

The Buddha's Life in a Nutshell

This semester's theme is the essentials of Buddhism. The first essential is right at the origins of Buddhism. The origin being the life of the Buddha. There are many mysteries about the Blessed One's life but the life of the Buddha continues to be an inspiration and assists in teaching us to avoid living our lives at the extremes.

There are many questions about the Buddha's life story, and most pertain to when the Blessed One lived and how long He lived. In other words, we don't exactly know when He was born or passed away. In short, there is no concrete answer, but the middle point of the extremes indicated the Buddha lived from approximately 563 B.C.E. to 483 B.C.E. Some sources say that the Buddha lived longer than the 80 years that we read in the Pali Canon, but I usually stick with what the Canon states for simplicity. For the record, this account of the Buddha's life is extremely brief, but there are many biographical and narrative sources with more information.

The future Buddha was born to King Suddhodana and Queen Maha Maya of the Sakyan clan in Lumbini, Nepal. During this time period there were two main forms of government in the Indian subcontinent. One was a monarchy and another was a tribal republic. The Sakyan clan was a tribal republic composed mostly of those in the warrior class.

There were many miraculous, for the lack of a better word, aspects of his birth. A couple being that he was born after exactly 10 months in the womb and that he was born with his mother standing up rather than in a reclining position (MN 123). A naming ceremony was held and the choice was Siddhartha Gotama. Siddhartha means "wish-fulfilled" or "one who has accomplished his goal." This name was chosen because the newborn child was proclaimed to either become a King of Kings or a fully enlightened one by the sages at the ceremony with the exception of Kondanna who only proclaimed the latter. Unfortunately, seven days after the birth of Siddhartha, Queen Maha Maya passed away and Prajapati Gotami (his aunt) would become like his mother.

Siddhartha was extremely wise and compassionate even as a youth. For example, he saved a swan his cousin Devadatta shot with an arrow. Pretty much all Siddhartha's material needs were satisfied in abundance. When Siddhartha was sixteen, however, he seemed a bit down. So his father brought women from various places around the country so that Siddhartha could marry one of them. The prince's choice was a woman named Yasodhara.

All the while Siddhartha's curiosity about life outside the palace walls was growing. Eventually, he wished to enter the village. The king reluctantly agreed since he wanted his son to be a ruler and not a sage. The king staged the outing, but the prince did see an old man in the street. This is something the prince had not seen before and he asked his charioteer Channa what the scoop was. Channa replied that the bent "like a roof bracket" person was indeed a man in old age and that all people, even kings, would eventually become old. The prince would visit the village a couple more times without his fathers' influence and see the sights of illness and death. Channa again had to tell Siddhartha that no one could stop these events from occurring. The last sight Siddhartha was to see was a monk. Admiring the serene complexion and informed of how a monk lived Siddhartha thought that he must become like that monk. At the same time, he was

informed of the birth of his son. Siddhartha is believed to have said “An impediment has been born to me.” Impediment is rahula in Pali and that was to become the name of his son. After looking in on his wife and child for the last time, Siddhartha rode off with Channa and would begin his life as a samana or a wandering ascetic in search of an escape from old age, illness, and death which haunts all beings.

During this time there were many spiritual teachers for those who chose to leave the household life. Siddhartha would choose Alara Kalama and pick up his teachings quickly. It got to the point where Alara Kalama put Siddhartha on equal footing. Siddhartha, however, knew that this achievement did not lead to an escape from old age, illness, and death; in other words; the teachings did not lead to Nibbana (Nirvana). So Siddhartha went in search of another teacher and found Uddaka Ramaputta. He obtained the teachings quickly and was offered to lead the community. Siddhartha, however, knew that these teachings too did not lead to Nibbana. As a result, he went off on his own to find the answers he was seeking (MN 26).

During the next six years Siddhartha would practice severe austerities. He would practice breathless meditation, eat only a spoonful of soup, and some even tried hanging upside down. But, it was no use, the only thing that happened was Siddhartha became so weak that he would urinate and fall over because his body was so emaciated. Then he remembered a time when he was young at a festival. He was alone and meditated under the shade of a tree and achieved jhana which is an extreme stage of concentrated meditation (MN 36). Thus, he realized the folly of having such an emaciated body and started eating solid food. Five other ascetics, who had been attendants to him, left thinking Siddhartha had abandoned his quest.

This did not hinder Siddhartha’s efforts and he would soon sit under the Bodhi tree in Uruvela near Senanigama (many suspect this is modern Bodhi Gaya). This is where Siddhartha would realize the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and realize higher knowledges such as previous births. This is where Mara, an evil deity, attempted to tempt Siddhartha but would fail. Siddhartha had reached Nibbana and enlightenment and would become the Buddha.

After realizing what He had accomplished, the Blessed One was content not to teach his doctrine since it was so difficult to realize. Brahma Sahampati (a deity), however, would arrive at the Blessed One’s location and eventually convince the Buddha to teach the Dhamma (the Doctrine) because there are some with “little dust in their eyes.” The Buddha wanted to teach the Doctrine to Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, but would come to realize that those individuals had passed away. So he decided to seek out the five attendants who left him. Wandering in stages, the Blessed One arrived at the Deer Park in Isipatana (Sarnath). The five were extremely skeptical since they (and others) believed only practices of austerities would reveal the path to enlightenment (MN 26). This is where the Blessed One gave the first discourse The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, which proclaims that the extremes of hedonism and self-mortification do not lead to any lasting happiness and are low practices. Similarly, he would later proclaim that eternalism and annihilationism are both incorrect extremes. This is when he proclaimed the Four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path which lead to the Middle Way between the extremes and to Nibbana (SN 56:11).

For the next 45 years, the Buddha would teach countless numbers of people. His father, aunt, wife, child, and many of his vast number of relatives would either become monks/nuns, or at least be at the first stage of enlightenment called Stream-entry.

But, just as he discovered many years before, no one is immune from death. The Buddha would eat contaminated food (many say pork) and become severely ill (dysentery). Eventually, the Blessed One would choose his final resting place in Kusinaga (Kushinagar). Here he would allow one more disciple to enter the order of monks. The Buddha also gave some last words of advice. For example, his last words to the monks were "Behold now, bhikkhus, I exhort you: All compounded things are subject to vanish. Strive with earnestness!" At this point the Buddha's final moments involve extreme meditative concentration before finally passing away (DN 16).

As is to be expected, many people mourned the death of the Buddha. Monks that had not yet achieved higher spiritual attainments cried like babies and those of the highest spiritual attainments (Arahantship) simply said something to the effect of "all compounded objects pass away, what how else could it be?"

In brief, after the death of the Buddha stupas with relics of the Buddha were created. It is also said that the Buddha formally stated that there were four worthy places to visit. Those being the place of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, first discourse, and death. In other words, Lumbini, Uruvela (Bodh Gaya), Isipatana (Sarnath), and Kusinaga (Kushinagar) are holy places.

The death of the Buddha led to discord between the remaining monks since no successor was named. It was only said that the Dhamma should be the authority after the Blessed One passed away. This led to the First Buddhist Council where the teachings of the modern Tipitaka were proclaimed. There were several councils, but many different sects would come and go up to the modern day.

What can we learn from the story of the Buddha? I guess the first thing is that material possessions and wealth are useful, but do not lead to an ultimate peace and happiness. This is why Siddhartha left the palace life. The second lesson we can learn is that we need to avoid the extremes if possible. Only when there is proper balance can the conditions for ultimate happiness (Nibbana) arise. And lastly, that no spiritual journey is going to be easy. There is going to be ups and downs, but if we can find that correct balance (the Middle Way) then our efforts will not be in vain.

Other impressions? Questions or comments?

Sources:

Life of the Buddha Buddhanet.net

DN 16, MN 26, MN 36, MN 123, SN 56:11

Vocab for e-mail: samana- spiritual wanderer or ascetic

Arahantship- highest spiritual attainment in Buddhism; a person without roots of greed, hatred, and delusion

Tipitaka- Three Baskets, Vinaya Pitaka, Sutta Pitaka, and Abhidhamma Pitaka