

1: Approaching the Buddha

The word “Buddha”

Buddha is not a name like John or Mary. It is a title. Buddha means “the one who knows” or “the one who is awake”. This title was given to the person we call the Buddha because he had, as it were, woken up from the dream of life and seen Reality. He was given this name after he became Enlightened.

The Buddha’s personal name was Siddhartha and his clan or family name was Gautama. He lived about 2500 years ago in the area which is now partly southern Nepal and partly northern India.

The birth of Siddhartha

Siddhartha (who when he later became enlightened was to become the Buddha) came from a prominent, well respected family. Tradition sometimes represents his father as having been the king of the Shakya tribe, but it seems more likely he was the elected president of the assembly that governed this tribe. This position was held for twelve years. It was during his father’s period of office that Siddhartha was born.

Siddhartha’s mother (Maha Maya) was the daughter of the chief of a neighbouring tribe (the Koliyas). It was customary for the first child to be born in the house of the mother’s parents. When a mother-to-be feels her time is approaching, she goes to her own parents’ house. This is what was going to happen in the case of Siddhartha. His mother set out for the place where her parents lived, but halfway there she was seized with the pangs of labour, and Siddhartha was born in a grove of sal trees, at a place called Lumbini.

His mother died seven days later, and Siddhartha was raised by his mother’s sister (Mahapajapati Gotami), whom his father had also married.

Shortly after Siddhartha’s birth his father had his horoscope cast. (This was common in India, and still is in some quarters. People want to know how their child is going to fare.) The sage who was asked to predict his future foretold that the child would either be a great political ruler, or a great spiritual sage.

Youth

As a young man Siddhartha had a good training in martial exercises, and learnt by word of mouth from the elders about the traditions, beliefs and genealogical lists (whakapapa) of the Shakya people. He did not go to school in the sense that we know it, and it is not clear whether he could read or write.

On the whole he had a comfortable sort of life, with no particular responsibility. His father (Suddhodana) was an affectionate parent who married him off when he was quite young; some accounts say when he was sixteen. He married a distant cousin, and in due course a son was born to him.

On the surface he seemed to have a rather pleasant life. But despite his comforts and good health Siddhartha was very deeply dissatisfied. The scriptures speak of a sort of spiritual crisis precipitated by what is known as the “Four Sights”.

The Four Sights

It’s impossible to prove whether Siddhartha literally went out and saw these Four Sights in the village street, or whether they are an allegory for a series of psychological and spiritual experiences. It would seem more likely that they are an allegory. Either way they encapsulate certain fundamental teachings of Buddhism, and throw light on Siddhartha’s inner experience.

The story goes that one day Siddhartha felt like going out in his chariot. He called his charioteer and they set off together. Then in the village Siddhartha saw the first sight: **an old man. The old man was very frail and could only just support himself.** This sight gave Siddhartha a shock. Something like the following conversation then took place:

Siddhartha: who on earth is that?

Charioteer: It is an old man.

Siddhartha: Why is he like that? Why is he so frail?

Charioteer: Well, he's just an old man. Everybody gets old, it's natural, it just happens.

Siddhartha: Will this also happen to me?

Charioteer: Yes, even to you. Young as you are now, one day you will be old.

This struck Siddhartha like a thunderbolt, and very sick at heart he returned home.

If you take all this literally it means he had been so cocooned in his home that he'd never seen an old person before and didn't realise there was such a thing as old age. But we can take it in another way because sometimes we see something as though for the first time. We might have physically seen something a thousand times before, but one day at a certain moment it strikes us as if we had never seen it before. Probably it was something like this that happened in the case of each of the Four Sights.

The second sight was that of a **sick man**. According to the story, Siddhartha had never seen anyone sick before, and on seeing the sick person realised that human life is prey to illness. He had to face the fact that he, too, might at any time be struck down by disease.

The third sight was a **corpse** being carried to the burning ground on a stretcher. [In India this sight is quite common.] As a result of this sight Siddhartha realised that all people sooner or later die, and that one day this would also happen to him.

Siddhartha had come up against these existential situations that neither he, nor anyone else can escape from. We do not want to grow old, but we cannot help it. We do not want to fall sick, but we cannot help it. We do not want to die, but we cannot help it.

The fourth sight Siddhartha saw was what in India is called a *sadhu*, a **holy man**. The **holy man** was very peacefully walking along the road with his begging bowl. He seemed so calm and self-possessed that Siddhartha thought that maybe by becoming a wanderer, like this man had, it would be possible to find an answer to the problems of existence.

Going Forth

One night when everything was quiet and there was a full moon in the sky, Siddhartha left home, including his sleeping wife and child. He was not happy to leave them but he felt impelled to go. He went out into the moonlight and rode many miles that night until he reached a river. There he left his horse and fine clothing, cut off his long hair and beard, and started a new life as a homeless wanderer in search of truth.

This "Going Forth" is sometimes criticised by modern day people as an irresponsible act. But there was plenty of support within his extended family, and he was sure his wife and child would be well cared for. In that society becoming a wanderer was considered an honourable life choice. In Siddhartha's case his decision to adopt that lifestyle was motivated as much by a desire to resolve others' existential predicament as to resolve his own.

Even for those who are in a family situation today, and intend to remain in it, Siddhartha's "Going Forth" has a metaphorical relevance. It can be taken as a metaphor for a victory over group-mindedness. It represents the process of becoming mentally independent of group attitudes and conditioning. It is taking the initiative, thinking for oneself, experiencing things for oneself; and being an individual.

Between Going Forth and Enlightenment

For six years after his Going Forth he was searching for a deeper and deeper understanding of the truth. In those days in India there were many people who taught ways leading to a realisation of truth. One of these ways was deliberately undergoing great physical hardship. Siddhartha conscientiously tried this approach. He

limited his food, he limited his sleep, he did not wash, he went about naked. He afterwards said that no one in India went beyond him in self-torture. But he also said that it did not lead him to Enlightenment.

Even though Siddhartha became famous for his austerities, when he realised this was not the way to truth he had the courage to give them up. For instance he started eating regular meals again. His disciples thought this was retrograde, and left him in disgust.

He wandered from place to place, and eventually came to a pleasant location on the banks of a river. He sat down there in the shade of a great tree and made a resolution not rise until he was Enlightened. There is a dramatic verse which was ascribed to him by some of the early compilers of the scriptures:

Flesh may wither away, blood may dry up, but until I gain Enlightenment I shall not move from this seat.

Day after day and night after night he sat there concentrating and purifying his mind. And gradually the light dawned. Just as he fixed his mind on the morning star glittering near the horizon, full Enlightenment arose. Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha. This was the end of his quest. He had become the Buddha, the one who knew. He had found the solution to the riddle of existence.

Post Enlightenment

His Enlightenment marked the beginning of his mission of helping others to spiritual awakening.

He left Bodha Gaya where he had become Enlightened and walked to Sarnath near Varanasi, about 150 kms away. There he gathered together the disciples who had left him when he gave up austerities, and taught them the Dharma (Truth), and they too became Enlightened. Over the succeeding years he continued to roam around north-eastern India, teaching people he encountered in his travels. Gradually he founded a spiritual community around him.

For nine months of the year he wandered from place to place. When he came to a village, if it was meal time he got out his begging bowl to receive alms food. When he had collected enough he sat down to eat (although sometimes he was unable to collect food and had to go hungry).

After his meal the villagers would often gather round to listen to his teaching. Sometimes Brahmins would come, sometimes wealthy landowners, sometimes peasants, sometimes merchants, sometimes sweepers, sometimes prostitutes. He taught them all. Sometimes in the cities he taught the king, as well as princes and wealthy merchants. In this way he gathered a considerable following and became, in his own day, the best known of all the spiritual teachers of India. He was Enlightened at age 35 and lived to be 80, so had about 45 years of active life spreading the Dharma. When he died there were thousands of disciples, both wanderers and lay people, men and women.

The Buddha's nature is beyond definition

Biographical information of the sort outlined above is sometimes regarded as answering the question: "who was the Buddha?" But does it really answer the question? An encounter between the Buddha and someone called Upaka indicates that factual information about his life is not an adequate answer to this question.

Upaka was what the texts describe as a "naked ascetic". (There are still some of these naked ascetics in India.) Upaka saw the Buddha coming in the distance and was very impressed by his appearance. He looked serene and joyful, and there was a radiance about his being. It was as though a light was shining from him. So Upaka felt that this was not an ordinary human being, and perhaps it was not a human being at all. Upaka thought that the being walking towards him was, perhaps, from some other plane. Maybe he was some sort of spirit.

Upaka: *Are you a yaksha* (a sublime spirit living in the forests)?"

The Buddha: *No.*

Upaka: *Are you a gandharva* (a sort of celestial musician)?" The Buddha: *No.*

Upaka: *Are you a deva* (a divine being)?

The Buddha: *No.*

Upaka: *Well, are you a human being?*

The Buddha: *No.*

Upaka: *If you are not a yaksha, or a gandharva, or a deva or a human being, who are you?*

The Buddha: *Those compulsive forces (samskaras) on account of which I might have been described as a yaksha or a gandharva or a deva or a human being have been overcome. Therefore I am a Buddha.*

In a way the Buddha was a human being, but he was not an ordinary person. He had an unlimited mind in a human body. He was free from all negative tendencies such as greed, hate and delusion. He had no compulsions to be reborn as any particular type of being.

Upaka saw a glorious figure coming towards him and tried to pigeon hole this being into one or other of the categories he recognised. But the Buddha would not have it. The Buddha insisted that none of Upaka's labels applied.

We ourselves might use the label "Buddha" or "Enlightened person", but it is not possible for us to fathom what that means. We can say Enlightenment is the plenitude of wisdom, or the fullness of compassion, but these are only words.

The Buddha is not the agent of a creator God

Although the Buddha is unfathomable, he is also revered by Buddhists as the highest type of being in the universe, higher even than the gods/angels (*devas*).

For people of Semitic faiths the categories of beings they recognise are generally: plants and animals, human beings, the son/agent of God, and God (in the sense of the creator and ruler of the universe). But none of these categories fit the Buddha.

Some people say that because devotees worship the Buddha, for them the Buddha is equivalent to a creator God, or the agent of God. But the word "worship" (*puja*) comes from the word "worth", and means to acknowledge the worth of somebody or something. In many Asian countries they use the same word for paying respect to the Buddha, to parents, to elder brothers and sisters, to teachers, and to any senior or respectable person. Although it is common to see Buddhists offer flowers and candles to a Buddha image, and to bow before that image, this does not mean they regard the Buddha as some sort of creator God, or the agent of God.

Faith in the Buddha

In various ways we may, over time, develop some sense of the Buddha's qualities and an affinity for his unfathomable nature. We may immerse ourselves in the stories of his life, read his teachings, and contemplate myths about him. We may appreciate him through artistic works - which like myths are not historically accurate but still convey something of his spirit. In these ways it is possible to develop a sense of "faith" (*sraddha*) in the Buddha.

Faith in the Buddha is an emotional response to what is ultimate in him. It is a response from deep within us to the transcendental, to that which is beyond the world (*lokottara*). It is a sort of resonance. Although faith does not mean we understand the Buddha in the way Upaka tried to, it does give us an avenue for starting to appreciate his inner nature.

Acknowledgement

These notes are primarily based on material from Sangharakshita's lecture: "*Who is the Buddha?*"