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# Buddha's Teachings — Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, and the Three Jewels

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# Buddha's Teachings — Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, and the Three Jewels

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## WHY IN NEWS

Buddha Purnima 2026 (May 1) was celebrated across India and globally. Beyond the ceremonial commemoration, the day is an occasion to revisit the foundational philosophical framework that the Buddha established — a framework that has influenced Indian thought, Asian civilisation, and modern movements ranging from B.R. Ambedkar's neo-Buddhist revival to contemporary mindfulness research.

## THE BUDDHA'S LIFE — BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

EVENT	APPROXIMATE YEAR
Birth as Siddhartha Gautama in Lumbini (present-day Nepal)	c. 563 BCE (or 480 BCE per some scholars)
Renunciation (Mahabhinishkramana) at age ~29	c. 534 BCE
Enlightenment (Bodhi) under the Bodhi tree, Bodh Gaya	c. 528 BCE
First sermon at Sarnath — Dhammachakra Pravartana	c. 528 BCE
Death (Mahaparinirvana) at Kushinagar, age ~80	c. 483 BCE

The traditional dating places the Buddha at 563-483 BCE; some modern scholars argue for a later date around 480-400 BCE based on archaeological and textual analysis.

## THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS (CHATVARI ARYASATYANI)

The Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath introduced the Four Noble Truths — the foundational diagnosis of human suffering and its remedy:

#	NOBLE TRUTH	MEANING
1	<b>Dukkha</b> (Suffering)	Life inherently involves suffering — birth, ageing, illness, death, separation from loved ones, association with the unloved
2	<b>Samudaya</b> (Origin of Suffering)	Suffering arises from craving (tanha) — desire for sensory pleasure, existence, and non-existence
3	<b>Nirodha</b> (Cessation of Suffering)	Suffering can end through the cessation of craving — Nirvana
4	<b>Magga</b> (Path to Cessation)	The Noble Eightfold Path is the way to end suffering

The Four Noble Truths are not pessimistic — they are a clinical diagnostic. Buddha is the “great physician” diagnosing the disease (dukkha), identifying its cause (tanha), declaring it curable (nirodha), and prescribing the treatment (magga).

## THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH (ARYASHTANGIKA MARGA)

The Buddha’s prescribed path to cessation of suffering. The eight components are traditionally grouped under three categories:

### Wisdom (Prajna)

- ① **Right View (Samyak Drishti)** — Understanding the Four Noble Truths
- ② **Right Intention (Samyak Sankalpa)** — Renunciation, goodwill, harmlessness

### Ethical Conduct (Sila)

- ① **Right Speech (Samyak Vac)** — No lying, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no idle chatter
- ② **Right Action (Samyak Karmanta)** — No killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct
- ③ **Right Livelihood (Samyak Ajiva)** — Avoid trades involving harm (weapons, intoxicants, slavery, butchery, poison)

### Mental Discipline (Samadhi)

- ① **Right Effort (Samyak Vyayama)** — Cultivating positive mental states
- ② **Right Mindfulness (Samyak Smriti)** — Awareness of body, sensations, mind, mental phenomena
- ③ **Right Concentration (Samyak Samadhi)** — Single-pointed meditation; jhanas

The Eightfold Path is depicted as the **Wheel of Dharma (Dharmachakra)** with 8 spokes — found on the Indian national flag and the Ashoka Chakra.

## THE THREE JEWELS (TRIRATNA)

Buddhism identifies three “refuges” or jewels that practitioners take refuge in:

JEWEL	MEANING
<b>Buddha</b>	The teacher; the awakened one
<b>Dharma</b>	The teaching; the truth taught by the Buddha
<b>Sangha</b>	The community of practitioners (originally the monastic order)

The traditional Buddhist commitment is “Buddham saranam gacchami; Dhammam saranam gacchami; Sangham saranam gacchami” — “I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the Dharma; I take refuge in the Sangha.”

## THE THREE MARKS OF EXISTENCE

Three universal characteristics of all conditioned phenomena:

- ❶ **Anicca (Anitya)** — Impermanence
- ❷ **Dukkha** — Unsatisfactoriness or suffering
- ❸ **Anatta (Anatman)** — Non-self; absence of permanent soul

The doctrine of **Anatman** distinguishes Buddhism from most Hindu philosophies (which posit Atman or eternal self). It is one of the most philosophically distinctive elements of Buddhist thought.

## MAJOR SCHOOLS OF BUDDHISM

SCHOOL	REGION	KEY FEATURES
<b>Theravada</b> (“Way of the Elders”)	Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos	Pali canon; emphasis on individual liberation through monastic life
<b>Mahayana</b> (“Great Vehicle”)	China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Tibet, Mongolia	Sanskrit canon; Bodhisattva ideal; emphasis on liberation of all beings
<b>Vajrayana</b> (“Diamond Vehicle”)	Tibet, Bhutan, Mongolia, Ladakh	Tantric practices; visualization meditation; Tibetan Buddhism

## BUDDHA AND INDIAN CONSTITUTIONAL ORDER

Buddha’s teachings have shaped Indian secular discourse:

- The **Ashoka Chakra** on the national flag (the Wheel of Dharma)
- The **Lion Capital of Ashoka** (Sarnath) as India’s national emblem
- Article 25’s Buddhist temple regulation provisions
- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s mass conversion to Buddhism (October 14, 1956, Nagpur) — fundamental moment in modern Indian Dalit politics

Ambedkar’s “Buddha and His Dhamma” (published posthumously 1957) reinterpreted Buddhism as a rationalist, egalitarian philosophy compatible with constitutional democracy.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS1 — Art & Culture	Buddha’s teachings; Buddhist philosophy; Three Jewels
GS1 — Indian History	Mauryan period; Ashoka’s Buddhism; Buddhist sites
GS4 — Ethics	Right intention; ethical conduct; mindfulness in administration

**Mains Keywords:** Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Path, Three Jewels (Triratna), Anatman, Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, Ashoka Chakra, B.R. Ambedkar Buddhism, Dharmachakra

### Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
Buddha's birth	c. 563 BCE (or 480 BCE per some scholars), Lumbini
Buddha's death	c. 483 BCE, Kushinagar
First sermon	Sarnath; Dhammachakra Pravartana Sutta
Four Noble Truths	Dukkha, Samudaya, Nirodha, Magga
Noble Eightfold Path	Right View, Intention, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Effort, Mindfulness, Concentration
Three Jewels	Buddha, Dharma, Sangha
Three Marks of Existence	Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta
Three Major Schools	Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana
Ambedkar's conversion	October 14, 1956, Nagpur
Ashoka Chakra	Dharma Wheel — symbol of Eightfold Path on Indian flag

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