

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE BUDDHA'S LIFE

By
Gary Allen

The Buddha is said to have practiced the ways of renunciation, meditation, and compassion for hundreds of thousands of lifetimes, perfecting himself spiritually before his birth in Lumbini (in present-day Nepal) 2,500 years ago. Dwelling in a heavenly state called Tushita, he saw the time was right for his birth in the world. His mother, Queen Maya, had a dream one night that a white king of elephants had entered her womb, and that a vast crowd of people had then bowed down to her. In the morning she awoke knowing she was pregnant. She carried the child for ten months, then one day gave birth to him in a garden as she grabbed hold of a tree branch, and he emerged miraculously and painlessly from her side. He's said to have taken seven steps, then announced that he was born to guide the world and that this would be his final birth.

The Buddha's mother died a week later, and her sister took her place, looking after the Buddha as if he were her own child. The extraordinary boy was prophesied by the sages who came to see him as one who would either become a universal monarch, meaning a very great and powerful king, or to become a buddha, a spiritual practitioner of the highest possible realization and wisdom. His father, King Shuddhodhana, very much wanted an heir to his throne and felt threatened by the Buddha's potential for becoming a renunciant. Hence he carefully kept the Buddha from knowing much of the world at large or from too much knowledge of spiritual practice by fully ensconcing him in palace life. Kept almost exclusively inside the palace, surrounded always by doting servants, the king attempted to create a princely world the Buddha would feel too much attachment for to consider leaving. As he matured, he was put in the midst of the most beautiful harem women skilled in the arts of music, dance, and love, who kept him entertained as much as possible on the upper floors of the palace so he didn't even have to walk outside on the ground.

As he neared adulthood, the king made sure to educate him properly so that he could eventually take over the throne. He quickly mastered both his academic studies and various martial arts, exhibiting such prowess in every discipline that he could defeat the other local young men brought in to compete with him and out debate the scholars sent to instruct him. Seeking to further cement his worldly ties, the king also married his son off to Yashodhara, a great beauty of dignified bearing, and they conceived a son. Hence, living in a situation of utmost luxury, with the most delicious food, excellent clothing, splendid quarters, tremendous wealth, the finest sex, the best entertainment, in the upper class company of other royals and noblemen, with a wonderful wife & son, extremely handsome, very skilled, and being groomed to take power in the kingdom, the Buddha continued palace life into his late twenties.

On the rare occasions the Buddha left the palace, King Shuddhodana had ordered the streets cleared of cripples and the like while filling them with smiling people throwing flowers--in order not to jar the Buddha's delicate sensibilities. But it happened one day, as he was taken by his charioteer to a garden on the outskirts of town, that he saw a very wrinkled, bent, white-haired old man. The charioteer had to explain to the Buddha what old age was. Upset, the Buddha ordered them to return to the palace.

On two more occasions the Buddha rode outside the walls, and he saw a very sick, emaciated man, and then he saw a corpse. Having been shielded all his life from experiencing these unavoidable facts of existence, the Buddha quickly recognized their import. He understood how all human beings, regardless of their status in the world, were subject to the sufferings of old age, sickness, and death, and that all the wealth and comforts available to a king could only distract one from facing these experiences, not eliminate them. The Buddha later said that upon witnessing old age, sickness, and death, he lost all the vanity he had about his youth, his health, and his good life.

His taste for the many pleasures of his princely life now began to vanish, and he brooded on the sufferings he'd seen. On a fourth occasion, the charioteer took the Buddha beyond the walls and this time he saw a wandering monk who lived without possessions or home, begging for his food. Impressed by the monk's radiant demeanor, a desire to live the same kind of life arose in the Buddha. Seeing his palace as a kind of golden cage and the spiritual path as a way to overcome suffering, at age 29 he decided to enter the life of a forest renunciant. His previous spiritual training and purpose had awoken, and a tremendous desire to know the truth about existence inspired him.

One night he chanced to see all the harem women asleep: one drooled, some snored, some had spilled wine on their clothes, and generally they seemed to be lying about in awkward postures like so many discarded corpses. The Buddha lost his fascination with them, then and there. Not long later, after going in to see his sleeping wife and child one last time, the Buddha snuck out of the palace in the middle of the night and headed into the wilderness.

Having lived with every luxury, the Buddha had to learn to eat whatever came into his begging bowl, as opposed to gourmet delicacies. Used to sumptuous quarters, he learned to sleep on the ground in every kind of weather. Realizing that he needed instruction in spiritual practice, he studied with a couple of different accomplished yogins, the greatest masters of their day, Arada and Rudraka. They believed in an eternal self or soul beyond the five senses. Quickly mastering their systems, the Buddha passed through the highest meditative levels of the formless god realm, the pinnacle of samsara: the realm of limitless space, the realm of limitless consciousness, the realm of no materiality, and the realm of neither perception nor non-perception. Though he had developed his meditative abilities, the Buddha still felt that even this highest state was not true enlightenment. His deepest, subtlest conflicts remained, and there was still a subtle level of self who dwelled as the watcher of this highest state, someone who was still subject to birth and death. Graciously departing from his teachers, he went off on his own.

Determined to make any sacrifice to attain enlightenment, the Buddha practiced asceticism. Five other ascetics, impressed by his meditative accomplishments and his presence, gathered around

him and acted as his attendants. He consumed as little as one grain of rice and one drop of water a day. He sat in the middle of a circle of bonfires in the hot sun in order to overcome his attachment to his senses. He grit his teeth and tensed all his muscles until sweat poured from his brow, trying to crush his thoughts out of existence. In these and other ways he spent years trying to overcome his attachments to his body and mind, but he grew so weak and skeletal he began to die.

He had taken asceticism as far as anyone possibly could, faced every privation and suffering, but still after years of effort had not achieved enlightenment. All he had done was enfeeble his body, but the problems with his mind remained. Recalling a moment when he was a young boy, in which he had gone out into the countryside with his father and the court to celebrate the first plowing of the fields in the spring, the Buddha remembered how he had wandered off, bored by the priests' chanting, to sit alone under a rose-apple tree. He had spontaneously entered a meditative state and sat there unmoving. The court was amazed to discover him that way two hours later. Thinking that he should try this approach, he gave up his asceticism and began to eat one meal a day again. Disgusted with his apparent indulgence in sense pleasures, the other ascetics abandoned him.

One spring day, after he'd awoken from auspicious dreams, a cowherd's daughter came to him with an offering of milk and rice. He felt particularly strengthened by this meal. Given some kusha grass by a grass-cutter to make a comfortable seat, he placed it beneath a large pipal tree and sat down, determined that he wouldn't get out of meditation posture until he had attained enlightenment. He was 35 years old.

At this point appeared Mara and his daughters, who are the demons of ignorance, passion, and aggression. The first daughter tried to deceive the Buddha by telling him that his father King Shuddhodhana had died, and now his evil cousin Devadatta had taken over the throne, hoping to pull the Buddha away from his task and distract him with a family drama. But the Buddha paid her no mind. The next daughter, representing passion, appeared with many exquisitely beautiful goddesses entreating the Buddha to come and cavort with them, saying that he'd achieved his goal and could now relax. She, too, failed to seduce him. The last daughter, representing aggression, generated a vast, nightmarish army of demons, misshapen and hideous, who brandished swords and hammers and hurled a rain of arrows, spears, and boulders down upon him. But he never wavered and their weapons fell harmlessly to the ground or turned to flower petals in the air.

Having been challenged by Mara to say how he earned the right to sit on this seat, he replied that it was through his practice of the paramitas, the transcendental actions of a bodhisattva, in countless lifetimes that gave him that right. Mara then laughed and asked him what witness he had to his practice of the paramitas. "The earth is my witness," he said, touching it with his fingers; there was a deafening boom, and the earth shook violently, scattering the army and defeating Mara.

Then, having once and for all cleared away all the obstacles, he went deep into meditation in the course of the four watches of the night. In the first, experiencing what's called the opening of the divine eye, he saw all his previous lives, his births, deaths, what race or gender he was, even

the kind of food he ate, how long he had lived, and so on. In this way too, he saw the long chains of countless lives of others, going back through many aeons and through innumerable forms, in the vast, never ending cycle of samsaric suffering, where beings must leave the ones they love again and again, and go on alone. In the second watch of the night, attaining the supreme divine eye, he saw how the states and situations beings experienced were based infallibly on karmic cause and effect, the result of virtuous and un-virtuous actions. When he looked at the nature of samsara, however, it seemed to him like a plantain tree; if you stripped off the layers, there was nothing there at the core.

In the third watch, his compassion expanded even further, as he examined how beings were blindly lost in this prison of birth and death with no understanding of how to get out. He saw that ignorance is the jailer, obscuring the ability to see the true nature of reality. Based on fundamental ignorance, the vast, luminous space of mind becomes separated into subject and object, self and others, existence and non-existence, birth and death, pain and pleasure, and all the other dualities. Believing in and maintaining an illusory ego, then the confused tendencies of passion, aggression, and ignorance arise--clinging hard to some experiences, fighting off others, and being numb to the rest--which are then accompanied by all kinds of other wrong views and delusions. Fixation on ego leads to fixation on the bodily senses, thereby giving rise to birth, old age, sickness, and death, which only make confusion seem that much more tangible and real. When sentient beings die, the stream of their consciousness just returns again to the basic ignorance and starts the whole cycle once more. The Buddha saw this process as taking place in twelve interdependent links of consciousness called the nidanas. By recognizing ignorance as their origin, he gained the insight that brought him to ultimate wisdom.

In the fourth watch of the night, as darkness turned to dawn, he looked up into the sky and saw the morning star gleaming brightly. At this moment he attained the complete freedom of final enlightenment, and knew that he'd fully achieved the goal of his long path through lifetimes of practice and had come to his last birth.

The Buddha stayed in meditation free from thoughts for another seven days. Eventually he arose, wandered from place to place in the area, stopping to meditate under different trees, as he considered whether or not he could communicate what he had learned. Seeing that sentient beings suffered from such deep and intractable delusions, he decided that he would be unable to communicate the subtlety of what he'd learned to them. But eventually the gods Indra and Brahma appeared to him, begging him to teach for the sake of the suffering world, and the Buddha consented. After seven weeks, he returned to the area where he had practiced with the five ascetics, thinking that they would be capable of learning. When they first saw him coming in the distance, they maintained their disdain toward him for abandoning asceticism. But as he got closer they noticed his majestic, radiant appearance and spontaneously prepared a seat for him, bringing water to wash his feet.

At first they kept up their skepticism toward him, but he insisted that he'd conquered confusion and attained the ultimate goal. Eventually, when they would listen, he taught them that clinging to passion and sensual pleasure was deluded, while practicing asceticism and mortifying the body was also delusion. Instead, he described for them a middle way that didn't fall into these extremes but led to full enlightenment. He then taught them the four noble truths: the truth of

suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the eight-fold path to cessation. This teaching, given in the Deer Park at Sarnath, was the foundation of the Buddha's doctrine and the first time he presented the dharma after his enlightenment. The five ascetics became the beginning of the sangha, the Buddhist community.

In nearby Varanasi, the son of a very rich man named Yasha came to feel disgusted with his life of servants and sensual enjoyments much the way the Buddha had and ran away from home one night. Coming upon the Buddha as he wandered, he was deeply impressed by the Buddha's teaching and renounced his former life to join the sangha. Eventually, fifty of Yasha's friends, the sons of Varanasi merchants, also followed his example, donning yellow robes and shaving their heads to become students of the Buddha. The sangha had begun to grow.

In another place lived a famous spiritual master named Kashyapa and his two brothers who were leaders of a thousand students. They practiced a fire ritual in which they worshiped a god dwelling in the flames. There, the Buddha subjugated a serpent demon, was seen attended by gods, parted the waters of a river, and performed other miracles until Kashyapa, his brothers, and all one thousand followers gave up their fire worship to practice the dharma.

Having gathered in a short time thousands of students, a messenger from his father, King Shuddhodhana, convinced the Buddha to revisit his home. Arriving there, he performed miracles and taught the dharma to his father, his step-mother, Queen Gotami, and his wife, Yashodhara, while bringing into the monastic sangha his young son and half-brother, as well as many of the kingdom's nobility. Later, before his death, the king would become a realized arhat. The Buddha's step-mother would eventually petition the Buddha to create a place for nuns in the monastic community. This was an unheard of idea in India at the time; religious communities didn't ordain women. After hesitating initially, the Buddha agreed as long as the women were understood to be under the authority and tutelage of the monks. He knew he would meet enormous resistance both in the monastic sangha and in Indian society at large, so he devised this set up to help minimize conflict. Then Queen Gotami became the leader of the nuns. Eventually Yashodhara would become a nun herself and attained arhatship, demonstrating great spiritual gifts.

Using his divine sight, the Buddha saw that his birth mother, Queen Maya, had been reborn in the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods. The Buddha ascended into that heaven for the course of the rainy season and guided his mother and some of the gods to the realization of arhatship.

Since the Buddha did not respect India's strict caste system which kept religious authority entirely in the hands of male brahmins and didn't admit the untouchable caste into spiritual orders at all, every kind of person was admitted into the sangha from any station in life, including untouchables, prostitutes, and murderers. In one famous case, Angulimala, a mass murderer who had strung the fingers of 99 of his victims around his neck, came in search of the Buddha to be the 100th. While the entire area had become terrorized by Angulimala's presence, when confronted by the Buddha, the Buddha showed him no fear. In fact, overcome by the Buddha's compassionate presence and kind words, he repented his evil and became a monk. The change in him was so remarkable that when he was recognized as the brutal Angulimala while

out begging for alms one day, he didn't retaliate or even lose his temper as a mob, filled with fear, violently beat him.

Once the Buddha prevented a war from breaking out between the Shakyans and the Kolyans, functioning as a calming mediator between agitated kingdoms. But he couldn't prevent the sangha from splitting into two factions when two monks came to a minor disagreement over rules. One monk, a sutra chanting master, had left his begging bowl with water in it at a cleaning spot, clearly contravening the rule that he should keep the bowl clean and take it with him. Since he felt he'd done this unintentionally, when he was confronted by the rules master, he didn't admit to a violation. A schism of extraordinary pettiness ensued with the monks choosing up sides. Though the Buddha offered to resolve the dispute, the monks got too deeply involved in their animosities to even accept his advice! The Buddha responded by simply walking away to a distant forest and remaining in meditation for six months. Meanwhile, the fighting monks stopped receiving respect and alms from the populace and finally came to their senses, inviting the Buddha back to resolve the dispute. The sutra master admitted his error, and the rules master let go of his objection.

A more serious problem than this one developed at a later time when one of the Buddha's more accomplished monks, his cousin Devadatta, developed an ambition to be famous and lead the sangha. He conspired with the king against the Buddha's life, trying to kill him by rolling a boulder down upon him, sending an assassin with a sword to him while he practiced meditation, and by releasing a wild elephant who charged the Buddha in a public square. In all cases, the Buddha immediately understood what was going on and calmly resolved each situation. Devadatta then tried to split the sangha, taking 500 monks away with him to start his own community, but the Buddha sent the arhats Shariputra and Maudgalyayana to pacify their dissent and bring them back into the community.

In all, the Buddha taught for 45 years after his enlightenment. He developed a community of many thousands of monks and lay practitioners, teaching everyone from beggars to kings. He established many monasteries, formulated the rules and practices for Buddhists, and provided a vast array of teachings called the three wheels of dharma. In the first "wheel" or cycle of teachings, he taught the four noble truths, the practices of mindfulness and awareness, basic ethical discipline, and the importance of karma, as well as providing a tremendous number of teachings on the constituents and psychology of the mind. He emphasized how suffering comes about and how it can be overcome by walking the path.

In his second turning of the wheel of dharma, he taught the emptiness of conditioned phenomena and the self, comparing appearances to a dream or a magic show, something that seems to be true but isn't. If he had given this teaching early on, his students might have misunderstood, feeling that because things were empty, there was no need for virtuous action or compassion or practice. Waiting until some were mature, they were better able to understand that he was showing them the absolute nature of reality was non-dual and beyond conception, not that they didn't need to practice and take karma seriously.

Having taught the empty nature of reality, the Buddha turned the third wheel of dharma, teaching that all beings have buddha nature. If he hadn't taught emptiness first, people might think that

buddha nature constituted a self or ego, but teaching it last, they understood that this was the potential for wisdom that everyone had, not a kind of self. The Buddha taught this to keep people from feeling inadequate, that they were too weak or confused to realize enlightenment, showing them that the potential to become a buddha had been in them all along, they just had to discover it.

At the age of 80, the Buddha decided that his work was finished. Accepting the offering of some pork he knew had gone bad (he prevented anyone else from eating it), he ate his last meal and became quite ill. In a mango grove near Kushinagara, he declared that he was about to die and invited the local people to come say good-bye to him. When they had finished, the monks crowded around where he lay, and he asked them if they had any remaining doubts about the dharma. When no one spoke, he emphasized to them how all meeting ends in parting and that all conditioned things were subject to decay. Telling them that they didn't need him to be there as a teacher if they truly applied themselves to practicing the dharma properly, he exhorted them to work diligently to achieve liberation for themselves. Then, laying in the lion's posture, on his right side with his head on his arm, he died. The earth shook; lightning flashed and thunder resounded, and the Buddha passed into parinirvana, the ultimate state of enlightenment beyond birth and death.

The Buddha chose his birth to demonstrate how those of great attainment can have control over birth and death, but still he was born, despite many signs of being unusual, from a human woman, and never claimed to be a god or anything other than a human being. Though innately very talented, he still undertook to train himself in intellectual and physical disciplines, becoming skilled in many varieties of worldly knowledge, with a full understanding of the culture into which he was born. Knowing the positive attributes of the culture, he would then be fully capable of transmitting the dharma to it. By living in the palace, having a wife, and enjoying sensual pleasures, he showed that enlightened people can enjoy the pleasures of the world, but he also demonstrated the limitations of those pleasures. Going outside the palace walls to experience an old person, a sick one, and a corpse, he faced the unequivocal suffering of life, and being inspired by the wandering monk, he showed how the spiritual path was a way to confront that suffering.

Working hard at asceticism for many years, the Buddha demonstrated a complete lack of attachment toward worldly things and willingness to exert himself on the path to the utmost. He also showed the limitations of asceticism as a spiritual practice. Giving up those austerities, he placed the emphasis of spiritual practice squarely on the mind, rather than on the body or other external issues. True practice is the middle way between harsh self-denial and heavy self-indulgence. Heroically, he faced Mara and the three poisons of passion, aggression, and ignorance, winning the essential battle with the ego and its deceptions by remaining unwavering in his meditative awareness and compassion. By attaining enlightenment, the Buddha demonstrated how enlightenment is within one's own mind and not dependent on external things. Though popular religion was based on worshiping and offering to a god, acting in ways to please the god who would then save the worshipers or punish the worshipers with hell if the god was displeased, the Buddha instead turned the three wheels of dharma, showing the way to overcome suffering and confusion by developing one's own inherent wisdom. He revealed the belief in a self to be an illusion, and giving his students the tools to effect their own liberation, he showed

them how overcome their self-deception and recognize the truth directly in their own experience. When the Buddha died, he had established his practice and teachings, and sewn innumerable spiritual seeds in many places. He passed peacefully from this world just as he had lived his life, with dignity, gentleness, and compassion, and left behind a tradition of spiritual practice that remains vital and liberating to this day.