

POPULATION IN THE WORLD:

~376 million

POPULATION IN CANADA:

~367,000 or ~1% of Canadians

HISTORY:

Over 2,500 years ago, in northern India (present-day Lumbini, Nepal), a prince named Siddhartha Gautama was born. He lived a life of luxury and security until he decided to explore the world beyond the walls of his palace. For the first time in his sheltered life, he encountered suffering. He saw different types of human suffering: old age, sickness, death; he also saw a response to them in the form of asceticism. After living a life of extreme wealth, Siddhartha adopted the life of an ascetic and studied the practices of meditation and self-denial. However, these rigorous ascetic experiences did not enable Siddhartha to understand and respond to the condition of human suffering. He eventually chose a “middle way”—a path balanced between excess and asceticism.

One day in Bodhgaya, India, beneath a Bodhi tree, Siddhartha became absorbed in meditation and reflection. He vowed to sit beneath this “tree of awakening” until he gained insight into the cause and cessation of suffering. He meditated through the night; when the morning star appeared, Siddhartha had gained the liberating insight that severed the causes of suffering and become “the Buddha,” or the awakened one. This state of awakening, called *nirvana*, implies the release from all sources of suffering. Upon attainment of *nirvana*, the compassionate Buddha began to teach others about the path toward liberation. He taught in the cities and villages of North India for 45 years and died in 483 BCE in Kushinagar, India.

Today, there is much rich diversity within the Buddhist tradition. Some sources identify two major streams: the Theravada tradition (common in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos) and the Mahayana tradition (common in China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan). The latter stream includes the Vajrayana tradition of Tibet. In a contemporary context, Buddhist traditions flow and mingle together in many parts of the world, including Canada.

FORMAL PLACE OF WORSHIP:

Temple

SACRED SCRIPTURE(S):

There are a variety of scriptures within the Buddhist tradition; none of these is considered authoritative for the entire Buddhist community. The Pali canon is authoritative in the Theravada tradition.

SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES:

- Believers in Buddhism, called Buddhists, do not believe in a personal God.
- To be Buddhist means to “take refuge” in the Three Treasures or Jewels: the Buddha, the *dharma* (the teachings) and the *sangha* (the community that follows these teachings).
- The Buddha’s first sermon in Sarnath, India, explained the concept of suffering and the cessation of suffering. This first “turning of the Wheel of Dharma” was introduced as the “Four Noble Truths.” The first Noble Truth teaches that life involves suffering—*dukkha* in the Pali language. The second Noble Truth is that suffering is caused by ignorance and attachment. The third Noble Truth is that there is a cessation to suffering: one can be released from suffering. The fourth Noble Truth is the Eightfold Path: a comprehensive system that leads to liberation. Often the Eightfold Path is divided into three basic subdivisions: Ethical actions of body, speech and mind; Concentration, which includes Mindfulness practices; and Wisdom—the direct perception into the nature of reality which eliminates the roots of ignorance (*avidya* in Sanskrit). Through the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, Buddha diagnosed the cause of human suffering and introduced a cure to alleviate it.
- Buddhists believe that existence is impermanent. No state, good or bad, is eternal.

The concept of *karma* (action), also found in Hinduism, is significant. *Karma* can be explained in Buddhism through the metaphor of planting seeds: good deeds will lead to good fruit and bad deeds will lead to bad fruit. In this way, past actions impact us and present actions reverberate into the future. Although our previous actions in part create how we experience our reality, we have the opportunity as humans to transform our minds and our karma.

OTHER IMPORTANT TRANSLATIONS:

- *Theravada* is a Sanskrit word meaning “the teachings of the Elders.”
- *Mahayana* is a Sanskrit word meaning “the great vehicle.”
- *Vajrayana* is a Sanskrit word meaning “the diamond vehicle.”

REFERENCES:

- BBC Religions – Buddhism: bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism
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- Statistics Canada – National Household Survey: statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/130508/dq130508b-eng.htm
- Project Interfaith – Buddhism: projectinterfaith.org/page/buddhism-guide