

## **The Buddha: His Life and Teachings**

### **Birth and Early Life**

Prince Siddhartha was born in the Lumbini Garden, present day Nepal as Queen Mayadevi traveled to her maternal home in Devadaha. His birth took place on the full moon of Vaisakha (April-May), around 623 BCE. Remarkably, the newborn prince took seven steps to the north and declared, "This is my last birth; henceforth, there will be no more rebirth for me." He was then bathed in the sacred Pushkarini pond.

Tragically, Queen Mayadevi passed away seven days later, and Siddhartha was raised by his stepmother, Prajapati Gautami, who nurtured him with great love in Kapilavastu, the capital of the Shakya kingdom. She treated him as her own son, alongside her other children.

### **Prophecies and Early Life**

King Suddhodana invited wise ascetics to interpret signs surrounding his son's birth. The sage Asita predicted that Siddhartha would become a great holy man and teacher if he encountered human suffering. Anxious about this prophecy, the king sheltered Siddhartha, surrounding him with luxury to prevent exposure to life's hardships. At 16, Siddhartha married Princess Yashodhara of Devadaha. They had a son, Rahula, after some years.

### **The Four Sights and Renunciation**

As Siddhartha grew older, he became increasingly curious about life beyond the palace walls. On his excursions, he encountered four significant sights: an old man, a sick man, a funeral procession, and a wandering ascetic. These encounters profoundly impacted him, revealing the realities of aging, illness, death, and the quest for spiritual release.

Moved by these sights, Siddhartha resolved to find a way to overcome suffering. At 29, he quietly left the palace at night, accompanied by his loyal charioteer and

horse. They reached the river Anoma, where Siddhartha sent them back, embarking on his journey barefoot and dressed as a mendicant.

### **Search for Enlightenment**

For six years, Siddhartha wandered, learning from various religious teachers and practicing severe asceticism. Despite intense self-mortification, he did not find the enlightenment he sought. Realizing that extreme deprivation was not the answer, he embraced the Middle Way—a balanced approach between indulgence and self-denial.

He resumed eating and continued his meditation, focusing on the discipline of the mind. Finally, at 35, under a banyan tree in Bodhgaya, Siddhartha attained enlightenment on the full moon of Baisakha (April-May) in 588 BCE, becoming the Buddha, or "Awakened One." This realization marked the beginning of his journey as Lord Sakyamuni Buddha, dedicated to teaching the path to liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

### **The Buddha's First Sermon and His Followers**

After achieving enlightenment, Lord Sakyamuni Buddha spent 49 days in deep meditation and reflection. On the fiftieth day, he was visited by two merchants, Tapussa and Bhallika, who offered him rice cakes and honey. These merchants became his first lay followers, marking the beginning of the Buddha's teaching journey.

### **Journey to Sarnath**

Determined to share his newfound insights, the Buddha traveled approximately 205 kilometers to Sarnath, near Varanasi, to meet his former companions—Kondanna, Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahanama, and Assaji. They had previously practiced asceticism together but had parted ways when Siddhartha chose the Middle Way.

### **The First Sermon: Dhammacakkappavattana**

In the Deer Park at Sarnath, the Buddha delivered his first sermon, known as the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dharma). He introduced the core teachings of Buddhism:

### **The Four Noble Truths:**

The Truth of Suffering (Dukkha): Life is inherently filled with suffering and dissatisfaction.

The Truth of the Cause of Suffering (Samudaya): Desire and ignorance are the root causes of all suffering.

The Truth of the End of Suffering (Nirodha): Suffering can end through Nirvana, the cessation of all desires.

The Truth of the Path Leading to the End of Suffering (Magga): The path to end suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path.

### **The Noble Eightfold Path:**

Right Understanding: Comprehension of the Four Noble Truths.

Right Thought: Cultivation of thoughts of renunciation, love, and compassion.

Right Speech: Speaking truthfully and harmoniously without harm.

Right Action: Engaging in ethical conduct and refraining from harm.

Right Livelihood: Earning a living through ethical means.

Right Effort: Diligent effort to cultivate positive states of mind.

Right Mindfulness: Being aware of body, feelings, thoughts, and phenomena.

Right Concentration: Developing deep meditation and mental focus.

### **Formation of the Sangha**

The five companions, deeply moved by the Buddha's teachings, became his first disciples, forming the initial Sangha (community of monks). This marked the

beginning of the monastic community, dedicated to following and spreading the Buddha's teachings.

### **Spreading the Teachings**

For the rest of his life, the Buddha traveled extensively, sharing the Dharma (teachings) with people from all walks of life. His teachings emphasized liberation from suffering and the attainment of Nirvana through the practice of the Eightfold Path. His followers, the Sangha, played a crucial role in disseminating his message throughout Nepal, India, and beyond, reaching countries like Sri Lanka, Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

The Buddha's legacy continues to inspire millions around the world, emphasizing compassion, ethical living, and mindfulness as paths to enlightenment.

### **Returning Home after the Enlightenment**

After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha returned to his hometown of Kapilavastu at the request of his father, King Suddhodhana. Accompanied by 300 monks of the Sangha, this visit marked the first time he returned since his renunciation. The meeting with his father took place at Nyigrodharama, now known as Kudan. Here, the Buddha shared his teachings, including the Middle Way and the path to enlightenment, with his family and the Sakya clan, leading many to embrace his teachings.

### **Mahaparinirvana and Distribution of His Relics**

At age 80, the Buddha entered mahaparinirvana (final nirvana) during the full moon of Vaisakha in 543 BCE, in Kushinagar, India. After his death, his body was cremated, and the sacred relics were distributed among eight claimants. The Koliya kingdom received a portion, which was enshrined in Ramagrama. The stupa at Ramagrama remains one of the most revered Buddhist shrines worldwide, as it uniquely preserves the original relics.

## **Spread of Buddhism**

The Buddha's teachings spread rapidly, transcending class and caste barriers. His emphasis on the Four Noble Truths and the Middle Way provided a universal path to salvation. By the time of his mahaparinirvana, many in the Sakya and Koliya kingdoms had become followers.

## **Buddhist Councils and the Spread of Teachings**

First Buddhist Council (c. 483 BCE):

Held at Saptaparni Caves near Rajagriha (Rajgir, India).

Codified the Buddha's teachings into the Vinaya Pitaka (monastic rules) and Sutra Pitaka (discourses).

Second Buddhist Council (c. 383 BCE):

Convened in Vaishali.

Addressed differences between the orthodox Sthaviravadins (Elders) and the Mahasanghikas (Great Community).

Third Buddhist Council (c. 250 BCE):

Patronized by Emperor Asoka in Pataliputra (Patna).

Sent emissaries, including his son Mahinda and daughter Sanghamitra, to spread Theravada Buddhism, notably to Sri Lanka.

Asoka's support significantly aided the spread of Buddhism, making it a major religion in Asia. Today, Buddhism is the state religion of Cambodia and Bhutan, and it holds a prominent place in the constitutions of Sri Lanka and Thailand.

## **Introduction to Tibet and Beyond**

In the 8th century, Acharya Padmasambhava, known as Guru Rinpoche, introduced Buddhism to Tibet. His teachings deeply influenced Tibetan culture, and Buddhism spread further north into Mongolia and other regions.

## **Buddhist Scriptures and Schools**

Buddhist scriptures are divided into the Theravada and Mahayana canons:

**Theravada:** Composed of the Tripitaka (Three Baskets) - Vinaya, Sutra, and Abhidhamma (philosophical texts).

**Mahayana:** Also contains a Tripitaka and additional sutras, often considered later interpretations that emphasize profound wisdom and compassion.

## **Modern Practice**

**Theravada Buddhism:** Predominantly practiced in Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar.

**Mahayana Buddhism:** Predominant in China, Mongolia, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, and Vietnam. Mahayana traditions also venerate other Buddhas like Amitabha and Medicine Buddha.

**Vajrayana Buddhism:** A sect of Mahayana, mainly practiced in Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan, focuses on tantric rituals, mantras, and mudras.

## **Distribution of Followers**

**Mahayana:** Approximately 54% of Buddhists.

**Vajrayana:** Around 4% of Buddhists.

**Theravada:** The remainder of the global Buddhist population.

The Buddha's teachings continue to guide millions, emphasizing compassion, ethical conduct, and mindfulness as paths to liberation.

