



The Buddha

BBC Resource¹

The history of Buddhism is the story of one man's spiritual journey to Enlightenment, and of the teachings and ways of living that developed from it.

Siddhartha Gautama - The Buddha

By finding the path to Enlightenment, Siddhartha was led from the pain of suffering and rebirth towards the path of Enlightenment and became known as the *Buddha* or 'awakened one'.

A life of luxury

Opinions differ as to the dates of Siddhartha Gautama's life. Historians have dated his birth and death as circa 566-486 BCE but more recent research suggests that he lived later than this, from around 490 BCE until circa 410 BCE. He was born into a royal family in the village of Lumbini in present-day Nepal, and his privileged life insulated him from the sufferings of life; sufferings such as sickness, age and death.

Discovering cruel reality

One day, after growing up, marrying and having a child, Siddhartha went outside the royal enclosure where he lived. When he went outside he saw, each for the first time, an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. This greatly disturbed him, and he learned that sickness, age, and death were the inevitable fate of human beings - a fate no-one could avoid.

¹ "Religions - Buddhism: The Buddha." BBC, BBC, 2 Oct. 2002, www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/history/history.shtml.

Becoming a holy man

Siddhartha had also seen a monk, and he decided this was a sign that he should leave his protected royal life and live as a homeless holy man. Siddhartha's travels showed him much more of the suffering of the world. He searched for a way to escape the inevitability of death, old age and pain first by studying with religious men. This didn't provide him with an answer.

A life of self-denial

Siddhartha encountered an Indian ascetic who encouraged him to follow a life of extreme self-denial and discipline. The Buddha also practised meditation but concluded that in themselves, the highest meditative states were not enough. Siddhartha followed this life of extreme asceticism for six years, but this did not satisfy him either; he still had not escaped from the world of suffering.

The middle way

He abandoned the strict lifestyle of self-denial and asceticism, but did not return to the pampered luxury of his early life. Instead, he pursued the Middle Way, which is just what it sounds like; neither luxury nor poverty.

Enlightenment

One day, seated beneath the Bodhi tree (the tree of awakening) Siddhartha became deeply absorbed in meditation, and reflected on his experience of life, determined to penetrate its truth. He finally achieved Enlightenment and became the Buddha. The Mahabodhi Temple at the site of Buddha's enlightenment, is now a pilgrimage site. Buddhist legend tells that at first the Buddha was happy to dwell within this state, but Brahma, king of the gods, asked, on behalf of the whole world, that he should share his understanding with others.

The Teacher

Buddha set in motion the *wheel of teaching*: rather than worshipping one god or gods, Buddhism centres around the timeless importance of the teaching, or the *dharma*. For the next 45 years of his life the Buddha taught many disciples, who became *Arahants* or 'noble ones', who had attained Enlightenment for themselves.