

## **Biography: The Story of Buddha**

About the year 560 B.G.E., a son, Siddhartha Gautama, was born to the ruler of one of the provinces of northern India. Legend has it that seven wise men from the hills came to visit the ruler, and announced that the new baby was so remarkable that he was certain to become a leader of men. "If he stays with the world," they proclaimed, "he will be king of all of India. But if he rejects the world, he will become a redeemer of mankind."

The king was more interested in seeing his son become king, so he did all in his power to keep the growing boy interested in worldly affairs. "I wore garments of silk and the attendants held a white umbrella over me" (Smith, 1959, p. 91), Gautama later recalled of his childhood. As the boy grew older, his father provided him with three palaces and four thousand dancing girls. A marriage was arranged between Prince Gautama and a neighbouring princess Yasodhara, and the wedded couple were later gifted with a son, Rahula.

In spite of royal commands that Gautama be shielded from all knowledge of suffering, at one point in his young life the prince made a startling discovery. One afternoon, while out riding with one of his servants, the young prince saw a man by the roadside. It was an old man with scraggly teeth and very thin hair who was so bent with age that he was resting on a cane. "Whatever is the matter with this man?" Gautama asked his servant. The servant had to explain that the man was bent with age and that old age comes to all who live long years.

The next day the prince and his servant went riding again, and this time they beheld a man, wracked with illness, lying by the roadside, convulsing with fever. Again Gautama asked, out of deep concern, about the status of the man, and the servant replied that the man was stricken with sickness which comes to most persons in the course of a lifetime. The prince was greatly dismayed at the suffering he was seeing.

On the third day, the prince and his servant beheld a funeral cart carrying a corpse, and a woman and children walking behind it, crying. The young prince asked, and was told, about death. He was horrified to realize that death is something that comes, sooner or later, to everyone. He spent long hours pondering this third disclosure of suffering.

On the fourth day, Prince Gautama and his servant beheld a monk, dressed in saffron robes, with his head shaven, and with a begging bowl in his hand. There was a look of serenity on the face of the monk, as if he had gone beyond the ways of the world and had come to grips with the problem of suffering. The prince realized that he, too, must renounce the world and somehow find answers to the riddle of life.

Thus, one night, when he was twenty-nine years old, Siddhartha Gautama kissed his sleeping wife and son good-bye and departed for the forest for a life of renunciation and a search for the meaning of life and an answer to suffering. Halfway into the forest, he changed clothing with his servant and sent the servant back to the palace. By himself in the forest, Gautama felt the loneliness of solitude.

The six years in the forest that followed are divided into three periods. First, Gautama studied under Hindu hermits until he had learned all that they could teach. Then he tried asceticism - giving up all worldly pleasures and eating only one bean a day to keep alive. In this second period, Gautama became so thin that he could feel his spine by pressing upon his abdomen, and the dirt accumulated so thickly on his body that it could be scraped off in large hunks. Finally, he became so weak that he could no longer think, and if friends had not come to feed him some warm rice gruel, he surely would have died.

Gautama learned from this self-torture that too much deprivation was as harmful as too much luxury, and the beginning of his doctrine of "The Middle Way" was born. The five friends, who had been fasting with him, were disappointed that Gautama had given up their way of life, but