

The Buddha (Enlightened one)

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Gautama or Siddhârtha, the founder of Buddhism, was born into an aristocratic family of the Shâkyâ clan located in Kapilavastu in what is now Nepal. His dates are usually given as c. 480-400 B.C., but some authorities claim that he was born in 566 B.C.E. What we know of his life stems from scattered comments by Gautama (or Gotama) himself, as recorded in the Pali Canon, and from later writers. The following five traditional biographies contain significant information: the *Mahâ-Vastu*, the *Lalita-Vistara*, the *Buddha-Carita* of Ashvaghosha (first century A.D.), the *Abhinishkramana-Sûtra*, and the *Nidâna-Kathâ* of Buddhaghosha (fifth century A.D.).

It is difficult and perhaps also not necessary to extract historical truth from the massive accretion of pious legends. The author of *The Three Jewels* puts it beautifully thus:

So far back in time does He stand, so high in attainment does He tower, that, as with some lofty mountain peak, the intervening depth of atmosphere, while enhancing the beauty of the spiritual colours of His career, would seem to blur the sharpness of the biographical outline. Yet despite the comparative paucity of biographical records as compared with doctrinal and disciplinary material in the Buddhist Scriptures, we know considerably more about the Buddha than about either Jesus or Mohammed . . . (p. 4)

While Gautama's historicity is no longer in dispute, the exact dates of his life are still being debated. Scholarly consensus favors the dates of 563-483 B.C.

Gautama's father was Shuddhodâna, his mother Mâyâ. She died shortly after his birth, and he was reared by his maternal aunt Mahâprajâpatî. At his birth, many auspicious signs indicated his innate spiritual greatness, which provided plenty of material for elaboration in legends.

One day, while seated under a rose apple tree and watching his father (ritually?) plow the field, he experienced a spontaneous state of inner awakening. Later Gautama's vivid recollection of this natural illumination would prove the doorway to final and complete liberation.

By his own admission, Gautama lived a luxurious, pampered life, which even weakened him. Like any son of a noble family, he was schooled in traditional lore, ethics, and various arts, especially knightly skills. When he was old enough, he had access to beautiful women, and during the four months of the rainy season indulged in all kinds of pleasurable pastimes indoors. Eventually he was married, and had one son, Rahula, who later became his disciple.

Yet despite his easy and self-indulgent life, he was unhappy. He found his mind drifting to such questions as the all-pervasiveness of suffering, disease, old age, and death. Against the protests of his family, he abandoned the courtly comforts and took up the life

of a renouncer, as many were wont to do in those days. From Kapilavastu, he traveled south into the jungles of what is now Bihar.

He became the disciple of a master named Arâda Kâlâma. It did not take Gautama long to realize the highest state known in Arâda's teaching—"the sphere of no-thing-ness" (*akimcanya-âyatana*). He declined the sage's kind invitation to share the leadership and instead resumed his travels.

His next teacher was Udraka Râmaputra, and again Gautama quickly attained the highest state promised in that sage's teaching—"the sphere of neither consciousness nor unconsciousness" (*naiva-samjñâ-anâsamjñâ-âyatana*). Again Gautama was offered to share the leadership of the community of practitioners, but he was irresistibly pulled on in his quest for ultimate liberation.

He settled down on the outskirts of Uruvelâ in the kingdom of Magadha. He started an uncompromising practice of fiercest penance (*tapas*), which left his body emaciated and close to starvation. When, after six years of extreme austerities, he still had not come any nearer to freedom, he abandoned his approach and adopted a more moderate course of action; he began to feed his body properly and quickly restored his strength. The five ascetics who had gathered around him and had looked to him for inspiration and encouragement, left him in dismay. Untaunted, Gautama persisted in his new-found Middle Way (Sanskrit: *madhyamâ-pratipad*; Pali: *majjhimâ-patipâda*).

He remembered his childhood experience of spontaneous awakening and used the recollection as a lever for a final intensive effort in meditation. Seated under a fig tree (which came to be known as the " *bodhi* tree"), he plunged into a state of deep contemplation. In a single night, he lifted his consciousness to ever higher levels of realization until he had removed all mental obscurations and attained absolute, irrevocable freedom—*nirvâna*, the "extinction" of all desire. When the Sun rose again, it was greeted by a fully realized *buddha* ("awakened one") seated beneath the tree—a spiritual accomplishment whose difficulty and immensity is hard to imagine. That night's awe-inspiring struggle was to prove auspicious for all humanity.

For several weeks after his enlightenment, Gautama the Buddha or Shakyamuni (the sage of the Shâkyas) pondered the implications of his attainment, and in the process produced a sublime teaching that, in the meantime, has helped numerous others to also rid themselves from emotional and mental limitations and discover their true nature, which is unconditionally free and beyond decline and death. He could have simply translated out but, for the sake of others, opted to stay in his body and share his wisdom with others.

The Buddha gave his first sermon—known as the "Discourse on Setting the Wheel of the Teaching in Motion" (*Dharma-Cakra-Pravartana-Sûtra*) in the Deer Park at Sarnath near Varanasi (Benares). He talked about the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths are:

1. Suffering (*duhkha*) is universal.
2. Suffering is caused by craving (*trishna*) anchored in spiritual ignorance (*avidyâ*).
3. Suffering can be overcome.
4. The way to overcome suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path consisting of (1) right view,

(2) right resolve, (3) right speech, (4) right conduct, (5) right livelihood, (6) right effort, (7) right mindfulness, and (8) right concentration.

The Buddha's first listeners were his former five fellow ascetics, and his wisdom and delivery were so authoritative that, one by one, they became his disciples. Others followed quickly. He charged them with going out and spreading the liberating teaching ([dharma](#)), so that others could find ultimate freedom as well.

He himself wandered to Uruvelâ and within a short span of time had won over the three leaders of a fire cult and their thousand disciples. He preached to them his famous Fire Sermon (*Âditya-Paryâya-Sûtra*) in which he declared that all things are on fire with the fire of attachment, hatred, delusion, and thus with suffering, grief, and despair.

Another important original contribution by the Buddha was his teaching on dependent origination (*pratîtya-samutpâda*), best expressed in the twelvefold nexus: (1) ignorance, (2) volitional activity, (3) consciousness, (4) psychophysical phenomena, (5) the sense faculties, (6) contact, (7) sensation, (8) thirst or craving, (9) clinging, (10) the process of becoming, (11) birth, (12) pain and death. None of these conditions or causes (*nidâna*) can arise of its own accord; they all are interdependent and constitute what is called the world of perpetual change, or *samsâra*.

With this teaching, the Buddha sought to overcome the inherent limitations of nihilism on the one hand and eternalism on the other. He rejected the Vedic/ Upanishadic notion of a stable Self (*âtman*) and instead advocated the idea that all things, including the human body and mind, are composites that contain no permanent transmigrating subject. Thus *nirvâna* (Pali: *nibbâna*) is not to be understood as the realization of an eternal essence; not is it merely the destruction of something. Ultimately, this state is indescribable and inexplicable. The enlightened or liberated being, or *buddha*, cannot be said to exist or not exist. Therefore the Buddha also used the term *shûnya* ("void") to designate it, which subsequent (Mahâyâna) Buddhist thinkers—notably Nâgârjuna—developed into a full-fledged philosophical framework.

Shortly after the Buddha delivered his Fire Sermon, King Bimbisâra gifted property to the Buddhist community ([sangha](#)), and the king's patronage greatly boosted the Buddha's missionary work. For nine months of the year, the Buddha adopted a wandering life during which he taught thousands of people from all sections of society. The converts included his parents, son, and cousins. Soon the Buddha's influence extended over an area of some 100,000 square miles in Northern India. Today Buddhism is estimated to have c. 350 million adherents throughout the world, including 2 million in the United States alone.

About eight years prior to the Buddha's death, his jealous, power-hungry cousin Devadatta made several attempts on Shakyamuni's life before he himself died in ignominy and misery.

The Buddha renounced the world at the age of twenty-nine and attained enlightenment six years later. Then he traveled and preached for forty-five years, until his passing in Kusinârâ at the age of eighty. His final admonition to his disciples was: "Impermanent are all composite things. Strive toward liberation with diligence."

See also [dharma](#), [sangha](#), [refuge](#)

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