Buddha’s First Sermon

Buddhism traces its origins to a handsome, wealthy young prince of a northern Indian tribe who left his family and home to live apart from the world and search for truth. Touched by human misery and suffering, Siddhartha Gautama (560-480 B.C.) longed to find a way to release men from pain and suffering. After rejecting extreme seclusion and self-deprivation as a possible solution, enlightenment (understanding) came to him while meditating under a tree. Thereafter he was called Buddha, “Enlightened One.”

Buddha believed that it was his mission to enlighten the world. For close to fifty years he preached his message throughout India, gaining followers and disciples wherever he went. His teachings provided a reaction against Hinduism. They provided a means whereby every individual, without ritual, without a priesthood, and without supernatural aid, could attain the blissful state of Nirvana, a state of perfect peace, where desire is extinguished.

Buddha’s first sermon set forth the causes of evil and suffering, as well as a means to cope with them.

What are these Four Noble Truths? They are the Noble Truth of Suffering, the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering, the Noble Truth of the Extinction of Suffering, and the Noble Truth of the Path that leads to the Extinction of Suffering.

What is the Noble Truth of Suffering? Suffering exists. Birth is suffering; decay is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering: not to get what one desires is suffering...

What now is the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering? Suffering comes from desire; the thirst (craving) for pleasures, the thirst for being, and the thirst for power.

What now is the Noble Truth of the Extinction of Suffering? The extinction of this thirst by complete annihilation (destruction) of desire, letting it go, expelling it, separating oneself from it, giving it no room.

This is the sacred truth of the path which leads to the extinction of suffering: it is this sacred, eight-fold path: Right views, Right aspirations, Right speech, Right conduct, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness, Right contemplation. This is the Middle Way which leads to peace, enlightenment, and Nirvana. Free from pain and torture is this path, free from groaning and suffering: it is the perfect path. There are two extremes from which man must abstain. What are these two extremes? One is a life of pleasure, devoted to desire and enjoyment: that is base, unspiritual, unworthy, unreal. The other is a life of mortification (complete denial of pleasure) that is base, unspiritual, unworthy, unreal. The way which lies between them, the middle way, enlightens the eyes, enlightens the mind, and leads to rest, to knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nirvana.

1. How, when, and where did Buddhism originate?
2. According to Buddha, what causes human suffering?
3. What is the eight-fold path, and how does it lead to the extinction of suffering?
4. Explain the Buddhist belief in the Middle Way.