

THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA



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The Birth of The Buddha

The Buddha's mother was Mahamaya, wife of King Suddhodana, leader of the Sakya clan. At conception, Queen Mahamaya dreamt of a splendid white elephant descending from the sky and entering her body [*top of thangka*].

According to custom, the Queen was returning to her parents' home to give birth when the party stopped to rest in the Lumbini garden. It was here that she gave birth, standing up and holding a branch of a sala tree for support.

The Buddha could walk immediately, and took several steps in each of the four directions, indicating that his teachings would spread in all directions. Lotus flowers blossomed where his feet touched the earth [*bottom left of thangka*].

The child was named Siddhartha, meaning 'the fulfilment of wishes'.

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His Life as a Prince

Prince Siddhartha was educated along with children of other noble families. He excelled in everything he learnt, including languages and mathematics. In competitions of strength and skill, he outshone his peers in archery and other sports [*bottom of thangka*]. He was tall, strong and handsome, and his good manners and kindness endeared him to everyone.

The king provided his son Siddhartha with all the luxuries of royalty, so that his son might be satisfied with worldly life and follow in his father's footsteps. Three palaces were built for him, for each season of the year, and he was surrounded by beautiful gardens and parks, music and attractive attendants.



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Developing Renunciation and Practising Austerities

On seeing the suffering of beings, Siddhartha grew disenchanted with pleasure and luxury and decided to search for the root of all suffering. One night, aged twenty-nine, Siddhartha secretly left the palace. He cut his hair as a sign of renunciation and gave away his royal clothes.

First, he studied, and mastered, the teachings of two great spiritual teachers. Then, for six years, Siddhartha engaged in harsh ascetic practices along with five others ascetics. However, he found that none of this led to a true cessation of suffering.

Abandoning these extremes, Siddhartha set out for Vajrasana. On the way, he met Sujata, the daughter of a wealthy property owner, who served him a dish of honeyed cream [*bottom left of thangka*]. He also met a grass-cutter from whom he received a handful of kusha grass to be used as a seat [*bottom right of thangka*].



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Overcoming Mara's Hosts

Siddhartha sat beneath a p epul tree to meditate. At dusk, he was confronted by Mara, lord of desire, who challenged his quest for enlightenment. In reply, Siddhartha touched the ground, calling Mother Earth (*central, in front of the Buddha*) to witness his many lives of accumulating merit and wisdom.

Mara gathered all his demonic forces in a massive attempt to prevent Siddhartha from attaining enlightenment. His terrifying army launched an attack of many kinds of weapons; but Siddhartha remained unmoved in the contemplation of loving kindness and the weapons fell about him as a shower of flowers.

Mara then sent his daughters to try to seduce Siddhartha (*bottom right of thangka*). They used all sorts of feminine wiles—dancing, singing, and coquetry—but Siddhartha, seeing that their beauty and attraction was subject to impermanence, remained unmoved.



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The Fully Enlightened Buddha

In the early part of the night, Siddhartha entered into the four dhyanas of meditation, reaching a pure state of mind that was bright, clear and of great equanimity. In the first watch of the night, he saw countless previous lives. In the second, he understood the infinite details of karma. In the third, he fully realized the Four Noble Truths and attained omniscience.

On his enlightenment, the Buddha proclaimed:

*I have found a nectar-like dharma,
Profound peace, natural simplicity, uncompounded luminosity.
If I teach it no one will understand;
I will remain right here in the forest, in silence.*

On being requested to teach by Brahma, who offered him a thousand-spoked golden wheel, and Indra, who offered a white conch, the Buddha accepted and Turned the Wheel of the Dharma.



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The Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma

The Buddha gave three major teachings or 'turnings of the wheel of the Dharma'.

The First turning took place at Deer Park in Saranath, near Varanasi, where the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths to his five former ascetic companions.

The Buddha gave the Second turning at Vulture Peak near Rajagriha, where he taught on *shunyata* [Skt.] ('emptiness') and *prajñāparamita* [Skt.] ('transcendent wisdom').

The Third turning was given at Vaishali and other places, where the Buddha taught on buddha nature.

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The Display of Miracles

The leaders of India's six main philosophical schools had challenged the Buddha to a contest of miraculous powers many times. Finally he accepted and, at Shravasti, King Prasenajit built a hall especially for the event and in it seven thrones were erected.

On the first day of spring, the six other teachers took their seats and Shakyamuni came to his, flying through the air. He sent forth fire and water, transforming the hall into a transparent palace. Planting his toothpick in the ground, he caused a great tree to spring up, fragrant and fully laden with flowers and ripe fruit. He multiplied his body infinitely, filling all space with Buddhas expounding the Dharma. In this way the Buddha displayed a different miracle each day for fifteen days, and, utterly defeating his opponents, inspired many students to follow the Dharma.



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Descent from the Heaven of the Thirty Three

After the great debate at Shravasti, to avoid being offered gifts and treated as a god, the Buddha vanished and reappeared in the Heaven of the Thirty Three, on the very peak of Mount Sumeru (*upper right of thangka*).

The Buddha, in gratitude, had vowed to repay his mother for all that she had done for him, and, as she was then residing in this heaven, he taught her and others so that they too might be free from samsara.

After three months, Maudgalyayana, one of the Buddha's main disciples, begged him to return to earth. He agreed, and at the appointed time, Buddha descended on a triple staircase made of lapis lazuli, gold and crystal, with Indra and Brahma on either side, to be received by crowds gathered at its base.



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Passing into Mahaparinirvana

At the age of eighty, sitting beneath shala trees in Kushinagara, the Buddha proclaimed to his disciples: "Monks, I am about to enter into nirvana. Don't torment yourselves by sorrow over it. If you have any questions, ask me." He repeated this three times, but all kept silent. Then he spoke his final words:

*All conditioned things are subject to decay.
Attain perfection through diligence.*

Lying on his right side, Buddha Shakyamuni entered into meditation and passed into mahaparinirvana. The earth shook, stars shot from the heavens, the sky in the ten directions burst forth in flames and the air was filled with celestial music.

After seven days, his body was cremated (*top right of thangka*) and his relics were divided into eight portions (*top left of thangka*) which were housed in eight great stupas.