

Lesson one: Background to the life of the Buddha.

This extract below is a summary taken from the book, Buddhism, written by Professor Denise Cush. I want you to read through this and answer the questions that follow. The aim of this work is to enable you to realise that religions do not arise in a vacuum but are influenced and shaped by the historical, political and religious landscape they emerge from (which links to the big idea of fuzzy edges: syncretic and hybridity).



The Buddha is also known as Siddhartha Gautama or Siddhartha of the Gautama clan. He lived in Northern India on the borders of Nepal probably around 2,500 years ago (scholars are not sure exactly when he lived but most agree it was probably between the 6th to the 4th centuries BCE).

He lived in an area surrounding the Ganges river in Northern India. This area was full of forests broken up by settlements where the people lived. People belonged to tribes which were sometimes grouped into small kingdoms. Two powerful kingdoms were Magadha and Kosala and both of these would later become important in helping to spread Buddhism across the Ganges region. Most people farmed but some also traded goods between the various towns and cities and a small number were priests or entertainers or intellectuals. The Buddha was part of the Shakya tribe (which is why he is sometimes called Shakyamuni or the holy man of the Shakya tribe). It was led by his father, a man called Suddhodana. He was more of a leader of the area rather than a king.

Great change was occurring in the ideas, beliefs and practices found amongst the people when the Buddha lived. There were different views surrounding the best way to live a good life, what kinds of religious practices should be followed (if at all) and the answers to the ultimate or big questions of life (such as why we are here and what the purpose of life should be). There were many different religious and non-religious groups claiming they could answer these questions (this is known as religious pluralism a bit like we have today). All of these ideas and practices influenced the Buddha and the rejection, adoption or refinement of these can be seen in the teachings he gave.

One of these was the Vedic religion which is an early form of Hinduism. They worshipped a group of Gods such as Indra the Storm God and Agni the Fire God who are also found in Buddhism and Hinduism today. It was a very influential group that was led by priests who said prayers and chants and who performed sacrifices and read holy books called the Vedas. They believed in Samsara where the soul (Atman) is re-incarnated due to Karma. The Vedic religion tended to be followed by the very powerful in society, but most of the ordinary people followed what has been called the folk traditions (i.e. beliefs of the ordinary people). These are very ancient and include giving offerings to local spirits and using spells and omens to protect oneself against devils or evil spirits. They also believed in a creator God called Brahma which was later absorbed into Hinduism.

Another group includes the Shramana or renouncers. This refers to those people who decided to give up normal life and become a wandering holy man or philosopher. They would live in the forest spending time meditating and practising yoga in the hope that they would find the truths about life (often considering questions about the soul or Atman, samsara, re-incarnation, Karma etc). They would live off donations (known as alms). Sometimes they would live in groups or spend time with a person who was more knowledgeable than them. Some would follow very extreme practices such as reducing the amount of food or sleep they would have in the hope that this would help them find the answers they were looking for more quickly. One group of renouncers influenced the development of the Vedic religion into Hinduism as they created the books called the Upanishads. Another group led to the emergence of the religion known as Jainism whose founder, a man called Mahavira, lived about 100 years before the Buddha.



Activities:

Read through this 3 times. The first time just read through this. The second time complete 1-2 on the list below. The third time do 3-4.

1. Highlight in one colour any key words in the piece which are on your key vocab list.
2. Highlight in another colour any other key words on this piece.
3. The Buddha will be critical of or he will change some of the current religious practices of his time. Summarise in bullet points the religious practices that existed during his life in the boxes below.

Vedic religion	Folk Traditions	Shramana or renouncer movement

4. Is there anything else about this piece that you find interesting or which links to anything else we have done?

Lesson two: Stories about the Buddha



The figure of the Buddha is important for many Buddhists. He is not believed to be the first or last Buddha, but rather he is part of a long line of Buddhas. This is because there is believed to be a Buddha for every eon. A famous Buddha in history is called Vipassi and the last is believed to be one called Maitreya.

Very little is known about the Buddha that is definitely true. It is believed that he lived in northern India probably somewhere between the 6th to the 4th century BCE but some scholars even doubt this. Dr Naomi Appleton at Edinburgh University claims it is pointless trying to find out what is definitely or historically true about the Buddha as this is not possible from the information that is available. Instead she claims the focus should be on examining the different ways in which he is described or shown in the various sources of information about him and also to explore the different ways this information is understood and used by Buddhists.

Stories were a significant way in which information about the Buddha was used to inform Buddhists about his life and teachings. Dr Appleton claims most of these are in a style known as hagiography. Hagiographies are biographies which describe the main character as being holy. They describe these holy people as being totally good, doing nothing wrong at all. Instead they do things perfectly, and sometimes they do miraculous things. People can read these stories and learn from their actions and words to work out how they too can be a good person. Thus, the stories of the Buddha show that he is more than human, and that he is a philosopher and teacher who liberates and saves humanity.

Dr Brian Black from the University of Lancaster agrees that you cannot read the stories about the Buddha as if they were a historically true. He claims that you also need to see how these stories have been influenced by other Indian philosophical and religious literature. For example, you can see the influence of the Hindu Mahabharata and the Ramayana as well as other ideas found when he lived such as Karma, Samsara, liberation, the soul and the gods found in Hinduism. Thus, it is important when you look at the stories surrounding the Buddha that you see them as examples of hagiographies and also the influence from other ideas found in Hinduism as well.

Dr Brian Black claims that the earliest accounts of the life of the Buddha are found in temple art which arose from about 200 years after the Buddha died. The most famous examples can be seen in a place called Sanchi. These early carvings never show the Buddha but instead they show things associated with him such as foot prints, an umbrella etc. The earliest written stories can be found in a collection of teachings called the Digha Nikaya written in Pali which forms part of the Pali Canon. They include the Mahapadana Sutra and the Mahaparinirvana Sutra. They were probably written around 500-200 BCE. Another significant text is the Buddha Carita which was written probably in the 1st century CE in Sanskrit by a Brahmin who converted to Buddhism. It is written in a poetic style similar to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and shares similar themes to these books.





As we look at these different accounts of the story of the Buddha, answer the following:

1. What are the main themes of the life of the Buddha covered in the account you are focusing upon?


2. What elements show he is more than human? What elements show he is a liberator? What elements show he is more than human? Which is more prominent?

3. How do they demonstrate the style of writing known as hagiography?

4. How do they show the influence of other styles of writing or belief that were prominent when they were written?

5. What is similar between the stories and what is unique?

Lesson three: Exploring stories surrounding the life of the Buddha

<p>Which story is this?</p>	
<p>Which main themes does this story cover in the life of the Buddha?</p>	
<p>Give some examples form the story which show he is human.</p>	
<p>Give some examples from the story which show he is a liberator.</p>	
<p>Give some examples from the story which show he is more than human.</p>	
<p>Give some examples which show it is a hagiography.</p>	
<p>Give some examples of shared beliefs with Hinduism (e.g. Karma, samsara, the gods, heaven etc).</p>	
<p>What is unique in this story and what is shared with the others?</p>	

Lesson three: Life of the Buddha from the Mahapadana sutra from the Digha Nikaya

When the Buddha was living in the city of Savatthi in Jeta's park he heard (with his divine hearing) some monks discussing past lives. The Buddha got up and went to them and started speaking about past lives.

The Buddha started to talk about a previous Buddha called Vipassi. He came to this world 91 eons ago. Another was the Buddha Sikhi who came 31 eons ago, followed by the Buddha Vessabhu. In the present eon it has been Kakusandha, Konagamana and Kassapa. Now it is the current Buddha.

He then starts giving information on each of these past Buddhas:

	Vipassi	Sikhi	Vessabhu	Kakusandha	Konagamana	Kassapa	The current Buddha
When he arose	91 eons ago	31 eons ago	31 eons ago	Present one	Present one	Present one	Present one
Caste	Royal	Royal	Royal	Brahmin	Brahmin	Brahmin	Royal
Clan	Kondana	Kondana	Kondana	Kassapa	Kassapa	Kassapa	Gotama
Life span	80,000 years	70,000 years	60,000 years	40,000 years	30,000 years	20,000 years	About 100
Where	Palol tree	Burflower tree	Sal tree	Mahari tree	Cluster fig	Banyan tree	Fig tree
Chief disciples	Khanda and Tissa	Abhibhu and Sambhava	Sona and Uttara	Vidhura and Sanjiva	Bhiyyosa and Uttara	Tissa and Bharadvaja	Sariputta and Moggallana
Gatherings	3 major ones	3 major ones	3 major ones	One major one	One major one	One major one	One major one
Chief monk	Asoka	Kheman-kara	Upasanta	Buddhija	Sothhija	Sabbamitta	Ananda
Father	Bandhuma	Aruna	Suppatita	Aggidatta	Yannadatta	Brahmadatta	Suddon-dana
Mother	Bandhumati	Pabhavati	Yassavati	Visakha	Uttara	Dhanavati	Maya
City	Bandhumati	Arunavati	Suppatita	Kehmavati	Sobhavati	Benares	Kapilav-athu

Lesson three: Life of the Buddha from the Mahapadana sutra from the Digha Nikaya

The monks were amazed by his power of being able to know all of this information. The Buddha said it was because he had gained enlightenment or awakening and also because the gods had told him. He then went on to talk about the Buddha Vipassi and how what happened to him in his last life also happens to all Buddhas.

Before Vipassi came to earth for the last time he was in the Tusita heaven. He left there and went straight into his mother's womb. She was a queen and so Vipassi was born as a prince. When his mother was pregnant with him, Vipassi was mindful and aware unlike normal babies. The gods protected his mother so that nothing happened to her when she was pregnant. She became very good and was always healthy. She could also see Vipassi in her womb and saw that he was very healthy. She gave birth standing up and the gods received him first. He was born completely clean and after he was born, two streams of water appeared from the sky. He was able to stand immediately and he took 7 steps whilst holding a white umbrella. He declared this was his last re-birth. Light shone everywhere after he was born; on earth, the hells and all of the heavens.

As was the custom, Brahmins or priests examined Vipassi and found he had 32 marks on his body. These marks included having flat feet with imprints of wheels on them, long fingers and toes, 40 teeth, a wide tongue, deep blue eyes and a single strand of hair between his eyebrows. They indicated that he would have two destinies: he would either be a great king or a liberated person.

Not long after Vipassi was born, his mother died and went to Tusita heaven. As he grew up, his father ensured he only ever knew joy and had a white umbrella held over him every day. He was constantly entertained so he never grew bored and he also had three mansions to live in; one for the summer, one for the rainy season and one for the winter. He had divine powers when he was born due to gaining good karma in his previous lives. In particular, he could see 10 KM in all directions day and night.



Lesson three: Life of the Buddha from the Mahapadana sutra from the Digha Nikaya



After many thousands of years, Vipassi asked his charioteer to take him to the park. When he was there, he saw an old man. He asked the charioteer what it was. When the charioteer said it was old age which no one could escape, Vipassi became unhappy and returned to the palace. His father showered him with pleasure to cheer him up. After some more thousands of years, he asked his charioteer to go out again. This time he saw an ill man and asked what it was. The charioteer replied it was sickness which no one can escape and once again the prince became unhappy and returned to the palace. The King increased the pleasures his son experienced. After another thousand years the prince asked again to go to the park. This time he saw a dead man and asked what it was. When the charioteer replied death which no one can escape, the prince became upset and returned to the palace again. Once again the King showered him with more pleasures. But after some more thousands years had passed he asked his charioteer if he could leave again. This time they saw a renouncer with a shaven head and he asked what it was. The charioteer explained that a renouncer does good deeds, is pure and has compassion for all. The prince Vipassi decided he wanted to be this so he shaved off his hair and beard and dressed in robes and became a renouncer.

84,000 people from Vipassi's city decided to do the same and followed him to become a renouncer. But when he told them to go home, they did so. Vipassi sat and meditated under a Palol tree. Whilst he was there, he gained enlightenment. He realised that craving is the cause of suffering and re-birth. He thought he should teach the Dharma but realised it was very hard to understand and decided not to. But the God Brahma managed to get him to change his mind.

Vipassi decided to teach what he had discovered (his teachings the dharma), to two wise men, Khanda and Tissa. So, he shut his eyes and vanished from where he was and re-appeared in the deer park near the capital city. The deer park keeper fetched Khanda and Tissa and Vipassi taught them the dharma. They too became monks or renouncers. They shaved off their hair, wore robes and became homeless. 84,000 people heard what had happened and they went to the deer park as well. Vipassi taught them and they gained enlightenment too. They told others who also went to Vipassi to gain enlightenment.

Gradually a sangha of 6,800,000 monks lived at Bandhumati. Vipassi decided to send some of these monks off to spread the dharma. But they had to come back to Bandhumati every 6 years to recite the monastic code so they did not forget it (the god Brahma promised to help him with this). They always did this, sometimes using psychic power or the help of the gods to do this.

Lesson three: Buddha Carita by Asvaghosa

(convert from Brahmanism) probably written in the 1st century CE influenced by the Hindu epic stories (e.g. Mahabharata and the Ramayana).

**Chapter 1: The birth of the holy one**

The city the Buddha was born into was a rich, beautiful place which had no people living in poverty. His father was the king of the Shakyas and he was a just and humble king who always did his duty. He was married to Maya who was beautiful, wise and humble.

Before his last re-birth, the Buddha lived in the Tusita heaven. He left this heaven and entered into his mother's womb in the form of a white elephant. As his mother neared the end of her pregnancy, she travelled to Lumbini. When she was there, she went into labour and gave birth pain free to the Buddha. Like other prominent figures in Hinduism, his birth was said to be miraculous as he was born from her side as she stood clutching the branches of a tree. Other gods, including Indra were present at the birth and bowed down to honour him. Other miraculous things occurred when he was born including the shaking of the earth, lotuses falling from heaven, people were able to recite poetry, teach and complete Hindu texts.

As soon as the Buddha was born, he was wise and could walk. He took 7 footsteps and declared this was his last re-birth. As was the custom, the seer or priest Asita came to the palace to examine the Buddha's body to see if there were any marks. He found some such as a wheel on his foot, a circle of hair between his eyebrows and webbing between his toes and fingers. Asita told the king that his son had come to give the truth to the world so that they could become awakened, ending re-birth.

**Chapter 2: Life in the palace**

After the birth of the Buddha, good fortune spread even more to his father, the king. He became even more wealthy. His animals became more fertile and his enemies became his friends. Sickness and bad weather decreased and fields produced more crops. There was no famine, no fear or sickness and because of this, there were less deaths. There was no theft or greed as people helped each other instead. Thus, all in all, life in the kingdom was really good.

However, there was some sadness as not long after the Buddha was born, his mother died. Her sister brought the Buddha up. He grew up in luxury having all kinds of pleasure. He was married to his cousin, Yasodhara and they had a son, Rahula.

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**Chapter 3: The Prince's Perturbation**

One day the prince wanted to leave the palace. The king made sure that he would only experience pleasure on the way so he made sure that any ill or mutilated person was removed along with beggars. All roads were beautifully decorated and people came out to see him as he passed.

However, as he travelled, the gods created an old man to walk along the road. He asked the charioteer who this person was that had white hair, limbs bent and using a staff? The charioteer said it was old age and said it comes to all people. This made the prince deeply upset and he went back to the palace. He decided to leave the palace again and this time the gods placed a diseased man in front of him. When he asked the charioteer what this was, the charioteer said, sickness which comes to us all. Once again the prince became upset and went back to the palace. His father tried to make him happier with lots of pleasure but the prince left the palace again. This time the gods made a dead man. The prince asked the charioteer what it was and he replied death which comes to us all. The prince became overwhelmed with sadness and asked to be taken back to the palace. But the charioteer took him to a pleasure garden instead.

**Chapter 5: Flight**

One day the prince left the palace again and went to the edges of the city. He saw a field being ploughed which resulted in the death of some insects. This filled him with sadness, so he sat under a tree and meditated on the cause of suffering. As he sat meditating, a renouncer walked up to him and when the prince asked him who he was he said he was a renouncer. He had turned away from objects of the senses and attachments as he was searching for liberation from this world of suffering.

The prince returned to the palace and decided to become a renouncer. He asked his father for his permission but her refused. He surrounded the prince with guards and women to ensure that he did not leave. But in the night they all fell asleep and the prince could make his escape. He awoke his charioteer, Chamdaka, and asked him to get his horse. As they left the palace, all of the gates flew open and the gods rejoiced.

**Chapter 4: The women rejected.**

When he arrived at the pleasure garden, women went out to meet him. But this did nothing as all he could think about was that people get old, they get sick and will die. He left.

**Chapter 6: The dismissal of Chamdaka**

When they reached a certain spot, the prince gave Chamdaka his jewellery and said he was going to become a renouncer. He took Chamdaka's sword and cut his hair. A celestial being gave him dark red robes to wear and he became a renouncer.

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**Chapter 7: Entry into the penance grove**

As the prince entered the hermitage, he lightened up the whole area. He asked the renouncers who were already there what he needed to do to become a renouncer. He was told he had to give penance and live off the land or what was given to him. However, after a few days, he decided to leave as he did not believe that penance was the answer. Before he left, one of the renouncers told him to go to another place to meet a renouncer/ascetic who had gained insights of bliss.

**Chapter 9: The deputation to the prince**

The family counsellor and priest went to the forest to speak to the prince. After speaking to the other renouncers, they found him sitting under a tree at the side of the road. They sat down beside him and asked him to return to the city to do his duty explaining that liberation can still occur in cities. They explain that his father is very upset and his wife mourns like a widow. But the prince refuses and they return to the city.

**Chapter 11: the passions spurned.**

The Prince explained to the king what he was doing. The prince then went to another hermitage.

**Chapter 12: Visit to Arada**

The prince went to visit the holy man Arada to ask him how he could be delivered from old age, sickness and death. He was not convinced by his answer and so he left and went to the hermitage of the sage Udraka. He was not convinced by his answer either so he went to see the sage Gaya. On the way, he saw five renouncers who were practising austerities in order to control the senses. They told him that if he fasted, he would find the answers he was looking for. So he decided to eat only a single jujube fruit, sesame seeds and rice. He did this for 6 years until he was only skin and bone. He realised this was not the way to gain the answers he was looking for. So he accepted some food from Nandabala the daughter of the leader of the herdsman and sat down under the root of an asvattha tree. He decided he would stay there until he gained the knowledge he was seeking.

**Chapter 8: Lamentations in the palace**

The charioteer came back to the city and as he passed, people started to weep that the prince had left. The city became bathed in gloom. People fainted. Yasodhara's grief was unbearable, as she fell to the ground and sobbed. She was critical of the prince as he should have taken her with him as their religion says (as Sita went with Rama). The king fell to the ground with grief and had to be carried by his attendants. He wailed and fell to the ground just like King Dasaratha did when Rama left the palace.

**Chapter 10: Srenya's visit**

The prince crossed the Ganges and went to the city of Rajagrha. The people came out to see him. The king, Srenya, heard of what was happening and went to see him when he settled in the woods in the mountain of Pandava.

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**Chapter 13: Defeat of Mara**

Mara was worried about what would happen when the Buddha would find the truth and so he decided to try to make him break his vow. He did this by sending temptations (symbolised by arrows), his children and also troops of demons. But none of this worked so he left.

**Chapter 14: Enlightenment**

The prince sat and meditated. As he did so, he remembered all of his previous births, experiencing each all over again. This made him feel compassion for all living things and that all existence was insubstantial. Then the next night he beheld the whole world and all of the re-births of every living being, in hell and heaven and on earth. He saw this was due to karma which was fuelled by desire or attachment to existence. Thus, if this stops, so will re-birth. It is ignorance that is the cause of this desire. This was the truth he wanted and when he realised this, the earth shook and was overwhelmed with joy. He was now a Buddha, an awakened one.

**Chapter 15**

The Buddha spent time in meditation in order to think about how he could save the world. He then left and spent time with different people. He spent time at the deer park teaching the first five disciples. The gods came to listen too.

**Chapter 16**

The Buddha taught that the two extremes of a life devoted to joy and desire and the life devoted to self-inflicted pain to modify the soul's corruptions are not the path to true awakening. This was through the Four Noble Truths with the 8-fold path. He taught this to the gods and the first five disciples who became the first arahants.

**Chapter 17: The progress to Lumbini**

Many came to the park to see and listen to the Buddha. He also visited ascetics and taught them and showed his supernatural power. They either gained enlightenment or followed him. Women also became renunciators and kings and other important people started to follow him. He converted many people as he travelled the land living off alms. Many became Arahants. Stupas were built including one in Lumbini.



Lesson four: Assessment activity on the stories of the Buddha

- 1. Big idea:** Fuzzy edge-worldviews are influenced by other beliefs, teachings, ideas and practices that exist (syncretic and hybridity).

Look back at the work we have done on the stories of the Buddha (you may find the lesson one and three work more useful here). Select two examples of beliefs, ideas, teachings or practices that already existed when the Buddha was born which the Buddha also accepted.

Example of the belief, teaching, idea or practice that existed at the time of the Buddha:




How this is seen in the story of the Buddha:



Example of the belief, teaching, idea or practice that existed at the time of the Buddha:



How this is seen in the story of the Buddha:



Lesson four: Assessment activity on the stories of the Buddha

2. Big idea: continuity, fluidity and change.

Look back to the work we did in lesson three where we explored different stories surrounding the Buddha. Select two things that remained the same in all of these four accounts and two things that changed or was not present in all four of these accounts.

The two things that remained the same in all four of the accounts:

1.

2.


The two things that were changed or which were not present in all four accounts:

1.

2.

3. Discipline: theology especially textual analysis.

a) In your own words, describe what hagiography means.



b) Give two reasons why this might be a better way to understand the story of the Buddha?



c) Do you think this is a good way of exploring stories of significant people in religions? Explain your answer.

