

ANCIENT INDIA – Hinduism and Buddhism

Hinduism

Hindu practices grew from the mingled beliefs, written down as hymns, of many groups in India. Some of these hymns may date back to 1500 B.C. Priests gathered the hymns into four collections called **Vedas** (VAY-duhz). Historians cherish them for a different reason. The Vedas are a most important clue to the history of India from 1500 to 500 B.C. This thousand year period is called the Vedic Age. The foundation of Hinduism is based in part on the following ideas:

(1) Nothing that lives ever dies entirely. When a living thing dies, its inner self is reborn in another form. This passing of the inner self from body to body is known as **reincarnation**.

(2) All wise Hindus must seek to reach a state of perfect understanding called **moksha**. The inner self that attains moksha will never suffer another reincarnation. In moksha, the self disappears to merge with Brahman.

Castes structured Indian society

According to the Vedas, four different castes, or groups of people, had been created from the body of a Hindu god. First, the **Brahmins** were created from the god's mouth. They later became the priestly caste and were the highest group in Indian society. The second group, the **Kshatriyas** (kuh-SHANT-ree-uhz), came from the god's arms. They were rulers and warriors. Third, the **Vaishyas** (VYSH-yuhz) were created from the god's legs. They were landowners, merchants, and artisans. The fourth group, the **Shudras** (SHOO-druh-z), came from the god's feet. They were the servant or slaves.

In reality, Hindu society was much more complicated than the myth suggested. There were hundreds of different groups, not just four. Over the years, these divisions in society became more and more defined. Eventually, each group had its own occupation, which was passed down from parent to child. People of each group ate only with each other and usually married only within their own group. Hindus called these groups within their society jatis, a word that means "birth group." When Europeans came into India, they called the groups **castes** (kasts), from the Latin word that meant "pure."

The very lowest group in society was those people outside the caste system - the outcastes or **untouchables**. Even lower than servants, untouchables could not so much as draw water from a caste well, lest their touch contaminate the water. They had to use separate wells or wait for a higher ranking person to get water for them.

Why was one person born a Brahmin while another was born an untouchable? Hinduism explained it by saying that Brahmins, in former lives, had committed no bad deeds. An untouchable, on the other hand, must have done bad deeds in an earlier incarnation.

Hindus believed in an ethical law of cause and effect called **karma**. By the law of karma, moral behavior in one lifetime guaranteed rebirth in a higher caste. Immoral behavior, on the other hand, automatically dropped a reborn soul to suffer in a lower caste. To earn a good rebirth, according to Hindu teachings, a person had to be a good member of his or her caste. Each caste had its particular **dharma**, or duty. Dharma is the set of duties and obligations of each caste. For example, a boy born into the warrior caste had to be willing to fight, kill, and be killed. A woman's dharma was to obey her father while she was a child, her husband after she married, and her sons if she was widowed. The individuals own wishes or talents made no



difference. According to an ancient Hindu text, it is better to do one's own duty badly than to do another's duty well.

Buddha

Around 530 B.C., near the very end of the Vedic age, a young man named **Siddhartha Gautama** challenged the ideas of the Brahmin priests. Even a lowborn person, he said, could gain enough wisdom in one lifetime to escape the cycle of death and rebirth.

The date traditionally given for Gautama's birth is 563 B.C. The stories say that Gautama was born into the warrior class and lived in luxury at his family's palace near the foothills of the Himalayas. Pampered by his wealthy family, he never saw pain, suffering, or death. He married a beautiful woman who bore him a son.

Again according to legend, Gautama's comfortable life was shattered one day when he first saw proof of human suffering. While riding in his chariot, Gautama saw a man who was terribly sick, another who was old and feeble, and a third that had died. He realized that life was an endless cycle of pain and the only way to escape it was by seeking wisdom.

One night, when he was about 29, Gautama took a last look at his sleeping wife and son. Then he left his palace and joined a wandering, homeless band of five other wisdom seekers. For six years, Gautama tried to find wisdom through harsh discipline and suffering. For days at a time he ate only a single grain of rice each day. His stomach became so empty that, by poking a finger into it, he could touch his backbone. Yet Gautama gained only pain, not wisdom. He decided therefore, to seek wisdom in other ways.

At last, enlightenment came to him. After meditating deeply for many days in the shade of a tree, Gautama suddenly felt that the truth became clear to him. He rose and set out to teach others what he had learned. Thereafter, he was known as Buddha, a title meaning "the Enlightened One."

Buddha gave his first sermon to the five wisdom seekers who had been his companions. Buddha taught the four main ideas that had come to him in his enlightenment, calling them the **Four Noble Truths**.

First Noble Truth: Everything in life is suffering and sorrow.

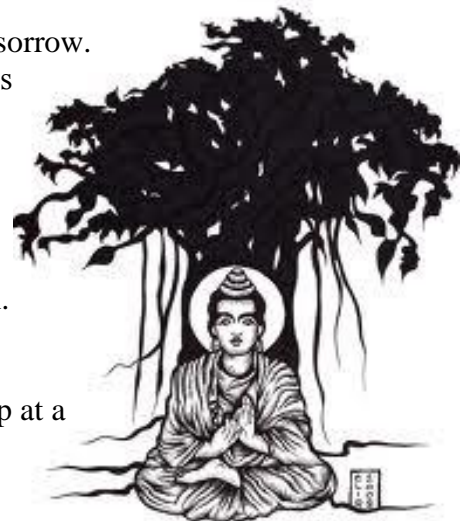
Second Noble Truth: The cause of this pain is people's self-centered cravings and desires. People seek pleasure that cannot last and leads only to rebirth and sorrow.

Third Noble Truth: The way to end all pain is to end all desires.

Fourth Noble Truth: People can overcome their desire and attain enlightenment by following the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path was like a staircase. According to Buddha, those who sought enlightenment had to master one step at a time. The steps of the Eightfold Path were right knowledge, purpose, speech, action, living, effort, mindfulness, and meditation. By following the Eightfold Path, any one could attain **nirvana** (nur-vahn-uh), Buddha's word for release from pain and selfishness.

Buddha taught his followers to treat all living things (humans, animals, and even insects) with loving-kindness. A devout Buddhist was not even supposed to swat a mosquito. Buddha's religion was also unique in its concerns for all human beings - women as well as men, lowborn as well as highborn.



Name _____

Per _____

SECTION REVIEW - Hinduism and Buddhism

Define: Definitions (1 point each)

(a) reincarnation -

(b) moksha -

(c) caste -

(d) untouchable -

(e) karma -

(f) dharma -

(g) nirvana -

1. Why are the Vedas important to historians? (1 point)

2. How did a Buddhist hope to achieve enlightenment? (1 point)

3. Both Hinduism and Buddhism claim that life is filled with suffering. What does each religion say is the cause of this suffering? (2 points)

a. Hinduism: _____

b. Buddhism: _____

EXTRA CREDIT: Explain how the ideas of reincarnation, karma, and caste are related.
