The Life of Buddha

Siddhattha Gotama was probably born in about 563 B.C. His father was the ruler of a small kingdom in northern India, where his family was Hindu. According to one legend, a fortune teller predicted that Siddhattha would be a great emperor provided he never saw a sick man, an old man, a dead man or a monk. If however he were to see these things, he would take up a life of a wandering holy man. Siddhattha’s father wanted his son to rule after him, so he vowed to keep Siddhattha from such sights. Siddhattha lived in luxury at the palace, grew up kind and good, married and had a son. Just when his life seemed complete, he began to question the value of his idle life. One day, he went outside the royal park and saw the four sights the fortune teller told of.

Siddhattha realized that even the most rich and powerful ruler cannot escape the suffering of illness, old age and death. He saw the fourth sight, the monk, as a sign that he should leave the palace and search for an answer to the problem of suffering. So, at the age of 29, he cut off his hair, put on beggar’s robes and became a wandering holy man.

Siddhattha studied with some holy men but this did not lead him to an answer. He then followed a strict fast for 6 years. This left him exhausted and near death. He realized that the problem would not be solved by going to extremes and he vowed to adopt what he called the **Middle Way**; neither indulging in luxury, nor causing needless hardship to his body.

Tradition says that one evening, Siddhattha sat down in the shade of a banyan tree near a temple of the Hindu god Vishnu, at a place called Bodh Gaya in India. He stayed there all night, deep in meditation. Then, as dawn broke, he saw the meaning of all things unfold, he was enlightened. From this point on, Siddhattha was was known as the Buddha.

At the moment when he reached enlightenment, the Buddha attained **nirvana**. This is freedom from the cycle of rebirth, and so freedom from suffering. Buddhists say that **nirvana** cannot be described in words; it lies beyond the definable.

After gaining enlightenment the Buddha passed on his new found knowledge to a group of monks. He spent the rest of his life wandering, teaching and meditating. The Buddha went on to live until the age of 80.

    

The Dharma of Buddhism

For the Buddha the need for suffering was too urgent to waste time in empty speculation. He did not try to answer the questions of weather God exists or why and how the world was created. Having the answers to such questions does not help to relieve the suffering.

The Buddha’s main teaching was made up of what are known as the Three Universal Truths, the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold path. Together these are known as the **dharma.**

***Three Universal Truths***

1. Everything in life is impermanent and is constantly changing.
2. Impermanence leads to suffering. The fact that nothing remains the same makes life unsatisfactory. People desire and become attached to things which can’t last. Even if someone achieves a state of contentment, it won’t last. Indeed, knowing that the contentment must end is itself a source of suffering.
3. There is no unchanging personal self. What people call the self is simply a collection of changing characteristics.

***Four Noble Truths***

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| 1. Life is full of suffering. | 1. The way to end suffering is to stop desiring things. |
| 1. People suffer because they desire worldly things and self-satisfaction. | 1. The only way to stop desiring things is to follow the ***Eightfold Path.*** |

***Eightfold Path***

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| 1. Know and understand the *Four Noble Truths.* | 1. Give up worldly things and don’t harm others. |
| 1. Tell the truth, don’t gossip, and don’t speak badly of others. | 1. Work for good and oppose evil. |
| 1. Do rewarding work. | 1. Make sure your mind keeps your senses under control. |
| 1. Don’t commit evil acts, like killing, stealing, or living an unclean life. | 1. Practice meditation as a way of understanding reality. |

**Buddhism:**

* **Siddhartha Gautama**, a prince who became **Buddha** “Enlightened One”
* The only way to find the truth about the world was to give up all desires.
* **Nirvana** – A state of wisdom when someone gives up all desires.
* **Stupa** – Buddhist shrines that have the shape of a dome or mound.