

## The Life of the Historical Buddha: Shakyamuni

Over two thousand years ago, a person named Siddhartha Gautama was born as a prince of the Shakya clan, which ruled a small kingdom in the foothills of the Himalayas in a region on the border between present-day India and Nepal. Siddhartha's auspicious birth has been celebrated and honored as miraculous in many scriptures: "At that moment, a flash of light emanated from the Queen's body and Siddhartha was born from her right side. The newborn then took seven steps in the four directions and proclaimed, 'I am the Holy One of heaven and earth and I shall be a savior to eliminate the sufferings of the world.'"

This story surely makes interesting reading, but what may be just as important, if not more so, is to contemplate the message behind his birth, life, and ministry. For example, it is said that the seven steps the newborn Buddha took represents going beyond the "six realms" of suffering and thus breaking free from the chains of ignorance to find true spiritual liberation.

Prince Siddhartha lacked nothing while he was growing up. His real mother died soon after he was born, but he was raised lovingly by his mother's sister. Some say that because of this, he became a pensive child. Maybe it was all part of the plan, so to speak, but the facts are that he was a prince immersed in lavish comfort and given everything of the world that anyone could ever want.

Yet, he could not help feeling restless. So, he decided to see for himself what was outside the palace walls in which he lived. At birth, he is said to have walked in the four cardinal directions. In going out into the world, he did the same: he went through four gates. Outside, he also saw four sights that made him contemplate his path more deeply. What he saw were an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a monk. The first three helped him to realize that everyone, even kings, was bound to age, fall ill, and die. The fourth pointed the way for him to follow in order to find a way to be free of the suffering associated with the first three.

Of course, being human, and with his father the king doing his best to dissuade him by showering him with luxury, the Prince hesitated at first. But, at the age of 29, he decided to renounce his home, wife, infant son, and aristocratic life, and he left everything behind to become a homeless ascetic. For the next six years, he went from teacher to teacher, spent long periods

fasting and engaging in other austerities, and practiced deep meditation. He became known as the “sage of the Shakyas,” which is what *Shakyamuni* means.

During his pursuit, Siddhartha underwent severe, life-threatening austerities, awakening to the “Middle Way” in the process. That is, he realized that to understand ultimate truth, you did not need to deny the physical needs of the body, and that it was equally important not to over-indulge the senses, either. After that, supreme enlightenment into the nature of suffering, and how to eliminate it, was not far off (although it was difficult, nevertheless, to achieve).

After struggling for six long years, Siddhartha was 35 when he had his great awakening: the wisdom to overcome delusive passions, clearly understanding the Four Noble Truths, which were what suffering is, what causes it, what it means to end it, and what path to follow in order to do so. In the same way, he understood clearly what delusions were, what caused them, what it meant to bring them to the end, and what path to take in order to do so. With the clear wisdom he had acquired, he was free from ignorance and craving. The understanding welled up within him that he had been liberated.

From that point on, he was a “buddha,” an “awakened one.” Scriptures tell of how he saw with new eyes and heard with new ears. He had become free from the limits of the mind, perceived ultimate reality, and enjoyed a wisdom encompassing all and which was one with all. He was in perfect nirvana! He could have stayed in his blissful state, content for the rest of his days in what he knew, but in his awakening, he had also seen that the same seeds of enlightenment existed in the hearts of everyone. And so, out of great compassion for all the needless suffering in the world, he decided to share his insight and urge people to cultivate enlightenment for themselves through practice.

The Buddha spent the rest of his life teaching others and passed away at the age of 80. During his 45-year ministry, the Buddha used various means to get his message across. He felt it was especially important to adjust his teachings to suit the listener. So, he utilized whatever means worked, including the demonstration of miraculous power if that would open the hearts of people and help them to walk the path.

One thing he avoided was answering highly metaphysical questions

that were not provable through one's direct, personal experience. Not that such questions aren't important to ponder—but the Buddha believed that some things were ultimately beyond a person's logical grasp, and that such intellectual pursuits could easily distract people from the hard work needed to find true enlightenment. The Buddha often warned that knowledge alone was limiting, and that action is what would expand a person's awareness. So rather than trying to answer difficult questions whose answers wouldn't be of use anyway, he sometimes stayed silent. At other times, he used parables to illustrate his point. One of them goes: There was a king who once entertained himself by gathering up several men who had never seen an elephant. The king blindfolded them and then had an elephant brought out. He asked them to touch one part of the animal and then tell him what they thought it was. The one who touched a leg declared that it was a pillar. Another who held the tail said it was a rope, while another who felt one of its tusks was sure that it was a plowshare.

Each man was “seeing” only one part of the elephant, and so each of their views was very subjective. Yet, they insisted they knew the whole truth and that their own idea was the one, true reality.

Over time, people from all different backgrounds gathered to listen to the Buddha. His followers came to encompass anyone who sought truth, from paupers to kings. Ignoring societal rank and gender, he preached an egalitarian message: nirvana and spiritual liberation know no boundaries conceived by human beings. It was quite revolutionary for the civilization in which he preached.

The Buddha's ideas on how to transcend the ills of human existence are just as fresh and relevant today. At the end of his life, the Buddha told his disciples not to grieve for him. He asked them to practice diligently, letting their transformed self become their guide. In that way, he would live on, forever with them. The essence of his last wishes for future generations has come down to us as the *Nirvana Sutra*.