

# Lesson 39

## Buddhism

### Objectives

- To identify the background and contributions of Siddhartha Gautama
- To define the main ideas of Buddhism
- To interpret the Buddhist concepts of an interdependent universe and being in the moment

### Notes to the Teacher

Buddhism is one of the world's oldest and most significant religions. Based on the teaching of Siddhartha Gautama, Buddhism boasts about three hundred million followers. The philosophy of Buddhism originated in India but traveled to China, Korea, and Japan.

One of the main beliefs of Buddhism is that life is a self-repeating cycle of life and death. This doctrine is very different from the linear order of chronological events that represents the Western reality.

If success in Western life is determined by wealth, fame, material possessions, and individual accomplishment, then the Buddhist life is determined by spiritual enlightenment, balance, controlling and eliminating desires, and modesty. It is a practical philosophy with many social applications.

In this lesson, students experience two Buddhist concepts. First, they read and answer questions explaining how the world is interdependent. Students then create an ecological web showing the connection between an object of nature and themselves. Second, students participate in a game where they practice being in the moment.

### Procedure

1. Ask students to name their heroes or people they think are successful. List responses on the board. Ask: What does this list of heroes say about our concept of success or importance? (*Fame, wealth, and individual accomplishment determine success or happiness in life.*)
2. Using the Teacher Resource Page, introduce the founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha

Guatama, and the basic principles of Buddhism. Have students record the information in their notebooks.

3. Distribute **Handout 69**. Have students complete part A as homework. Review responses.

### Suggested Responses:

1. *to slow down and see the world; to become more aware of nature surrounding us*
2. *The idea that nothing is independent on its own and is dependent on the "other" to exist grows out of yin and yang.*
3. *People exist with nature. An examination of the interrelationships between organisms shows that human beings should not dominate or conquer nature but learn to flow with it.*
4. *The web could include the following items: caterpillar, rain, grass, sunshine, earth, decomposed plants that fertilize the earth, worms, and humans.*
4. Ask for volunteers to share their ecological webs on the board. Discuss their similarities and differences.
5. Have students complete part B of **Handout 69** as an in-class activity. Provide paper and markers. Assign one object of nature per student. Allow class time to work on posters.
6. Display completed posters. Conduct a "gallery walk." Have students explain their ecological webs.
7. Conclude **Handout 69** by asking how the ecological webs reflect the Buddhist concept of interbeing. (*It shows that all organisms are interrelated and therefore deserve respect and attention.*)
8. Introduce **Handout 70** by asking what it means to live each moment. (*Slowing down and paying attention to the world around us is a skill; we overlook so much by living a fast-paced life.*) Have students slowly count to twenty silently while paying attention to the counting. Ask if this could represent being in the moment. Briefly discuss responses.

9. Distribute **Handout 70**. Read the handout together. **Handout 70** can be done as a homework assignment or as a class activity. If it is done as a class activity, use the following timetable.
  - five to ten minutes to walk outside and get situated
  - ten to fifteen minutes of quiet observation
  - five minutes to walk back to the classroom
  - five minutes to reflect and to answer questions
10. Conclude with a class discussion based on students' responses to **Handout 70**.

## **Siddhartha Guatama (563–583 B.C.)**

### **Biographical Background**

- Guatama was born into a family of privilege.
- His mother and father secluded him in the palace life of luxury and beauty. He selected a beautiful princess to marry and she gave birth to their son.
- Restless with the palace life, he ventured outside. He witnessed the suffering of ordinary life. The things he witnessed caused him to question the meaning of human existence.
- At age twenty-nine, he returned to the palace and said farewell to his wife and son and left to live a life of modesty.
- He spent six weeks fasting and living on as little food, drink, and sleep as possible. When near death he was revived by a kind woman who nursed him back to health. Realizing the extremes his life had brought him, he decided to adopt a path of moderation—a middle between self-indulgence and extreme asceticism.
- Legend has it that he spent forty-nine days (a week of weeks) sitting under the sacred Bodhi tree. After this time he experienced a state of profound understanding or enlightenment. He became the “Enlightened One” or “Buddha.”
- He spent the remainder of his life traveling throughout India, teaching his insights and his way of life.

### **Buddhism Defined**

- Buddhism is a twenty-five-hundred-year-old philosophy and religion.
- Buddhism was founded in India and spread to China, Japan, and much of Asia. This religion claims to have more than three hundred million followers
- The major schools of Buddhism are Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana.
  1. Mahayana, the Greater Vehicle, was made popular in China and spread into Korea and Japan. It centers on saving suffering humanity.
  2. Theravada, the Lesser Vehicle, is popular in Southeastern Asia. This strain of Buddhism values self-salvation and promotes monastic life as the central means to achieve enlightenment.
  3. Vajrayana, Tibetan was made well known by the Dalai Lama and his fellow Tibetans. It is similar to Mahayana Buddhism and is known for its intellectual depths and vibrant culture. Many of its scriptures are of the Tantric (singing) nature.

### **Key Concepts Associated with Buddhism**

- Three jewels of Buddhism: The three jewels are seen as the foundation of Buddhism.
  1. Buddha: an ideal whom humans should imitate (Thich Naht Hahn, a famous and revered monk, sees Buddha as a state of mind and in that sense is still living today.)
  2. Dharma: the sum total of Buddhist teachings about how to view the world and how to live properly
  3. Sangha: the community of monks and nuns
- The Four Noble Truths
  1. Suffering is a part of life.
  2. The cause of suffering is desire.
  3. Stopping desire is the only way to stop suffering.
  4. The way to stop suffering is to follow the Eightfold Path.

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- **The Eightfold Path**

This is called the “Middle Way” of Buddhism. Following the Eightfold Path produces a combination of understanding, compassion, and an advanced state of consciousness.

1. Right understanding: Realize the causes of desire.
2. Right intentions: Recognize impure thoughts and eliminate them.
3. Right speech: Avoid lies, exaggerations, and harsh words.
4. Right action: Avoid stealing and sexual contact that causes hurt.
5. Right work: A livelihood should not cause harm.
6. Right effort: Strive to improve.
7. Right meditation: Use meditation to focus on nature of reality.
8. Right contemplation: Cultivate inner peace.

- **Karma**

Karma is the Sanskrit word for “action” or “deed,” and conceptually it is the most important law of the universe. It determines what happens from life to life. The law of karma says that all deeds produce positive or negative effects and these effects carry over from one life to the next. Therefore, a person determines his or her destiny.

- **Rebirth**

Rebirth or the concept of reincarnation says that a person lives many lives. Since the task of spiritual development is too great to accomplish in one lifetime, it takes many lifetimes to attain enlightenment.

- **Nirvana**

The state of release from the cycle of rebirth and suffering. It is considered to be a state of mind and of inner peace.

- **Interdependent Universe**

This concept is perhaps most well understood in the Taoist’s yin and yang. It basically is an understanding that the universe is one. Therefore, nothing is separate from anything else. It is a worldview that holds all things as dependent upon each other for existence.

- **Being in the Moment**

Buddha saw the world as being in perpetual flux, which means that nothing ever was the same as it was a moment ago. Therefore, handle each situation as it arises.

## The Interdependent Universe

### Part A.

Read the following and answer the questions at the end. Be prepared to share your answers.

The concept of the interdependent universe is best understood in the Taoist's yin and yang. It basically says that the universe is one; nothing is separate from anything else. The interdependent universe can also serve as an explanation for existence. Since everything is linked and related, everything is ultimately one. Another way to describe it would be "inter-being." Buddhism calls realizing this inter-being "enlightenment." This enlightenment provides an explanation for existence and correlates well with an ecological cycle. By understanding how connected the earth is, we come to realize that the universe includes our physical being as well as our mental being.

### The Caterpillar Story

I walked in the woods on a sunny afternoon with my five-year-old nephew.

He's pretty small, so I helped him climb over the big logs we met along our path; he made sure I walked slowly enough to notice the dance around me. I saw a bird's nest, some moss growing, and I began to hear the river flowing near our trail.

We walked and we talked. He asked me questions I could not answer: "Why is there an up?"

And I asked him questions he could answer: "What do you want for lunch?"  
"Ice cream," he replied.

Using his sleeve, he nonchalantly wiped his nose and I knew he was wiser than I.

We came across a cocoon. I shared my excitement and I told him a beautiful butterfly would come out of it soon. He asked, "What is in the cocoon now?"

I explained to him that a caterpillar is inside.

"What is inside the caterpillar?" he asked.

"Well, lots of things." I explained to him how the caterpillar came into being. I told of the things that led up to this caterpillar: the rain it took to make the flowers grow that the caterpillar's parents ate from; the sky that held the rain; the sun that beamed its warmth to the flowers. I told him to look deep and think about all the worms in the earth that helped make the flowers grow. And the soil the flowers grew from was made fertile from the trees that had grown, died, and decomposed in the ground. "Can you see all the things that led up to this caterpillar? Can you see all the things that this caterpillar will lead to? It's all interconnected. We're all one."

I wanted him to realize that everything was dependent on everything else. I wanted him to realize that everything was everything else.

My nephew looked up at me with five-year-old blue eyes, dragged his sleeve across his nose and asked, "Am I the caterpillar?"

—Michael McRaith

1. What does the child teach the adult?
2. Explain how this story illustrates the concept of yin and yang.
3. How does this story explain that a person is not only a part of nature but is nature?
4. Create an ecological web for the caterpillar. Be sure to include the connection between the caterpillar and the humans.

**Part B.**

For one of the objects of nature from the following list, create an ecological web or write a short descriptive story like "The Caterpillar." In either case, make sure to include within the chain a connection between the object and you.

**Objects of Nature**

pine cone	stream	rabbit	ice
lake	mountain	cactus	honey bee
dandelion	stone	cloud	moon
moss	shark	blue jay	blade of grass
squirrel	seashell	maple tree	snail
turtle	frog	wolf	ocean
ant	butterfly	dirt	worm
rock	owl		

—Ross and Kara Kasmarek

## The Quiet Game

Read the following information in preparation for the Quiet Game. After experiencing the assignment, answer the questions at the end. Be prepared to share your answers.

You will go outside, find a comfortable spot to sit, and observe the world. The objective here is to notice, to pay attention to the things that surround you. As you leave the building, do not talk. Not talking may be the most difficult part of this assignment. So, think of it as a challenge. Think of it as . . . the Quiet Game.

Why quiet? Well, being quiet isn't necessarily the best way to be all the time. But refraining from vocal participation creates more of an opportunity to observe. "To notice" is a big tool in Buddhism (and in Eastern thought in general). The key to acquiring and maintaining a Buddha-nature (true nature) is simply to pay attention. So often our minds glaze over what seems unimportant and we spend most of our time thinking of the past or planning the future—leaving the present moment unused and essentially ignored. Attaining and maintaining a "Buddha-nature" is cultivated by staying "in the moment."

A good example of this would be a person who has just finished work and is walking across the parking lot towards his or her car. Often this person is thinking about being in the car or being at home or perhaps even thinking about returning to work tomorrow. If this person were practicing "being in the moment," then this person would be thinking about walking across the parking lot.

Much of this is just learning not to take life experiences for granted. We become accustomed to things and forget their worth. Walking. Talking. Breathing.

In this practice, try to appreciate some of the things you may be taking for granted and try to see the world as it is . . . naturally.

So as you go down the hall and sit outside . . . try to just pay attention. If someone begins to laugh . . . pay attention to them laughing. If your mind begins to wander . . . pay attention to your wandering mind. When you sit down, pay attention to your body . . . its breathing, blinking, beating. Then just notice the natural world. Take a deeper look at the world surrounding you. You might notice the clouds moving, the sound of the birds chirping, the warmth of the sunshine, the faces of others, etc. . . .

It may be helpful to think of yourself as an alien visiting this planet for the first time . . . assuming nothing . . . expecting nothing.

1. What was difficult about the Quiet Game?
2. What was easy about the Quiet Game?
3. Did you experience being in the moment? If so, explain how it felt. If not, explain why you were unable to be in the moment.