

Who Was the Buddha?

Part I: Early Life To Enlightenment

Tonight I'd like to talk about the life of the Buddha, the founder of what we call Buddhism, but he just called "Dhamma." As with any great historical figure, a huge amount of legend has accumulated around the Buddha, and when we're talking about a person who lived 2500 years ago, the opportunities for assessing the historical validity of these accounts are very limited. It is generally agreed that the oldest texts we have about the Buddha and his teachings are those known as the Tipitaka or the Pali Cannon. These documents form the scriptural basis for the Theravada school of Buddhism. In the following account, I've limited myself to these Pali sources. We have to remember that there are other accounts of incidents in the Buddha's life that might be true, and there are things in the Pali Cannon that might not be, but relying on the oldest documents seems like the safest path if one is trying to get closer to historical truth. During tonight's talk, I'll be quoting some passages from the Tipitaka, which I hope will give you some appreciation of the sound of this amazing body of literature.

Siddhattha Gotama, the man who would become the Buddha, was born at Lumbini, in present-day Nepal, probably around 600 BC, although there is still some controversy regarding exact dates. He was born a prince and he describes his own life as one of luxury:

I lived in refinement, utmost refinement, total refinement. My father even had lotus ponds made in our palace: one where red-lotuses bloomed, one where white lotuses bloomed, one where blue lotuses bloomed, all for my sake. ... I had three palaces: one for the cold season, one for the hot season, one for the rainy season. During the four months of the rainy season I was entertained in the rainy-season palace by minstrels without a single man among them, and I did not once come down from the palace. (AN 3.38)

But, despite this fairy-tale existence, he was troubled by thoughts about old age, sickness, and death.

Even though I was endowed with such fortune, such total refinement, the thought occurred to me: 'When an untaught, run-of-the-mill person, himself subject to aging, not beyond aging, sees another who is aged, he is horrified, humiliated, and disgusted, oblivious to himself that he too is subject to aging, not beyond aging. If I — who am subject to aging, not beyond aging — were to be horrified, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another person who is aged, that would not be fitting for me.' As I noticed

this, the [typical] young person's intoxication with youth entirely dropped away. (AN 3.38)

(This passage is repeated in parallel to refer to sickness and death.)

So, at the age of 29, he decided to leave home and pursue the life of a wandering ascetic.

This is probably a good time to say a few words about the general state of religion in India at the time of the Buddha. The religious establishment of the day was Brahmanism, an early form of Hinduism that centered on a complex system of rituals dictated in texts called the Vedas. Brahmanism was tightly controlled by a wealthy priestly caste. As a more familiar example, you might think of Medieval Catholicism in Europe, which was similar in that religion was highly institutionalized and controlled by a powerful and wealthy establishment that served as an intermediary between the laity and God.

Although not as rigid as it later became, Indian society at that time was governed by the caste system in which one's spiritual and societal duties were dictated by the circumstances of one's birth. Gotama was born into the *khatiya* (warrior) class. Other castes included the Brahmin caste, a new and increasingly influential merchant class, and a lower caste of "untouchables."

In addition to orthodox Brahmanism, there were the *shramanas*, who were religious seekers, often of non-Brahmin caste. *Shramanas* abandoned the household life in favor of the life of a wandering mendicant, dependent on offerings of food and clothing from lay supporters. Various *shramana* schools existed, generally forming communities (*sanghas*) that were organized without regard to caste. The *shramana* schools all rejected the Brahmanical idea of a supreme creator deity, but differed on many other points. As far as I know, the only one of these non-Buddhist *shramana* schools that exists into the present day is Jainism, which actually has a great deal in common with Buddhism.

So, having experienced disillusionment with his princely life, and not belonging to the Brahmin caste, the natural choice for Gotama was to leave home to become a *shramana*.

... when I was still young, black-haired, endowed with the blessings of youth in the first stage of life, having shaved off my hair & beard — though my parents wished otherwise and were grieving with tears on their faces — I put on the ochre robe and went forth from the home life into homelessness. (MN 36)

It's curious that this passage only refers to his *parents* being grieved, since Gotama also left behind a wife and child. We will return to this point in more detail next week.

Having left home, Gotama sought out spiritual teachers. He studied under two teachers: Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. Both of these *shramana* teachers were expert meditators, but their highest accomplishments were extremely refined states of *samadhi*, or meditative concentration. Gotama learned the meditative skills that they taught and clearly respected both men, but he did not feel that their teachings in themselves led to the end of suffering that he sought, so he left their communities to pursue his quest alone.

The approach that he decided to adopt was extreme asceticism, which was the route favored by the Jain school. He began practicing very painful sorts of meditation.

I thought: 'Suppose I were to become absorbed in the trance of non-breathing.' So I stopped the in-breaths & out-breaths in my nose & mouth. As I did so, there was a loud roaring of winds coming out my ears, just like the loud roar of winds coming out of a smith's bellows... So I stopped the in-breaths & out-breaths in my nose & mouth & ears. As I did so, extreme forces sliced through my head, just as if a strong man were slicing my head open with a sharp sword... Extreme pains arose in my head, just as if a strong man were tightening a turban made of tough leather straps around my head... Extreme forces carved up my stomach cavity, just as if a butcher or his apprentice were to carve up the stomach cavity of an ox... There was an extreme burning in my body, just as if two strong men, grabbing a weaker man by the arms, were to roast & broil him over a pit of hot embers. (MN 36)

He ate only tiny amounts of food.

Simply from my eating so little, my limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems... My backside became like a camel's hoof... My spine stood out like a string of beads... My ribs jutted out like the jutting rafters of an old, run-down barn... The gleam of my eyes appeared to be sunk deep in my eye sockets like the gleam of water deep in a well... My scalp shriveled & withered like a green bitter gourd, shriveled & withered in the heat & the wind... The skin of my belly became so stuck to my spine that when I thought of touching my belly, I grabbed hold of my spine as well; and when I thought of touching my spine, I grabbed hold of the skin of my belly as well... If I urinated or defecated, I fell over on my face right there... Simply from my eating so little, if I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair — rotted at its roots — fell from my body as I rubbed, simply from eating so little. (MN 36)

Not only was he not having a good time, he found the entire exercise completely unproductive, noting that despite all of this effort, he had not “attained any superior human state, any distinction in knowledge or vision worthy of the noble ones.”

At this point he remembered something that had happened to him while he was still a prince. He had been sitting outdoors under a tree and had apparently spontaneously entered an introductory state of *samadhi*. He recalled that this was a pleasant experience, not painful. So he decided to eat some real food and meditate in a calm and relaxed manner. This realization ultimately came to be known as the Middle Path: a spiritual seeker should not lead a life of indulgence (which actually was the path of one of the *shramana* schools), but neither should he torture himself.

One night Gotama was meditating in this more moderate manner and achieved a very deep level of concentration, a skill he had mastered under his former teachers. He directed his mind toward three particular topics, the most significant of which is the third:

When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the knowledge of the ending of the mental pollutants. I discerned, as it was actually present, that 'This is *dukkha*... This is the origination of *dukkha*... This is the cessation of *dukkha*... This is the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*... These are pollutants... This is the origination of pollutants... This is the cessation of pollutants... This is the way leading to the cessation of pollutants.' My heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, was released from the pollutant of sensuality, released from the pollutant of becoming, released from the pollutant of ignorance. With release, there was the knowledge, 'Released.' I discerned that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.' (MN 36)

At this point, Gotama became the Buddha, the Awakened One. Two weeks from now, Chris will be telling us more about exactly what that means, but for now I'll just say that at this point, Gotama became completely free of the round of perpetual birth and death in which we all exist. He had attained his goal of *nibbana*, the permanent end of suffering.

The story of the Buddha is in one sense a historical account of the life of a man. In another it is a universal tale of spiritual striving and the search for answers that most of us can relate to. I doubt that any of us grew up in palaces, but statistically speaking, people at small, private colleges are reasonably well off. College is often a time of questioning. We question the values and mores of our families and of the larger society, including the value of the relative material wealth that many of us enjoy. Sometimes we think we've found an answer, but we get it wrong. Siddhattha Gotama went through the same process. He made some mistakes (like the whole "not eating" thing) and did some things that we might not approve of (like leaving his wife and kid). He tried a few different spiritual paths, and didn't find what he was looking for. But finally, through the practice of meditation, he attained his goal, showing us that a human being can in fact get free of the round of suffering.

So, if any of you have been wondering why the practice of meditation is so central to Buddhism, this is your answer: meditation was the practice by which Siddhatha Gotama attained *nibbana* 2500 years ago. Today we follow his example in hopes of reaching the same goal.