

There once was an Indian prince called Siddhartha Gotama. Prince Siddhartha was born around 563 BCE, son of King Sudhodana and Queen Maya. The royal couple decided to name the baby Siddhartha, which means "one who brings all good." News of the birth spread, and there was much celebration. Many visitors came to pay tribute to Siddhartha. One of these visitors was the holy sage, Asita. Asita told the parents that the prince would be either a great king or a great saint. When Asita's eyes met the infant's, the sage began to weep. This worried the king and queen, but Asita explained that these were bittersweet tears he shed for himself, because he saw that this was a special child, one who could lead others to peace. The holy man wept because, after a lifetime of searching, he would not live to hear Siddhartha's teachings.

Both the king and queen were happy, but Sudhodana wanted to be certain that his son became a great emperor, not a saint. Therefore, he set out to give Siddhartha all he could desire. But the couple's joy was quickly ended when Queen Maya shortly became seriously ill. Within seven days of giving birth, she lay on her bed dying. She asked her sister, Prajapati, to mother her son. Prajapati consented. Soon afterwards, the queen passed away. Prajapati raised Siddhartha as though he were her own son, and the prince lived a carefree childhood within the palace walls. King Sudhodana made certain that the boy received the finest education, for Asita's prophecy remained with him. The prince learned quickly.

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.

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.

Siddhartha encountered an Indian ascetic who encouraged him to follow a life of extreme self-denial and discipline. He 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.

He abandoned the strict lifestyle of self-denial, but did not return to the pampered luxury of his early life. Instead, he pursued the "Middle Way", neither luxury or self-denial. One day he sat under a Bodhi Tree (known as the tree of awakening). Siddhartha deeply concentrated in meditation and thought carefully about his life and experiences. During this time he attained Enlightenment and became the Buddha, which means 'enlightened one'. With this knowledge, he set about telling others and sharing what he had learned.

