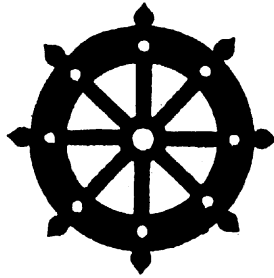


Who was the Buddha?



According to the ancient tradition the Buddha was born the son of a nobleman or clan chief called *Suddhodana* in the north of India around the year 563 BC. His name before he experienced the ultimate enlightenment called *Nirvana* and therefore earned the title of *Buddha* or 'enlightened one' was *Siddhartha*, a name which means something like 'he who has achieved his purpose'. His family name was *Gautama*. His mother, who died soon after his birth, was called *Mahamaya*.

The place of his birth is probably the town of *Lumbini*, which is just within the border of modern *Nepal*, but most of his life of some eighty years was spent in that part of the great plain formed by the *River Ganges* which makes up the present Indian state of *Bihar*.

The first full-length biographies of the Buddha were not written until several centuries after his death. But earlier sources can be traced further back and it is not impossible to disentangle fact from pious legend and

myth. Three episodes in particular stand out: his renunciation, his enlightenment and the preaching of the first sermon which started him on his career as the compassionate teacher. Each of these experiences is important, not just as a record of the man, but as the embodiment of certain basic attitudes and beliefs which are present in all the many schools and groups which make up the great religious tradition we call Buddhism.

Renunciation

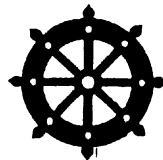
The young Siddhartha grew up in luxury, as befitted the son of a nobleman. The pampered young man lacked for nothing and in due course he married Yasodhara and they had a son called Rahula. But by the age of twenty-nine he had begun to see a side of life which profoundly disturbed him. According to the story, he was taken out for a chariot-ride through the country and saw in quick succession an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a wandering holy man. The sight of the first three led him to question the value of the sort of life he had been leading; the fourth gave him the answer. At that time religious ascetics were a fairly common sight, as they are even today in modern India. The *sannyasi* — to give the holy man his proper title — seeks total liberation from the pain of existence and the threat of continuous reincarnation, one life of suffering after another. Siddhartha resolved, therefore, to renounce the world and to seek that liberation. One

night he went off, as the texts put it, 'from the household life to homelessness'.

Enlightenment

For six years he wandered, seeking the truth. He studied first of all with two famous teachers of meditation who showed him how to achieve certain rarified levels of consciousness. Siddhartha proved himself an excellent pupil and soon absorbed all that these men could teach him. But he was not satisfied; this was not the Ultimate that he sought. He left them and took up with five ascetics who were practising extreme austerities which, they hoped, would lead to enlightenment.

After years of getting nowhere, Siddhartha surveyed his emaciated body, bones sticking through the blackened skin, and realised that this way no more led to the total enlightenment he so desired than the self-indulgence of his youth. The story goes that he remembered another way of meditation which he had experienced as a child — basically a middle way between these two extremes. Sitting down under a tree by a river at a place now known as Bodh Gaya he practised this meditation and before the night was over had attained the perfect enlightenment.



The First Sermon

At the age of thirty-five Siddhartha became the Buddha, the fully enlightened one. Now what was he to do? According to the legend he was persuaded by Brahma, the chief god, to preach the doctrine of *Dharma* – the Truth which he had discovered. Out of compassion for a world afflicted by suffering and ignorance the Buddha set out, seeking people who might understand. His original teachers had both died, and eventually he found the five ascetics, his erstwhile companions, dwelling in a deer-park in Sarnath, just to the north of the city of Benares, modern Varanasi.

At first they rejected him as ‘that backslider’ but, realising that something extraordinary had happened to this now tranquil and self-assured young man they decided to listen to what he had to say. On hearing his sermon, called in the tradition the ‘Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Truth’, the five were themselves enlightened and became the first members of the *Buddhasangha*, the community of disciples.

The Sangha grew rapidly. The Buddha’s influence spread and he soon numbered among his devotees kings and wealthy merchants as well as innumerable ascetic monks and lay-folk. He continued to lead the wandering life for some forty-five years, spreading his message of wisdom and compassion through the towns and villages of North-West India. At the age of eighty he became gravely ill. Gathering his followers

around him he preached a final sermon which ends with the famous words: ‘Impermanent are all conditioned things; work out your own salvation with diligence.’ Immediately he slipped into meditation and entered into the final Nirvana. After his death his body was cremated and the ashes buried in a number of memorial mounds called *stupas*. Very quickly these became centres of pilgrimage and devotion and the cult of the Buddha had begun.



Questions for Discussion

1. Are there any ways in which the story of the Buddha resembles that of Christ or any of the Christian saints? Where are the similarities? the differences?
2. What do the Buddha’s final words mean to a Christian? What would we agree/disagree with? why?

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The Committee is grateful to its member Rev. Michael Barnes SJ for this contribution.

+ Charles Henderson
Chairman

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