Background Information on Buddhism

Directions: This information will help your group create a character collage of Buddha. Take turns reading sections of the handout aloud and leading a discussion of the questions after that section.

Buddhism is a belief system based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as Buddha. Gautama was a prince who lived in India from 563 to 483 B.C. Gautama led a life of comfort, or luxury, in his palace. He never suffered or saw other people suffer. Then one day he saw three men: a man who was very sick, a man who was old and feeble, and a dead man. Gautama's comfortable life was shattered. He wanted to learn what causes suffering and how to escape it. He left the palace to search for the answers to these questions. For six years, Gautama tried to find wisdom by living without any comforts. For days at a time, he ate only one grain of rice a day. But this did not help him to find the answers to his questions. Finally, he sat down under a tree to think deeply, or meditate. He meditated deeply for many days, and then he saw the truth about life. After that, he was known as the Buddha, or the "Enlightened One" (one who sees the truth).

Stop Here & Discuss

- Who was Buddha?
- Why did Gautama leave the palace?
- How did he learn the truth about life?

Buddhism is based on four main ideas, called the Four Noble Truths.

- **First Noble Truth**  Life is suffering. This means that people everywhere experience unhappiness, pain, sickness, and death.

- **Second Noble Truth**  The cause of suffering is people's self-centered desires. People want things they do not have and do not want things they do have. If they get something they want, it does not last. Either way, they are disappointed and unhappy.

- **Third Noble Truth**  The way to escape suffering is to get rid of self-centered desires. When people do this, they become free from pain and selfishness, or reach enlightenment.

- **Fourth Noble Truth**  People can get rid of self-centered desires by living a life that is neither luxurious nor harsh. The Buddha called this the Middle Path. The Middle Path has three parts: moral discipline, mental discipline, and wisdom. Moral discipline means acting, speaking, and earning one's living in ways that are not self-centered. Mental discipline means trying hard to follow the Middle Path, controlling one's emotions, and examining one's thoughts. Wisdom means seeing how life really is and then wanting to act on what one sees.
The Buddha also believed that after one dies, one is reborn in another body. One is reborn over and over, and suffers over and over, until one reaches enlightenment, or nirvana. The way to end one's suffering and reach enlightenment is to follow the Middle Path.

- Describe the Four Noble Truths in your own words.
- According to Buddhism, what is the cause of suffering?
- What is the Middle Path?

After Buddha died, Buddhism changed in two important ways. First, Buddhism slowly became a religion. Today, many Buddhists worship the Buddha as a God. They pray to him, asking him to help them reach enlightenment. Second, travelers and missionaries spread Buddhism throughout Central and East Asia. Buddhist monks and traders brought Buddhism to China in A.D. 200. In the centuries that followed, Buddhism gradually became as popular as China's two other important belief systems—Confucianism and Daoism.

Starting in 1949, the Communist government tried to stop people from practicing Buddhism. Buddhist monks and priests were arrested, and Buddhist temples were closed or destroyed. But Buddhism continues to be an important religion in China. In the mid 1970s, the Chinese government let the Buddhists reopen a few of their temples. Today Buddhist ceremonies, or rituals, are used on many important occasions.

- How did Buddhism change after Buddha died?
- When and how did Buddhism reach China?
- What role does Buddhism play in China today?

Quotes from the Teachings of Buddha

**Quote 1:** Like fish caught in a net, desires trap us as we swim downstream in the violent flood of birth and death. Turn away from desires and leap out of the torrent (rushing river)...of misery.

**Quote 2:** The mind is flighty (easily excited) and hard to grasp (get control of); the mind pursues all its desires (goes after anything it wants). To tame the mind is great goodness. Subdue (conquer) the mind and know tranquillity (peace).