

The Legend of Buddha (A Hero's Journey Legend)

Retold by Reg Harris

The Divine Child

The legend of Buddha begins more than 2,500 years ago in a region of northern India. Buddha was a historical figure, the son of a regional king, but as happens with many heroes and saviors, the facts of his life were enhanced with myth and symbol to make his life more meaningful to his followers.

Buddha was born in 560 B.C.E. According to tradition, he was conceived in his mother by the gods and born of a "virgin" birth. He walked immediately, and wherever he stepped, a lotus flower grew. Buddha was not called Buddha until much later in his life. His real name was Gautama, but he was better known as Siddhartha, or "he who will achieve."

Powerful King or World Savior

When Siddhartha was a child, his father wished to know his son's fate. The king summoned the Brahmins, the highest order of Hindu priests, to foretell the future. The Brahmins told the king that Siddhartha's life would take one of two directions. If he remained attached to the world, he would unify India and become the country's greatest king. However, if he abandoned the world, he would become not a king but a world savior.

Siddhartha's father wanted his son to become a great ruler, so he spared no effort to keep the Prince attached to worldly things. Three palaces and forty thousand dance girls were placed at the prince's disposal. The king commanded that no ugliness intrude upon the boy's world of beauty and pleasure. In particular, he wanted the prince shielded from old age, sickness, and death. Even the use of the words "death" and "grief" were forbidden.

Thus Siddhartha was raised in a world of luxury and pleasure, unaware of pain, suffering, and death. He was an extremely handsome young man, and he married a neighboring princess at age sixteen with whom he had a son.

Siddhartha had everything: wealth, power, and a beautiful family. In addition, as heir to his father's throne, he was destined for power and fame. Despite all this, however, Siddhartha began to feel a deep dissatisfaction. He yearned for a life with deeper meaning.

The Four Passing Sights

One day, many years later, the prince decided to visit the town. His father ordered servants to go ahead to clean and decorate the road and to remove any ugly or sad sights from his son's path. The servants did as they were told. Somehow, however, they overlooked an old man.

The man was crooked and trembling with age, and when Siddhartha rode by and saw him leaning on his staff, he was astonished. He had never seen what years could do, and he realized that feebleness was the fate of all who lived to old age.

On the prince's next ride, the king extended his guard, but again his efforts failed. Siddhartha met an incurable invalid, and he learned the suffering of pain and disease. On a third ride, the young prince encountered a funeral procession, and he saw the impermanence of all life.

Finally, on a fourth ride, Siddhartha saw a Hindu monk with a shaven head, wearing a yellow robe and carrying a beggar's bowl. The monk told the prince that he had abandoned worldly concerns to pass beyond suffering and joy. On that day, Siddhartha learned the possibility of freedom from the suffering of life.

The Impermanence of All Things

From these four passing sights, Siddhartha realized that impermanence and suffering were conditions of all life. He realized that he could never find peace in physical pleasure and material objects. The music, the

dancing, the feasts, the royal processions and elaborate festivals only increased his discontent. The bright flowers, the fragile butterflies, and the melting snows reminded him of the impermanence of all things.

Finally, Siddhartha decided to break free of sensual distractions, so he went to his father. "Everything in the world is changing and transitory [temporary]," he said. "Let me leave to follow the call of the truth seeker."

His father refused. "You hold all of my hopes for the royal line," he said. "I cannot let you throw that away."

"How can I continue to live here knowing that others are suffering?" Siddhartha said. "I must go."

The Great Going Forth

To keep the prince from leaving, the king doubled the guards on the palace walls and brought in even more distractions to convince his son to abandon all thoughts of leaving.

But the prince would not change his mind, and one night in his twenty-ninth year, Siddhartha made his break, a break now known as "The Great Going Forth."

In the early-morning hours he went to where his wife and son were sleeping and bade them both a silent good-bye. Then he ordered the gatekeeper to bridle his great white horse, and the two escaped from the castle and rode off toward the forest.

Reaching its edge by daybreak, Siddhartha changed clothes with the gatekeeper, who returned to break the news to the family. The prince, dressed as a pauper [poor person], shaved his head and plunged into the forest in search of truth and enlightenment.

The Search

Siddhartha was no longer a young prince. Now he wandered through India as Gautama, a monk and beggar. During these years, he mastered yoga, meditation, and studied at a religious hermitage [monastery], but religious studies did not teach him what he wanted to know. He left the hermitage and lived alone for six more years. During that time he pushed poverty to the extreme.

One day, starving and near death, Gautama sat down to rest on the bank of a broad river. As he sat, a young village girl named Sujata saw him and offered him a bowl of rice. Gautama accepted. That meal saved his life.

Gautama ate the rice slowly, thinking about his experiences. He had not found happiness as a rich prince, and he had almost died as a pauper. What, he wondered, had he failed to understand?

Then, as he sat, he heard voices. Looking up, he saw a raft floating by him on the river. On the raft an old man was teaching a boy how to tune a stringed instrument.

"If you tighten the string too much, it will break under the strain," he was saying. "If you don't tighten it enough, it will not make music."

When he heard those words, Gautama realized that living at life's extremes would not bring peace or enlightenment. He saw that fulfillment in life was to be found only on the path of moderation.

The Immovable Spot

With that realization, Gautama knew that he was near to the enlightenment he sought, so he set off for the town of Gaya in northeastern India, where he would find the tree of wisdom. The exhausting trip took many days, but finally, one evening, he reached the sacred fig tree.

He spread fresh grass under the tree, seated himself, and vowed, "Here, on this seat, may my body wither, my skin and flesh dissolve, if I rise before I have obtained enlightenment."

The Battle with Mara

To achieve enlightenment, Gautama had to master the desires and impulses which chain the human spirit to the material world. The struggle was not easy, for he had to battle Mara, the Evil One, god of death, desire, and illusion.

Mara knew that if Gautama attained enlightenment, his own power over people would be broken, so he went immediately to the sacred tree. He appeared before Gautama mounted on an elephant and carrying weapons in his thousand hands. He was surrounded by his terrifying army, which stretched around him as far as the eye could see. Gautama, however, remained unmoved. Then Mara attacked him, seeking to break his concentration.

First, the Evil One tried sensual temptation. He displayed his beautiful daughters--Desire, Longing, and Lust--surrounded by their attendants. They sang and danced before Gautama, but the mind of the Great Being was not distracted. The daughters of Mara withdrew.

Then Mara attacked with fear. He hurled whirlwinds, rocks, thunder and flame, boiling mud, blistering sands, and utter darkness against the Savior, but the missiles were transformed into flowers by the power of Gautama's perfection.

Finally, the Evil One challenged Gautama's right to be on the Immovable Spot. "You are a prince. You have a social duty to your people," Mara challenged. "You have no right to seek liberation."

But Gautama was not swayed. He simply touched the ground with his fingertips, asking the mother goddess Earth to confirm his right to be where he was. She did so with a hundred thousand roars. At the sound, Mara's elephant fell to its knees in reverence, and Mara's army disappeared.

Enlightenment

After defeating Mara, Gautama worked through the night, meditating on life and death, rebirth, and on karma (the chain of cause and effect). Then, as the sun rose, he experienced perfect enlightenment.

Gautama now became the Buddha, the "awakened" or "enlightened" one. For seven weeks he meditated on his experience, on life, and on nirvana, the state of freedom from pain, worry, and the impermanence of the physical world.

Near the end of his meditation, a great storm raged for seven days. Naga Mucilinda, a giant cobra who was King of Serpents, emerged from the roots of the tree to protect him. The serpent made a seat with his body and a canopy of his outspread hood to shelter the Buddha from the storm.

Knowing that Buddha had achieved enlightenment, Mara tried one more temptation. This time he appealed to reason.

"Who will understand truth as complex as that which you have discovered?" he asked Buddha. "What you have experienced goes beyond words and human understanding. Why bother to spread this message before uncomprehending eyes? Why not leave mankind to the devil and slip at once into nirvana?"

Buddha saw the truth in these words. People were slow to accept wisdom. Why sacrifice nirvana to preach his message to those who could not understand or appreciate it?

As he considered, the Hindu gods approached, begging him to remain. "You must save humanity from the hell of attachment and the sin of ignorance," they said. "You hold the path to peace and spiritual liberation."

Buddha was persuaded to remain and preach, and Mara, seeing that he had lost, left Buddha's life forever.

Buddha's Preaching

Buddha gave his first sermon at Benares, in the Deer Park. He taught life's middle path as the way to liberation.

"Avoid the unworthy life of pleasure and the useless life of fasting and poverty," he told his monks. "Perfection avoids life's extremes. Follow the middle path."

After that sermon, Buddha took his message throughout India. For forty-four years he preached moderation and liberation, converting those who heard him to his new philosophy. He founded a religious order and maintained a rigorous schedule of preaching and counseling.

Buddha Passes to Nirvana

One evening about 480 B.C.E., in the town of Kusinagara, Buddha ate dinner at the home of Cunda, a village blacksmith and one of his disciples. Somehow, poison mushrooms got into his dish, and the Buddha fell mortally ill.

Near death, he was taken to a grove of trees where his disciples had prepared a couch for him. Even as he was dying, Buddha thought of others. In the midst of his pain he realized that Cunda might feel responsible for his death.

“Tell Cunda,” he directed his companions, “that of all the meals I have eaten during my life, only two stand out as exceptional blessings. One was the meal which enabled me to regain my strength so that I could attain enlightenment. The other was Cunda’s meal, which is now opening for me the gates to nirvana.”

As their master suffered his last agony, many of the disciples wept, but Buddha comforted them.

“Do not say you have lost your master,” he said. “The doctrine that I have preached will guide you when I have disappeared. Remember, all created things are impermanent. Work diligently for liberation.”

With these words, the Buddha’s journey ended, and he passed into eternal bliss.