Buddhism is one of the world's major religions. It originated in South Asia around the fifth century B.C.E., and over the next millennia, it spread across Asia and to the rest of the world.

Buddhists believe that human life is a cycle of suffering and rebirth, but that if one achieves a state of enlightenment (nirvana), it is possible to escape this cycle forever. Siddhartha Gautama was the first person to reach this state of enlightenment and is still known today as the Buddha. Buddhists do not believe in any kind of deity or god, although there are supernatural figures who can help or hinder people on the path toward enlightenment.

Born in Nepal, Siddhartha Gautama was an Indian prince who, upon seeing people poor and dying, realized that human life is suffering. He renounced his wealth and adopted the life of a poor beggar, spending his time meditating and traveling. Ultimately, he remained unsatisfied and settled on "the Middle Way"—the idea that the path to enlightenment was neither asceticism nor wealth, but rather, a way of life between the two extremes. Eventually, in a state of deep meditation, Gautama achieved enlightenment underneath the Bodhi tree (the tree of awakening). The Mahabodhi Temple in Bihar, India—the site of his enlightenment—is now a major Buddhist pilgrimage site.