

WJEC AS Unit 1D: An Introduction to Buddhism - Knowledge Organiser:

Theme 1A Accounts of the Birth of the historical Buddha and the Four Sights

Key concepts

- The social setting of the birth of the Buddha (490/450 – 410/370 BCE) is the advanced civilisation in the Indus Valley 2000 years before him and the Aryan invasion around 1500 BCE introduced the caste system based on social categories, e.g. brahmin (priest) and kshatriya (warrior).

- Religious setting of the Buddha, what is later termed 'Hinduism', was predominant with a focus on Brahman (universal spirit), atman (the soul), samsara (reincarnation) and karma (action that has a consequence).
- Various religious groups emerged and existed at the time of the Buddha (including Jains, materialists and sceptics), which questioned received beliefs and developed their own approaches to life, death and the afterlife.

- Hagiographical and mythological elements might be found in the interpretations of the dream of Maya and the elephant, the birth from Maya's side, the prophecy given by Asita to Siddhodana and the early life.
- It is generally recognised that accounts do not present a historical narrative although they have historical elements, but present a hagiography (religious biography with elements of myth).
- The focus is not on factual questions of When? Where? What? and How? but on interpretative questions: What do the accounts show about Buddhist principles? What does Buddha represent? How do they support the dharma?
- Buddha is seen as special and unique, as untainted by previous karma and as entering the world from a much higher realm of 'existence'.
- The Buddha's early life is seen as being one of complete luxury – living in three palaces, completely protected from the outside world – as would be the case with any other prince.

- The impact of the Four Sights (old age, sickness, death and a wandering holy man) in terms of the Buddha's transition from misperception and seeing unreality before, to true perception and seeing things as they truly are afterwards.
- The Four Sights, in whatever way they are interpreted, illustrate the three lakshanas (marks of existence) as being universal truths: dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), anicca (impermanence) and anatta (insubstantiality/no-self).

- Buddhists interpret the accounts in differing ways depending on their '*a priori*' beliefs. It is not so much who Gautama Buddha was, but what he represents: the potential human beings have to achieve enlightenment through following the dharma.
- Many Theravada Buddhists regard the Buddha as a human being who used his gifts to reach enlightenment and who was a talented religious teacher.
- Many Mahayana Buddhists align the historical Buddha with countless other Buddhas and bodhisattvas who exemplify compassion.

Key quotes

'The Buddha was a member of a distinct social group in the Indian religious scene.' (Williams)

'If it could be shown for certain...that the Buddha never existed that need not, as such, have dramatic repercussions for Buddhists.' (Williams)

'A heavenly voice has been heard by me in the heavenly path, that thy son has been born for the sake of supreme knowledge.' (Asita speaks to Siddhodana)

'There are shrines with statues of the Buddha...[which] have their value in satisfying the religious emotions and needs of those who are less advanced intellectually and spiritually, and helping them gradually along the Path.' (Rahula)

'Lacking nothing of the earthly joys of life, he lived amid song and dance, in luxury and pleasure, knowing nothing of sorrow.' (Piyadassi)

Key words

Aryan	brahmin	dharma	kshatriya	atman
Brahman	samsara	karma	hagiography	Jains

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some focus on the Buddha as a historical person who lived 2,500 years ago.

Others focus on the Buddha as a concept - on the teaching, not the teacher.

Key questions

Can an authentic and historical Buddha be identified and re-constructed?

Would a complete biography of the historical Buddha be of value to Buddhists?

What approach should be taken to the supernatural and mythical elements that are present in the accounts of the birth of the Buddha?