

## **How Siddhartha Gotama became 'The Awakened One'**

*Theme: The nature of the Buddha's wisdom*

This is what we have been told. Once, a long time ago – indeed, to be more exact, about two thousand five hundred years ago – there was a handsome young man called Siddhartha Gotama, of the Sakya people, who lived in the city of Kapilavatthu in north-east India, not far from the Himalayan mountains. His family was wealthy, so Siddhartha lived in a splendid palace with lovely gardens; he always wore the most beautiful clothes and ate the choicest food that money could buy. And always there was a servant to hold a white sunshade over his head to protect him from the heat or the wind or the dust.

Now, from time to time Siddhartha left his beautiful palace, accompanied by servants of course, and went out into the town. And there came a time when, during his visits to the town, he saw things that brought to a sudden end the pleasure and ease he felt in his wealthy, comfortable life in the palace.

On the first occasion he saw a very old person with wrinkled skin, bent over and walking very slowly with a stick. And he thought, 'How can I take pleasure in being young when I know that in the end I must become wrinkled and old like that person?'

On the second occasion he saw a sick person covered in sores being carried on a stretcher. And he thought, 'How can I take pleasure in being healthy when I know that soon or later I shall become sick and covered in sores like that person?'

On the third occasion he saw a dead person lying in an open coffin, waiting to be buried. And he thought, 'How can I take pleasure in being alive when I know that soon or later I too must die?'

And on the fourth occasion he saw a man begging for money, his head shaved and wearing the yellow robe of a wandering philosopher, who had left behind all his possessions and gone in search of wisdom. And he thought, 'That's right: I too will leave behind my riches and my comfortable life in the palace, which in the end I must lose anyway, and go in search of a happiness that will last for ever. Because the happiness I have now will certainly not last for ever.'

So Siddhartha left the palace, his parents, his beautiful clothes and all his possessions, and set off in search of a wisdom that would set him free from the pains of sickness, old age and death. At first he became a follower of two famous teachers who taught him to meditate – to relax and focus his mind – in such a way that the world and its unhappiness would disappear and become no more than a dream. He followed their

teaching for several years and learned to do exactly as his teachers told him, but he did not feel satisfied. 'What is the point of making the world seem no more than a dream?' he thought. 'Every time when I finish meditating in this way my I am back again where I started, still worried and afraid – worried about possessions, and afraid of old age, sickness and death as well as of the wild animals in the forest. This is not the practice I am looking for. I want to find how to be calm, how to be unafraid and how to understand why things are as they are.'

So, continuing his search, Siddhartha tried following the practices of another set of teachers, who said that he could attain a state of purity and joy by giving up all the pleasures that bind human beings to earthly life with its pains and sorrows. As we have seen, Siddhartha agreed about the pains and sorrows of earthly life. But these teachers even included eating and drinking among the pleasures that he needed to give up, and after a trying this approach for several more years he found he was becoming very weak. So he thought, 'This can't possibly work. Finding wisdom takes effort, and for effort I need strength, and to keep up my strength I need to eat and drink!'

Now, just at that moment he remembered something that had happened to him when he was still a young boy, but until that moment he hadn't realized just how important it had been. He had been sitting in the shade under a rose-apple tree, watching his father ploughing one of their fields, and suddenly he had found himself in a state of deep peace, completely absorbed in watching the scene in front of him, having no feelings – no desire, no irritation, no fear – and aware only of a gentle happiness. 'Aha,' thought Siddhartha, 'Perhaps that is the way to the sort of wisdom I am seeking. Perhaps what I am looking for is a Middle Way, which is not simply enjoying pleasures and not simply giving them up either.' He still didn't know exactly what this Middle Way consisted, but he felt that at last, after all these years of searching he was on the right track. And the first thing he did was to have something to eat and drink, which immediately made him feel better.

From that point, things moved swiftly. Siddhartha came to the town of Uruvela on the banks of the River Neranjara and he sat down in the shade of a tall tree. There he sat, relaxing and focusing his mind in the way he had remembered from that time under the rose-apple tree, for seven days and nights, and at the end of the final night – the night of the full moon in the month of May – he knew that, at last he had understood. He had 'woken up'. He saw how deeply we are linked to everything and everyone else in the world. He saw how each of our actions affects us and changes us, for better or for worse. He saw that everything in the world is always changing, and as he looked on this ceaselessly changing world he felt a wonderful sense both of love and of tranquillity. Above all, he knew, at last, the cause of suffering and its cure; he knew that he must love

things deeply, but without wanting to possess them. He was no longer afraid of anything, not even age or sickness or death.

At first he was so amazed at what he had discovered and it seemed so different from what the other teachers at that time were saying that he thought, 'No-one else will ever be able to understand all this; it is too difficult. I'll just have to keep it to myself.' But the following night he had a vision of a holy man surrounded by a radiant light, saying to him, 'The world needs this Dharma, this wisdom, that you have found. You *can* teach it and you *must* teach it.'

So for the rest of his life (and he lived to be an old man) Siddhartha Gotama taught his new wisdom to everyone who would listen. He had many followers and during his lifetime he became the most famous teacher in the whole of India. And from that time onwards Siddhartha Gotama has always been known as the Buddha – 'the Awakened One' – and the type of tree under which he sat during his seven days and nights of concentration has since been known as a 'Bodhi tree' – a tree of Enlightenment.

### Questions

1. Why did Siddhartha Gotama leave his rich, comfortable life in the palace?
2. What was he looking for?
3. What did he finally understand when he was sitting under the Bodhi tree?
4. Why did Siddhartha feel that, when he became Enlightened, he no longer needed to be afraid of old age, sickness and death?

### *Dharma Issues*

- *The newness and difference of the form of spiritual awareness that the Buddha discovered.*
- *The extent to which the spiritual path is necessarily a form of 'going forth' from life as we currently know it.*

*Based on: Nanamoli: The Life of the Buddha According to the Pali Canon, Buddhist Publication Society, pp. 1-29. For an explanation of the name 'Siddhartha' see (e.g.) Sangharakshita, Who Is The Buddha?, p.39.*