



Life of the Buddha in brief

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The Buddha lived in northern India about 2,500 years ago. Scholars disagree about the exact dates of his life. It is generally acknowledged that he lived at some time between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE and the dates most commonly accepted are **563-483 BCE**.

The Buddha lived between the foothills of the Himalayan mountains to the north and the **Ganges River** basin to the south. He was born in **Lumbini**, in present-day Nepal, spent his childhood in **Kapilavastu** and attained enlightenment in present-day **Bodh Gaya**. He gave his first teaching in the Deer Park in **Sarnath**, where he spoke of the Four Noble Truths, and devoted the last forty-five years of his life to teaching people as he wandered through the villages and towns of the Ganges basin. He passed away in **Kusinagara**. (See map on the website or at this [link](#).) The geographical area related to the Buddha's life is therefore relatively small and during his lifetime it is thought that his influence would have been quite localised.

Biographies of the Buddha only appeared many centuries after his death and by that time the story had become very elaborate and dramatised for the purpose of public storytelling. The oldest sources of information about his life are found in the Buddhist scriptures called the **Pali Canon**, but there his life is not recounted chronologically and has to be pieced together. As a result, Buddhists have developed a narrative framework for the Buddha's life story so it is commonly recounted in terms of Ten Acts. A framework like this is useful for remembering the main points of his life. The value of the Buddha's life story for Buddhists stems from the fact that he was a human being like we are and therefore set an example that we can follow. From the academic point of view, however, his life story is a blend of historical events and legend and is problematic because it is so difficult to tell fact from fiction.

1. Conception

According to Buddhist tradition, the Buddha was born to Queen Mahamaya, wife of King Suddhodana who was leader of the clan of the Shakyas. Before he took birth as a human being he resided in the Tushita Heaven, or Heaven of the Contented, a pure non-physical dimension that is one of the many heavens included in the Buddhist view of the universe.

The Buddha's conception and birth are said to have been marked by miraculous events. As soon as his mind descended from that heavenly existence into his mother's womb, it is said that a tremendous light appeared in the world, and the event was marked by earthquakes. The queen dreamed that a splendid white elephant came down from the sky and entered her body. This is symbolic: the colour white represents purity, and the elephant represents supreme power and majesty. Her dream was later interpreted to mean that her son would be either a great king or a great religious teacher. There is no indication that this was a virgin birth. During her pregnancy the queen was naturally virtuous and felt no physical pain. Her pregnancy is said to have lasted ten months but these are lunar months, so they are equivalent to nine months in the modern calendar.



2. Physical birth

According to the custom at that time, women returned to their parents' home to give birth, so it was arranged for Queen Mahamaya to travel to the neighbouring kingdom of Koliya where her father was the king. On the way she and her party passed by a garden called Lumbini Park where the Queen ordered a halt. It was intended to be only a brief rest but as she relaxed in the shade of a tree she gave birth to her son.

The story of the Buddha's birth is very striking. It is said that Queen Mahamaya gave birth standing up, leaning gracefully against a Sala tree. The baby emerged not from her womb but from under her right armpit, with no blood or birth waters of any kind. Miraculously, two jets of water appeared from the sky, one cool and one warm, for bathing the Buddha and his mother. And the earth trembled to mark the event.

As soon as he was born, the Buddha was able to stand up and took several steps in each of the four directions of the compass. This is seen as symbolising that his teachings would spread in all directions. At the same time, he declared that this would be his last birth and he was free from rebirth as a human being.

The child was named Siddhartha, meaning 'fulfilment of wishes'. One of the first visitors to the palace after his birth was a sage called Asita who was reputed for his wisdom and powers of clairvoyance. Asita predicted that the child would be out of the ordinary and could become either a great king or a spiritual leader. But since King Suddhodana hoped his son would be heir to the throne, he deliberately shielded the child from anything that might trigger his spiritual yearnings.

3. Accomplishment in worldly skills

The culture of India at that time was advanced and sophisticated. As a child, the Buddha was educated along with children of other noble families. He excelled at everything he did. He was proficient in sports like wrestling and archery, and was schooled in mathematics, languages, music and so forth. He grew up to be tall, strong and handsome, and his good manners and kindness endeared him to everyone.

When he was seven, his father took him to the annual ploughing festival, and because he was only a child he was allowed to watch and rest under a rose-apple tree. As he was seated there his mind naturally fell into meditation and he attained an advanced mental state quite effortlessly. This was the first mystical experience recorded in his life. Time had stood still for him, and as if to illustrate this it is said that the shadow of the rose-apple tree had not moved from the time the attendants left him there to the time they came to collect him.

4. His youth: a life of pleasure and indulgence

All possible luxuries and comforts were provided for Siddhartha to ensure that he would be satisfied with his life as a prince. Three palaces were built for him, one for each season of the year (the hot season, the rains and the winter). He was surrounded with beautiful parks and gardens, music, attractive attendants and so on. He married the beautiful Yasodhara with much ceremony and rejoicing, and they gave birth to a baby boy named Rahula. The king thought that everything would turn out as he hoped.



5. Leaving the palace

But Siddhartha grew bored and restless. The story goes that one day he summoned his charioteer, Channa, to take him for a drive outside the palace grounds – apparently this was the first time he had ventured beyond the palace gates. On his first trip he came across a tired old man by the roadside with no teeth, white hair, bleary eyes and legs so weak he needed a stick. The sight astonished him and he asked Channa what it could be. Channa explained that old age comes to us all. Siddhartha was so upset he turned around and returned to the palace.

He made three other trips out of the palace. On the second trip he saw an ill person writhing with pain, his eyes bloodshot. Siddhartha was filled with compassion. On the third trip, he came across a funeral procession with mourners carrying a corpse to the river for its last rites. Siddhartha was stunned to realize that youth is not indefinite and every single one of us must die. Finally, on his fourth trip, he met a man with a shaven head, barefoot and wearing a simple robe, sitting quietly in meditation. He was an ascetic. There is a tradition in India – which continues today – whereby some men choose to leave their life in society and take up a lifestyle of hardship and simplicity, staying in forests or on the roadside and begging for their food, as a way of seeking freedom from suffering. They are called *shramanas* or ascetics.

These four experiences were transformative and mark a turning point in the Buddha's life. They are known as the **Four Signs or the Four Sights: old age, illness, death and the religious life**. The experience of encountering them led him to decide to leave the palace and look for a solution to human suffering and this quest is what motivated the rest of his life.

It is unlikely that the Buddha actually witnessed the Four Signs in this literal way. This dramatisation of the story seems to have been a later embellishment of the narrative. It is hard to believe that he would have been as naïve as the story portrays him. It may be more useful to read this episode as his process of disenchantment with pleasure and luxury, and his growing realization that complacency cuts one off from the nature and meaning of life. He felt the need to explore life for himself.

6. Life as an ascetic

Siddhartha renounced family life and left his palace at the age of 29. Tradition has it that he left at night in secret to avoid his family's pleas for him to stay. He spent the following six years as an ascetic. He followed a number of teachers in the forest and learned yoga and meditation from them. In addition, he practised mortification of the body: he fasted, for example, he held his breath for long periods until his head would seem to burst; he stayed out in the burning sun in summer and bathed in icy water in winter. He would stand on one leg for long periods or would squat for days without sitting down.

Long afterwards, the Buddha told his disciples that he learned a great deal from this experience. In particular, it developed his discipline and will power. However, in the end, he did not find the answers he was looking for and his mind grew weak from lack of food. One day a girl named Sujata found him in the forest and took pity on him. She offered him a bowl of milk rice which immediately restored his strength. After this Siddhartha abandoned asceticism and, remembering his childhood experience under the rose-apple tree, realized that only meditation could lead him to enlightenment.

This episode of the Buddha's life is taken to mean that extreme attitudes are unhelpful. Even if our goal is freedom, truth and happiness, if we try too hard to achieve it this can be counter-productive. Extremes of



puritanism or austerity do not bring us closer to our goal – and neither do the other extremes of indulgence and hedonism. At this point in his life, Siddhartha discovered that a balanced approach is best.

7. Victory over Mara

Siddhartha then chose to sit under a large fig tree to meditate. At first he was confronted by worldly temptations depicted in the form of the demon Mara – a religious experience similar to the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness.

Mara symbolises the forces of desire and death. Mara is a deity who became powerful through previous good works, but who uses his power to entrap people in sensual desire and attachment so they stay within his realm of influence.

Mara wanted to prevent Siddhartha's enlightenment because it would make him free of death's clutches. According to the Mahayana account in the *Lalitavistara Sutra*, he began by sending his own sons to arouse anger in Siddhartha. The sons, dressed as warriors, approached menacingly and released their arrows to kill him, but Siddhartha remained unmoved and as the arrows came near they turned into flowers. Next, Mara sent his daughters to try to seduce Siddhartha. Some were fat, some were thin, some were young and others were old so Mara was confident that there was at least one the Buddha would find attractive. But the Buddha had overcome lustful desire so once again he remained unmoved, and the daughters eventually slunk away. Mara then tempted the Buddha's pride by offering him the whole of his kingdom provided he abandoned his quest for enlightenment, but the Buddha refused. He had overcome all hope for fame and glory so Mara's offer failed to tempt him.

Finally, Mara taunted the Buddha with the warning that nobody would ever believe him when he announced to the world that he had attained enlightenment. In response, the Buddha touched the earth with his right hand and called the earth goddess as his witness, whereupon the earth quaked in reply. Mara finally gave up and fled.

This story is a dramatisation of one of the Buddha's main religious experiences. It taught him that, before one can attain one's religious goal, it is necessary to overcome all desire, aggression, pride and other harmful emotions. The event is commemorated by many images and paintings, particularly by statues of Gautama cross-legged in meditation with his right hand touching the earth. This episode can be seen as victory over evil, but evil in Buddhism is not primarily an external force; rather it is the power of our own negative emotions.

8. Enlightenment

Siddhartha then experienced various stages of joy and ecstasy known in Pali as the four *jhanas* (or *dhyanas* in Sanskrit) of meditation. Gradually deepening his state of concentrated calm he reached the fourth *jhana*, a state of great even-mindedness, mental brightness and purity. Based on this state, at each of the three watches of the night he had three distinct insights in his meditation known together as the 'threefold knowledge': these insights are crucial, because they are the foundation of all his teachings.



- First, he saw countless numbers of his own previous lives: who he had been, his name, where he had lived, and so forth.
- Second, he understood the birth and death of all beings in the universe, and what causes them to be reborn into different situations.
- Third, he attained omniscience, the all-knowing quality of enlightenment. This means that he understood the true nature of all things.

With the third insight, at dawn, the Buddha attained enlightenment at the age of 35. This extraordinary event was marked by miracles: the earth shook and streams of flowers fell from the sky. Mahayana scriptures elaborate further and say that the gods rained down parasols, flower earrings, pearl necklaces, and garlands of moons and half-moons; and all the gods gathered together in the sky to praise the Buddha.

According to the Theravada tradition, the Buddha expressed his joy at liberation silently to himself in the following words:

I have gone round in vain the cycles of many lives, ever striving to find the builder of the house of life and death. How great is the sorrow of life that must die! But now I have seen you, housebuilder: never more shall you build this house. The rafters of sins are broken, the ridge-pole of ignorance is destroyed. The fever of craving is past: for my mortal mind is gone to the joy of the immortal nirvana.ⁱ

By attaining enlightenment, the Buddha destroyed the ‘house’ of the ordinary mind, the structure and components of the ignorant self that wanders endlessly from life to life. He also exclaimed:

Victory is mine, knowledge is mine, and all purity, all surrender.

I want nothing. I am free. I found my way. Whom shall I call Teacher?ⁱⁱ

According to the Mahayana tradition, the Buddha described enlightenment in terms of the nature of the mind, and spoke these words upon his enlightenment:

Profound and peaceful, free from complexity, uncompounded luminosity

I have found a nectar-like Dharma.

Yet if I were to teach it, no-one would understand,

So I shall remain silent here in the forest.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Sanskrit word for enlightenment is *bodhi* which means ‘awakening’, and someone who attains spiritual awakening is called a ‘*buddha*’. To become enlightened means to wake up from the sleep of ignorance, from all the misconceptions we have about ourselves and the world. An enlightened being understands things as they truly are. Enlightenment takes us beyond human limitations into a dimension that transcends such things as space and time. The unique feature of the Buddha’s message is that such a transcendental state is achievable for human beings during their lifetimes and not only after death.



9. Spreading the teaching

At first, the Buddha remained silent in the forest because he thought nobody would be able to understand what enlightenment is. But the gods persuaded him that some people would be mature enough to hear his words, so he began to teach. The Buddha spent his last 45 years wandering throughout northeast India explaining how we can all attain enlightenment just as he did. He taught kings and poor people, men and women, old and young. Some of his disciples became monks and nuns, and others remained householders. On some occasions he drew audiences of several thousand people, a large number at that time. Even so, the Buddha's followers were a minority in the region, and lived alongside practitioners of India's other religions.

Westerners often judge the Buddha harshly for the way he abandoned his wife and son in pursuit of his religious goal. They think this is selfish and surely not an example for all to follow. The scriptures tell us, however, that during the period when the Buddha was teaching he went back to the region where he lived as a child and gave public teachings there. As a result, both his aunt and his son became monastics. Even the Buddha's father became reconciled to his son's life and respected him as a religious teacher.

All the Buddha's teachings were given during this period, and the scriptures were later compiled on the basis of these teachings. During his lifetime, however, none of the Buddha's teachings were written down because writing was not common at that time.

10. Death or passing away

The Buddha was unwell for several months before he died, but he continued to wander on foot and teach. On his deathbed, in Kusinagara, he asked his monks whether they had any final questions for him. They remained silent. He then encouraged them not to hold back out of respect for him, but to ask any questions on their minds. Still they remained silent. He then spoke his last words: "All conditioned things are subject to decay. Attain perfection through diligence." His death was a final teaching on impermanence: all things come to an end, and one can never be complacent.

The Buddha passed away at the age of 80 as a result of eating tainted food. According to Theravada Buddhism, he passed into each of the *jhanas* of meditation one by one, then into the four 'formless' mystical states, and then into 'cessation of cognition and feeling'. He then gradually descended back into the first *jhana*, then back to the fourth, and attained *parinirvana* from there. For Buddhists he did not die in the ordinary sense, rather he attained the supreme nirvana (*parinirvana*) which is deathless.



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ⁱ *Dhammapada* 153-4.

ⁱⁱ *Dhammapada* 353.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, XXV, 1.