic feature article: "Buddha Rising"

<http://www.mysticalartsoftibet.org/mandala.htm>
Tibetan mandalas

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/07/mandala-of-compassion_n_5942202.html
Article on Tibetan mandalas in the popular press

E. Film

1. *The Cup (Phorpa)*, directed by Khyentse Norbu
2. *Kundun*, directed by Martin Scorsese
3. *The Little Buddha*, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci
4. *Life of Buddha*, directed by Martin Meissonnier
5. *Seven Years in Tibet*, directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud

Handout 1 ▶ P. 1 Siddhartha's Discovery

In the year 563 BCE, in a small kingdom in what is now Nepal, north of India, a prince was born to the king and queen. His name was Siddhartha Gautama. Soon after his birth, a holy man named Asita arrived and gave a prophecy: Siddhartha would either become a great king and a world conqueror, or a great saint and a world savior. The king wanted Siddhartha to be a great king, so he kept the boy always surrounded by beautiful people and pleasant activities in one of his three palaces.

The young prince was raised to become a warrior and a king. He played games with the young men in the court and lived a life of luxury. When he became a man he married a beautiful woman named Yashodara, and they had a son named Rahula. He felt blessed.

One day all of this changed, however, when he saw four sights that he had never seen before.² He left his palace to go riding with his charioteer Chandaka, and although his father had arranged for nothing unpleasant to come into his sight, he happened to see an old man. He was startled, for he had never before seen someone who was wrinkled or bent over. Siddhartha asked, "What is wrong with that man?"

Chandaka answered, "He is old. Time has wrinkled his skin and bent his back."

"Will that happen to me as well?" asked the prince.

"Old age happens to us all," replied Chandaka.

Next they came upon some people who were sick, and Siddhartha asked what made them like that. His charioteer explained that they were ill, and that all people get sick at least once in their life.

The third sight was a corpse, ready for cremation. In India most people through the ages have been cremated upon a large, carefully stacked pile of wood. The family watches while the body burns and turns to ashes, which takes a while. This sight shocked Siddhartha, for he had also been sheltered from death. "Chandaka, what is this?"

"This is death, my lord. This is what happens to all people when their body is finished. Their body is laid down and turned to ashes, while their soul will go to another body." Siddhartha felt anguish over this man's death, and also over his rebirth, which would simply lead to another cycle of death. In the palace he had had no idea that this was the fate of all people. He could no longer enjoy his pleasure and luxury, knowing what life contained.

The fourth sight was of a monk who had left his home and family and possessions in order to reach enlightenment. Along with his robes, he wore a peaceful expression. Siddhartha then vowed to follow the path of a monk and seek enlightenment. His father tried to persuade him to stay, to think of his duties to his family and kingdom, but he felt a higher duty to relieve the suffering of all mankind. So in the middle of the night, he said goodbye to his sleeping wife and son and left the palace forever. At age 29, he set out on a quest to understand and overcome the suffering involved in being human.

² Some stories say these sights occurred on one trip he made outside the palace walls, and some say they took place over four separate trips. In any case, they made him unhappy with his life, unable to live as he had done before.

Handout 1 ► P. 2 Siddhartha's Discovery

The next six years he spent searching, studying, and meditating. Much of that time he spent with a group of ascetics³ who were extremely hard on their bodies. Siddhartha outdid them all in self-deprivation, and they became his followers. But one day, when he was nearly starving to death, a peasant girl offered him some food and he ate it. He realized he was not going to reach enlightenment by torturing his body, any more than he had reached it in his comfortable life in the palace. The path to enlightenment had to be somewhere between the extremes of luxury and hardship, pleasure and pain. His followers thought he was a traitor to their way of life, but he would eventually call his discovery The Middle Way.

Alone, but nourished and refreshed, he sat down under a tree and determined that he would not get up again until he had reached enlightenment. As he sat, he experienced many false visions and temptations to quit, but he remained there for a day and a night (or many days and nights, according to some versions) and then one morning he was filled with a vast, new understanding and had reached enlightenment. He was now “Buddha” or “Awakened One” for he had awakened from the dream that keeps us ignorant of things as they really are.

At Sarnath near Benares, about a hundred miles from Bodh Gaya, he came across the five ascetics he had practiced with for so long. There, in a deer park, he preached his first sermon, which is called “setting the wheel of the teaching in motion.” He explained to them the *Dhamma*, or teachings, of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. They became his very first disciples and the beginnings of the *Sangha*, or community of monks.

He also attracted lay followers, people who listened to his teachings but continued their role in society. Eventually even his father, his wife, and his son came to hear him speak and were converted to his new understanding. For 45 more years he taught, maintained an order of monks, and traveled about the region. Due to his inner peace and wisdom, stories followed him that portrayed him as a god. But he never asked anyone to take anything he said on faith; he wanted his listeners to practice and attain their own freedom. He encouraged them to take responsibility for themselves, and his last words were: “Work out your own salvation with diligence.”

³ An ascetic is a person who practices severe self-denial, usually for religious or spiritual reasons.

Handout 2

The Core Teachings of Buddhism: The Four Noble Truths

1. The Noble Truth of Suffering: Life involves suffering. There is physical pain, and emotional suffering, such as loss, regret, and the ending of pleasure.

(Suffering is perhaps the most common translation for the Sanskrit word *duhkha*, which can also be translated as imperfect, stressful, or filled with anguish. Contributing to the anguish is *anitya*—the fact that all things are impermanent, including living things such as ourselves. Furthermore, there is the concept of *anatman*—literally, “no soul.” *Anatman* means that all things are interconnected and interdependent, so that no thing—including ourselves—has a separate existence.)

2. The Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering: Our suffering is caused by our attachment to things, which are impermanent. Our desire causes our suffering.

(Attachment is a common translation for the word *trishna*, which literally means thirst and is also translated as desire, clinging, greed, craving, or lust. Because we and the world are imperfect, impermanent, and not separate, we are forever “clinging” to things, each other, and ourselves, in a mistaken effort at permanence. Besides *trishna*, there is *dvesha*, which means avoidance or hatred. Hatred is its own kind of clinging. And finally there is *avidya*, ignorance or the refusal to see. Not fully understanding the impermanence of things is what leads us to cling in the first place.)

3. The Noble Truth of the Ending of Suffering: There is a way to end suffering.

(Perhaps the most misunderstood term in Buddhism is the one that refers to the overcoming of attachment: *nirvana*. It literally means “blowing out,” but is often thought to refer to either a Buddhist heaven or complete nothingness. Actually, it refers to the letting go of clinging, hatred, and ignorance, and the full acceptance of imperfection, impermanence, and interconnectedness.)

4. The Noble Truth of the Method to End Suffering: The way to end suffering is to follow the Eightfold Path.

(Buddha called his teachings, or *dharma*, the Middle Way, which is understood as meaning the middle way between such competing philosophies as materialism and idealism, or hedonism and asceticism. This path, this Middle Way, is elaborated as the Eightfold Path.)

Handout 3

The Core Teachings of Buddhism: The Eightfold Path

- 1.** Right views: Understanding and accepting the Four Noble Truths.
- 2.** Right intent: The decision to follow the Eightfold Path, and persistence to keep at it.
- 3.** Right speech: Honest and kind speech, avoiding lying and slander.
- 4.** Right conduct: Following the five Buddhist precepts.
 - a.** Do not kill.
 - b.** Do not steal.
 - c.** Do not lie.
 - d.** Do not be unchaste.
 - e.** Do not use intoxicants.
- 5.** Right livelihood. Engaging in a profession that supports life, rather than destroys it.
- 6.** Right effort: Exerting oneself to understand the truth, follow the moral code, and engage in mindfulness and meditation.
- 7.** Right mindfulness: Awareness of one's current thoughts, feelings, and sensations.
- 8.** Right concentration: Meditation.

Handout 4 ▶ P.1 **The Spread of Buddhism**

COUNTRY	PERCENT OF POPULATION THAT IS BUDDHIST
Cambodia	96.9%
Thailand	93.2%
Burma	80.1%
Sri Lanka	69.3%
Japan	36.2%
South Korea	22.9%
China	18.2%
Malaysia	17.7%
Vietnam	16.4%

With your atlas, locate and label these countries on the map on the next page. Then answer the following questions:

1. Why do you think Buddhism attracted so many followers? Why would it interest kings and commoners alike?

2. In many countries, Buddhism entered and thrived alongside the existing religion (Hinduism in India, Taoism in China, Shinto in Japan). Why was this possible for Buddhism?

Lesson 2 (BUDDHISM)

Handout 4 ▶ P.2 **The Spread of Buddhism⁵**



⁵The Spread of Buddhism, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asie.svg>