

The Story of Buddha's Enlightenment

Buddhism began almost 2,500 years ago. The foundation of Buddhism rests on the life of one teacher, an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gotama. Prince Siddhartha grew up in small kingdom in northeast India, an area which now rests in Nepal. His father, King Sudhodana, ruled over the Shakya people. Although the King hoped his son would carry on his legacy, the prince had a very different calling, one which made him one of history's most famous and influential figures.

In order to understand the principals of Buddhism, one must begin with the life of its founder. The deeds and words of Lord Buddha are the source and inspiration behind this popular faith. As you read the story of Buddha's enlightenment given below and on the following pages, be sure to locate all place names on the map, page 173.

Prince Siddhartha was born around 563 BCE, son of King Sudhodana and Queen Maya. Even before the birth, the queen had premonitions of great happenings. Legend tells that in her dreams a radiant white elephant descended from the sky. As the elephant descended, its six large tusks pierced the queen's womb, and she was filled with light.

That morning, the king and queen sought the counsel of the wise, for this was no ordinary dream. The fortune tellers explained that the queen would give birth to a son, and he would be a great leader. The couple was overjoyed at hearing this. King Sudhodana was thrilled, for now he would have a successor.

About ten months later, on the full moon night, in the Indian month of *Vaisakha* (May/June), Queen Maya was on her way to her father's house in the town of Lumbini. Suddenly, she halted her escorts, descended from her carriage, and entered a lush, beautiful garden. There she gave birth to a son. Legends tell of the sacred silence which anointed the garden that night and of a peace which flowed throughout the land.

The royal couple decided to name the baby Siddhartha, which means "the one who brings all good." News of the prince's birth spread, and there was much celebration. Many visitors came to pay tribute to Siddhartha. One of these visitors was the holy sage, Asita. Asita told the parents that the prince would be either a great king or a great saint. Then something strange happened. When Asita's eyes met the infant's, the sage began to weep. This worried the king and queen, but Asita explained that these were bittersweet tears he shed for himself, for he saw that this indeed was a special child, one who could lead others to peace. Now the holy man wept because, after a lifetime of searching, he would not live to hear Siddhartha's teachings.

Both the king and queen were happy, but Sudhodana wanted to be certain that his son became a great emperor, not a saint. Therefore, he set out to give Siddhartha all he could desire.

But the couple's joy was quickly ended when Queen Maya shortly became seriously ill. Within seven days of giving birth, she lay on her bed dying. She asked her sister, Prajapati, to mother her son. Prajapati consented. Soon afterwards, the queen passed away.

Prajapati raised Siddhartha as though he were her own son, and the prince lived a carefree childhood within the palace walls. King Sudhodana made certain that the boy received the finest education, for Asita's prophecy remained with him. The prince learned quickly. In fact, legend has it that after only a few lessons he had no need of teachers—he had learned all they could teach him.

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As Siddhartha grew, his intelligence was matched with a compassionate gentleness. Unlike his peers, he spent a great deal of time alone, wandering the palace gardens. He did not participate in the common games of boys but sought the company of animals and nature.

It was on one of these garden days that the prince came upon a wounded white swan, an arrow still piercing its wing. He removed the arrow and comforted the bird, tending to its wounds. Shortly thereafter, Devadatta, Siddhartha's cousin, came running. Adorned with bow and arrow, Devadatta demanded the swan he had hunted. But the Prince refused. The boys argued until they agreed to settle their dispute in the palace's court.

When Devadatta came before the judges, he claimed that because he shot the bird, it should belong to him. When Siddhartha spoke, he said that he had saved the swan's life, and therefore it belonged to him. The judges sided with the prince, agreeing that the bird's savior has a greater right.

Years went by, and as the prince became a young man he continued in his gentle, quiet ways. This disturbed his father, who wanted his son more involved in worldly matters. But the King's worries were allayed when Siddhartha met Princess Yasodhara, daughter of King Suprabuddha. The young couple wanted to be married, but the neighboring king needed proof of Siddhartha's bravery and skills. Only then would he give his daughter in marriage. Although he had little experience in warrior games, the prince gladly agreed to take part in a contest against other suitors. Now even Siddhartha's father was worried. How could the prince compete against the other young men who had spent years in training?

But the prince surprised everyone with his abilities. He began by winning the archery match, defeating his cousin, Devadatta. Next, he won the swordsmanship contest when, in one lightning quick stroke, he slashed through a tree—a tree with two trunks! However, though the prince was powerful, it was his gentleness which won him the final contest.

Each of the suitors was given an opportunity to mount a wild horse. One by one they were thrown by the wild, kicking beast. In fact, the horse was so ferocious that the judges were about to stop. But when Siddhartha approached the horse, stroking it softly and speaking kind words, the horse mellowed. The prince mounted the horse, and the contest was over. Prince Siddhartha and Princess Yasodhara were wed.

Although King Sudhodana was happy, he remained worried that his son may yet become a saint. So, he built the newlyweds two enormous, heavenly palaces—one for winter and one for summer. These dwellings were surrounded by walls. Only beautiful servants, accomplished musicians, and the finest foods were allowed in the lush, natural settings. In this way, the king hoped Siddhartha would never be disturbed or seek to go outside the palace, and for years the prince and princess lived undisturbed within the palace walls. In time, they gave birth to a son, Rahula.

Now, although Siddhartha had all the luxuries in the world, he had yet to do one thing: venture outside the palace grounds. From servants he heard tales of other lands and wonders of different peoples, languages, and landscapes. A stirring began inside him. Shortly after, he asked his father's permission to visit the capital city of his kingdom. The king consented, but he ordered his subjects to hide away anyone who was ill or old and to decorate their houses in festive colors, for Sudhodana did not want any sights to trouble his son.

So, aboard his chariot the Prince entered the city of Kapilavastu. The streets, lined with onlookers, were filled with gaiety and celebration. The cheerful citizens, all of them healthy and young, showered the prince with praise. For a moment, Siddhartha was pleased, thinking that this city was like his

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Amidst the crowd stood an elderly man, saddened and bent with age. In all his years, the Prince had never seen such a sight. In fact, he did not even know that people grew old. This knowledge stunned him, and when he returned to the palace, he sat alone in deep contemplation.

In time, the Prince journeyed again into the city, and again the streets were lined with happy faces. However, among the citizens was a sick man, coughing and pale. In all his palace years, sickness was unknown to Siddhartha. Now, he learned of disease. He learned that anyone can fall ill at anytime. This news saddened him.

But the prince's third trip to the city affected him most deeply. Riding along in his chariot, he saw a group of mourners carrying a coffin. Inside the coffin, he saw a dead man wrapped in white. Now he learned of death and the rites of cremation. He was overwhelmed with the thought that even his beloved wife and son would someday die.

Siddhartha became very depressed and spent his time alone. His father tried to cheer him, but to no avail. The prince wondered how people could live happily knowing that old age, sickness, and death awaited them. His gloom deepened, until one day he rode out again on his chariot. This time, he traveled to the countryside. There he saw a saint meditating under a tree. He learned that this hermit had exchanged all worldly pleasures to seek for truth. This man had also seen the suffering in the world and sought to go beyond it to enlightenment. Prince Siddhartha was deeply moved by the sight. He returned to the palace, sure of his calling.

Siddhartha's mind was made up: he would leave his life of luxury and search for truth. Knowing he would not receive consent, that very night as everyone lay sleeping, he bid a silent farewell to his wife and son. He mounted his horse and set out for the forest in the far reaches of the land where the holy men gather. When he arrived, he cut his long hair and donned the robe of an ascetic, a man of solitude searching for wisdom. Now, at the age of twenty-nine, his journey had begun.

Prince Siddhartha spent the next six years in the forest. He studied with the most famous sages, but still he did not find an end to suffering. He joined a group of men who believed enlightenment could be found by denying the body nourishment and sleep, thereby mastering pain. For years the prince ate and slept very little. He grew as thin as a skeleton, and though the rain and sun beat down on him, he did not waver from his practices.

Finally, he realized that he was getting nowhere. Though he had neglected his bodily needs, he had not found an end to suffering. Thus, when a young woman came to him offering food, he accepted. Now that he was nourished he sat in meditation under a bodhi tree in the town of Bodhgaya. He sat down and vowed, come what may, he would not move until he found an end to sorrow. Although demons tempted him with images of his past and evil spirits brought nightmares upon him, the prince was centered on his goal.

Finally, under the Tree of Enlightenment, Siddhartha became Buddha, the Enlightened One. He went on to become a great world teacher, as Asita had prophesied, and from his teachings, Buddhism was born.

Places in the Life of Buddha

