

CHAPTER 16

Buddhism: The Life of Buddha



Buddhism is one of the world's major paths of faith. Founded by Siddhartha Gautama in India, it became at different times the leading religion in every country of the Far East and shaped the cultures of China, Japan, Korea, Thailand and Mongolia.

Buddhism is sometimes described as an "atheistic religion," because Buddha did not talk about God but was mainly concerned with spiritual growth and the fulfillment of human potential. Unlike the founders of Christianity and Islam, he did not claim that his teaching was revealed to him by God. Nevertheless, the moral code and values that Buddha discovered and understood are very similar to those of religions that affirm the existence of God.

Childhood

The founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, was born in 563 BC, the son of an elected king of a small realm in Nepal, at the foothills of the snow-clad Himalayas. His father named him Siddhartha, meaning "one who accomplishes his objectives in life." His followers hailed him as the *Buddha* or Enlightened One.

Buddha's father summoned fortune-tellers at his birth in order to receive insight about the boy's future. The fortune-tellers foretold of Buddha's greatness. They all agreed that he was no ordinary child. His career path, however, appeared ambiguous. If he remained in his worldly position, he would unify India and become a great conqueror, a Universal King. On the other hand, if he forsook the world, he would become not a king but a world redeemer.

They told Gautama's father that as soon as his son encountered old age, sickness and death, he would abandon the household. The king took every precaution to keep the boy in seclusion amid the luxuries of the palace. No effort was spared to keep the prince's mind attached to his royal life. Specifically, the prince was to be shielded from contact with sickness, decrepitude, and death. Even when he went riding, runners went ahead to clear the roads of potentially disturbing sights.

By the standards of his day, Gautama's upbringing was luxurious. Living at various seasons of the year in three palaces, he was dressed in the most expensive clothes, fed the choicest delicacies and served by lovely female minstrels. As a prince, he received the best education in classical Indian literature. As a member of the warrior caste, he also learned the physical arts of a gentleman: how to ride a horse, mount an elephant, drive a chariot and lead an army. He was also blessed with a handsome appearance, for there are numerous references in Buddhism to "the

perfection of his visible body." At 16, he married a princess from a neighboring kingdom; she was named Yasodhara, and she bore him a son they called Rahala.

In spite of the ease and delights of palace life, Gautama became dissatisfied with worldly ambitions and sensual pleasures. He was gifted with a sensitive soul. Unbridled indulgence had gradually transformed a monarch's heir and warrior prince into an apostle of limitless compassion.

The four signs

It was only when he was 29 years old that Gautama really began to think about the meaning of life. During excursions with his charioteer Channa, he saw four sights that changed his life. One day, Gautama happened to encounter an old man, decrepit, broken-toothed, gray-haired, crooked and bent of body, leaning on a staff and trembling. Gautama was shocked by the reality of old age and realized that although he was now young and strong, he would also grow old. On another occasion, while touring a pleasure park, he saw a man who was desperately sick. Gautama was again distressed and taken aback by the misery of human existence. On a third occasion, he came across a funeral procession and realized that all persons must die. When he finally encountered a shaven-headed monk wearing the robe of an ascetic order, he learned the possibility of withdrawal from the world.

Once Gautama had recognized the inevitability of bodily pain and death, he could not return to fleshly pleasure. The singing of the dancing girls, the lilt of the lutes and cymbals, the sumptuous feasts and processions only mocked his brooding mind. Flowers nodding in the sunshine and snows melting on the Himalayas cried louder of the transient quality of worldly things. He determined to quit the distractions of the palace and follow the call of a truth-seeker. When he told this to his parents, they were shocked and would not give him permission to leave the palace. The young prince said to his father:

Father, if you can give me permanent freedom from the sufferings of birth, sickness, aging, and death, I will stay in the palace; but if you cannot, I must leave and make my human life truly meaningful.

The young prince's determination to leave the palace and enter a life of meditation could not be shaken. On the same night that his wife bore him a son, he secretly stole away, left his young family, and rode off into the forest in search of enlightenment.

Gautama became a wandering ascetic without possessions. He tore off his clothes, shaved his head, slept on a bed of thorn branches and denied himself food. He sought out two of the foremost Hindu masters of the day to inherit from them the wisdom of their vast tradition, including meditation. He learned a great deal about Hindu philosophy and meditation. In time he concluded that he had learned all they had to teach him, but he still had not found the complete liberation he was looking for.

He then joined a band of extreme ascetics who believed that harsh treatment of the body would lead to liberation of the soul. For the next six years he tried every material deprivation imaginable. He wore rough, uncomfortable garments. He spent long periods in uncomfortable stances without moving. He pulled out his hair and beard. He alternately lived in wild animal-infested forests, snow, deserts or in total solitude. He tried to stop or slow down his breathing, ate excrement and fasted, and finally stopped eating altogether. He ate so little — one bean a day during one of his fasts — that one day he commented, "When I thought I would touch the skin of my stomach, I actually took hold of my spine."

A person of enormous willpower, he outdid all the other ascetics in every austerity. Despite the fact that he had disciplined his physical senses, practiced great self-control, conquered his emotions and controlled his thoughts, the former prince felt

that the ascetic life had not brought him closer to obtaining the truth. In near exhaustion from his final fast, he accepted a meal of milk rice, renounced his ascetic life and decided to concentrate on meditation. His ascetic companions left him in disgust at what they saw as his weakness.

However, this experiment provided the first plank of Gautama's philosophy, the principle of the *Middle Way* between the extremes of indulgence and self-torture. People need some things to keep warm, clean, and well fed, but a life pursuing the satisfaction of these desires alone will not provide permanent happiness. After one has eaten one's fill, eating more does not make one happier. People do not achieve lasting happiness merely by collecting possessions and satisfying their physical desires. Physical desires are quickly sated, although greed itself is not. On the other hand, renouncing our desires does not bring happiness either. Therefore, self-control is good, but pointless suffering is not; helping others and working to improve the world as well as yourself is also good, and total solitude is not necessary. Also through this experience, Gautama found that human beings are affected by their physical sufferings, and that a human is not a soul imprisoned in a body but a being of both mind and body.

The enlightenment

After eating his meal of milk rice, Gautama slept and that same night had five dreams. After the dreams he rose, sat under a tree and started to meditate, determined not to move until he had obtained enlightenment. It is said that as he sat in meditation, Mara, the chief of demons, tried to tempt him and stop him from reaching his goal. Mara tried to frighten him with terrifying demons and distract him with beautiful women. However, Gautama resisted all these temptations by developing even deeper concentration. That night, Gautama experienced enlightenment. His thinking became very calm and detached, and he was filled with joy. Soon the thinking faded away, leaving joy and rapture. Eventually even the joy dissipated, leaving his mind peaceful, tranquil and clear — a sharp tool ready to penetrate to the heart of reality. With his mind prepared in this way, Gautama gained insight into the nature of human existence and realized his goal of experiencing perfect peace. The state of *nirvana* which he attained cannot be described in words. For 49 days he sat lost in rapture and in complete bliss under the tree his followers later called the Bo (enlightenment) Tree.

I have conquered all; I know all, and my life is pure.
I have left all, and I am free from craving.
I myself found the way.
Whom shall I call Teacher?
Whom shall I teach?

Gautama had become a Buddha — one who has found the truth himself without reliance on any guru (teacher).

After experiencing enlightenment, Buddha was tempted by Mara one more time. He told him that no one would understand the profound truth he had discovered, so why bother to try to teach anyone? Why not just be done with the world, leave his body and slip away into *nirvana*? But Buddha decided that he would dedicate the rest of his life to saving others.

Teaching ministry

Buddha sought out his former ascetic colleagues and preached to them his first sermon, known as the Deer Park Sermon. In it he explained to them the *Four Noble Truths* (which we shall look at in the next chapter), and they became his first dis-

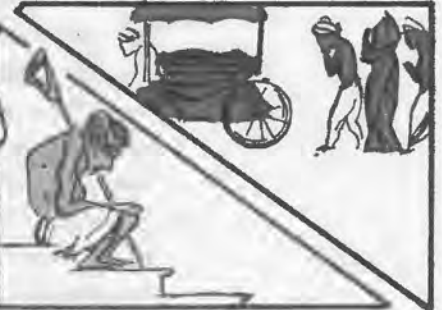


Gautama will become a great king.

But if he ever comes upon death, sickness or old age, he will go away from this world and he will become a great thinker.



Gautama grew up, got married. The king hid the reality of life from his son.



Gautama became an ascetic, but he could not feel the truth. He found asceticism senseless.

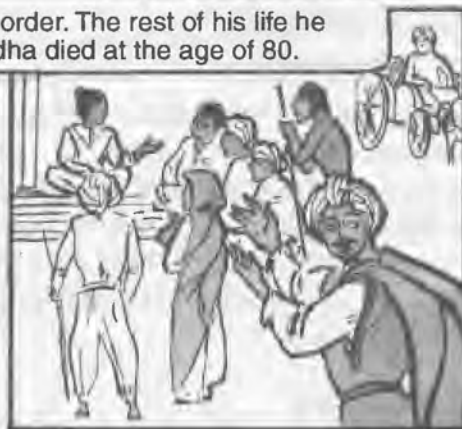


Then he decided to meditate.



At last one evening he suddenly attained enlightenment.

Buddha founded a monastic order. The rest of his life he dedicated to preaching. Buddha died at the age of 80.



ciples. Buddha devoted the remaining 45 years of his life to sharing the ego-shattering and life-redeeming message. His teaching was very radical and challenged the establishment of his day. He taught in the vernacular of the people instead of the Sanskrit of the Hindu scriptures. He rejected the monopolistic grip of the Brahmins (Hindu teachers) on religious knowledge by challenging every individual to do his own religious seeking:

Do not accept what you hear by report, do not accept tradition, do not accept a statement because it is found in your books, nor because it is in accord with your belief, nor because it is the saying of your teacher. Be ye lamps unto yourselves. Those who, either now or after I am dead, shall rely upon themselves only and not look for assistance to anyone besides themselves, it is they who shall reach the topmost height.

Buddha also ridiculed the meticulous observance of ancient rituals, which he thought were irrelevant to the hard, practical job of overcoming self-centered desire. He ignored speculation concerning the nature of God and the soul because it was distraction and did not help a person to reach nirvana. He also rejected reliance on miracles for salvation. People who sought them were looking for shortcuts that did not exist instead of working out their own salvation. Attacking the fatalism he found in his own day, Buddha challenged every person to make his own effort that was necessary for enlightenment. These challenges to the status quo aroused considerable controversy. Buddha was regarded by Hindus as a great heretic, and for centuries Hindus opposed Buddhism.

Despite the stringent caste system, Buddha taught everyone who was interested. The Buddhist community or *sangha* was made up of four categories: monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. His own family, including his father, became his followers. He often used parables in his teaching such as the famous one of the blind men and the elephant. Many incidents from his life became instructional stories in their own right, such as the story of Kisagotami (following page).

Many people were attracted to him by his calm, warm personality and the simplicity and depth of his teaching. By the time he died, he had a following of hundreds if not thousands of enlightened people.

Death

At the age of 80, Buddha died in an obscure little town where he had come to spread his message. At the house of his friend Cunda, a blacksmith, he became ill after eating a meal. Despite great pain, he remained calm. It occurred to him that Cunda might feel responsible for his death. His last command was that his companions tell Cunda that of all the meals eaten during his life only two stood out as exceptional blessings. One was the meal whose strength had enabled him to attain enlightenment under the Bo Tree; the other was the one that opened to him the final gates to nirvana.

Gautama Buddha taught that in the future another Buddha would come to help men set up an ideal kingdom of righteousness and peace. This coming Buddha is called Maitreya (love). He would be a different person from Gautama but would have the same mission, and he would have far greater success.

Initially Buddhism spread very rapidly in India and beyond. Its teaching was of universal application, and it was very practical and flexible in its guidance. By the 12th century Buddhism declined in India, but it grew to become a major religion in Sri Lanka, China, Tibet, Korea, Japan and throughout Southeast Asia.

The Story of Kisagotami

During one of his travels Buddha met an old woman called Kisagotami. He listened as she cried about the miseries of her life. She asked the Buddha for help. He explained to her that her life was no different from anyone else's life: All life is suffering. The only way for her to escape her suffering was to enter into a state of nirvana. She must "blow out" the flame of her desires and cravings.

The woman would not listen; she could not escape from these desires or forget her suffering. Buddha told her that if she would bring him a mustard seed from a house that had never known sorrow or trouble, he would use it to banish all her miseries.

Delighted with this promise, the woman began her search and Buddha went on his way. Much later he returned to find the woman singing to herself as she washed clothes by the riverside.

Since Buddha had a "spiritual eye," he could already see what had happened to the woman. Nevertheless, he asked if she had found the house that had never known suffering or trouble. "No," the woman replied, "every house I visited had far more trouble than my house."

"Will you keep searching?" the Buddha asked.

"Later I will search," the woman said. "Right now, I must stop and help these people. They are far less fortunate than I am."

"Then you do not need the mustard seed," Buddha told her. "You are on the road to becoming a Buddha yourself."



Something to think about



- What was the most important thing missing in Gautama's life, for which he gave up everything to search?
- Why did the realization of the existence of death and suffering make such an impact on his life?
- What do you think his parents and family thought about his choices in life?
- What does "Be ye lamps unto yourselves" mean?

For Your Journal



Imagine yourself sitting beneath the Bo Tree. Which temptations would you find most difficult to resist? Write about the struggle you would have to overcome them.