

Life of Siddhartha: background notes

There are many versions of 'mythical' occurrences associated with the birth of the Buddha. Stories about the Buddha's life are found in various sacred texts, such as the Mahavastu, the Buddhacarita and the Lalitavistara Sutra. Siddhartha is thought to have belonged to the ruling class of warriors (Ksatriyas), from the Sakya peoples who were based around modern-day Nepal. He was born to the local ruler Suddhodana, who was married to Maya.

All stories indicate that Siddhartha was unique. At the time of his conception ten months earlier, according to tradition, Maya dreamed that a white elephant entered her womb. Siddhartha was born from her side and this occurred beneath a tree. In addition, the baby Siddhartha immediately stood up and took seven paces and announced that he would have no more rebirths!

Siddhartha's destiny is also a theme of the birth narratives. Some holy men at the time predicted that he would be a strong ruler like his father. Another called Asita raised two fingers indicating that Siddhartha would either be a local ruler or a wandering holy man. Another called Kondanna predicted that he would become a holy man and pursue the truth. The story continues that to avoid this happening, the king had to ensure that his son lived a life of absolute luxury which avoided any unpleasantness. In particular, four things were to be avoided.

These four forbidden things are known as 'the four signs' or 'the four sights'. In essence they are: (1) old age, (2) sickness, (3) death, and, (4) a wandering holy man. It was argued that if the prince was kept away from these four things, then he would not waver from his path of future king and ruler. Up until the age of 29, despite leading an extraordinary life of luxury and protection, his life was no more unusual than that of the sons of other rulers. Married to Yasodhara at 16 they lived within their palace grounds in relative calm. The significant events that brought about change for Siddhartha involve excursions from the palace ground with his charioteer Channa at the age of 29.

The first sight was an old, weak man, bent over with old age. The second sight was another man who had been ravaged by disease, mere skin and bone with the very little strength in his body ebbing away. The third sight was one of grieving relatives carrying the corpse of their beloved on their shoulders in preparation for cremation.

The impact of such an experience was obviously heightened by the sheltered nature of Siddhartha's life. It was his first understanding of the fact that he, like those he saw, was subject to the very same ravishing of time and nature and would ultimately be no more. This disturbed him and caused great anxiety. Why all this suffering?

Lastly, the sight that provoked the prince most deeply was a wandering holy man walking calmly and contentedly in pursuit of truth and an answer to life's problems. From where was this sense of peace derived? On returning to the palace, Siddhartha immediately sought freedom. He renounced his birth right and took on the mantle of a wandering holy man. He then sought out two teachers of yoga and while experimenting with yoga he became so weak and thin that his backbone was visible through his stomach. At this point, after being revived with milk-rice by a woman called Sujata, Siddhartha decided to pursue an alternative lifestyle of the Middle Way.

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Sitting beneath a pipal tree, in a state of deep meditation, Siddhartha contemplated the nature of existence throughout the night. However, the demon god Mara, challenged Siddhartha to abandon his quest. Mara boasted that no one could bear witness to Siddhartha's good works in previous lives and this one. But Siddhartha placed his hand to the ground and touched the earth as a witness to his good works.

At the point of enlightenment, Siddhartha became the Buddha, the 'fully awakened one' and was able to see past lives of all beings and the workings of karma, the arising and ceasing of all phenomena dependent on causes and conditions, and liberation from craving and suffering.