



The Story of Buddhism

From "History Alive!: The Ancient World", Chapter 6, pgs. 152-159

Introduction

In Chapter 15, you read about Hinduism, India's first great religion. In this chapter, you will learn about another great religion that began in India, **Buddhism**.

Buddhism is based on the teachings of the **Buddha**, which means "Awakened One." The Buddha was a man who lived in India from about 563 to 483 BCE. Before earning the title of Buddha, he was a young prince named Siddhartha Gautama.

At the age of 29, Prince Siddhartha walked away from his royal life and went in search of spiritual peace. During his journeys, he learned great truths that changed his life. By sharing these truths with others, he began the great religion of Buddhism.

Buddhism was different from Hinduism in several ways. It was not based on complicated rituals and beliefs in many gods, as Hinduism was. Instead, it was a way of life based on simple teachings. Unlike ancient Hinduism, Buddhism embraced all people regardless of their caste. It taught people how to reach enlightenment, or happiness that comes from the knowledge of deep truth. Buddhists believed that once they reached enlightenment, they would no longer be reborn again and again.

In this chapter, you will learn about Buddhism through legends that are told about the Buddha's life. You'll find out what Prince Siddhartha discovered and how his teachings became the basis of Buddhism.

Prince Siddhartha's Birth

Prince Siddhartha was born about 563 BCE in the northern part of India, near the Himalaya Mountains. His father, Suddhodana, was a powerful king. His mother was the beautiful Queen Maya.

One night, before her son was born, the queen had a dream. In the dream, she was carried high over the Himalayas to a silver mountain and set on a silver couch. A white elephant with six tusks walked around her and then struck her side.

The king and queen asked the Brahmins (Hindu priests) to explain her dream. "You are carrying a child who will be a great man," they told the queen. The Brahmins declared that the prince's future held two possible paths. As a prince, he could rule the universe. But if he left royal life to see the suffering in the world, he would become a Buddha, one who is enlightened.

The queen gave birth to Prince Siddhartha in a garden. Stories say that after the prince's birth, a soft, warm rain of heavenly flowers fell on the baby and his mother. The infant prince looked a few years old and could already walk and talk. Siddhartha began his remarkable life by taking a few steps and declaring, "I am leader of the world and the guide to the world."

The Prince's Royal Life

Prince Siddhartha's father wanted his son to be a great and powerful ruler. He was worried about the Brahmins' predictions. If the prince saw the world's suffering, he might give up his royal duties to seek a spiritual path.

The king decided to protect his son from all the horrors of the world. He raised the prince in a world of perfect wealth and beauty. He provided his son with only the finest gardens, houses, education, and food. Servants took care of the prince's every need, from washing his clothes to playing music for his amusement.

The prince enjoyed his easy life, yet he was always curious about the world outside the palace walls. Some days he would sit under a rose apple tree and think about the world beyond his reach.

At the age of 16, Prince Siddhartha married a beautiful young noblewoman. The wedding feast lasted seven days and seven nights. For 12 years the couple lived together in perfect peace, enjoying the prince's many palaces. When Siddhartha turned 29, they had a son.

The Prince Discovers Three Forms of Suffering

After Siddhartha became a father, the king gave him more freedom to travel outside the royal palaces. During his trips, the prince discovered three forms of suffering.

On his first trip, the prince and his chariot driver saw a thin man who walked with the aid of a stick. "Why does that man look so terrible?" the prince asked. His driver replied that the man was old. He told the prince that everyone's body weakens as it ages.

On the second trip, the prince and his driver saw a man crying out in pain on the ground. "What is the matter with that poor man?" the prince asked. The driver explained that the man was sick.

On the third trip, the prince saw a group of people walking slowly down the road. The group carried a figure wrapped in white cloth. "Death came for that man," Siddhartha's driver said quietly. "One day it will come for you, too."

The prince was deeply troubled by his discovery of aging, sickness, and death. Unable to sit at home with his thoughts, he set out a fourth time. This time he met a man who glowed with inner peace and calm. The man was an ascetic. An **ascetic** is someone who gives up worldly pleasures such as possessions, fine clothes, money, and even shelter.

"How can you sit so peacefully when there is so much suffering around you?" the prince asked the man. The ascetic replied, "To be free of suffering, one must give up the desires, pleasures, and comforts of the world. I find peace by helping others find peace."

The Prince Becomes an Ascetic

Prince Siddhartha's experiences with suffering changed him forever. Suddenly, his royal life seemed empty. He wanted to find the happiness and peace the ascetic had found.

Siddhartha decided to give up his old life and find enlightenment. Becoming enlightened meant finding deep truth and being free of suffering.

One night the prince asked his faithful driver to take him to the forest. At the edge of the dark woods, Siddhartha removed his royal robes, sandals, and jewels. He cut off his hair with a knife. He put on a simple robe and kept only a small bowl for **alms**, or gifts of food. Wishing his driver farewell, Siddhartha began his life as an ascetic.

Siddhartha met other ascetics as he wandered the forests and fields. Like him, they wanted to understand the nature of the world. They believed they could reach enlightenment through meditation. While meditating, the ascetics sat quietly and focused their minds on spiritual questions. Siddhartha quickly became an expert at meditation.

The ascetics also denied their bodies many basic needs. For example, they stayed up all night without sleeping. They sat in the hot sun without shelter. They held their breath for long periods of time. They also fasted, or stopped eating, for many days at a time. They hoped to find spiritual truth through self-denial.

Siddhartha followed the way of the ascetics until he was pitifully thin from lack of food. Legends say that he became so skinny that he could touch his stomach and feel his backbone. Eventually, he became unhappy with this extreme way of living. And he had not yet found the key to enlightenment.

The Prince Becomes the Buddha

Siddhartha had learned that giving up bodily pleasures did not bring enlightenment. He decided to balance himself between the extremes of pleasure and pain. He would be neither a prince nor an ascetic. Instead, he would seek a "middle way" as a path to enlightenment.

The prince's new way of thinking caused the other ascetics to leave him. But he was content to be alone. He was not yet enlightened, but he was on the right path.

A full moon rose on Siddhartha’s 35th birthday. He bathed in the river and rested quietly in a grove of trees. When he awoke, he had a strong feeling that he would soon become enlightened. Then a grass cutter gave him eight handfuls of soft grass as a present. Siddhartha walked until he reached a tree that became known as the Bodhi (Enlightenment) tree. He placed the grass at the foot of the tree and sat down. He vowed to meditate under the tree until he reached enlightenment.

While Siddhartha meditated, a wicked god, Mara, tried to frighten him. Then Mara tried to tempt him by sending his three daughters, Discontent (Unhappiness), Delight, and Desire. Siddhartha resisted them all. He meditated through the night about the nature of reality and how to reach **nirvana**, or true happiness and peace. As the night went on, his mind filled with the truths he had been seeking. He saw his past lives and the great cycle of rebirth. He saw the importance of karma. Eventually he saw how to gain freedom from the endless cycle and so end all suffering.

By morning, the young prince had become the Buddha, the Awakened One. He had reached enlightenment.

The truths that the Buddha discovered under the Bodhi tree are the basis of Buddhism. They are often called the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha would spend the rest of his life sharing these truths with the people of India.

The Buddha’s Teachings

Behind Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths is the idea that all things change. The Buddha saw that even when one finds pleasure, it does not last forever, and one suffers when it is lost. To end suffering, he taught, people should travel the Eightfold Path. This path follows the “middle way.”

The Buddha could have selfishly escaped into enlightenment. Instead, he chose to teach others the path that he had found. In time, his followers spread his teachings throughout India and other parts of Asia.

The Four Noble Truths

1. *Suffering is present in all things, and nothing lasts forever.*
2. *Suffering is caused by cravings (desires and wants).*
3. *The way to end suffering is to give up all cravings.*
4. *The way to give up all cravings is to live life according to the Eightfold Path.*

The Eightfold Path

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| Right Understanding | Develop a deep understanding of the Four Noble Truths |
| Right Purpose | Live a life of selflessness (not selfishness), love, and nonviolence |
| Right Speech | Be careful and truthful in what you say. Do not lie or gossip. |
| Right Action | Do not kill, steal, or lie. Be honest. |
| Right Way to Earn a Living | Do not work at a job that causes harm to people or living creatures. |
| Right Effort | Promote good actions and prevent evil actions. |
| Right Mindfulness | Be aware of but not attached to your emotions, thoughts, and feelings. |
| Right Concentration | Focus your mind with practices such as meditation. |

Chapter Summary: *In this chapter, you learned about Buddhism. Buddhism was the second great religion to come from India. It is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha became the Buddha by reaching enlightenment.*