

Gautama Buddha

Young Oon Kim

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Dr. Young Oon Kim attended Kwansai Gakuin University in Japan and studied at the Methodist seminary there. She later did post-graduate work at Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto and was for a number of years professor of New Testament and Comparative Religion at Ehwa Women's University in Seoul. During her life-long effort to probe and bridge the religious truth of the East and West, she has been involved in various ecumenical conferences in Europe as well as traveling and lecturing extensively in the U.S. But beyond that she has been a profound, living religious force in the lives of hundreds in both the Occident and the Orient.

*Her previous works include *Divine Principle and Its Application and Unification Theology and Christian Thought*. Currently she is living and writing in Washington, D.C. and is professor of Systematic Theology and World Religions at the Unification Theological Seminary in Barrytown, N.Y.*

His Life

In the eyes of many modern Indians, the greatest teacher of their nation was the founder of Buddhism. Literature and religion know him by several names. Since he belonged to the Gotama clan, he is sometimes referred to as Gautama. His father named him Siddhartha, meaning "One who accomplished his objectives in life." Subsequently, after his reputation as a teacher was spread about, he was praised as Sakyamuni, the "sage" of the Sakya tribe. By his followers, Gautama was hailed as the *Buddha* (Enlightened One), *Tathagata* (the self-realized) or *Bhagavan* (the blessed).

India has been sublimely indifferent to matters of history and chronology. Most scholars tentatively conclude that Buddha was born about 563 B.C. and lived until 483 B.C. His father served as the elected king of a small realm in Nepal at the foothills of the snowclad Himalayas. The monarch was married to two sisters, one of whom -- Maya -- gave birth to Buddha, while the other brought him up. Maya lived only a week after the birth of her son.

Most of our modern accounts of Buddha's life depend upon historical research carried out by western scholars. For the Buddhists, everything about him is embroidered with colorful legends. According to the faithful, the eternal Buddha surveyed the world, found conditions suitable for his descent to earth, miraculously assumed the form of a white elephant and entered the womb of the sleeping virgin queen Maya. He remained inside her for ten months, and when he came forth from his mother's body, immediately the flowers burst into bloom.

The king later surrounded his growing son with extreme luxury. Living at various seasons of the year in three palaces, Gautama was dressed in the most expensive clothes, fed the choicest delicacies and served by lovely female minstrels. As a prince he received the best sort of education in classical Indian literature. Yet as a member of the warrior caste rather than the Brahmin priesthood, he also learned the physical arts of a gentleman: how to ride a horse, mount an elephant, drive a chariot and lead an army.

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

Brahmins had warned the king that this might happen. They told him that as soon as his son saw old age, sickness and death, as well as the existence of holy men, he would abandon the household. The father heeded the warning and took every precaution to keep the boy in seclusions amid the luxuries of the palace and the beauty of the pleasure gardens -- to no avail.

According to a famous Buddhist tale, Gautama happened to encounter an aged man while driving along in a chariot. The man was bent over, leaning on a staff and tottering as he walked. The sight of old age shocked the prince. On another occasion while touring his pleasure park, Gautama saw a man who was desperately sick and became similarly distressed: he was taken aback by the misery of human existence. On a third occasion the prince met a funeral procession and realized that all men must die. When he finally encountered a shaven headed yogi wearing the yellow robe of an ascetic order, he resolved to adopt the religious life, as the Brahmins had predicted. Gautama made the vow to be "thorough in the peaceful life, thorough in good action, thorough in meritorious conduct, thorough in harmlessness, thorough in kindness to all creatures."

After deciding to abandon the world, Gautama returned home, to his wife that he had married at age sixteen. Even though he discovered at that time that he had become a father, such joy did not deter him from the ascetic life. Now twenty-nine, the prince moved from the palace, leaving his wife and child behind. Determined to escape from life's endless misery the prince proceeded to renounce the world.

For six years he subjected himself to ascetic torture of his body. He tore off his clothes, plucked out the hair of his head and face, slept on a bed of thorn branches and denied himself food. However, by disciplining his physical senses and uprooting his passions, the former prince achieved no feeling of liberation from the endless wheel of rebirth.

Gautama hence realized the folly of the ascetic life. He resumed eating and drinking like an ordinary person. While sitting under a tree on the banks of a river, he resolved to attempt emancipation by means of intense concentration. By meditating all night, the former monk successfully attained complete enlightenment. Henceforth Gautama was the Buddha.

Once he had achieved liberation, Buddha become a teacher. "I will beat the drum of the Immortal in the darkness of the world," he vowed.² Moving to Benares, he preached his first sermon, entitled "Discourse on the Turning Wheel of the Law":

"Monks, two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth as a wanderer"

Devotion to the pleasure, of sense, a low practice of villagers,

"Devotion to self-mortification which is painful, unworthy and unprofitable."

"By avoiding these two extremes the Tathagata (Buddha) has gained knowledge of the middle path which gives vision, knowledge, calm, enlightenment, Nibbana."

"What is the middle path?"

"Truly, it is the eightfold path: right view, right aim, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

"Now this is the truth about suffering:"

"Birth is suffering, decay is suffering, death is suffering.... In a word, this life of ours based on grasping -- that is suffering. "And this is the truth about the cause of suffering:"

"It is craving that leads back to birth -- craving for sensual pleasure, craving for continued existence, craving for life to end. "And this is the truth about stopping suffering:"

"Truly it is utter passionless cessation of, the giving up, the release from and the absence of longing for this craving."

"And this is the practice that leads to the end of suffering -- the eightfold path."³

His ministry continued for the next forty-five years. Wandering in the eastern part of the Ganges Valley and preaching in the major cities, he taught his gospel of the "middle path" between self-indulgence and self-negation. Success crowned his ministry from the outset; within three months he had converted sixty monks to his cause. Men of every caste -- Brahmins, merchants, warriors, even untouchables -- joined Buddha's monastic community. For the final quarter century of his life he resided in a beautiful park donated by a rich layman.

At age eighty, Gautama's life came to a sudden end. While on a preaching tour, he became dangerously ill. Realizing that his career would soon be finished, Buddha summed up his doctrine in a few sentences for his personal attendant and favorite disciple, Ananda; then at a banquet provided for him and his retinue, Buddha suffered an attack of food poisoning caused by eating either mushrooms or pork.⁴

Death came at Kusinara. After asking his monks if they had any final questions for him to answer, Buddha began to contemplate. Amidst the shaking of the earth and peals of thunder -- say the Buddhist scriptures -- he entered final Nibbana. His body was then wrapped in one thousand layers of the finest cloth and cremated. Relics were divided and distributed to eight cities, each of which erected a memorial shrine to contain them. Four spots were henceforth especially sacred where Buddha was born, where he attained enlightenment, where he preached his first sermon, and where he entered Nibbana.⁵

For Buddhists the personality of Buddha is as important as his teachings. A professor of Nalanda University in India, for example, extols his unruffled calm, tolerance, practicality, ready wit, persuasive reasonableness and deeds of service.⁶

Even those who are only aware of the popular statues of Buddha are immediately struck by his profound peace of soul and tranquility of spirit. Buddhist scriptures relate that one night their master overheard an angry debate about him between a wandering Indian holy man and a follower of the Enlightened One. The next morning Buddha told his monks that if anyone finds fault with him or his teaching, he should never become displeased or offended. Such feelings would only harm the disciples or should they be pleased to hear praise of him -- for this too would disturb their calm. If men slander me, merely see if what they say contains some truth, he advised. And if they praise us, find out if their compliments are based on fact.⁷

Buddha's tolerance is also related in stories about his attitude toward the rival sect of Jains. General Siha, a prominent patron of Jainism, once visited Gautama to find out how the Buddhists could "bewitch" so many people. Repeating all the accusations made against the Middle Path, Siha was amazed to see how Buddha analyzed each criticism and clarified his own position. When the general asked to join the Buddhists, Gautama advised him to make further study rather than come to a quick decision. This only increased Siha's enthusiasm, so Buddha accepted him as a lay disciple but only on the condition that the general continue to support the Jain monks with whom he had been associated.⁸ At another time, a millionaire Jain layman encountered Buddha with the intention of exposing his theological weaknesses. After finding himself caught in a series of verbal contradictions the Jain pleaded to become a Buddhist. Again, Buddha agreed only if the millionaire promised not to cut off his financial support of the Jain ascetics.⁹ Since Jainism and Buddhism were rival reform movements in Indian religion, Buddha's broadmindedness and liberality appear even more admirable and unusual.

The impact which Buddha made on his own time and all subsequent centuries can be illustrated with two quotations, both modern, one from a distinguished Hindu, the other from an American philosopher. Professor D.S. Sarma of Madras wrote, "... during the lifetime of Buddha the charm of his own wonderful personality and the story of his great renunciation overcame everything. For he was the most lovable of the world-teachers. No harsh word ever escaped his lips. He ever radiated peace, gentleness and serenity, and he had boundless compassion for all beings. The success of his simple practical teaching conveyed in the language of the people was immediate."¹⁰

Professor E.A. Burt of Cornell University won his scholarly fame for a book on the metaphysical foundations of modern science. Attracted to Buddhism, he prepared an anthology of Gautama's teachings found in the Buddhist sacred writing. Of Buddha he said: "Gautama the Buddha seems to have combined in high degree two qualities that are rarely found together and each of which is rarely exemplified in high degree. On the one hand, he was a man of rich and responsive human sympathy, of unflinching patience, strength, gentleness, and good will. His friendliness, to all who came to him in sincere search, was genuine and unreserved. He therefore aroused in his followers a wondering, eager, affectionate devotion such as only the greatest leaders of men have awakened.

On the other hand, he was a thinker, of unexcelled philosophic power. His was one of the giant intellects of human history, exhibiting a keenness of analytic understanding that has rarely been equaled. He probed through the deceptions of the thought of his day, adopting it where it seemed to him clearly sound and abandoning or radically revising it when he saw that it was missing the true and the good. It is in virtue of this characteristic of the Master that Buddhism is the only one of the great religions of the world that is consciously and frankly based on a systematic rational analysis of the problem of life, and of the way to its solution. Buddha was a pioneering lover of men, and a philosophic genius, rolled into a single rigorous and radiant personality."¹¹

Buddha and Hinduism

Like Jesus of Nazareth who opposed the orthodox Judaism of his day and was condemned as a blasphemer, false prophet and revolutionary, Gautama criticized conventional Hindu piety and was denounced by the Brahmins as a dangerous heretic. In light of this, one should understand the Buddha's teaching as it contrasts with the prevailing Hinduism of his generation.

As opposed to Brahmanism, the Buddha discarded the authority of the Vedas as divine revelation. Where the Hindus thought of Vedic scripture as infallible, he preached against blind acceptance of the Vedas or of any book because he felt that such uncritical reliance upon scripture was harmful to man's spiritual progress: "Do not accept a thing merely because it has been handed down by tradition."

Buddhism also differs from Hinduism in regard to the belief in a creator-God. Those who follow Gautama cannot accept the idea of a First Cause because in their eyes both the realm of matter, in ceaseless flux,

and the realm of spirit have no beginning. Buddhism denies all three Hindu concepts of divinity: the deist God who dwells in heaven; the pantheistic God who pervades everything; and the personal God like Krishna or Siva who answers prayers and becomes incarnate. Buddhism believes in gods, but these are merely minor celestial beings, spiritual powers living on a different plane of existence than the human one. For the Buddhists, these gods are in fact lower than the saints who have attained enlightenment.

In matters of ritual too, Buddhism differs greatly from Hinduism. Buddha rejected the spiritual efficacy of external rites at a time when his Brahmin contemporaries based their faith on the saving power of Vedic sacrifices. Buddhists thus denied the merit of such practices as washing in the Ganges, fasting, or putting holy markings on one's body to ward off evil spirits. As a Buddhist nun told a Brahmin, "If you could go to heaven by bathing in the river, then surely the fish, tortoises, frogs, water snakes, and crocodiles too will attain heaven. Moreover, if the sins are washed off by bathing, the merits too will be washed off by the water."¹²

Buddhism believes that only self-culture, self-discipline and self-realization are means to self-purification. No external rites can effect inner purity. True tranquility of spirit comes from diligent meditation and contemplation. As a result, modern Indian Buddhists look askance at the practices of self-mortification carried out by Jain and Hindu ascetics. They doubt that the yogins can cleanse their souls by smearing their naked bodies with ashes or piercing themselves with spikes. Buddha tried such means to secure salvation and learned that they were of no help in realizing the Truth. In Buddhist opinion, these methods merely make a man more disturbed and restless. Real austerity refers not to the inflicting of physical pain but rather to the burning up of one's mental defilements.

Besides denying the creator God, the efficacy of external rites and ascetic self-negation, Buddhism disagrees with Hindu monism. Buddha challenged the Hindu belief in an external, ever present Brahman or Atman. He taught that the ever-existing Self is an imaginary construct of which we can have no real comprehension. In his eyes, to believe in Brahman is like climbing a ladder to the sky in order to reach a place we know nothing about or like falling in love with a beautiful queen whom no one has ever seen.¹³

Buddhism also will have nothing to do with the special privileges showered on the Hindu upper classes or the disgraceful contempt with which the so-called untouchables are treated. In the Buddhist monastic order all are considered brothers and sisters. Long before Gandhi and the other spokesmen for Hindu social reform, Buddha declared, "It is not by birth that one becomes a Brahmin or an untouchable, but it is through one's acts that one becomes a Brahmin or an untouchable."¹⁴

Buddha's hostility to the caste system is illustrated by a story of his relationship with Sunita, a poor street cleaner. As scripture tells it, in the first watch of the night the Exalted One surveyed the world with great pity. And he saw the possibility for sainthood in Sunita, shining like a lamp within a jar. When dawn came he walked to the city carrying his alms bowl and sought the street where the outcast was cleaning. Now Sunita was collecting rubbish. And when he saw the Master, he was filled with awe. Finding no place to hide -- as untouchables are expected to do when men of the privileged classes appear -- Sunita had to confront the Buddha. "Sunita, what to you is this wretched mode of living? Can you endure to leave the world?" asked the Enlightened One. Henceforth, the pitiful scavenger was a member of the Buddhist monastic order.¹⁵

The similarities between the Brahmins and the Buddha, nevertheless, are as real as their differences. In both belief and behavior, the two faiths held much in common. For example, Buddha taught the doctrine of reincarnation and based his philosophy on the law of karma. Upon numerous occasions he referred to the Hindu Vedas to illustrate his ideas and repeatedly praised Hindu sages. Hinduism and Buddhism agree about the need for following the path of renunciation; often Buddhist saints and Hindu holy men practiced the same types of yoga discipline. Both groups stressed the value of meditation as a means to achieve mystical illumination. In all these matters, Buddhism and Hinduism appear to be branches growing out of one tree and are nourished by the same soil of Indian mysticism. Consequently, while one recognizes Buddha's revolutionary and unique position in Indian religious thought, his ties to Hinduism are apparent.

For many centuries Hindus condemned Gautama as the notorious heresiarch. The philosopher-theologian Shankara, for instance, who did so much to provide the classic exposition of Vedanta Hinduism, had to refute charges that he was only a Buddhist in disguise -- the worst accusation orthodox Brahmins could level against any thinker. Fortunately, to a considerable extent dialogue has now replaced debate. In fact, the danger at present among Indian nationalists is to transform the Buddha into a Hindu. As has long been its method, Hinduism effectively silences an opponent by embracing him, swallowing up his distinctiveness in its tolerance of everything from animism to absolute idealism.

According to one group of modern Hindu apologists, Gautama was an exceptional world teacher whose differences from Hinduism have been exaggerated and whose ideas are in the main correct but have been badly misunderstood.¹⁶ If Buddhism had stopped with the simple and practical side of Buddha's sermons that life is filled with suffering because of man's sensuous desires and that a state of perfection can be achieved when passions are extinguished -- this would have been a useful supplement to the mystical teachings of the Upanishads. If followers of the Buddha shifted men's attention away from ritualistic observances to the securing of peace and happiness through a strenuous moral life, as Gautama wanted, then Buddhism could have been regarded as a renaissance of true Hinduism as valuable as the more philosophic awakening of Vedanta. Since scholars now greatly differ over the views of Buddha on the

nature of the world, the reality of the soul and the final state of liberation, it is quite probable that later Buddhists added to and perverted his actual teachings. In this case these apologists would argue Buddhists rather than Buddha are to blame for the erroneous notions that there is nothing permanent in the universe, no changeless Brahman, no immortal soul, no goal in life but annihilation. Because of distortions, Buddhism looks like a system, of mere self-culture -- moonlit world, beautiful yet uncomfortably cold.

In the eyes of such Hindus, Buddha (or his disciples) exaggerated the negative aspects of Upanishadic mysticism and minimized its positive features. Worst of all, he tried to turn the whole world into a monastery. Because of his cold rationalism, he gave birth to a system without God, without worship and without the warm feeling of true devotion. His negations, true enough but one-sided, kept men from experiencing joyous union with the Supreme Reality.

Footnotes

1. From the legend of the "Four Signs", quoted in S. Dutt, *The Buddha and Five After-Centuries*, Luzac and Co., London, 1957, pp. 26-27.
2. Quoted in C. Humphreys, *Buddhism*, Pelican Book, Harmondsworth, 1969 edition, p. 34.
3. An abridgement. Cf. E.A. Burtt, *Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, Mentor Book, N.Y., 1955, pp. 29-32 for a fuller text.
4. The delicacy served to Buddha was "pig's soft food" (sukaramaddava) which could have been either food made of pork or soft food eaten by pigs, e.g., mushrooms or some type of fungus.
5. The above account is largely based on K.K.S. Ch'en, *Buddhism The light of Asia*, Barron's Educational Series, Woodbury, N.Y., 1968, pp. 13-29.
6. J. Kashyap in K.W. Morgan, ed., *The Path of the Buddha*, Ronald Press, N.Y., 1956, pp. 10, 20.
7. *Ibid*, p. 11.
8. *Ibid*, pp. 12-14.
9. *Ibid*, p. 15.
10. D.S. Sarma, *Hinduism Through the Ages*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1973, p. 15.
11. E.A. Burtt, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, 1955, pp. 22-23.
12. Quoted from the "Tripitaka" by J. Kashyap, in K. Morgan, *Ibid*, pp. 45-46.
13. Kashyap, *Ibid*, p. 47.
14. Quoted by Kashyap, *Ibid*, p. 46.
15. Quoted in J.B. Pratt, *Pilgrimage of Buddhism*, Macmillan Co., N.Y. 1928, p. 12.
16. S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1923, vol. I, pp. 676-694.