

Beginner's Course - 1A

The Buddha and His Teachings



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About 2,500 years ago, the Buddha was born as a crown prince by the name of Siddhartha Gautama.

His mother died in childbirth. According to legend, his father King Suddhodana invited 8 Brahmin high priest to make predictions about his son's future. They all gave him the same prediction: That Siddhartha was to become either a great king or a holy man.

Siddhartha was raised in opulence and indulgence. He was trained as a warrior, to be a general, and eventually rule the country in place of his father. At the age of 16 his father arranged for him to marry his cousin, who bore him a son.

His father shielded Siddhartha from all knowledge of normal human life and suffering, as well from all knowledge of religious teachings, fearing his son would become a holy man instead of a king.

For Siddhartha, he built palaces to indulge in son and surrounded him all with healthy, happy and beautiful people. Siddhartha had no knowledge of the real world outside of his palaces.

At the age of 29, Siddhartha begged his father to let him tour his future kingdom. His father agreed and made sure that the path of Siddhartha's tour would be well staged with only healthy, young and happy people to receive their prince.

Siddhartha was taken outside the gates of his palace. Despite the king's careful plan, Siddhartha still ran across a frail old man. He was surprised and perplexed at the condition of being "old". Then running off the path of his tour that his father had planned, he saw the sickly, a funeral with a decaying body, and an ascetic.

Shocked at the realization of the truth of suffering, Siddhartha came back from his tour very sad. The joy of luxury life could no delude him about the conditions that people have to experience. He was determined to find an end to suffering.

He snuck out of his palace at night with his charioteer, Channa. He gave away his luxurious clothes and jewelry and traded for a simple robe of an ascetic. He embarked on the ascetic way of life to learn about the Hindu religion.

He went to the two most famous Hindu teacher of the day to learn of meditative practices. He learned all their techniques and attained the highest level of meditative state that these two teachers could teach him. They invited him to stay and become their successor. But Siddhartha did not agree, because although the lessons he learned were wonderful and level of meditative practice he attained were holy, they still did not provide him with an answer for the end of suffering. He left the two teachers and went on to the forest to further his practice.

Siddhartha and a group of five companions set out to take their austerities even further. They tried to find enlightenment through near total deprivation of worldly goods, including food. They practiced self-mortification. After nearly starving himself to death, he collapsed in a river while bathing and almost drowned. Siddhartha began to reconsider his path. Then, he remembered a moment in childhood in which he had been watching his father start the season's plowing. He had fallen into a naturally concentrated and focused state that was truly blissful and refreshing.

Siddhartha discovered what Buddhists call the Middle Way – a path of moderation away from the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. When he reached this realization, he accepted a little milk and rice pudding from a village girl. Then, sitting under a tree, now known as the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, India, he vowed never to arise until he had found the Truth. The five companions, believing that he had abandoned his search and become undisciplined, left. After 49 days meditating, at the age of 35, he attained Enlightenment. Siddhartha Gautama, from then on, was known as the Buddha or "Awakened One."

For the remaining part of his life after his enlightenment, the Buddha taught thousands of people by walking on barefoot from town to town with his monks and nuns. The Buddha and his followers led a life of voluntary poverty, begging for food and talking to people they come across who offered them food.

He accepted people from all levels of life to his order, from the Hindu nobility down to the lowest class, the untouchables. He accepted members of his royal clan, his step mother, cousins, son, half brother, to be monks and nuns of his order. He accepted murderers, thieves, and people who others frown at and look down upon to be a part of his order.

Because of his popularity and break with the Hindu tradition, several assassination attempts were made on the Buddha's life.

The Buddha established the three gems of Buddhism. The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

The Buddha or The Awakened One – is the historical Gotama Buddha who is regarded as our teacher, an awakened person who possesses great compassion to teach and lead others to enlightenment. It is also regarded as the awakened nature within every living being.

The Dharma or The Great Truth – these are the teachings of the Buddha and Sages who followed after the Buddha's death. It is through the Dharma that we learned of the truth of life and find our own liberation from the sufferings that all human beings endure.

The Sangha, the Church or Community of Followers – all those who follow the Buddha's teaching and practice it in their own life. A Sangha is made up of 5 or more people who have taken the vows of refuge with the three gems to take the Buddha as their teacher, the Dharma as their guiding map and the Sangha as their family of spiritual support in supporting each other to practice and learn to end's the suffering of oneself and help others.

The Buddha's teachings can be summed up as:

1. The Buddha is an awakened person or the awakened nature in all of us.
2. The Buddha taught of the truth of sufferings and the way to end one's sufferings.
3. Regardless of which school of Buddhism exists today, the fundamental tenets of Buddhism are the three Dharma seals, the four noble truths, and the precepts.
4. Buddhism is about practice, not a mere belief.

I'd like to conclude by reading a few of Buddha's own words:

*Do not accept any of my words on faith,
Believing them just because I said them.
Be like an analyst buying gold, who cuts, burns,
And critically examines his product for authenticity.
Only accept what passes the test
By proving useful and beneficial in your life.*

*Rely on the teaching, not on the person;
Rely on the meaning, not on the words;
Rely on the definitive meaning, not on the provisional;
Rely on your wisdom mind, not on your ordinary mind.*

*My teaching is not a philosophy. It is the result of direct experience...
My teaching is a means of practice, not something to hold onto or worship.
My teaching is like a raft used to cross the river.
Only a fool would carry the raft around after he had already reached the other shore of liberation.*

Light your own torch and shine your own way.