

## **Religious Leaders: Buddha**

**Synopsis:** Siddhartha Gautama, who would one day become known as Buddha ("enlightened one" or "the awakened"), lived in Nepal sometime between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C. While scholars agree that he did in fact live, the events of his life are still debated. According to the most widely known story of his life, after experimenting with different teachings for years, and finding none of them acceptable, Gautama spent a fateful night in deep meditation. During his meditation, all of the answers he had been seeking became clear, and he achieved full awareness, thereby becoming Buddha.

### **Early Years**

The Buddha, or "enlightened one," was born Siddhartha (which means "he who achieves his aim") Gautama to a large clan called the Shakyas in Lumbini, (today, modern Nepal) in the sixth century B.C. His father was king who ruled the tribe, known to be economically poor and on the outskirts geographically. His mother died seven days after giving birth to him, but a holy man prophesized great things for the young Siddhartha: He would either be a great king or military leader or he would be a great spiritual leader. To keep his son from witnessing the miseries and suffering of the world, Siddhartha's father raised him in opulence in a palace built just for the boy and sheltered him from knowledge of religion and human hardship. According to custom, he married at the age of 16, but his life of total seclusion continued for another 13 years.

### **Beyond The Palace Walls**

The prince reached his late 20s with little experience of the world outside the walls of his opulent palaces, but one day he ventured out beyond the palace walls and was quickly confronted with the realities of human frailty: He saw a very old man, and Siddhartha's charioteer explained that all people grow old. Questions about all he had not experienced led him to take more journeys of exploration, and on these subsequent trips he encountered a diseased man, a decaying corpse and an ascetic. The charioteer explained that the ascetic had renounced the world to seek release from the human fear of death and suffering. Siddhartha was overcome by these sights, and the next day, at age 29, he left his kingdom, wife and son to lead an ascetic life, and determine a way to relieve the universal suffering that he now understood to be one of the defining traits of humanity.

## **The Ascetic Life And Enlightenment**

For the next six years, Siddhartha lived an ascetic life and partook in its practices, studying and meditating using the words of various religious teachers as his guide. He practiced his new way of life with a group of five ascetics, and his dedication to his quest was so stunning that the five ascetics became Siddhartha's followers. When answers to his questions did not appear, however, he redoubled his efforts, enduring pain, fasting nearly to starvation and refusing water.

Whatever he tried, Siddhartha could not reach the level of satisfaction he sought, until one day when a young girl offered him a bowl of rice. As he accepted it, he suddenly realized that corporeal austerity was not the means to achieve inner liberation, and that living under harsh physical constraints was not helping him achieve spiritual release. So he had his rice, drank water and bathed in the river. The five ascetics decided that Siddhartha had given up the ascetic life and would now follow the ways of the flesh, and they promptly left him. From then on, however, Siddhartha encouraged people to follow a path of balance instead of one characterized by extremism. He called this path the Middle Way.

## **The Buddha Emerges**

That night, Siddhartha sat under the Bodhi tree, vowing to not get up until the truths he sought came to him, and he meditated until the sun came up the next day. He remained there for several days, purifying his mind, seeing his entire life, and previous lives, in his thoughts. During this time, he had to overcome the threats of Mara, an evil demon, who challenged his right to become the Buddha. When Mara attempted to claim the enlightened state as his own, Siddhartha touched his hand to the ground and asked the Earth to bear witness to his enlightenment, which it did, banishing Mara. And soon a picture began to form in his mind of all that occurred in the universe, and Siddhartha finally saw the answer to the questions of suffering that he had been seeking for so many years. In that moment of pure enlightenment, Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha ("he who is awake").

Armed with his new knowledge, the Buddha was initially hesitant to teach, because what he now knew could not be communicated to others in words. According to legend, it was then the king of gods, Brahma, who convinced Buddha to teach, and he got up from his spot under the Bodhi tree and set out to do just that.

About 100 miles away, he came across the five ascetics he had practiced with for so long, who had abandoned him on the eve of his enlightenment. To them and others who

had gathered, he preached his first sermon (henceforth known as Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma), in which he explained the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, which became the pillars of Buddhism. The ascetics then became his first disciples and formed the foundation of the Sangha, or community of monks. Women were admitted to the Sangha, and all barriers of class, race, sex and previous background were ignored, with only the desire to reach enlightenment through the banishment of suffering and spiritual emptiness considered.

For the remainder of his 80 years, Buddha traveled, preaching the Dharma (the name given to the teachings of the Buddha) in an effort to lead others to and along the path of enlightenment. When he died, it is said that he told his disciples that they should follow no leader.

The Buddha is undoubtedly one of the most influential figures in world history, and his teachings have affected everything from a variety of other faiths (as many find their origins in the words of the Buddha) to literature to philosophy, both within India and to the farthest reaches of the Western world.

Source: Newsela