

Life of the Buddha: Early Life & Going Forth

Tonight's talk is the first in a series of talks that we'll be offering on the life of the Buddha, the founder of what we call Buddhism, but he just called "Dhamma." Before we get started, I'd like to say that the life of the Buddha has far more than historical interest. We may instinctively feel that the Buddha's world is far removed from our own (by about 2600 years and half a globe), but as we proceed we'll see that the Buddha faced many of the same challenges that we face today. (Possible exception: assassination attempt by crazed elephant.) Furthermore, we'll see that India in the time of the Buddha had more similarities to the modern world than one might think.

I want to emphasize that the Buddha was a real human being. Over two millennia of veneration have sometimes threatened to obscure that fact. Popular legends have accumulated and elaborate academic doctrines have been developed regarding the cosmic nature of the Buddha, but please remember that we're talking about a real person.

Siddhattha Gotama was born sometime around 560 BC (give or take a few decades), probably in present-day Nepal.

[A little aside on the names of the Buddha: Siddhattha Gotama was his actual name. "Buddha" is a title that was given to him after his enlightenment. When you read accounts of Gotama's pre-enlightenment life, you'll often see him referred to as "the Bodhisatta," meaning the future Buddha. Another name you may come across is "Sakyamuni," meaning "the sage of the Sakyas," "Sakya" being his clan name.]

We don't know much about Gotama's early life. Tradition has it that his parents were King Suddhodana and Mahamaya. His mother died shortly after his birth and he was raised by his aunt, Mahapajapati Gotami.

As you might expect, there are a lot of legends surrounding his birth. One of these states that before Gotama's birth, a seer predicted that he would grow up to be either a great monarch or a great spiritual leader. Not surprisingly, his father voted for the former. In order to steer his son away from spiritual concerns, Suddhodana raised him in a very luxurious and sheltered manner.

Whether the prophecy story is true or not, Gotama *was* raised in such a manner, which he describes in great and amusing detail:

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)

Fortunately for us, this sheltered upbringing did not prevent Gotama from reflecting on the temporary nature of his state.

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.)

This awareness of aging, sickness, and death, produced in Gotama a sense of *samvega* or disillusionment. For many of us, this is the beginning of spiritual seeking. At some point, most of us take a look around and realize that our life is marked by unavoidable difficulties.

My grandmother used to tell a story about my mom. When my mom was a little girl, she came to my grandmother in tears and said "I don't want to be baptized, I don't want to get married, and I don't want to die!" She picked a different (and strange) set of three things, but the significance was similar. She realized that there were things about her life that she couldn't control.

While realizations of this sort are common, what people do with them varies greatly. One popular coping mechanism is just ignoring this insight and going back to our usual pursuits. Another possible result is an unproductive state of existential angst: we become the stereotypical "sullen teen."

Gotama did neither of these things. He set about finding a solution to the problem. He realized that his current situation (what with the minstrels and all), did not lend itself to a spiritual quest:

"Before my Awakening, when I was still an unawakened Bodhisatta, the thought occurred to me: 'The household life is crowded, a dusty road. Life gone forth is the open air. It isn't easy, living in a home, to lead the holy life that is totally perfect, totally pure, a polished shell. What if I, having

shaved off my hair & beard and putting on the ochre robe, were to go forth from the home life into homelessness?' (MN 36)

So, at the age of 29 (he seems to have had his realization a little late), 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 Catholicism in Medieval 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.

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.

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*.

So at a later time, 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)

Obviously, not all of us are going to become wandering ascetics, monks, or nuns. In fact, that's a pretty unpopular option in our time. Perhaps the more practical point we can take away from this narrative is that spiritual progress often requires a sort of break with what has come before: a decision that "I'm going to do things differently now." Next week, we'll discuss how Gotama went about his search for answers after he had left home.

