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Why Buddhism?

When we meet people who ask about Buddhism, these are some of the most common reasons they are curious about this path. Some of these reasons might be yours:

- Many people have a perception that Buddhists are calm, quiet, peaceful people, and they find this attractive.
- Their life has not turned out the way they expected, and they hope that Buddhism will help them find the path to get back on track.
- They heard about or tried meditation and think that might make them happy. They might think, “Once I start meditating, I am sure my life will be better.”
- They recognize that they are living with anxiety or fear. It is uncomfortable. They look around and think the Buddhist path will somehow eliminate or reduce the intensity of those feelings.
- They encountered the Dalai Lama on social media, through one of his books or courses, or in the news, and are inspired by his persona.

It seems like he is one of the happiest people on Earth. And somehow, they feel that this man has the answers they are looking for. They want to be more like him.

- They observed that the Buddhists they know don't think or view life like most other people.
- They read that one of their favorite actors or actresses practice Buddhism and are curious.
- They keep reading profound quotes by “the Buddha” on mugs, napkins, or Instagram, and it sure sounds like he knew a lot about life's toughest issues.

Do any of these reasons resonate with you? What draws you to Buddhism? There are countless reasons people are inspired to learn about it. We are both devout Buddhist practitioners—Lama Lhanang has been a lifelong Buddhist, while Mordy became a Buddhist as an adult. We have both found this path to be profound, beautiful, and helpful, and we love to share it with anyone who is curious.

We wrote this book to share basic information about Buddhism with anyone who is interested—whether you have any intention of becoming Buddhist or not. People practice Buddhism in many different ways, and this short book can't cover them all. Instead, we aim to offer an overview of some of the key teachings of Buddhism. And since what draws many people to Buddhism is its contemplative nature, we also include reflection questions, meditations, or practices with each chapter. We encourage you to try them

to get a flavor of the practice. But of course, you are welcome to skip them—please follow your instincts.

Many people begin to investigate Buddhism by reading about the Buddha who lived 2600 years ago. He was a man—not a god. And what he taught resonates with us.

And this generates more questions! How can I be like the Buddha? If the Buddha isn't a god, is Buddhism a religion? Who do Buddhists pray to? Is Buddhism a way of life, a philosophy, a science? We will answer some of these questions directly, and some we will leave up to you after you finish this book.

For many people, the religion we were born into didn't meet our needs, and in some cases may have even caused more harm than good. This can leave a void or confusion, which triggers our curiosity for other spiritual paths in life.

Many people have tried to meditate and sensed that there was something in the practice that needed more investigation. And after all, wasn't Buddhism the foundational inspiration for the mindfulness meditation we now see all over the world?

Many have heard that Buddhists have practices about how to die in peace. And even though you may not understand what Nirvana means, when we die, wouldn't it be nice to go there?

However you got to this moment, you are reading this book now. And we are very happy you're checking out this thing called Buddhism.

It is our desire that you will benefit from the teachings, practices, and explanations here. And we hope we can answer

many of the questions that you may have about Buddhism as you begin to discover the Buddha in you!

Keep in mind, though, that sometimes asking questions leads to even more questions!

Contemplate

- What motivated you to pick up this book?
- What do you hope to get out of reading it?
- What does Buddhism mean to you right now?

Knowing your motivation will likely ensure that you find what you are looking for! You don't need to be a Buddhist to read this book or benefit from its contents. Feel free to take what works for you and leave the rest.

Who Was the Buddha?

Siddhartha Gautama was born into a wealthy family in approximately 563 BCE, in what is now Nepal. His father was the chief of the state of Shakya, located in the foothills of the Himalayas. In many prayers and chants you may see his name written as Buddha Shakyamuni, which literally means “enlightened one who is sage of the Shakyas.”

His mother died soon after giving birth to Siddhartha. He was raised by his father and his aunt, who eventually became his stepmother. His father, like many parents, did his best to shield Siddhartha from all human sorrow. But one day, curiosity got the best of Siddhartha.

He left his family’s palatial home to see what life was like for those outside of his cushy, opulent environment. While being driven around by his charioteer, he observed what for him were unusual sights—an older man, an ill man, and the corpse of someone who had died. When his charioteer explained to him that this is what everyone experiences in life, he was greatly surprised.

On his way back to the palace, Siddhartha saw an ascetic monk walking peacefully. The human suffering that he saw

that day, juxtaposed with the image of someone who knew how to find peace in the world, awoke something in him. It triggered in him a desire to seek the meaning of life.

Soon after, while still in his twenties, Siddhartha left his wealthy family—including his new wife and child—to try to understand why people suffer. For some readers of history, leaving one's wife and child to search for liberation or awakening can be viewed in a negative light. However, this act can also be viewed as a courageous and selfless act. Siddhartha left the comfort of a palace, searching for awakening so he could end suffering for all sentient beings—including his wife and child. We see this as truly an act of selflessness.

He spent years as a wandering ascetic, meditating and studying with many teachers and practicing with yogis. Ascetics are people who practice severe self-discipline for religious purposes. But he was not able to find liberation from suffering for himself or for others. He was dissatisfied with this lack of progress. Determined to find the answers for himself, he left his teachers and embarked on his own path.

After six years of wandering, meditating, and living an ascetic lifestyle, he was still not able to make the progress he had hoped for. Underweight, exhausted, and physically spent, he decided to sit under a tree in Bodhi Gaya, a town in the Indian state of Bihar, and vowed not to leave that spot until he attained liberation or awakening. After six days and nights, with great effort, focus, and concentration, he did!

One of the many realizations he attained as he became enlightened was the understanding that the path of extremes did not bring liberation. Asceticism put the body under severe conditions and only created enemies of the body and mind. The body is not separate from the mind. The body should not be punished. And the other extreme, desire cultivated by hedonism, only brought more desire. Neither extreme led to an enlightened state. His enlightened knowledge born of both extremes showed that the path of the middle way was the best path to reduce suffering and to liberation.

A story best illustrates this idea. The Buddha was asked by one of his new students, a highly skilled lute player, why he was having difficulty meditating. Buddha asked his student, “When playing the lute, what happens when the strings of the lute are too tight?” His student responded easily, “The strings will break.” And when he asked his student, “What happens when the strings of the lute are too loose?” his student responded, “Well, then the lute won’t play.” His student immediately understood that meditation was similar. The middle way—for both meditation and one’s approach to life, thoughts, and decisions—was the path toward a peaceful mind and enlightenment.

After achieving his enlightened state of mind, the Buddha wandered the countryside, taught whoever requested teachings, and accumulated many devoted followers. The aura of enlightenment that surrounded him did not go unnoticed. When meeting people, many observed this bright countenance and asked him who he was. His response was simply,

“I am Buddha.” The word Buddha means awakened, or one who has become aware.

For the rest of his life, the Buddha wandered through Northern India, teaching anyone who expressed interest in reducing their suffering or seeking liberation. He also created an order of monks and nuns, who lived according to his teachings. He ensured that they spread the teachings far and wide for generations to come.

The Buddha passed away in approximately 483 BCE, at the age of 80. It is thought that his students numbered in the thousands before he died. Today, there are more than 500 million Buddhists around the world.

The Buddha’s realizations after his enlightenment included the understanding of many aspects of life. They include karma, impermanence, suffering, the central importance of compassion for all sentient beings, and an understanding of how what we call the “self” truly exists. We look forward to sharing the Buddha’s teachings on these topics in upcoming chapters.

Contemplate

The story of Buddha is typically recounted with him leaving the palace of his father seeking to learn what was going on outside his sheltered life. Undoubtedly, prior to his enlightenment, his thoughts, actions, and speech were not always pure and serene.

As the story is told, he achieved enlightenment after years of practice and study.

The path was not easy for him, and the same may be true for you.

- Where and why did your spiritual path start?
- What have you learned so far on your path?
- Where do you think this path will take you?