Life of the Buddha

This image, depicting a wall painting in a Laotian temple, shows Siddhartha during his efforts to find enlightenment by fasting and being an ascetic. He was not-yet "The Buddha," at this stage of his life—and—he was starving (as his pronounced rib-cage shows). His life was saved when a young girl gave him the gift of a bowl of rice. Image online, via Wikimedia Commons.

The Buddha lived about 2500 years ago (perhaps earlier, based on recent archeological findings). Today he is known as the "Great Teacher" (or the "Awakened One"). He founded a religion which helps people to understand their own minds.

Until about 100 years ago, Buddhism was largely unknown to the West. Details about the Buddha's life were largely lost to history. Beginning in the 1860s, however, a series of archeologists tried to find sites associated with the life of the Buddha.

It took a breakthrough discovery, in 1896 (2440 in the Buddhist calendar), to unlock the origins of the Prince we now know as the Buddha. In a remote village, across the border of India and Nepal, archeologists rediscovered the great stone pillar of Ashoka at Lumbini (in Nepal). A British expedition was sent to decipher the inscription.

The inscription, itself, states that it marks the place where the Buddha was born. It was the first time that anyone had found independent confirmation that the Buddha was a real person, not just a legendary figure.

The pillar tells us that his birthplace was Lumbini and his home was at Kapilvastu. One suspected site, for this place is in India; the other is in Nepal.

The site in Nepal—known today as Tilaurakot—is very well preserved. At its center is a palace. That is the place where the Buddha's story begins.

"The Life of the Buddha" is a BBC documentary about the man who became known as "The Buddha." It is embedded here, via YouTube. Copyright BBC, all rights reserved.

Around 2,500 years ago, Northern India was divided into kingdoms and republics. The Buddha's father, Suddhodana, was the elected chieftan of the Shakya tribe. His Queen was Maya.

On the night of a full moon, the Queen had a dream that a special being, known as the Buddha, would be born again on Earth. Queen Maya was carried to the Himalayas where the Buddha was conceived.

The baby boy was called Siddhartha, meaning "every wish fulfilled." When his mother died soon after the child's birth, he was brought-up by his aunt.

His father hoped that his son would become a great political leader. That, however, did not seem to be the direction that Siddhartha wanted to take. He was a deeply serious child who wanted to understand the world around him.

Expected to be the future king, Siddhartha was also expected to be the leader of Kapilavastu. The palace has long-since deteriorated, but archaeological discoveries at Tilaurakot have provided archeologists with important information.

It wasn't the palace, however, which fascinated Siddhartha. It was the hinterland, beyond the palace and its surroundings, which he wanted to explore. Such places gave him a different vision of the world.

In the rural areas, he saw how hard the farmers worked, which was something the child had never witnessed in the palace. This first experience of real life was extremely significant for the Prince.

Contemplating what he saw, he watched the farmer turn-over tilled pieces of land. In this very focused state, he watched a bird spot a worm which the farmer's field work had uncovered.

The bird ate the worm, and Siddhartha realized that had the farmer not been tilling the field, at that moment in time, the bird would not have seen (and eaten) the worm. The young lad also felt compassion for the worms being killed.

This series of events led the young boy to conclude that everything in life is connected and all actions have

consequences. The realization would ultimately lead him to the concept of karma, a cornerstone of his teaching.

Siddhartha's father worried about the future of his son. Trying to protect him from suffering, Suddhodana wanted the Prince to follow in the King's own footsteps. Yet, as he grew older, Siddhartha seemed to be far-less interested in Kingship than in enlightenment. He wanted to understand the world's reality, not be a leader of men.

Suddhodana wanted to create a beautiful world for his son, inside the palace. When Siddhartha turned 16, the King found a beautiful bride for him. Even that, however, was not enough to keep the Prince inside the palace. He decided to leave for a time.

Still naive about life, Siddhartha and his charioteer (Channa) made four separate journeys. Away from his father's influence, the Prince observed things he had never seen before.

In one village, he saw an old man walking. Not understanding what was afflicting the man, Siddhartha asked Channa what was wrong. He learned that the man was impacted by old age, which happens to everyone. Siddhartha had never previously witnessed aging and was distressed to learn about it.

Reality was revealing itself to the Prince. Misfortune and suffering seemed to dominate every aspect of life.

Then he saw a sick man whose features were twisted by illness. He asked his charioteer if everyone could become sick. Once again Siddhartha learned a truth he had not previously understood. Everyone can get sick. Everyone can succumb to disease.

The wall of fantasy, which his father had tried so hard to create, was crumbling all around the Prince.

As he continued his journey, Siddhartha saw the corpse of a man who had just died. Being carried to the funeral pyre, the human remains would be put to the torch.

Siddhartha then learned that it was a Brahmin belief that people would not just die once, but that they would be reincarnated only to suffer and die again ... and again ... and again.

There seemed to be no end, and no solution, to the continuous cycle of human misery. From a life of palatial luxury, Siddhartha had come face-to-face with old age, illness and death as the true reality of lived-out human existence.

Then he saw a man wearing a simple robe and holding a beggar's bowl. What would cause anyone to choose such life? Channa explained that the robed man had renounced all pleasures and wandered the countryside to seek-out answers explaining mankind's painful existence.

These "four signs," from the four encounters, made the inescapable reality of life very clear for the Prince. It isn't just someone else who would get old, sick and die. Everyone who lives into old age would eventually get sick and die.

After his fourth journey, Siddhartha realized that even the fruits and flowers inside the beautiful palace would rot, and the palace walls would one day crumble. His newly born child, his wife and himself would also grow old, become ill and die. He began to sense the inevitability of impermanence.

Siddhartha decided he had to:

- Abandon his wife and son;
- Leave home; and
- Find his own answers to life's sufferings.

Against the tradition of his family and the Brahmin religion, he left with his charioteer. After exchanging his robes for rags, and cutting-off his hair, he continued on his journey alone. Siddhartha sent Channa back to the palace with the remains of his princely life.

When he reached the cities, Siddhartha saw suffering on a scale he never thought imaginable. He realized that if he were to find a solution to life's sufferings, he needed to challenge the Brahmin way of thinking.

He disagreed that only the Brahmins - by birth, the privileged few—were entitled to the solutions of life's sufferings. The Prince thought that the solutions to life's problems should be available to everyone.

A person, in other words, should not be *born* an outcast or *born* into privilege. One *becomes* a Brahmin by living well; one *becomes* an outcast by living badly.

Traveling further, in northern India, Siddhartha was looking for a different way of life. He embraced meditation as a means to that end and sought-out the leading teachers of meditation.

Although he became very skilled at meditation, Siddhartha did not see it as the only way to combat the difficulties of life or to solve the problems associated with suffering and rebirth (or reincarnation).

He continued his search for answers. Focusing on his body, he tried fasting and focused on ways to liberate his soul. He fasted so long that he nearly died.

When he was close to death, a young girl saved his life by giving him a gift - a bowl of rice and milk. Siddhartha realized that if he starved again, he would die without having achieved anything meaningful in his life. Such a path would be futile.

Disciplining the body through extreme self-denial, in other words, did not help Siddhartha to solve the problem

of human misery and suffering. He needed a different way to get to the state of mind he desired.

Then the Prince saw a musician tuning his sitar. When the strings were too slack, the instrument would not play. When the strings were too tight, they would snap. Only when the strings were neither too tight nor too slack would the instrument produce beautiful sounds.

Siddhartha realized that it was not just the middle way that worked well for the sitar. It was also the "Middle Path" that could lead to a state of tuneful harmony in his own life - to the state of enlightenment, inner peace and harmony - for which he was searching.

Where would he find enlightenment, the state of everlasting peace? At Bodh Gaya, he sat under a bodhi tree and vowed not to leave until he found the way to enlightenment.

Siddhartha calmly thought about how life works. He focused his attention on his breath. This quieted his mind, just like it did when he was a child, watching the farmer plow his field.

As he went deeper and deeper into his own unconsciousness, he encountered a demon, called Mara. The lord of ego and illusion sent other demons who sent flaming arrows at Siddhartha. With his mind, the Prince turned those arrows into lotus flowers which fell harmlessly around him.

Then Mara tried to seduce Siddhartha with his three daughters. Turning away from whatever evils they directed at him, the Prince began to see the women's faces rot. Then they disappeared into the Earth.

At the moment when Siddhartha realized that Mara was just an aspect of himself, he achieved enlightenment. At the age of 35, the Prince had become "The Buddha" (the "awakened one").

Immediately thereafter, he spent seven days beneath the tree in a state of absolute bliss. When he had reached that state of peacefulness, in his own mind, he began to see a way to escape the inevitable cycle of old age, sickness and death.

He sensed that if we can remove desire from our lives, we can also remove suffering and dissatisfaction from our lives. The insights he gained while sitting under the tree led to Buddhism, a religion practiced by about 400 million people today.

The Buddha discovered four "noble truths" to live a better life:

- Recognize there is suffering in life
- Diagnose desire as the cause of that suffering
- Realize there is a cure for desire
- Follow the prescription to cure desire (the illness) and achieve Nirvana (enlightenment).

The goal of life, according to the Buddha, is to reach a state of mind which is free of craving, ignorance, hatred, delusion and desire (and all the other things which cause people to become miserable). Only then do we reach a state of liberation.

The Buddha said there are specific steps to reach this enlightened state. They are:

- Morality
- Meditation
- Wisdom

Once he understood this for himself, the Buddha set-up a school to help others achieve enlightenment. Today a descendant of the tree, where the Buddha reached this realization, stands beside a temple where monks recite the Buddha's words. To quote one of those monks, they are trying to "practice mindfulness."

That, he says, "sums-up Buddhism in two words."

Eight years after his experience under the tree, the Prince returned to the palace. His father forgave him for leaving, once he saw how important Siddhartha's quest had been. After she heard the story, Siddhartha's step-mother decided to follow his teachings, becoming the world's first nun.

The Buddha left his family again, but he ordained his son as a monk before he left. He encouraged people to live together, peacefully, and to help each other become enlightened.

Quotes about peace, attributed to the Buddha, include these:

> *Peace comes from within. Do not seek it without.*

and

> *Better than a thousand hollow words is one word that brings peace.*

Among other things, the Buddha also taught that even lay people can achieve wisdom and eternal bliss. In the

East, his message quickly spread. Today, in the West, people use meditation, and its resulting calmness, to deal with the stresses of life.

Many Buddhists believe that the Buddha was a human being with the same types of physical frailties which negatively effect all people. As an example, he died—at the age of 80—from food poisoning. It is said that, before passing away, he fell into a deep trance. He was free, at last, from suffering.

The Buddha's body was cremated; his ashes preserved (and enshrined 200 years later). Memorizing the Buddha's teachings, monks orally passed them on from generation to generation. His words were also recorded on pillars.

All of this led to one of the world's oldest religions. It is a religion which focuses not on God but on one's ability to reach Nirvana.

As the Buddha would say, that ability lies within the mind of everyone.

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