



## Background Information on Buddhism

**Directions:** The following information will help your group create a character collage on Buddhism. Each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Buddhism is a belief system based on the life and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha. Gautama was a prince who lived in India from 563 to 483 B.C. According to legend, Gautama led a luxurious and sheltered life in his palace. One day his comfortable life was shattered when he saw a man who was very sick, another who was old and feeble, and a third who had died. Gautama realized that life was an endless cycle of pain, and the only way to escape it was by seeking wisdom. So, Gautama left the palace and for six years tried to find wisdom through ~~harsh discipline and suffering~~. For days at a time he ate only a single grain of rice each day. Despite his efforts, Gautama felt only pain, not wisdom and insight about life. Finally, at the age of 35, after meditating deeply for many days in the shade of a tree, Gautama suddenly felt that the truth about life became clear to him. Thereafter, he was known as the Buddha, or the “Enlightened One.”



- Who was the Buddha?
- Why did Gautama begin his quest for wisdom and truth?
- How did he discover the truth about life?

Many of the important foundations of Buddhism were stated in a sermon the Buddha gave shortly after his meditative experience. Buddha taught these four main ideas, known as the Four Noble Truths.

- **First Noble Truth** Suffering and sorrow are part of life. The Buddha believed people everywhere were subject to pain, sickness, and death.
- **Second Noble Truth** ~~The cause of suffering~~ and sorrow is people’s self-centered desires. People seek pleasure that cannot last and leads only to more suffering. If people did not want wealth, power, pleasure, and fame, they would not be disappointed and unhappy when they do not have these things.
- **Third Noble Truth** The way to escape suffering is to overcome desires and reach a state of “not wanting.”
- **Fourth Noble Truth** People can overcome their desires and reach the state of enlightenment (release from pain and selfishness), or *nirvana*, by following the Middle Path. The Middle Path involves leading an ethical (morally correct), compassionate life, in which one meditates and participates in rituals.



- Summarize the Four Noble Truths in your own words.
- What do Buddhists believe causes suffering in life?
- How does a person follow the Middle Path?