

Buddhism is a way of life based on the teachings of a man who lived in Northern India more than two and a half thousand years ago. His followers called him 'Buddha', which means 'the enlightened one' or 'the one who is fully awake' because they believed that he had discovered the truth about life.

Buddhism starts with a question:

'Why is there suffering and unhappiness? Can these be overcome?'

Buddhists believe that everyone wants to be happy but that most people don't really know how to achieve true happiness. Some people try to grasp at success, or money, or a career, or someone who will love them. They think that these things will bring them happiness, and sometimes they do. But people can lose their jobs and their money, partners can die or divorce, friendships can end. And all the time, people are getting older. Everyone we know will have to die one day, and so shall we. Life never seems to be quite right, so how can we find happiness?

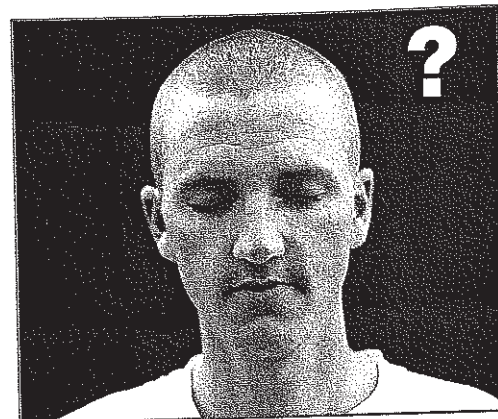
The teachings of the Buddha aim to help people overcome suffering and promote happiness by showing them how to look quietly and carefully at life, to reflect on the way in which things change and to think carefully about what it is that actually makes us happy or unhappy.

Buddhists believe that by doing this they will also become wiser and kinder towards all other living things. They believe that the key to all this lies in thinking and seeing the world in the right way.

● Questions you might want to ask about Buddhism

● WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?

Buddhist teaching claims to help you become happier. Buddhists say that you can't really understand and love other people until you have started to understand and enjoy being the person you are. Becoming happier yourself is the first step towards making others happy as well.



● IS IT ALL IN THE MIND?

Well, yes. Buddhism is about training the mind to be calm and peaceful, contented and happy. As a result of such inner happiness, it teaches that people will naturally be able to develop heartfelt qualities of kindness and generosity towards others.

● DO YOU HAVE TO BE RELIGIOUS TO BE BUDDHIST?

Buddhism is like other religions because:

- it has temples and shrines where people go to make offerings in front of images
- Buddhists sit quietly in meditation and sometimes chant – often singing the same phrase over and over again
- there are teachings about life and guidelines about how Buddhists should behave
- there are ancient texts that are treated with great respect.

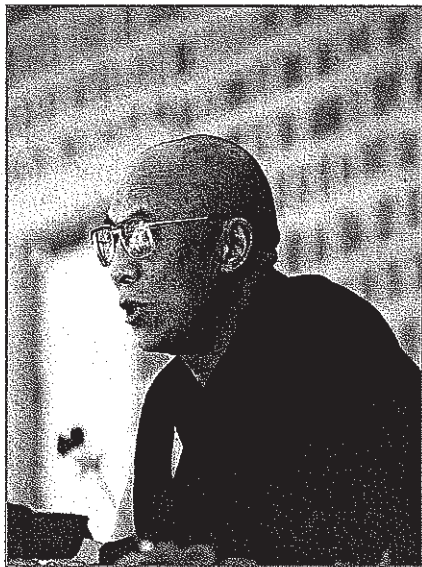
But Buddhism is unlike other religions because:

- Buddhists are not asked to believe anything on trust. They are free to examine all the teachings carefully and come to their own conclusions
- Buddhism does not teach belief in God, nor does it teach that there is no God
- people can practise Buddhism with or without taking part in ceremonies.

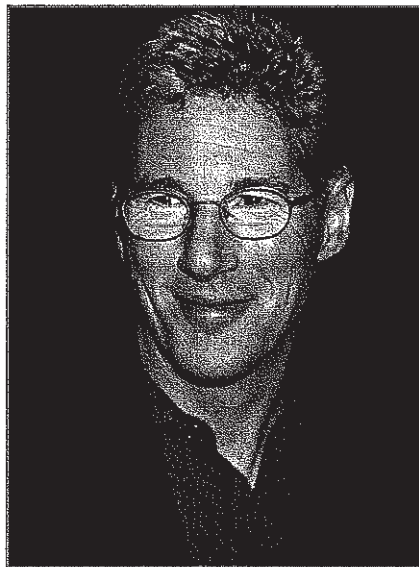
So there is no simple answer to this question.

● HOW CAN YOU SPOT THAT SOMEONE IS A BUDDHIST?

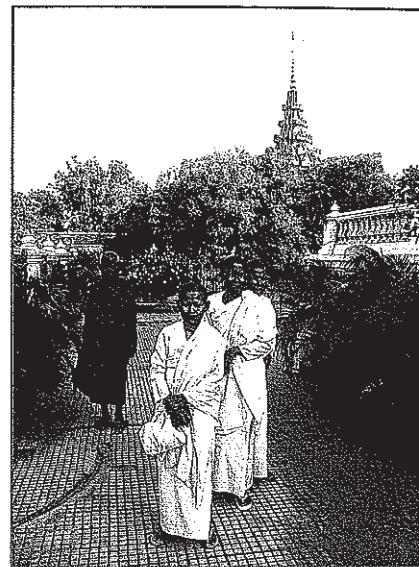
Well, take a look at the photos on the next page. What do the people have in common?



▲ Some people are famous for being Buddhist. The Dalai Lama is the leader of the Buddhist people of Tibet, many of whom now live in other countries. He is also seen as a spiritual leader by many other Buddhists worldwide



▲ Other people, like the actor Richard Gere, are famous for some other reason, but also make it clear that they are Buddhist



▲ Other people are seen to be Buddhist by the costume they wear. Here, we can see Buddhist nuns and a monk



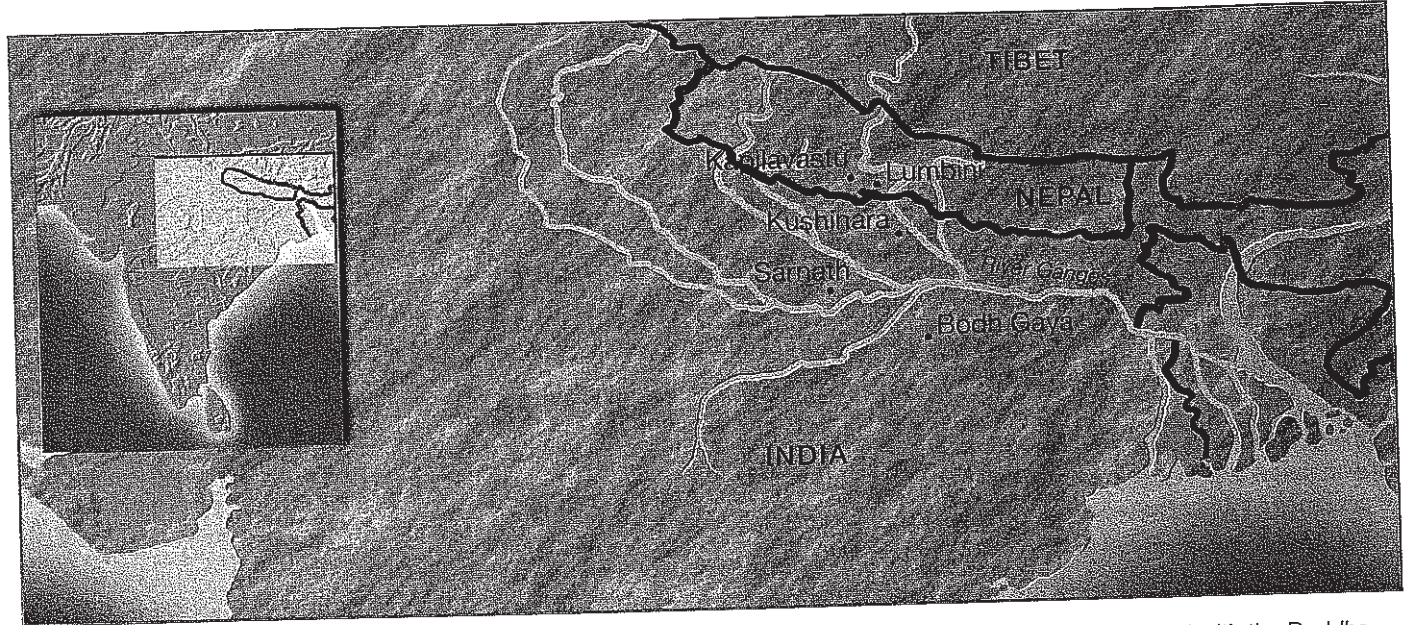
◀▶ Most Buddhists, however, are not famous – except among their friends – and they do not wear special clothes. Nor do they come from any particular part of the world. Most Buddhists, in fact, come from the Far East, South East Asia and the Himalayas, but of the two Buddhists shown here, Janet Kovach was born in England and Jacques Seneque in Mauritius, an island in the Indian Ocean



- 1 Before you start to study Buddhism, write down a list of things you know about it already. Under that, write down any questions that you might want to ask a Buddhist.
- 2 What things make you really happy? What things make you unhappy? Make two lists. Then:
 - a) against each of the 'happy' things, put down what that happiness actually depends on. What could prevent you from being happy because of this? (For example: You could be happy when people say you

are beautiful or handsome. In that case, your happiness depends on never growing old or losing your good looks.)

b) against each of the 'unhappy' things, write down if there is anything you can do to avoid that unhappiness. (Some things, like a person or animal you love dying, can't be changed. Other things, like being punished for doing something silly, probably can be changed. Think about what you can change and what you can't.)



▲ Some places in Northern India associated with the Buddha

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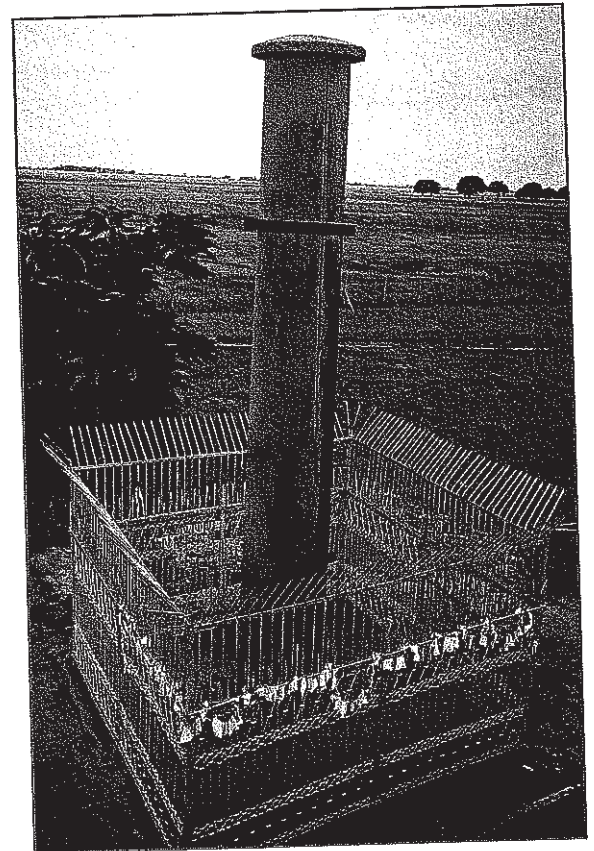
The man who was to be called ‘The Buddha’ was born at Lumbini in the foothills of the Himalayas, in what is now Nepal, about two and a half thousand years ago, and was given the name Siddhartha. His family name was Gautama, so his full name was Siddhartha Gautama (or Siddhatta Gotama, in Pali, a language used for the earliest Buddhist scriptures).

In Northern India at that time there were two kingdoms, but also some areas ruled by local clans. Siddhartha’s father, Shuddhodana, was the ruler of one of these clans – the Shakyas. Later, people were to call Siddhartha ‘Shakyamuni’, which means ‘the wise man of the Shakyas’.

So Siddhartha was brought up in luxury, living the life of a local prince, surrounded by everything he could want.

There are many stories about the life of the Buddha. They were passed on by word of mouth for about six hundred years before being written down. They were a reminder of the Buddha’s teachings and of his kindness.

According to one story, a wise man called Asita saw Siddhartha when he was a child. He said that Siddhartha would grow up to be a great religious teacher, and that he would give up all his worldly wealth and power.



▲ This stone pillar is at Lumbini. It was put up in about 250BCE by the Buddhist Emperor Ashoka. It says, ‘Here was born Buddha Shakyamuni’

Being a prince, Siddhartha was brought up in a palace in his father's capital city, Kapilavastu. He had servants to look after him and give him everything he wanted.

As a young ruler, he was trained in martial arts, such as swordplay, archery and horsemanship. Siddhartha was good at these, but he was also said to be good at sport and the arts. He was even given beautiful young women to take care of him.

At an early age he was married to Yasodhara, a local princess. One tradition says that she saw Siddhartha among other princes at a competition which included sports, martial arts and the singing of love songs! They had a son, Rahula.

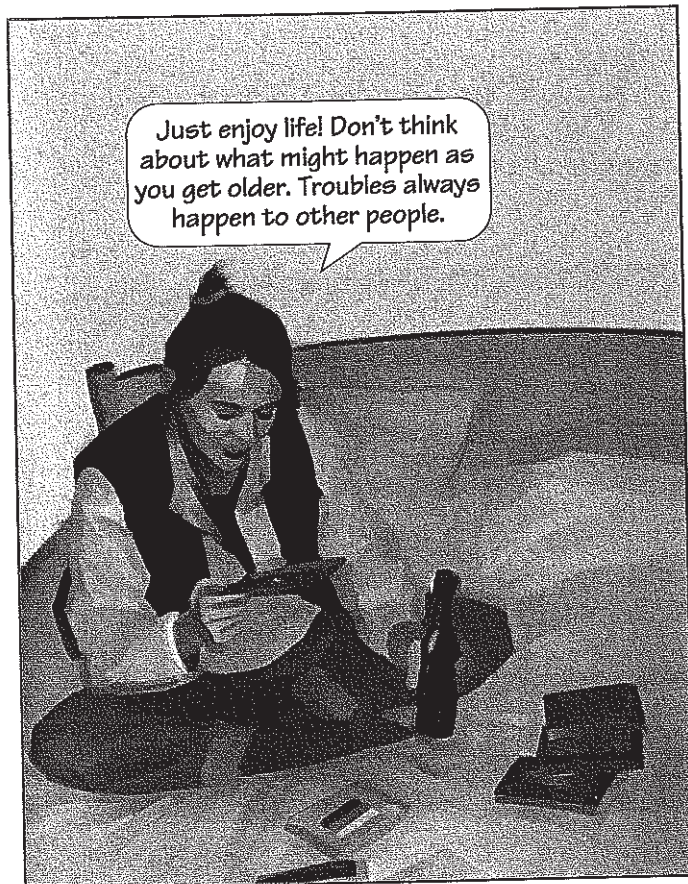
Naturally enough, Shuddhodana hoped that his son would want to take over from him as ruler one day, rather than give it all up for religion, as the seer had predicted.

He therefore tried to stop Siddhartha from finding out about suffering and death, in case they led him to think too deeply about life. He also made sure that Siddhartha had every luxury, in the hope that these things would stop him from becoming interested in religion.

But, in spite of all this, Siddhartha was not completely happy. Nor was he content simply to accept what his father had planned for him. He wanted to see what life was like outside the comfortable surroundings of his own little world.

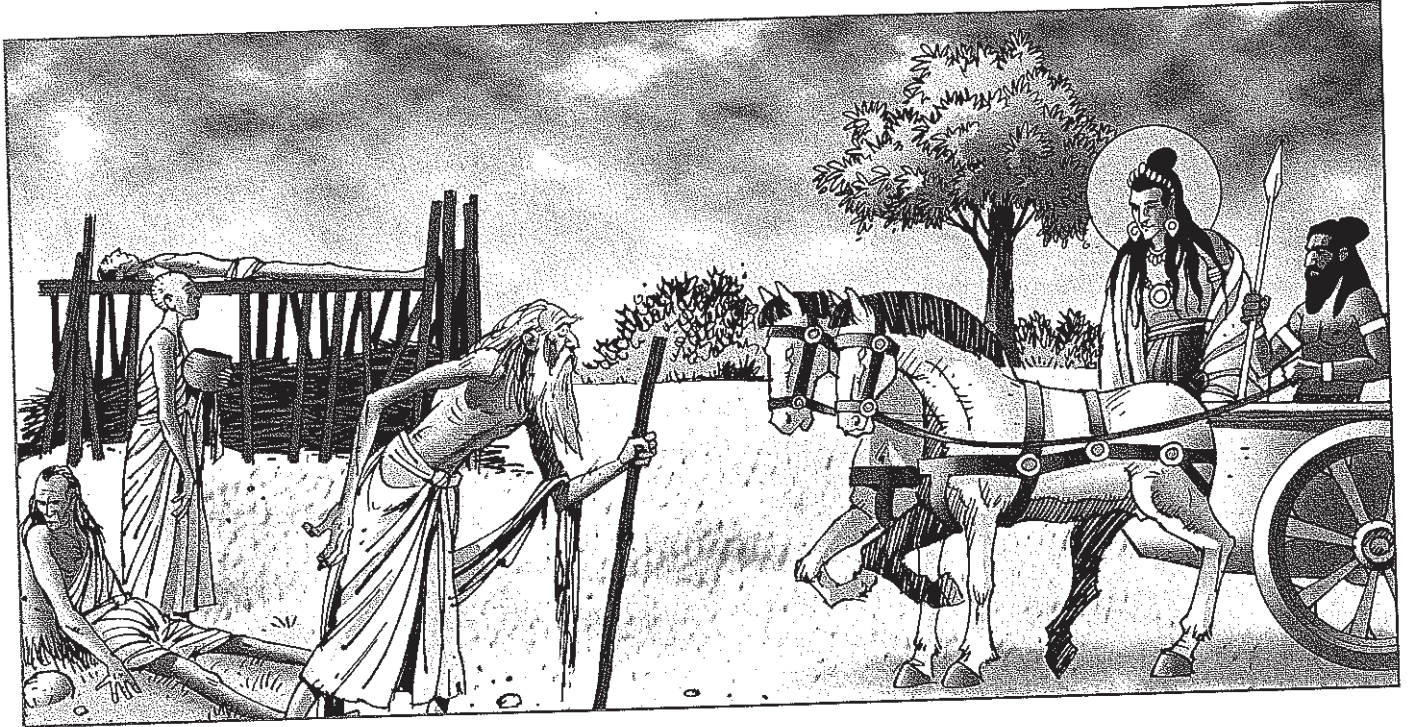


▲ What is your dream world? Would you like to be like this? Would it make you happy?



▲ Is this good advice? Give your views

- 1 Copy out and complete the following paragraph:
The man who became the Buddha was called _____ . He was born at _____ , which is in _____. He was a prince, who lived in a _____ and had _____ to wait on him. He married _____ and they had a son called _____ .
- 2 Sometimes parents try to stop their children from seeing or hearing about things that might upset them. Do you think this is always a good thing? Write down examples of the sort of things you think should and should not be kept from children. Then compare your lists with others.
- 3 Parents often have great hopes for their children when they grow up. Do you think this is a good thing? What problems might it create?
- 4 If you were Siddhartha, would you want to see outside your palace, or would you prefer to stay and enjoy the life of ease? Give your reasons.



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▲ Siddhartha saw four things: an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a holy man (a Sadhu)

Whenever Siddhartha went out in his chariot, his father sent servants ahead to try to get all the blind, sick and old people out of sight. But, in spite of this, Siddhartha saw the four things in the picture above. They were to change his life.

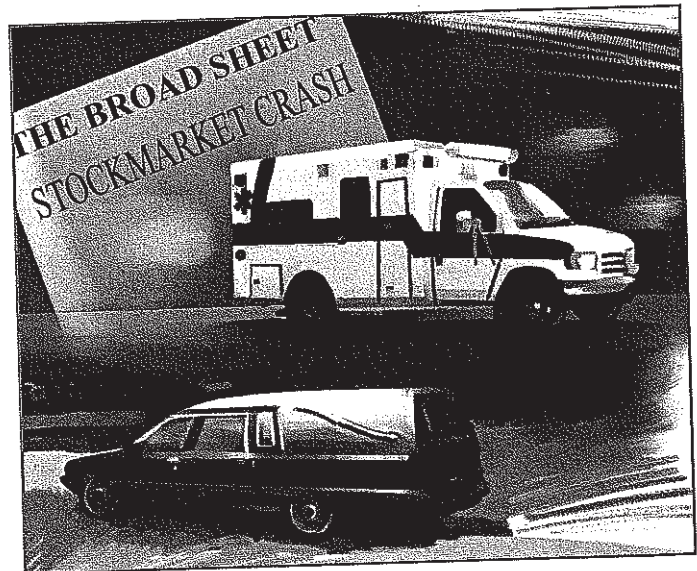
After seeing the first three of these – the old person, the sick person and the corpse – Siddhartha realised that he too would one day grow old and die, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Everything changes and eventually dies; that is a simple fact of life, but thinking about it came as a shock to him.

He was no longer satisfied with his life of luxury, but felt a great love for ordinary people, and wanted to help them overcome their suffering.

The last person he saw was a Sadhu, a holy man who had given up all his possessions to live a spiritual life. Siddhartha felt certain that he should do the same.

He thought about this for a long time. Then, one night, leaving his wife and son in the palace, he asked Channa, his charioteer, to drive him out of the city.

Then Siddhartha got down from the chariot. He cut off his hair, took off his fine clothes and, wearing just a simple robe, he set out on the homeless life. He was twenty-nine years old.



▲ You are unlikely to see a corpse being carried through the street, but some of the hazards that people face in life are the same now as in Siddhartha's day

Siddhartha wanted to find meaning and purpose in life and to understand how to overcome suffering. This is how one Buddhist book expresses these feelings:

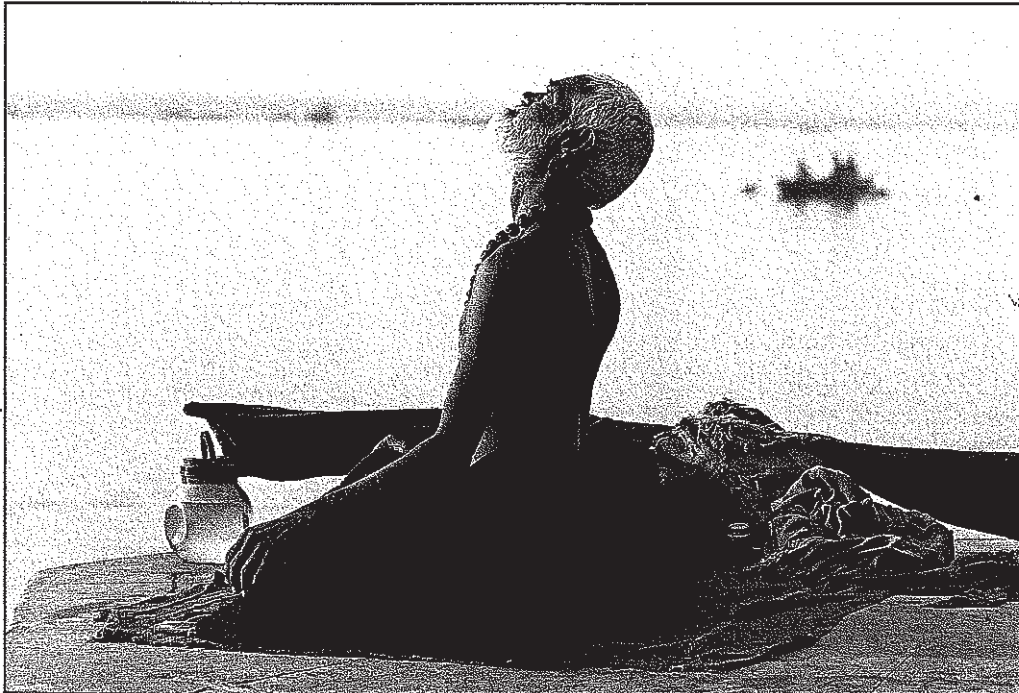
● How can there be laughter, how can there be pleasure, when the whole world is burning? When you are in deep darkness will you not ask for a lamp?
The Dhammapada verse 146

For six years Siddhartha lived as an ascetic. He accepted the hardships of this way of life and followed the most strict disciplines of the religion of his day (which became what we now call Hinduism). He studied under well-known teachers and then settled to live with five other holy men by the River Nairanjana.

He trained himself to have no food for long periods of time, and then ate only just enough to survive. It is said that he nearly killed himself **fasting** like this. He grew so thin you could see his backbone through his stomach.

Finally, he decided that this discipline was doing him no good. It had not helped him to find the truth about life, so he gave it up. He went down to the river and bathed. Coming back, he met Nandabala, a milkmaid, who offered him some milk rice to eat, which he accepted.

When the other holy men saw him give up his fast, they thought that he would be going back to a life of luxury, and deserted him.



◀ A Hindu ascetic (a Sadhu) sitting beside the Ganges, in India. Siddhartha tried living this way for six years

- 1 Divide a page into four rectangles. Put the title 'The four things that Siddhartha saw from his chariot' and name a different one in each box. Then illustrate each of them, perhaps using newscuttings. Then describe in each box what you think Siddhartha felt when he saw each of these things.
- 2 Imagine that you are the charioteer Channa. You have left Siddhartha alone to start out on his new life and you are returning to the palace. You will have to explain to the family what has happened and why Siddhartha felt he had to go out into a life of

homelessness. Write down how you would explain his decision.

- 3 Can you think of any examples today of people who have given up money or a regular job, perhaps, in order to go and do something they feel is more important or to live a totally different kind of life? Why do you think someone might do this? Do you think it is a sensible thing to do?
- 4 'Get real!' Why might you be tempted to say that to a modern-day Siddhartha? What would you mean by it?



▲ The temptations and Siddhartha's enlightenment. On the right the Buddha is touching the Earth as he is about to become enlightened. He is said to have called on the Earth to witness this event

In the eyes of everyone else, Siddhartha had failed. He had left his family and the prospect of being an influential ruler in order to follow the spiritual life. Now, after six years, he had realised that the way of discipline was not going to achieve what he wanted. Giving that up, he had been deserted by his five companions.

He had not achieved what he set out to do, but he was still determined to find the truth about life and about how to overcome suffering. He went and sat at the foot of a tree, and vowed that he would not get up until he had found the truth.

Sitting there, many images went through his mind. Some of these were of women, tempting him to be distracted from his quest by sexual thoughts. Other images were frightening. But they did not make him change his mind.

He sat under the tree all night struggling with these temptations. As he continued to meditate there, we are told that step by step he started to see everything in a new way. And as dawn approached, he is said to have gained enlightenment, in other words, he is believed to have seen the truth about life.

The word for enlightenment is 'Bodhi', so the tree under which he sat is called the Bodhi-tree (or Bo-tree) – and, of course, someone who has become enlightened is called a 'Buddha'.

From then on, Siddhartha Gautama became known as 'the Buddha'. His followers do not think that he was a god. They describe him as an enlightened human being. In other words, they claim that he was able to see and understand the truth about life.

But what did he see as he sat there all night? What is the vision that makes a person a 'Buddha'?

There is a problem here. In order to know and see exactly what Siddhartha saw, you too would have to be a Buddha! How can you explain something that is totally different from anything you've experienced before? That was Siddhartha's first problem on becoming a Buddha.

For some time he stayed near the Bo-Tree, and considered whether or not it was possible to explain what he had seen. But eventually he came to the conclusion that it was possible, and that there were people ready for his message.

● What did he see?

There are accounts of that night in the Buddhist scriptures, but they are difficult to understand, and the descriptions of what Siddhartha experienced are in terms that would have been more easily understood by people living in India two and a half thousand years ago. But it was something like this:

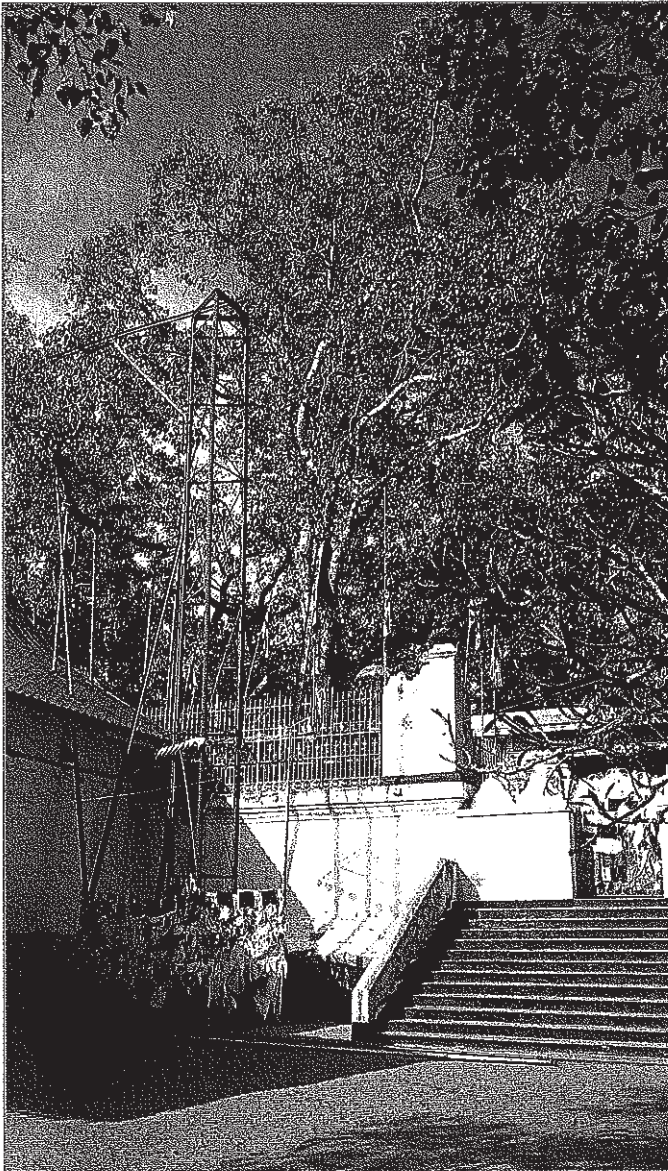
In his mind's eye he saw everything that had happened in the past, through many, many lifetimes. He also saw millions of creatures being born, living and then dying. He saw life changing and moving on like a great wheel, with individual creatures just a tiny part of that process.

He also saw how all this happens – that everything comes into being because of the conditions that surround it, and when those conditions change, it ceases to be.

He also saw that people suffered because they were always **craving** and grasping at things that were themselves subject to change, hoping that they would provide permanent satisfaction.

The mistake was in seeing people as separate, permanent selves. In reality, he saw everything as constantly changing, part of a pattern of causes and effects that stretched out to the ends of the world.

Siddhartha (or 'Buddha' as he is known from this point on) came to realise that *individual people are not separate from the rest of the world, but are part of it. Everything that arises in their lives comes about because of causes and conditions. The world is always changing, and so are we.*



Buddhists believe that everyone can eventually achieve enlightenment. Some say that everyone has a 'Buddha nature' within himself or herself. Siddhartha is usually described as *the* Buddha, because Buddhists see him as the first to have become enlightened in this way. They also respect him as a great teacher, helping others to understand life, and to make progress towards their own enlightenment.

- 1 Illustrate the main events in the Buddha's life – from birth to enlightenment. Against each of your drawings, say why it is important for an understanding of the Buddha and what he taught.
- 2 Many doubts and temptations arose in Siddhartha's mind as he sat beneath the Bo-tree. What doubts do you think he would have had? (Think about his life.)
- 3 Have you ever felt determined to do something even if everyone else thinks you are wrong? If so, describe how you felt. If not, describe how you think you might have felt. Do you think it takes courage to go on?
- 4 Although you can't understand it fully without being enlightened, try to put in your own words something of what the Buddha is said to have 'seen' as he became enlightened. Do you think it makes sense?

◀ This is the oldest authenticated living tree, and is said to have been grown from a cutting taken from the original Bo-tree