# What is Buddhism? (Part II)

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The Great Renunciation refers to Prince Siddhartha’s decision to leave his royal life and possessions to pursue spiritual enlightenment.

In the previous article, we discussed the core teachings of Buddhism. In this one, we will focus on Buddhism as a religion and its emergence in the world. Before we explore what Buddhism is, we must first consider the question of what religion actually is. According to Wikipedia, “Religion is a range of social-cultural systems, including designated behaviors and practices, moral beliefs, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organizations, that generally relate

humanity to supernatural, transcendental, and spiritual elements—although there is no scholarly consensus over what precisely constitutes a religion." Additionally, we will examine the origins of religions and the reasons for their emergence.

The origin of religious belief is an open question with several possible explanations, including awareness of individual mortality, a sense of community, and dreams. Religions often feature sacred histories, narratives, and mythologies that are preserved through oral traditions and sacred texts, aiming to explain the origins of life and various phenomena. Religious practices may include rituals, sermons, commemorations or veneration of deities or saints, sacrifices, feasts, trances, and initiations, among others.

According to the African Studies Association at the University of Michigan (2005), there are an estimated 10,000 distinct religions worldwide. Religions that encompass these belief systems, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, first entered the English language in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The origin of religion remains uncertain; however, some scholars have categorized religions into three broad groups: World religions (which refers to international religions), Indigenous religions (referring to smaller, culture-specific groups), and New religious movements (which encompass recently developed religions). When discussing Buddhism, I refer to it as a system of metaphysical and social philosophy organized by the Buddha. It is important to note that I am not addressing Buddhism in its modern context; rather, we will focus on it as a philosophy instead of a religion. To better understand Buddhism, we can follow a model that clarifies our thoughts. First, we should identify the problem. Next, we need to seek a solution to that problem. Afterward, we should explore techniques or methods to address the issue, and finally, we must discover the actual solution and put it into practice. This process reflects the teachings of Lord Buddha and encompasses Buddhist philosophy, the science of mind, and Buddhist psychology. While this approach has its limitations, it can significantly enhance our understanding of Buddhism. What makes someone a Buddhist? One traditional answer is that a Buddhist is someone who has taken refuge in the Three Jewels. Taking refuge means seeking protection from the sufferings of the world in Buddhism. The Three Jewels consist of the Buddha, who teaches a path out of suffering; the Dharma, which encompasses the Buddha's teachings about reality; and the Sangha, the community of Buddhists who are all seeking a path out of suffering. According to the Bodhicaryāvatāra, Buddhism has several forms, including Mahāyāna, Theravāda, and Vajrayāna (often referred to as the "Diamond Vehicle"). Countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia,

Laos, Thailand, and Sri Lanka are associated with Theravāda Buddhism, while China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Taiwan are representative of Mahāyāna Buddhism, also known as the “Great Vehicle.” Mahāyāna Buddhism also has a significant presence in Tibet, Mongolia, Singapore, and parts of Malaysia and Indonesia.

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Tibetan Buddhism is practiced in Tibet, Mongolia, parts of Nepal, and northern India. It is considered a form of Vajrayana Buddhism, also known as the ‘Diamond Vehicle.’ The representative of this tradition is His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who is regarded as an emanation of a bodhisattva. To summarize the key themes, Buddhist traditions are highly diverse. Despite this diversity, people in these regions share a belief in Lord Buddha and actively follow His teachings.

How did Buddhism come to be in the world? According to Thēravāda Buddhism, the Lord Buddha, Prince Siddhartha, was born in the Sal Grove of Lumbini, India. Until the age of 29, he had never seen an elderly person, as his father had prohibited old and sick individuals from entering the kingdom. One day, while traveling to the royal garden, he encountered the Four Omens: an old man, a sick person, a dead body, and a wandering ascetic, who was a holy man. Upon seeing these sights, the Prince said to his charioteer, “If all human beings, including myself, cannot escape the reality of death, then do not take me to the royal garden to enjoy its pleasures. Turn back now from this place where death is seen and return me to the royal palace” – (Mahā Budddhavamsa – The Great Chronicle of Buddhas, Wisdom Library.)

According to legend, at the age of 29, just as he was about to attain the glory and powers of a Universal Monarch, the prince rejected and dismissed them as if they were nothing. Following this, he decided to renounce the world and become a recluse. In this moment, his perspective is captured in the legend when he speaks to Channa, his charioteer: “O Kandaka (Channa), my companion, assist me for this one night. Once I achieve Buddhahood with your help, I will rescue all sentient beings, including the devas, from the cycle of samsara and guide them to the high ground of Nibbāna.” After renouncing his kingdom, Prince Siddhartha reached the bank of the river, crossing the Anōmā River in a single night and passing through

the three kingdoms of Sākiya, Kōliya, and Malla, accompanied by Minister Channa.

While standing on the pearly sandbank, The Bodhisatva, Siddhārtha addressed Channa: “Friend Channa, take Kandaka (horse) together with my ornaments and return home. I will become a recluse.” When Channa said that he would also like to do the same, the Prince forbade him three times saying: “You cannot have permission to become a recluse. Just go beck to the city.” After the Minister went, the Prince with the sword in his right hand, cut off the hair-knot. At that instant, The Bodhisattva received a big robe, an upper robe, a lower robe, a bowl with its bag, and a water-strainer. Thereupon, the Bodhisattva assumed the appearance of a noble recluse by putting on the robes properly. Becoming a recluse ascetic, appending seven days in ascetic bliss in the nearby mango grove, Anupiya, travelled thirty yojanas-(miles) on foot in one single day to the city of Rajagaha.

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