



# Life of the Buddha

Edward Horner





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## Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Siddhārtha Gautama's Early Life	5
The Four Passing Sights	6
The Aftermath	7
The Renunciation	8
The Search	8
The Enlightenment of the Buddha	9
The Teacher	11
Last Words	13
Other Buddhist Titles from Mind of Peace Publications	14



## **Introduction**

Like so many ancient tales that come to us largely through oral traditions, what we think we “know” is often only speculation and interpretation. Stories get embellished along the way – added to and altered in many ways, often taking on a life of their own. Whether or not the man who was to become the Buddha existed, as I will describe below, is not really too important to the ideals of Buddhism. If he were totally fictitious, the ideals and ideas of Buddhism would likely stand up to vigorous intellectual testing. Still, I gain some small comfort in at least imagining the Buddha existed.

## **Siddhārtha Gautama's Early Life**

This brief history is not meant to be historically accurate. Dates and places are somewhat in question, but we need a starting point.

It is suggested that Siddhārtha Gautama – the man who was to become the Buddha – was born about 563 BCE in Lumbini, in what is now Nepal. We are told that his father, King Suddhodana, was leader of the large Shakya clan. Tragically, Siddhārtha’s mother, Queen Mayadevi, died about a week after giving birth to her son.

A few days after Siddhārtha was born a traveling ascetic, or seer, told King Suddhodana that Siddhārtha was destined for great things, either on the field of battle or as a spiritual teacher. King Suddhodana would rather his son be a great military leader and raised him in that manner, perhaps in the hopes that he would eventually conquer all seventeen provinces of India, to become supreme leader of the country. As such, Siddhārtha was shielded from knowledge of religion and much of the world with its suffering and pain. He was not encouraged to travel beyond the palace walls.

Siddhārtha is raised, largely within the confines of the palace, by his aunt Mahaprajapati until the age of seven. He’s taught meditation and other spiritual practices.



Not long after his seventh birthday, we are told that he experiences his first major spiritual event; he obtains the *first jhana* during meditation. This is deep level of mindful awareness, brought about through profound concentration, the abandonment of the five hindrances (sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt) and the attainment of the jhana factors (applied thought, sustained thought, rapture, happiness and one-pointedness of mind) It's unusual for one so young.

Siddhārtha learns hand to hand combat, various military skills and becomes a proficient archer.

By the age of sixteen he marries his cousin Princess Yasodhara, who is of the same age. By all accounts, the next thirteen years pass happily enough within the royal family. His father builds the couple three palaces; one each for the cold, hot and rainy season in various parts of the country.

### **The Four Passing Sights**

Somewhere near his 29th birthday, Siddhārtha asks his charioteer to take him outside the walls of the family compound. Against his better judgment, the charioteer (Channa) agrees. As they drive through, or towards the city, they happen upon four sights that were to have a lasting impact on the prince. First, they come upon an old man or woman. Siddhārtha asks Channa what has happened to this person that causes them to walk slowly, with a hunched back. Why is their skin so wrinkled, their hair grey and why do they not seem alert? Channa replies, this person has done nothing to cause these conditions. They are merely old. Age comes to us all. The prince falls silent and seems lost in thought, troubled, or both.

Next they come across a sick man. Siddhārtha asks, what has happened to this person? Channa replies that nothing, per se, has occurred to this individual, they are only ill – suffering from one disease or another.



Sickness and pain is the fate of everyone as they go through life. It's unavoidable. The prince continues to be troubled by these sights.

Further along in the day they come across some people carrying a corpse along the road. Siddhārtha asks Channa what has happened to this man – why is he not moving? Channa replies that this is death. The man has done nothing to deserve it, it's just a part of life. Like ageing and sickness and pain, this is the fate that awaits everyone. He hears that simple birth is the cause of death.

Finally, they come across a holy man – an ascetic. Upon speaking with him the prince learns that the man is devoting his life to finding the cause of human suffering and its cure.

## The Aftermath

Having experienced these four sights, Siddhārtha and Channa make their way back to the palace.

Essentially, Siddhārtha finds himself facing a major turning point in his life. Is he to stay behind the palace walls and be protected from the realities of life, or, like Neo in *The Matrix*, “After this, there is no turning back. You take the **blue pill**—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the **red pill**—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

For some time Siddhārtha participated in the palace life, the fêtes, the banquets, the amusements, the petitioners, etc. but found little pleasure in the distractions.

News comes that his wife has given birth to their son. Even this does not bring him any joy. He names his son, Rahula, which means ‘fetter.’ One story suggests that when Siddhārtha hears the news he says, something along the lines of, “*Rāhu jāto, bandhanam jātam*” — “A rāhu is born, a fetter has arisen.” Siddhārtha, perhaps, realizes now that



attachment to family, wealth and ideas may cause some suffering and be limiting in a spiritual life.

That very evening, after some festivities, Siddhārtha finds himself wandering around the palace, alone. He observes that the performers who were, only hours ago, alive and vibrant are now drunkenly asleep, snoring and sputtering. He reflects on the four sights he previously observed – the sick man, the old person, the dead man and the ascetic – and realizes that all things are impermanent, everything and everyone ages and all things pass away. The beauty of the dancers, now slothfully lounging in their cups and snoring and the talented musicians, now fulminating in their alcohol induced sleep are evidence of his revelation.

### **The Renunciation**

Siddhārtha seems to realize he is no longer satisfied with the protected and privileged palace life. With resolution, he shaves his head, discards his royal clothing and dons a beggars robe. He then proceeds to leave the palace and his family behind and begin his life as a wandering ascetic, a seeker of truth, that very evening.

It must be remembered that Siddhārtha didn't just abandoned his family. He left his son in the capable hands of his own father, King Suddhodana and he was well provided for.

### **The Search**

When Siddhārtha left the palace life behind, he took up a search for teachers who could help him with his quest to relieve human suffering as well as teach him different forms of meditation. Indeed, he found many teachers and learned from them what he could. Still, he was dissatisfied and eventually took leave of these teachers, taking with him five companions.

He and his companions turned away from the teachings to seek their own way. They sought relief from human suffering through the practice



of physical discipline. They would endure pain, deprivation and near starvation in their quest.

At one point, when he was at his lowest ebb and near starvation, Siddhārtha recognized that in his renunciation of the privileged life he began grasping and glorifying its opposite – depravation. The life of physical pleasure or the life of physical discipline and depravation seemed polar opposites. The middle way between these two seemed forgotten.

About this time a young woman comes to him and offers him some rice milk, which he is hesitant to take, but he recognizes that he can't really search for the end of human suffering if he is too ill of body or weak of mind. He took the milk and drank it, ate some food and bathed in the river. His five companions, upon seeing this, turned away from him, believing he was turning against and abandoning them and so he left was to carry on in his quest alone.

He seeks out wise men, seers and masters of meditation to help him attain greater understanding of human suffering might be brought under control and ultimately ended. From each, he learns a bit, but the causes and cures of human suffering remain as elusive to him as ever.

### **The Enlightenment of the Buddha**

Years pass and Siddhārtha finds himself in the town of Bodh Gaya. He decides to sit beneath a particular fig tree in deep meditation for as long as it takes for him to come up with the answers to human suffering.

Using calming meditation to clear his mind and then mindfulness meditation to open himself to the truth, he sought answers.

During this time, he is plagued by Mara, Lord of Death. It's told that Mara sent his most beautiful daughters to seduce the would-be Buddha, but Siddhārtha remained in meditation, unfazed by the women. Mara

then sent a host of monsters to attack Siddhārtha, but again Siddhārtha continued in meditation, seeking enlightenment.

Mara then challenged Siddhārtha that the seat of enlightenment belonged solely to himself, Mara, and not some mortal usurper. As he spoke the army cried out, “We are his witness!” “Who will be your witness, Siddhārtha?” Mara demanded. In reply Siddhārtha set his right hand upon the earth and the earth itself spoke, “I bear you witness.” At this, Mara faded. As the morning star rose in the east, Siddhārtha became fully enlightened - the Sākyamuni Buddha or simply The Buddha.





Siddhārtha is now 35 years of age. He continues to sit beneath the tree for many more days, thinking over the difficulty of trying to communicate his new knowledge to others. Many would have viewed his thoughts and words as heresy and he was not bound to make many friends with his ideas. It's seemed too difficult. In one story, Brahma, King of the Gods, appears and persuades him to spread his knowledge by saying that some people only have a little dirt in their eyes and might be awakened if only they could hear his story.

## The Teacher

The Buddha once again meets up with his five companions (with whom he had practiced earlier) near Sarnath, about 100 miles away from Bodh Gaya. There, in a deer park, he is said to have given his first sermon, which was called *Dhammacakkappavattana* sutra or “Setting of the Wheel of Teaching in Motion.” He tells them of the Four Noble Truths (Sentient beings suffer. There are causes to this suffering. The suffering can end. The Eight Fold Path is the key<sup>1</sup>) and they become his first disciples and the basis for the *sangha* or community of monks.

About 528-527 BCE his teachings are spread quickly through delivery by himself and that of his followers. The *dharma* (teachings of the Buddha) gains traction and thousands of people turn away from

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<sup>1</sup> The prescription given by The Buddha to help humans seek relief from suffering. The path is generally divided into eight attitudes and actions, which are categorized under Wisdom, Ethics and Mental Development. To read more about the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, try [My Buddhist Journal](#).

### Wisdom

1. Right view
2. Right thinking

### Ethics

3. Right action
4. Right livelihood
5. Right speech

### Mental Development

6. Right concentration (meditation)
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right effort

Hinduism and other various religious practices of the time, and seek solace in Buddhism.

About 523 BCE Siddharth's father dies. Sākyamuni Buddha returns to the palace where he grew up, for the funeral. Here he meets his aunt Mahaprajapati and upon her insistence (and not after some considerable resistance from him) agrees to her ordination. From this point on, women were allowed into the sangha - despite some mislaid concerns by male adherents of the dharma.

The Buddha carries on with his teaching for 45 years, traveling throughout northwestern India, converting tens, then hundreds of thousands to his teachings. In many locations, he and his cousin and traveling companion Ananda are met with distrust, fear and even violence. He was, after all, something of a threat to the vested powers and interests in the lands through which he travelled. We are told that assassination attempts were made on his life.

One notable attempt (among a few) was that of Devadatta, brother-in-law and cousin of The Buddha - Anandas' brother. Devadatta, while professing to be a follower of The Buddha, seemed mostly interested in how he could profit from his relationship with Buddha. The Buddha saw this and warned his followers against such thinking. This angers Devadatta and he seeks revenge against The Buddha, including, but not limited to, assassination attempts.

In the first assassination attempt, Devadatta sends archers to kill The Buddha as he meditated, but when the archers approached and saw such serenity upon the face of The Buddha, they lay down their weapons and became his followers. This infuriates Devadatta who then plans and executes at least two other failed attempts to kill The Buddha; one involved hurling a boulder from high overhead and the other an intoxicated elephant is let loose to trample The Buddha on one of his alms rounds!



## Last Words

At the age of eighty, The Buddha tells Ananda, that he will soon be leaving. It comes to pass that in the town of Kushinagara, about 100 miles from his hometown, he inadvertently consumes some spoiled food and falls ill. He enters a deep meditation and, according to the story, his last words are; “Impermanent are all created things; Strive on with awareness” Alternatively ...

*"Behold, O monks, this is my last advice to you.  
All component things in the world are changeable.  
They are not lasting.  
Work hard to gain your own salvation."*

Having uttered these words, he passes from this life, into Nirvana - an existence without birth, death, time or space. A place/time that is beyond the cycle of samsara<sup>2</sup>

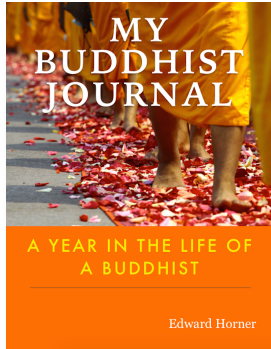
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<sup>2</sup> A Sanskrit word commonly used to describe the ultimate goal of following the *Eightfold Path*. Other words that are used include the Pali “*nibbana*” or “*nibbāna*.” These words have various meanings, including; “blowing out” and “quenching.”

In most Buddhist traditions, in order to achieve the goal of Nirvana one must practice the doctrine to ultimately extinguish *The Three Fires* or *Three Poisons* of the mind; passion, aversion and ignorance. Once these fires are extinguished, then we can gain release from the cycle of *samsara* and *rebirth* and enter a place of no-time and no-death, without suffering or the causes of suffering.

In the Theravada tradition, Nirvana is the highest goal - existence without rebirth. In the Mahayana tradition, Buddhahood is the highest goal - one gains Nirvana, then returns to the world of samsara to help other sentient beings seek their ultimate relief from suffering.

## Other Buddhist Titles from Mind of Peace Publications

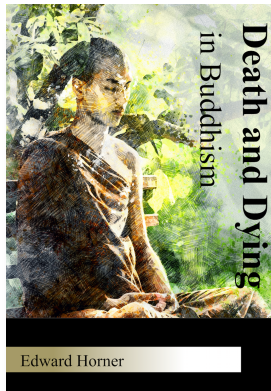
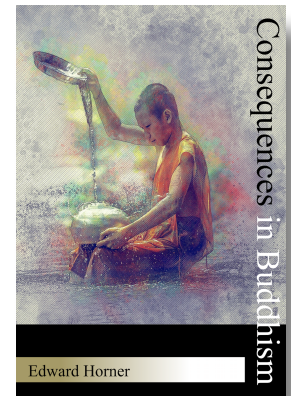


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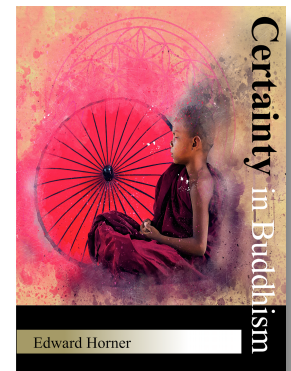
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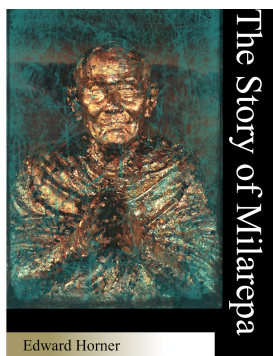
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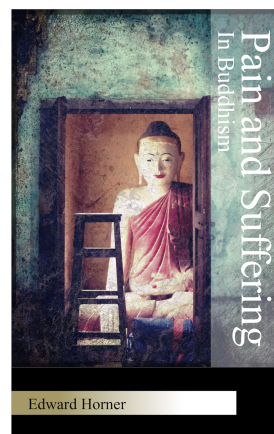
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352 pages. Ebook ISBN EBook ISBN 978-0-9953161-2-6